

Pia Masiero

Velichka Ivanova. *Fiction, utopie, histoire. Essai sur Philip Roth et Milan Kundera.*

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- 1 Ivanova ambitiously proposes and successfully manages to read Philip Roth's and Milan Kundera's works along comparatistic lines. The comparison between Milan Kundera and Philip Roth is certainly not new and stems directly from the two authors' knowing each other personally (starting in the 1970s). Roth wrote the introduction to Kundera's *Laughable Loves* back in 1974, he dedicated *The Ghost Writer* (1979) to him and invokes his presence mentioning his name in *The Human Stain* in 2000. The most notable and extended critical treatment (in English) of the two writers' relationship to date comes from Ross Posnock's *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (2006). Kundera is one of the chief interlocutors Posnock sets Roth in conversation with. According to Posnock "Kundera and Roth share an abiding suspicion of lyricism and utopian thinking, of pastoral and idylls, all fantasies of regression cultivated by totalitarianism (and, for Roth, by American exceptionalism) to erase the past and sanitize the present" (63). They furthermore both explore "the individual's complicity" (63) with idyllic (and naive) constructions. Ivanova - although referring explicitly to Posnock's work just in passing - takes up the American scholar's work indirectly and proposes her own piece of comparatistic reading which will end up illuminating some of Posnock's own ideas on the two authors. Whereas Posnock's juxtaposition aims at demonstrating Roth's cosmopolitan range, Ivanova concentrates her critical endeavour on an analysis of those novels by the two authors which revolve around a recognizable link to history.
- 2 Ivanova's selection falls on four novels by Kundera "forming a continuity both chronological and thematic" (15) - *The Joke* (1967), *Life is Elsewhere* (1973), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) - and on what she calls Roth's "United States tetralogy" (15) - *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), *The Human Stain* (2000) and *The Plot Against America* (2004).
- 3 Ivanova convincingly demonstrates that even if neither writer actually intended to write historical cycles, a retrospective apprehension of the chosen "tetralogies" shows a noticeable thematic unit centering on History. More specifically, Ivanova's analysis is guided by two interrelated questions: how do Roth and Kundera manage to articulate life in a more authentic and precise way than historiography itself? How do they succeed in conveying (historically determined) human experience? As the title of the book itself indicates, Ivanova will answer these questions plunging deep into the two writers' respective arts of fiction.
- 4 Divided by completely different socio-historical contexts, Roth and Kundera share the same unshakable belief in the novel's ability to illuminate and understand history through its very reinvention. The common perception of belonging to a long-standing novelistic tradition away from and beyond historically determined precincts is explored in the first chapter which is tellingly devoted to Franz Kafka, a veritable literary forefather for both authors. The Kafkian themes Ivanova lists - the impotent individual, the persecutory spirit, self-accusation, the violation of private life, the double - are all briefly presented in reference to the novels she has chosen. Well beyond these specific echoes, Ivanova suggests that Kundera considered Kafka's work as "exemplary of the novel's autonomy" (27) and that Roth aimed at understanding "the compensatory role that imagination plays in the modern artist" (31) through Kafka's example.
- 5 The second chapter - Counter-Utopias - defines the parallel concepts of Idyll in Kundera and of Pastoral in Roth. Ivanova follows in the tracks of the two authors' narrative choices to demonstrate how both recognize in their respective historical and sociological contexts the same penchant for illusory Edenic dreams and how both stress the inherent danger of such blind interpretations of reality. The different variations of the interplay between promise and illusion, dream and reality, collective dream and individual dream are keenly presented by Ivanova who shows character after character (for example Ira Ringold in *I*

Married a Communist and Franz in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, or Merry Levov in *American Pastoral* and the young revolutionists in *Life is Elsewhere*) and scene after scene, interesting and unexpected echoes between the two authors. Communist Czechoslovakia is not so different from McCarthyist America, after all and “the rare occurrence of the expected” (the verse by W. C. Williams appearing as the second epigraph to *American Pastoral*) could well be considered as describing the unstable and illusory quality of every rational project built by Kundera’s characters. Ivanova illustrates through careful cross-textual analyses how both authors deem it crucial to escape “the influence of the collectivity to access an individual identity and to free artistic creativity” (139). They furthermore share, according to Ivanova, the same skepticism about unconditional political involvement and the same implacable derision of lyric attitudes which they both stigmatize through irony deployed by means of “the simple confrontation of voices” (141). Ivanova rightly attributes to the interplay of different voices questioning history and its interpretation the polyphonic quality typical of Roth’s and Kundera’s styles. What Ivanova calls “polyphonic writing” opens up an interactive field allowing the reader “to collaborate in the author’s reinvention of History” (234).

- 6 The third and last chapter - Writing the Real - takes up the aesthetic theme which had already surfaced in the course of the two preceding chapters and examines it more thoroughly. Ivanova had presented ample evidence of the two authors’ overall view of the novel as the place of freedom, of exploration, of questioning, of choice, of reinvention; she now focuses more explicitly on those thematic structures which represent Roth’s and Kundera’s “opposition to History” (161). She lists four such structures - the theme of the conformist integrated bourgeois, the theme of young people facing an unexpected history, the theme of the militant idealists, the theme of the perpetual reinterpretation of the past - which she analyzes in detail. The fourth theme allows her to explore the different narratological choices which formally sustain the thematic quest for truth both on the individual and the historical level. Here Ivanova offers an illuminating comparison between the two authors’ different methods of integrating the real and the fictional (a vexed and complex issue in both authors’ scholarship), which dispels the (simplistic) temptation to consider the search for realistic effects the core of Roth’s and Kundera’s preoccupations. These thematic analyses lead Ivanova to highlight the differences between Roth and Kundera: whereas the former relies on a clearly recognizable main character and centers his novels on a central intrigue giving it an overall epic tonality, the latter privileges the marginalization of the main character renouncing to a clear spelling out of the central motif within an overall inclination to a musical construction. The pages Ivanova devotes to the role of the narrator and of the characters demonstrate her narratological competence and her skill at explaining complex matters in a simple and readable way.
- 7 Ivanova shows to be always aware that the word influence is not the most appropriate to describe the relationship between Kundera and Roth: throughout her acute and fresh close-readings, she is rather guided by the belief that intertextual analyses may shed useful light on both authors’ unique narrative worlds - dialogically. The result is a solid achievement and a valuable contribution to the field of both Roth and Kundera scholarship.

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About the author

Pia Masiero

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

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