

The Labyrinth of Values: Triangular Desire in Milan Kundera's *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years*

di Trevor Cribben Merrill

In her excellent study, *Kundera or the Memory of Desire*, Eva Le Grand defines desire in Kundera's oeuvre as the capacity for substituting «dreams of a better world ... for reality» for «dressing up the real in an idyllic and ecstatic vision of the world to which one sacrifices without scruple all critical and ethical awareness»¹. From this perspective, desire is quixotic, that is to say it leads to a wish-fulfilling transfiguration of the world, making things appear otherwise than they really are: Don Quixote takes a barber's basin for a magical helmet, a prostitute for a chaste maiden, or a windmill for a giant. In Kundera's novels desire is revealed as a lie, one that feeds the lyrical illusions of youth and gives rise to the siren-song of utopian «kitsch». It screens off the unpleasant aspects of existence, hiding death from view. For Le Grand, the novel reverses the work of desire, undoing the spell that shrouds reality in mirages. She sees Kundera as a demolisher of illusions and his novels as a negation of the twentieth century's most pernicious myths, both personal and political.

In one of Kundera's early stories, *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years*, a young man consults his role model, the expert seducer Havel: he cannot decide whether his girlfriend is beautiful or ugly, cannot decide whether she is worthy of the libertine he aspires to be. When Havel, disgruntled by a series of rejections at the hands of some attractive local women, tells him that he should break up with her and pursue a different erotic object (a plain middle-aged woman), the young man complies at once: he abandons his girlfriend and rushes off to seduce this new quarry.

Le Grand's definition of desire as it functions in Kundera's novels applies nicely here. The young journalist «dresses up the real», taking an unattractive woman for an alluring one. His critical awareness paralyzed, he has no scruples about «sacrificing» his pretty girlfriend on the spur of the moment to Havel's plan, despite his inner qualms and the substitute's lack of beauty. In short, Le Grand traces a faithful picture of desire as it appears in this text, one of seven short stories collected in Kundera's second mature work, *Laughable Loves*². Le Grand's description highlights the notions of substitution, sacrifice, and lack of awareness. The desiring subject is fundamentally blind. All of the features of the story find an echo in her definition. All, that is, but one. There is still one missing ingredient, an ingredient so important and, in this story at least, so obvious that many critics have either missed it or consider it beneath their attention. Le Grand alludes to it when, in the process of refining her definition, she writes: «The very knowledge of the world becomes contaminated, all the more so because it does not rest on real-life feeling, but on an *imitation* of feeling»³. The missing ingredient is imitation, which

¹ E. Le Grand, *Kundera or The Memory of Desire*, tr. Lin Burman, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario 1999, p. 10.

² First published in Czech in 1969 and translated into English by Suzanne Rappaport in 1974. The translation was later revised by the author and Aaron Asher and reissued in 1999.

³ *Ibidem*.

suggests that the desiring subject is at a remove from his desire. He does not fully own the impulses that dictate his actions and transfigure the world. Invoking imitation points to the presence of some admired Other at the origin of desire.

Critics agree that desire is important in Kundera's work but they are missing something essential if they do not take into account its quixotic nature. In *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years* desire is indeed quixotic to the extent that it takes form and acquires intensity and direction under the influence of a prestigious Other. To designate desire as quixotic is also to say that it is triangular, mediated, *mimetic* in the Girardian sense. When the young journalist seeks Havel out at the beginning of the story, it is in hopes of gaining access to his wife, a famous movie actress. Already depressed by his nagging health problems and waning powers of seduction, Havel receives the young man coldly, and this is enough to confer upon him an air of intimidating superiority. The journalist is crushed, and his sense of inferiority grows when he learns that Havel is a libertine whose conquests are the stuff of legend in Bohemia. Over dinner, he tries to redeem himself by showing Havel that he is a connoisseur of women, wine, and cheese. Kundera compares him to a student trying to please the jury during a school examination: the journalist seeks to anticipate his model's wishes and takes his every judgment to heart. In what sense is his desire quixotic? The journalist resembles Don Quixote, enthralled by the exploits of his fictional hero, the world champion of chivalry, Amadis of Gaul. Don Quixote hopes one day to acquire the superhuman prowess of which Amadis appears to be the sole proprietor. Indeed, convinced of the desperate shortage of knights errant in his own era, he wants not so much to equal as to surpass the exploits of his models by bringing back the dead institution of chivalry in a degraded age. He loves Dulcinea only because he believes that in doing so he is adhering to the ideal of knightly perfection embodied by his models. Likewise, the journalist dreams of becoming Don Juan in the age of what Kundera labels «terminal paradoxes», a crepuscular age where the adventure of Don Juanism, which began at the dawn of the Modern Period, is coming to an end. The journalist fantasizes about possessing the arrogant self-assurance exuded by his new master, and he desires the homely female doctor Frantishka because Havel's «genius had entered into him and now dwelled with him»⁴. Instead of traveling in a straight line from subject to object like an arrow, desire makes a detour through the «mediator». Don Quixote desires via Amadis, the journalist via Havel. Havel's desire envelopes its objects in a shimmering halo; his indifference renders them odious. Merely by showing approval or disapproval, the master transforms frogs into princesses and princesses into frogs with the ease of a magician waving his wand⁵.

Don Quixote and the young journalist have much in common. In Cervantes' novel, however, Amadis and the other knights that Don Quixote imitates play the role of transcendent models, impassive, reigning benevolently over their disciple from on high. They cannot judge Don Quixote, who never truly experiences the humiliation of defeat until he is unseated in single combat at the novel's conclusion. Moreover, Dulcinea is a

⁴ M. Kundera, *Laughable Loves*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1974, p. 198.

⁵ In this sense, in addition to a story about the transfiguring power of imitative desire, *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years* is also a meditation on the elusive essence of beauty itself – for can it really be said that the homely female doctor is ugly, provided she appears beautiful in the young journalist's eyes? Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, but rather in the eye of the mediator.

fantasy and there is therefore no possibility that Don Quixote will ever consummate his love for her because she does not exist. With Cervantes, love remains chaste, uncontaminated by the sexuality tintured with cruelty and humiliation that we call *eroticism*. By contrast, Havel intimidates the young man from the very beginning with his virile sexuality. His sadism is the inverted mirror image of the journalist's masochism. The metaphor of the school examination suggests the acolyte's terror, his panicked sense of insecurity, which stands in direct proportion to the master's air of self-confidence. The God has come down to earth and stands in his worshiper's path, ready to deliver a devastating verdict at the slightest provocation.

The young man's request that Havel «check out»⁶ his girlfriend could be read as a parody version of Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband*. In this compact short novel, a widower pesters his late wife's former lover into going with him to visit his pretty young fiancée. The eternal husband is afflicted with a particularly nasty case of what psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian calls the «Waterloo syndrome». The only battles that count in his eyes are the ones he has lost, and he sets himself up for new failures again and again by trying to replay them. He introduces his former rival to his future wife in order to receive confirmation of her desirability, presumably so that he can then snatch victory from the jaws of defeat by vanquishing the blasé Don Juan in head-to-head erotic combat. His hopes are, of course, unfounded, the same causes produce the same effects, and he looks on, miserable, as his fiancée is swept off her feet by the interloper. The eternal husband is the pitiful engineer of his own downfall. *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years* lacks the ferocious satirical power of Dostoevsky's novel, yet the underlying structure is the same, even if Kundera veers away from a direct confrontation between the younger man and his older rival. Kundera sacrifices intensity to comic effect. The theme of the hoax enables him to treat rivalry while at the same time achieving farcical effects of the Cervantes type. We are in the realm of *vaudeville*, but it is a dark vaudeville, a boulevard theater for the twentieth century, with an existential edge

On another level, the story is a send-up of provincial snobbery. Real libertines, the ones from the big city, Havel claims, care little for superficial physical traits like a shapely body or a lovely face. They are after something far more elusive and far more ineffable: «There exists a certain external shapeliness in a woman, which small-town taste mistakenly considers beauty»⁷. Havel proceeds to describe the supposedly luscious legs of Frantishka, the female doctor, embellishing his description with nudges, winks, and allusions to that lady's potent erotic charms. Convinced of Havel's infallibility, the journalist becomes totally infatuated with the woman Havel chooses for him, though he naively confesses that until that moment, it had never occurred to him to look at her «as a woman». That very evening, he visits Frantishka and repeats word for word Havel's encomium of her beauty and shapely legs. The object has been transfigured utterly in the mediator's gaze.

In a key moment in the text, Kundera goes beyond the mere narrative description of imitative desire and formulates conceptually the principle that governs the behavior of his characters: for the journalist, «the world in which he lived was [...] a labyrinth of

⁶ Ivi, p. 177.

⁷ Ivi, p. 187.

values, the worth of which he only quite dimly surmised, and, consequently, illusory values could only become real values when they were *endorsed*⁸. Values do not exist as such until they have been approved by an Other. The «illusory» values are those of the Pascalian *moi haïssable*, unable to believe in the legitimacy of its own desires without the aid of a divine mediator, whereas the «real» values are those of this same mediator. Kundera is fully aware of the mimetic paradox and shows great bravura in his handling of it. With an admirable effort at intellectual synthesis, he is not content to point out the phenomenon but also accounts for it in theoretical terms.

Once we have grasped the most obvious triangular relationship at the heart of the story, it is not difficult to extract the others. The journalist is not the only character to fall victim to the mirage of triangular desire. In his preface to Le Grand's essay on Kundera, Guy Scarpetta mourns the passing of the eighteenth-century libertine's «magnificent sovereignty». He affirms that the supposed libertines of the twentieth century never succeeded in recapturing this «true freedom»⁹. Like Scarpetta, Kundera looks upon the contemporary seducer with a skeptical eye: «Don Juan was a master, while [the contemporary libertine] is a slave», he writes¹⁰. The modern woman is no longer a passive object of desire; she has fought for and acquired the freedom to grant to whomever she chooses what virtue once required her to withhold. This means that the seducer can no longer congratulate himself for having overcome her resistance, and that when she rejects him he no longer has any readily available means of saving face. Women are now active and dangerous threats to masculine erotic supremacy. Doctor Havel has an inflated reputation as a lover. But the women he meets in the little spa town show him nothing but disdain. As René Girard writes, the libertine desires absolute freedom and his insecurity goes hand in hand with this outsized ambition:

Modern vanity dreads nothing more than sheer indifference. The modern egotist is *almost* convinced that he is God. As such he should be invulnerable to all and all should be vulnerable to him [...]. Confronted by an indifferent woman the modern seducer immediately suspects, with *angoisse* in his heart, that she, and not he, is the Divinity¹¹.

When he accosts a woman, Havel wagers his freedom. He is not condemned to be free, as Sartre would say. He feels condemned precisely because he aspires to boundless freedom. This aspiration alone can explain the strange power exerted on him by the indifference of others. One of the women Havel approaches looks to him like a beautiful riding horse, and, the narrator is quick to point out, it is just such women who hold a special attraction for the doctor. The comparison between woman and beast suggests a fundamental and inaccessible otherness – one is reminded of Freud's comparison of the narcissistic woman to an emotionally unavailable cat, or of the ornithological metaphors employed by Proust to describe the «little group» on the Balbec beach or the chiseled face of the Duchesse de Guermantes, which brings to mind a bird of prey. This first metaphor is followed quickly by another. Havel hastens to help

⁸ Ivi, p. 178.

⁹ E. Le Grand, *op. cit.*, p. XVI.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 141.

¹¹ R. Girard, *Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953-2005*, ed. Robert Doran, Stanford Press 2008, p. 36.

the woman put on her coat, but to his dismay she manifests no sign of gratitude. He smiles at her -- she does not return his smile: «Havel felt as if she had slapped him in the face» and is plunged into an even deeper state of depression. The metaphor of the slap is no more arbitrary than the earlier equine metaphor: in evoking physical violence, Kundera confers on the scene a faintly comic yet undeniable sadomasochistic tonality.

In what sense is Havel's desire triangular? Havel imitates the woman's desire: if she appears to desire him, he desires himself as well. Havel is the desiring subject, but also the object of desire -- his own, which is a copy of the woman's. His self-love is at stake. His encounter with the beautiful woman constitutes what the theoreticians call a zero-sum game: if the woman desires herself, she cannot desire Havel. Her lack of desire for him renders him undesirable in his own eyes as well. The current of desire runs along these lines of mediation in a flash. The woman's indifference dismays Havel; his dismay increases her indifference, and Havel feels worse and worse.

Havel's situation is inseparable from a specific era. The eighteenth-century seducer could ascribe a woman's rejection of him to her modesty or prudence. Let us compare, for example, Havel's reaction to that of Meilcour, the hero of *Wanderings of the Heart and Mind* (1736), a classic libertine novel by Crébillon the younger. The protagonist of this first-person novel meets the girl he desires in the Tuileries Garden. He wants to attract her attention but she greets him with sheer indifference:

My unknown beauty had not even noticed me. Her disdain surprised and pained me. Vanity made me think that I did not deserve it [...]. I thought I had been mistaken; and, unable to think badly of myself for long, I imagined that modesty alone had forced her into doing what she had done¹².

Crébillon's hero does not (at least in this passage) experience the hellish after-effects of rejection. He is able to persuade himself that the young woman's indifference reflects her modesty rather than true disdain. Havel, on the other hand, in virtue of his historical situation (women in our era are no longer expected to repel male advances), can no longer attribute his failure to anything but genuine lack of interest. He is therefore forced to *resent* the rejection, which floods him with noxious feelings. In the Communist world described by Kundera, concrete differences – the class system – have been abolished by decree of the regime. The mimetic process reaches a new stage. In his short text on Kundera, René Girard writes: «The games of love and chance described by Marivaux are already programmed, in the novelistic sense, but they are not yet Kafkaesque [...]. As the program without an author gains ground, existence and being become tragic without losing their novelistic lightness, that lightness which becomes *unbearable* in the Kunderian sense»¹³. In the eighteenth century, mimetic desire is still «an aristocratic pastime that affects only a small part of the human soul». In Kundera's masterpieces, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which examine the concrete reality of Soviet Communism, the influence of the model on his imitator is so crushing and all-pervading that it would be no exaggeration to qualify it as «totalitarian». Girard writes: «The collapse of common values leads to a vertiginous increase in the part of our

¹² F. Crébillon, *Les Egarements du coeur et de l'esprit*, Seuil, L'Ecole des loisirs, Paris 1992, p. 79 (my translation).

¹³ R. Girard, *Le jeu des secrets interdits. Au bout du roman: la nouvelle barbarie*, in «Le Nouvel Observateur», 21 Nov. 1986 (my translation).

being condemned to define itself not alone or face to face with an ideal humanity, but in the aleatory combat of little novelistic interactions». Instead of an aristocrat endowed with an *a priori* sacred status, today's seducer is an unstable being whose value is determined by direct suffrage, his mediator a brutal dictator who rules over his psychic life with an iron fist. The light-hearted, playful flirtation of the eighteenth century gives way to *totalitarian marivaudage*.

Havel, as a seducer, is a canny manipulator of mimetic desire. His awareness is on par with that of the novelist himself. But his ruses, reminiscent of advertising, mark him as a bourgeois rather than an aristocratic libertine. The aristocrat overcomes the resistance of his conquests with professions of eternal love. Even in the eighteenth century, when the language of passion begins to wear thin and serves mostly as an ironic mask, an alibi for sexual desire, the man who fails to employ it is unlikely to meet with success. Havel, on the contrary, must convince his conquests that he does *not* love them, or rather that he is loved by someone else. It is only thanks to his wife, the famous movie actress, whom everyone in the little provincial village recognizes, that Havel manages to soothe his bruised ego. Strolling through the streets, he encourages her to kiss him passionately within eyeshot of the villagers. Her presence at his side sends his stock soaring. One of the women who rebuffed him, eager to place herself on equal footing with the actress, now succumbs to his advances, for like all of the other characters in this story, she, too, desires mimetically. And suddenly, now that she has stopped giving him the cold shoulder, Havel no longer wants her. She speaks to him sweetly and looks at him submissively, and he is completely reassured. Her hauteur temporarily destroyed his flattering image of himself as a sexual conquistador. Her humble air restores him to his former glory: he copies her desire for him and begins to desire himself once more. It becomes clear in this moment that Havel is no hedonist; what interests him is metaphysical gratification rather than sensual pleasure. Or, as a character in another early Kundera short story puts it, «eroticism is not only the desire for the body, but to an equal extent a desire for honour. The partner, whom you've won [...] is your mirror, the measure of what you are and what you stand for. In eroticism we seek the image of our own significance and importance»¹⁴.

Many of Kundera's critics in addition to Le Grand have underlined the importance of desire in Kundera's fiction, though without offering an engagement with its triangular nature. Guy Scarpetta and François Ricard are two of Kundera's best readers, and in their critical essays they both emphasize the importance of eroticism, desire, and illusion in his novels. In his essay *Agnes's Final Afternoon*, Ricard briefly discusses the Girardian notion of «conversion» in the opening pages, only to discard it¹⁵. John O'Brien does a good job describing the main outlines of *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years* in his study of Kundera's work and its relationship to feminism and feminist literary criticism. However, he is a little too concerned with condemning Kundera's misogynistic misrepresentations of women to attach much importance to the presence of triangular desire, except to decry Havel's manipulative use of his wife to arouse the interest of the

¹⁴ M. Kundera, *Laughable Loves*, cit., p. 94.

¹⁵ F. Ricard, *Agnes's Final Afternoon*, Harper Perennial, New York 2004.

local women who have snubbed him¹⁶. Indeed, to my knowledge, only one reader has thoroughly explored the triangular interpretation of *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years*: Milan Kundera himself. In a radio appearance with René Girard in 1989, Kundera had the following to say about his short story:

There is a short story that I would not have been able to write if I had read your book on the novel beforehand. Because you talk about a desire that is always inspired by someone else's desire. I wrote a short story called *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years* in which there is a great skirt-chaser who is admired by a young disciple. And he is so dependent on the judgment of his model that he is only capable of being with the women that his model recommends to him. This great Don Juan is so sadistic that he always recommends women who are absolutely ugly. When a young girl is beautiful, he tells him, «No, it's not worth your trouble». And the young man obeys him completely. It's almost the caricature of what you wrote! If I had read your book first, I would have come down with writer's block. I had the twofold pleasure of reading you, and of reading you too late¹⁷.

The testimony of the author is not essential, but it is far from negligible either. It reinforces the textual evidence: *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years* is about triangular desire, about the relationship between model and disciple, the transfiguration of the object, and the forgetting of the mediator's influence by the subject. Kundera describes the workings of desire in such laughably obvious fashion that the word «caricature» certainly applies. The literary text operates here at a level beyond that of the criticism it inspires. We are living in an era of overblown, hypertrophied mimetic desire and Kundera's story reflects this, while the critics' silence demands interpretation. Is it a mere oversight or does it speak to an unwillingness to repeat what the literary text has already outlined so explicitly? In cases where the revelation of triangular desire has become the text's reason for being, criticism can scarcely hope to shed light on the paradoxes of desire by approaching them with a theoretical grid (linguistic, psychoanalytic, or otherwise) foreign to their internal logic. We have outlived the era of the «intentional fallacy» and the «death of the author». Every author undoubtedly has blind spots. Social constraints, unconscious forces, and reader participation play a role in literary creation. But in some cases the author manages to achieve a distance from the influence of the Other and to make this distance manifest in his work. Authors who have become conscious of the workings of triangular desire know, at least to a certain degree, exactly what they are about, insofar as they are no longer prisoners of the romantic system that they are describing in their works. This, of course, does not mean that these authors are not still mystified on some other level corresponding to a still more advanced stage of the mimetic process, blinded to their submission to Manichean or romantic schema that remain beyond them. In the case of *Dr. Havel After Twenty Years*, however, the author's interpretation goes beyond that of even his most perspicacious critics, and it is for this reason that I have adopted it here.

Sommario

¹⁶ J. O'Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections*, Saint Martin's Press, New York 1995.

¹⁷ «Tout arrive», encounter between Milan Kundera and René Girard (my translation), «France Culture», 11 November 1989 (<http://yrol.free.fr/LITTERA/GIRARD/entretien.htm>).

Sin dall'uscita di *Menzogna romantica e verità romanzesca*, pubblicato da René Girard nel 1961, sappiamo che il desiderio non è spontaneo ma imitativo, come preso in prestito da un modello. In *Dottor Havel vent'anni dopo*, un racconto tratto dalla raccolta *Amori ridicoli* (1970), Milan Kundera dà una descrizione caricaturale del funzionamento del desiderio triangolare. In una città balneare della Boemia, un giovane giornalista subisce il fascino di un grande seduttore, il dottor Havel, che lo convince a sedurre una donna laida. Nel farci riflettere sulla natura stessa della bellezza, Kundera formula in maniera concettuale la legge del desiderio triangolare e si abbandona ad una meditazione sulla sorte del libertino moderno in un'epoca in cui l'avventura del dongiovannismo finalmente si conclude.