

Book Review

Encounter: Essays by Milan Kundera

Trans. by Linda Asher,
London: Faber and Faber, 2010, 192 pp., £12.99,
ISBN 978-0-571-25089-9



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ALMOST EXACTLY HALFWAY THROUGH his latest collection of essays, Milan Kundera provides, in a manner with which readers of both his fiction and non-fiction will be familiar, a working definition of the noun that he has chosen for his title. An encounter, he informs us, is 'not a social relation, not a friendship, not even an alliance', but 'a spark; a lightning flash; random chance' (pp. 83–84). This explanation grants some cohesion between the thematic concerns and performative elements of a book in danger of appearing frustratingly eclectic, which blends reworked versions of material published elsewhere—in some cases, as with Kundera's musings on musician Iannis Xenakis, decades ago—with entirely new compositions, together introducing a series of fascinating subjects but mostly refusing to dwell on any single one for more than a few short paragraphs. The second of *Encounter's* nine parts, for example, discusses several European novels that Kundera finds particularly interesting, but in affording each only two or three pages his explorations often sound much like the truncated soundbites that novels of his own, such as *Immortality* and *Slowness*, work hard to denounce. In discussing Dostoyevsky's descriptions of different kinds of laughter, Kundera suggests that he is more adept at seeing the concerns of his own novels everywhere, at reducing the works of other authors down into reflections of his own, than he is at teasing out these works' own preoccupations. Furthermore, many of the texts discussed here have been

explored previously in Kundera's earlier non-fiction (*The Art of the Novel*, the particularly brilliant *Testaments Betrayed*, and *The Curtain*), mostly in a manner far more rigorous. Kundera's frequent citation across these texts of his favourite four Central European novelists, 'Kafka, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz' (p. 141), has become something of a tic, while his discussion of Czech composer Leoš Janáček reiterates many of the arguments advanced in greater depth by parts five, seven, and nine of *Testaments Betrayed*. Kundera also discusses, via contemporary Czech writers Vera Linhartova and Josef Škvorecký, the notion that a politically-driven emigration may rapidly become a liberation, and a place of exile a new homeland, dealing in a cursory manner with themes that are far more thoroughly the focus of his latest novel, 2002's *Ignorance*.

But Kundera's aforementioned unpacking of the eponymous noun 'encounter' does much to vindicate what might initially appear to be textual deficiencies. The definition is provided during an eloquent discussion of André Breton's encounters in 1941 and 1945 with various young writers, including Aimé Césaire and René Depestre, the consequences of these very brief meetings rippling outwards across the following decades via their influence on these individuals' own aesthetic and political leanings. What this section makes vividly clear is that such encounters between artists and audiences are no less formative through their brevity. Kundera also references in this section the famous Surrealist evocation of 'a chance encounter on a dissection table of a sewing machine with an umbrella' (p. 86). *Encounter* itself is a dissection table of sorts, one where the vast range of works pulled apart—comprising paintings, novels, political manifestos, and operas—appear only a little less disparate than the objects described by Lautréamont. Kundera appears to be seeking, via this collection, to distil the essence of the various encounters that proved as formative for him as Césaire and Depestre's with Breton. The characteristic enthusiasm and brio of his prose in Linda Asher's translation (Asher has also translated into English the author's earlier non-fiction and his three most recent novels) makes him an entrancing writer on any subject, and transforms these encounters into ones which his readers are able to share decades later.

The individual essays are at their best, particularly for Kundera's long-term audience, when they discuss texts and writers to which Kundera has not previously referred. Not every novel discussed in *Encounter* has been examined more closely elsewhere, and many of the authors mentioned here are still more obscure to an English audience than those figuring most prominently in Kundera's earlier non-fiction. The brief readings that comprise the text's aforementioned second section, for example, describe such novels as Guðbergur Bergsson's *The Swan* and Marek Bieńczyk's *Tworci* with such vivacity that the reader may find it difficult not to turn immediately to Wikipedia or Amazon for further exploration. The brevity of the reader's encounters with these works arguably becomes one of this collection's strengths, stoking an initial enthusiasm but suggesting also that there is still much about them to discover. Especially interesting, however, is Kundera's longer engagement with Anatole France's *The Gods Are Thirsty*, and its main character, the Jacobite Gamelin, who, as an artist aligning his creativity with the causes of the French revolution, demonstrates himself to be a possible literary precursor of Kundera's own Jaromil, the young poet protagonist of his

second novel, *Life is Elsewhere*. Gamelin reminds Kundera of a time when he was still a fervent Communist, and a friend of his outlined a plan to produce ‘a new card game in which the kings, queens, and jacks would be replaced by Stakhanovites, partisans or Lenins’ (p. 47). These passages ably demonstrate how encounters between friends, between readers and texts, between authors and characters—both their own and those from their favourite novels—can all coalesce into a single, multifaceted and multitemporal experience.

Of all the encounters this collection facilitates, sure to be the most contentious and arguably the most interesting occurs in the very first section. Here Kundera repeats a passage first published in the French periodical *L’Arc* in 1977, shortly after his emigration from Czechoslovakia, in which he describes meeting in a Prague apartment with a young girl in order to prepare for a police interrogation by matching his answers with hers; the contrast between her fear at the escalating situation and her usual calmness prompts in Kundera a sudden desire to rape her (pp. 3–5). While it is likely that Kundera’s English audience will be unfamiliar with this piece, they will conceivably recognize that it has also appeared in an eerily similar form at the close of part three of his 1978 novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, when his first-person narrator meets the magazine editor, ‘R.’, in order to prepare for examination and discusses, with an alarmingly brazen candidness, his sudden urge to subject her to assault. Though the narrators of Kundera’s novels, including *Laughter and Forgetting*, commonly share their name with the author, these novels’ attempts to question the sanctity of textual representation ensure that the reader can never quite be sure if these narrators are literal authorial surrogates or more playful simulacra; the more disconcerting these narrators’ actions, the easier it is for a fan of Kundera to assume the latter. The little-known biographical passage brought to the foreground in *Encounter*, however, shares with its questionably fictional variation exact metaphors, incidental details, and entire sub-clauses, granting the novelistic version an increased degree of reality and leaving reader and author in a closer encounter here than in any other of his texts. Kundera has been accused of arguing passionately against the naively falsifying effects of kitsch while subjecting his own biography to the same process; he has also decried at length the growth of readerships more interested in authors’ lives than in their works. This section of *Encounter* arguably sees the octogenarian Kundera capitulating in the face of such interest and, through owning here the most problematic of all his narrators’ confessions, confessing himself that throughout his oeuvre he has been hiding in plain sight—and that far from erasing contentious aspects of his life, his novels are, conversely, littered with them.

Despite initially seeming slight and incoherent, then, this collection is carried by the strong central theme of the ‘encounter’, which, while not as immediately obvious as those of *Testaments Betrayed* and *The Curtain*, is woven with a stronger subtlety and deftness through the text, directly engendering several examples of what it describes, both between Kundera’s readers and his favourite pieces of culture, and between his readers and his usually more enigmatic self.

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