

## Late Review 1

Dílo Milana Kundery v překladech / Œuvre de Milan Kundera et sa traduction” (2019)  
The French Monumental Milan in Light of the ‘Aragon Complex’ of the ‘Kundera agency’  
[with a focus on the French public life of his  
first novel *Žert / La Plaisanterie / The Joke*]

### PART 1 : RUN-UPS, LEAD-UPS AND CONTEXTS (1)

#### A crucial run-up: Aragon’s Legs Rushing to Moscow

Four years later [Louis Aragon’s] legs took him to  
Moscow to receive a decoration from Brezhnev ...  
from Milan Kundera’s Preface to the 1982  
English translation of his novel *The Joke*<sup>1</sup>

Quelques années plus tard, ses jambes, tout  
obéissamment, l’ont emmené à Moscou où il s’est laissé  
décorer par Brejnev ... <sup>2</sup>  
from Milan Kundera’s “Note d’auteur” in the  
1985 and 1993 “Du monde entier” versions of  
his novel *La Plaisanterie*<sup>3</sup>

Bohužel, několik let po našem setkání ho jeho nohy do  
Ruska přece je donesly, aby tam mohl převzít od  
Brežneva nějaký metál.<sup>4</sup>  
from Milan Kundera’s author’s note in all Brno  
Atlantis editions of his novel *Žert [The Joke]*  
from 1991 to 2023<sup>5</sup>

The three mottos of this first section of my text represent three versions of the same narrative presented in three “author’s notes” accompanying editions of Milan Kundera’s first novel “The Joke”. The core event contained in the narrative is false or perhaps even fabricated. The factual bare bones of the events in the narrative are as follows: Milan Kundera met with Louis Aragon in Paris in October of 1968 after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia of August 1968 while presenting the French translation of his first novel, entitled *La Plaisanterie*. Then comes Kundera’s narrative, which is partially uncorroborated, and partially demonstrably false. As the story goes,

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<sup>1</sup> “Author’s note”, in: Milan Kundera: *The Joke*, translated by Michael Heim, London 1982, here; vii.

<sup>2</sup> A few years later, his [i.e. Louis Aragon’s] legs, quite obediently, took him to Moscow where he let himself be decorated by Brezhnev... [translation by H.M.]

<sup>3</sup> “Note de l’auteur” (397-401), in: Milan Kundera: *La Plaisanterie*, Paris 1985, here : 398-399

<sup>4</sup> “Unfortunately, a few years after our meeting, his [i.e. Louis Aragon’s] legs took him to Russia, so that he could accept some kind of medal from Brežnev” [translation by H.M.]

<sup>5</sup> “Poznámka autora” (358-367), in: Milan Kundera: *Žert*, 8th printing of the 2017 version, Brno 2023, here: 363-364.

Kundera witnessed Aragon being terribly upset, indeed one might even say hysterical, about said invasion. The pinnacle of Aragon's excitement was, according to the story, expressed in the writer's solemn resolve that, even if he wanted to go, his legs would never again take Aragon, a frequent Soviet traveler since the 1930s, to Moscow (in some versions: "to Russia"). That is the uncorroborated part. But let us assume Aragon said this in Kundera's presence.

Then comes the part which is demonstrably false: After this lead-up, one reads some form of the sentence quoted in three versions in the three mottos, which is something like the punchline of a joke: Aragon's legs, according to the narrative, did indeed to Russia not long after, "he let himself be decorated by Brezhnev", as the first (English language) version of the narrative goes.

In reality, Aragon did not receive a medal in Moscow "several" or "four" years later, indeed at any time between 1968 and his death in 1982. What actually occurred is that Aragon was, in October of 1972, on the occasion of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, awarded the "Order of the October Revolution"<sup>6</sup> in the Soviet embassy in Paris (it was a maximally 10 minute walk from Aragon's home on rue de Varenne to 79 rue de Grenelle where the embassy was then located). Since Brezhnev was not in Paris at the time (he visited Paris in November of 1971, but not in November of 1972<sup>7</sup>), he could not have given Aragon the medal personally.<sup>8</sup> This false or fabricated story is told in the author's

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<sup>6</sup> "Established 31 October 1967 in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution. Awarded to Soviet citizens, enterprises, organizations, and other collective groups of workers, military units, and provinces, counties, and cities of the republics. The order is bestowed for active revolutionary activities, large contributions to the strengthening and expansion of the government, outstanding merits in the building of socialism and the building of communism; also for outstanding courage and gallantry demonstrated in combat and meritorious service in strengthening the national defense of the Soviet State. The order may be awarded to foreign nationals." (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070117131807/http://www.soviethonors.com/Order-of-October-Revolution.htm>) The wikipedia article notes: "It is the second-highest Soviet order, after the Order of Lenin."

<sup>7</sup> <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1971/11/06/79163812.html?pageNumber=30>

<sup>8</sup> Jan Novák quotes surveillance materials of the Czechoslovak secret police which have Kundera describing a visit with Aragon prize after Aragon had a car accident (most probably the serious accident Aragon had while driving on the Place de la Concorde on January 18. 1974 - *Oeuvres romanesques complètes* V : LXVIII). According to the Czechoslovak secret police surveillance report as recounted by Novák, Kundera described Aragon as claiming to have gotten the medal personally from Brezhnev in Paris and was proudly showing it around (Jan Novák: *Kundera. Český život a doba*, Prague 2020, 748). In Novák's account, and most probably in the Czechoslovak secret police surveillance report as well, the medal is mistakenly called the Order of Lenin, which Aragon never received. Aragon did receive the "Lenin Peace Prize" (established in 1949 for non-Soviet citizens) in Moscow in 1957, which is not the same thing as the Lenin Prize (established in 1925 mainly for Soviet citizens). Aragon most certainly not received the award of 1957 personally from Brezhnev, who did not yet perform such representative functions at that time. The most logical explanation for all this is that Kundera's French was not good enough to understand exactly what Aragon was saying in 1974. Aragon's award was specifically justified with reference to his many years of work for French-Soviet peaceful cooperation (*Oeuvres romanesques complètes* V: LXXI). Since this was, as the New York Times

note of every Brno Atlantis edition of *Žert* [*The Joke*] from 1991 to the latest one published in 2023 (in its eighth identical edition since 2017), the year of Kundera's death – from there comes the third version quoted above.

One could go to great lengths to discuss why the USSR awarded Aragon that medal in October of 1972 and to figure out why Aragon accepted that award on Soviet embassy territory after railing in no uncertain terms against the Soviet led invasion of Czechoslovakia of 1968.

After Aragon died on Christmas Eve, 1982, the *New York Times* formulated a plausible explanation in its obituary published on Christmas day (section 1, p. 28) of that year. The obituary describes Aragon's opposition to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and its consequences for his periodical *Les lettres françaises*, of which he had been the editor in chief since 1953: "After he wrote an editorial warning against muzzling Czechoslovak intellectuals, circulation of the publication was barred in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. It was a serious blow, and the magazine succumbed in 1972." The obituary described this as a "punishment" by the Soviet authorities followed by an "olive branch" in the form of the Soviet medal award in October/November 1972. It also notes: "The citation hailed [Aragon's] role in 'strengthening French-Soviet relations of friendship.' Even so, he did not immediately visit Moscow, where he had once been a frequent guest."<sup>9</sup>

Those details, however, are not the point here. I note them only to show how simply accessible the facts of the matter are. One could also speculate about the reasons the publishing house Atlantis in Kundera's home town Brno has in over 30 years not bothered to fact check, i.e. to see if the story of the 1972 trip to Russia story was true, and to inform its readers of the falsehood of the statement (or at least to somehow note that the "author's note" is in some places more fiction

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obituary correctly states, an olive branch offered by the Soviet leadership despite Aragon's critique of some Soviet policies of the late 60s and early 70s, one can understand Aragon's satisfaction with the gesture. Kundera, if the reports are correct, seems to have taken recounting the story as an occasion to make Aragon look ridiculous.

<sup>9</sup> The entire obituary is available here: <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/12/25/obituaries/obituary-lousi-aragon-french-poet-and-prominent-communist-dies-at-85.html>.

than fact). In doing this, the Brno publishing house has potentially let a generation of Czech readers of the novel believe this fictional account to be factual.

We are dealing here with something which is not terribly difficult to do, considering the huge amount of literature on Aragon, including the readily accessible editions of Aragon's works at the prestigious Gallimard *Bibliothèque de Pléiade*. The biographical data on Aragon in that edition notes clearly the circumstances of the awarding of this medal in early October of 1972, allowing him to celebrate his birthday (he turned 75 on October 3) technically on Soviet territory. In addition, as noted, the *New York Times* obituary just quoted is readily available on the internet.

What is important here is the fact that the Brno publisher continues to this day to propagate something which is false and is most probably simply an opportune lie which Kundera viewed to be an integral part of the "note" of the author, since it remained in all three versions. This is a fact (of blatant and defamatory non-factuality) which tells us something about officially sanctioned materials which emerged with and around the publications of Milan Kundera, particularly during Kundera's lifetime, which ended a year ago. These materials are my subject here. This is the broader context in which the text which follows is located: the discussion of a book (in this case a bibliography) also located within those authoritatively author sanctioned 'Kunderian officialdom'. This particular false or fabricated anecdote about Aragon's legs is particularly important for this text, since I am arguing that the framing and "containing" (as I will say later, the "screen remembering") of the Aragonian connection to Kundera's emergence on the French market and thus also on the world market is a crucial factor in the evolution of Kundera's accounts of that emergence. This, in turn, is something which directly shapes important aspects of said bibliography. Aragon's lower limbs as instruments of a grand verbal gesture of a grand Parisian author in 1968:<sup>10</sup> the manner in which they are presented lends an unflattering, i.e. an anti-heroic and ridiculous appearance to the French Communist writer who 'owned' those legs/jambes/nohy.

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<sup>10</sup> See my article: *Gesta s kloboukem, gender, žánr a (Beethovenova) hudba v díle Milana Kundery. Anihilace ideologie a ideologie anihilace / Kundera Hat Gestures, Gender, Genre and (Beethoven's) Music. The Erasure of Ideology and the Ideology of Erasure*, in *Gesta síly / Gestures of Power*, Zlín 2024, 91-134.

Those who know the novel with which Kundera marked his idiosyncratic breaking with the Czechoslovak Communist regime in the late 1970s, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, might compare the motif of those legs in Kundera's Aragon narrative to the hat of Vladimir Clementis on Gottwald's head which the Kundera's novel used as the epitome of historical oblivion produced by totalitarian historiography. There, the hat of Clementis on Klement Gottwald's head represents a trace in widely distributed propaganda photos of a man later killed by Gottwald's Stalinist apparatus, and then erased from the photo itself.

And Aragon's legs in Kundera's depiction? They not only show Aragon racing to Moscow at every opportunity in attempt to humiliate the hero of the "résistance intérieure française" (indeed the heroic résistance couple Aragon-Triolet). The motif is a discursive trace of the French author, if Aragon actually spoke those words quoted in the French author's note of 1985 as: « Même si moi je voulais y aller, mes jambes le refuseront ! ». This phrase, invented by Kundera or not, this expression of the most fundamental and total rejection of the invasion, becomes a metonymy which Kundera ran wild with. The legs became a concretization of the lex Kundera of convenient truth.

That said (and here we see that an untruth like this contains a kind of truth) the image, on the surface, is not completely implausible. One can speak of a continual displacement to Russia, even to Russian, in Aragon's case. This was represented by Aragon's frequent trips to Moscow and other places in the USSR, by his physically and discursively omnipresent Russian Jewish wife Elsa Triolet to whom he dedicated many many works, but also by the direct presence of Russian themes and even Russian words in his literary works, including the 1965 novel *Mise à mort*.<sup>11</sup> Kundera takes Aragon's discursive legs and makes them into an instrument of satire and ridicule, indeed of humiliation. The person humiliated is a monumental French writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with whom Kundera shared the sun of the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*. In a way, Kundera piggybacked over

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<sup>11</sup> In this context one can refer to the several quotes from Puškin's *Ergenij Onegin* written in cyrillic letters (*Oeuvres romanesques complètes* V : 56, 59, 183) in the middle of the French text.

Aragon's monumentality in an attempt to achieve his own, pushing Aragon's head down a painfully and embarrassingly hard against his own proud French-writer chest.

The motif of the legs is highly representative and highly interesting from a rhetorical point of view. As for the latter, lower limbs transfer their lowness by analogy onto the entire person of Aragon, thus denigrating him.

As in the case of Czechoslovak Stalinist narratives about their putsch of 1948, the authority in charge of official narrations banked on no one particularly caring, as well as few or no Czech readers even being able to determine if Aragon's legs actually took him to Russia in 1972. The author(ity) was also banking on the unwillingness (or perhaps even legal inability) of his Brno publisher to publicly point out the 'mistake'. As far as I can tell, this correction is happening for the first time in this text here. The authority supporting the convenient falsehood being corrected here was not the PARTY<sup>12</sup>, or any large apparatus, but rather a lone novelist getting "a little help from his friends" (i.e. assisted by the 'Kunderian agents' whom I will be discussing below). Ironically, the authority was a novelist who was known to the broader public of the 70s, 80s and 90s for doggedly insisting that we fight falsifications produced by people in absolute power, i.e. for being the dissident he never really was<sup>13</sup>. Here, however, it is Kundera himself who is in power, more specifically his official post-1989 persona which he was expressly defining in the Czech version of the author's note, said at the end of the text to be written in "Saint Jacques sur mer" [sic] in January of 1990). Kundera is operating in this particular sphere, one of his own making, the core of which is a French readership having practically no access to Czech and the Czech

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<sup>12</sup> In the context of my research project I write the name of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, indeed all Moscow-led Communist Parties in the Soviet sphere on influence, in this way in order to make clear that they are in my view not to be considered political parties – in contrast to Communist parties such as entered or enter into the electoral process such as in France to this day, or in the Czech republic since the 1990s - but rather as purely administrative instruments for the brutally violent exercise of absolute power.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Bolton's standard work on the Czech dissident movement, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*, Cambridge (Mass.) 2012, does not include Milan Kundera as a personal participant in the dissident movement, since Kundera as an emigrant was not considered to be part of the opposition in the country which is what defines a dissident.

readership having little access to French<sup>14</sup>, as the fate of the Aragon narrative in Czech publications with its decades long uncorrected falsehood shows. In this sphere, Aragon's legs go wherever Kundera wants them to go, be it "Moscow" (in the English and French versions) or "Russia" (in the constantly reprinted Czech version).

In the modest but potent sphere of Kundera's hegemony, not as large as the Soviet one was, but controlled with all the more dictatorial strictness, Aragon's legs, and thus his whole body, interred in the same year 1982 at the mill Villeneuve of St.-Arnoult-en-Yvelines next to that of his twelve years deceased wife, were at the Brno writer's disposal. In the "author's note" whose first version emerged in the year of Aragon's (and of Brežnev's) death, and whose Czech version has been in circulation for at least 32 years, those legs will now have been eternally going "to Russia". They are as such a symptomatic element of the official Kundera, of 'Kunderian officialdom'.

Turning now to Kundera himself, as opposed to the agents who make up Kunderian officialdom, I note that would be false to limit the argumentation on these "author's notes" to a critique of peddling falsehoods. Two constructive aspects need to be underscored: genre and translation.

The message of the Brno Atlantis book has presented to Czech readers for 32 years between 1991 and 2023 is a double-edged sword. The publisher is, on the one hand, playing a cynical game with the ignorance of most of the Czech readership. On the other hand, the presence of this "author's note" for an entire generation makes it part of the novel, which calls into question the factuality of the individual statements. The false account of the 75 year old Aragon's rushing to Russia to grovel to Brežnev in Kundera's "writer's note" in a sense became a new 1990 fiction added to the 1967-1968 fictional work in the Czech 'original' of *Žert [The Joke]* (now in the meantime declared to be subordinate to the French *La plaisanterie*, the 'new original' with all of its massive deviations from the Czech original). Pointing out this configuration serves as an apt run-up to my account of

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<sup>14</sup> See my review article of Jan Novak's book, where I describe the systematic division of Milan Kundera's readerships - <https://www.fabula.org/acta/document13883.php>

this ‘Kunderian officialdom’, particularly in France, but also in the Brno/Paris consortium behind the bibliography under review.

One sees here that the agents of Kunderian officialdom sometimes lag behind the games of their leader, perhaps not entirely grasping them, and in any case slavishly re-printing semi-fictional accounts such as the “author’s note” for decades and – most likely unintentionally - passing them off for facts. They thus sell their readers a text whose genre is not an accompanying factual paratext, but rather a continuation of the fiction of the novel it accompanies.

Secondly, there is the issue of translation. Let us briefly look at the – ironically – last version of the “author’s note”, the one published in Kundera’s native tongue Czech (one can assume that both other ones, particularly the first one in English of 1982, were in some way written in Czech and then translated by an unknown hand).

“Unfortunately, a few years after our meeting, his [i.e. Louis Aragon’s] legs took him to Russia, so that he could accept some kind of medal from Brežnev.” Thus my translation of the Czech version of the “legs account”. There are numerous aspects of this Czech formulation which could be studied in detail here. I will do this in another text on this Czech version of the “Author’s Note” as a whole, and here just note three things.

Firstly, one sees that, like the French version, the Czech version changes the “four years” of the English version (pointing directly to 1972) to “several years”, “quelques années”. This was perhaps done in order to make the account a bit fuzzier and more difficult to fact check. Secondly, the Czech version steps back from the truly insulting comment on the “obedience” in the French version (“tout obéissamment”). Instead, thirdly, the decision is made to start the whole phrase with “Unfortunately” (“Bohužel”).<sup>15</sup> The pathos of this word becomes hollow and absurd given the fact that what follows is not true. But, as is this case of many words addressing the Czech audience from France (more specifically from the impossible to locate “St. Jacques sur mer”), one

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<sup>15</sup> I thank my colleague Anna Förster for underscoring the importance of this detail.



asks oneself who is talking to whom here. Whose misfortune is being addressed in the word “unfortunately”? That of Aragon? That of the Communist movement? That of the French? The Czechs? That of some kind of general historical justice? Or most likely – that of Milan Kundera himself who feigns bitter disappointment at Aragon’s behavior, while in reality understanding better than anyone else the mechanisms of party discipline.

Be that as it may, there is nothing more symptomatic of the fuzzy reference of texts propagated by Kunderian officialdom than this “unfortunately”/“bohužel” – propagated in the name of an author who his disciples depict as a master of “precision”.

One last comment in my introductory remarks to the “late review”, also related to translation: The publication which is under review in this article is a one of several recent French-Czech hybrid publications (and publicity activities) initiated by the Moravian Library in Brno.<sup>16</sup> These publications sometimes have an eerie Brno-Paris double identity which places them neither here nor there. One can see this as an echo of the odd cultural location of the “unfortunately”/“bohužel” just discussed.

This double identity could theoretically be – and most probably is meant to be - a sign of border-crossing universality, something which would be helpful in a bibliography designed for international use. However, in the case of the Aragonian presences and absences in the bibliography (this being most probably the last denigration of Aragon in Kunderian officialdom during Milan Kundera’s lifetime), the intended universality is a symptom of a collective of Kunderian agents which banked (literally, since commerce was at stake) on the mutual ignorance of readers based in Brno (Prague, Ostrava, etc.) and in Paris about the respective others’ sphere of

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<sup>16</sup> The two most prominent are the French-Czech annotated bibliography of translations of Czech literature into French between 1989 and 2020, *La littérature tchèque et ses traductions en français (1989-2020) / Česká literatura ve francouzských překladech (1989-2020)*, ed. X. Galmiche et. al., Brno 2021 and *Únos Západu aneb laboratoř soumraku*, ed. T. Kubíček, Brno 2022 (published also in an English translation as *A kidnapped West: the laboratory of twilight*, Brno 2023), a series of essays on the occasion of the republication of Kundera’s essay “Un occident kidnappé”, something I will be discussing in a separate article.

knowledge. An example of that mutual ignorance is Atlantis Brno's mindlessly reproducing the false story of Aragon's legs in 1972.

This story is part of Milan Kundera's echoes and mirrorings of the Bolshevik utopia which had long since become dystopic when it arrived in full force on the banks of the Moldau in Prague and the Svatka in Brno in February 1948. One should not forget that this was the year *after* Milan Kundera and his father Dr. Ludvík<sup>17</sup> had joined the ranks of its PARTY of which Dr. Ludvík, as well as Milan's temporary Parisian father Louis, remained a loyal member to their deaths in 1971 and 1982 respectively. One should also remember that Milan Kundera never intentionally departed from the PARTY's ranks, but was twice ejected from them, in 1950 and in .... 1972.

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<sup>17</sup> It is helpful to call Milan Kundera's father "Dr. Ludvík" in order for him not to be confused with the writer and translator Ludvík Kundera, Milan's cousin. He will be an important figure in the continuation of this text.