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Remainders of Fascism and Communism: Ethical and Political Dilemmas in Narratives of Diaspora

Une chose était sûre: des milliers d'émigrés, pendant la même nuit, en d'innombrables variants, rêvaient tous le même rêve. Le rêve d'émigration: l'un des phénomènes les plus étranges de la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle.
(Kundera 1986: p. 21)

THE EXPULSION OR EMIGRATION of individuals and communities from their original homeland is a common denominator of conquest, imperialism, colonial and anti-colonial wars but also, in the 20th century, of the establishment of fascist and communist regimes. Where there is a diaspora, there invariably looms the question of return, as dream, nightmare, or both at once. Whatever the political situations enabling or disabling repatriation may be, the historical understanding of the effects of departure and return on the individual is incomplete without recourse to literary narratives of diaspora. Though the particular oppression and violence of fascist and communist regimes generate alienation – physical, cultural and/or psychological – of the dissenting individual towards their original community and homeland, their impact on the individual's sense of self and communal identity, and the negotiations through which they will decide for or against return, will be unique to each personal situation.

Thomas Bernhard's novel *Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall* and Milan Kundera's novel *L'Ignorance* are equally insistent on the value, right and duty of personal reflection and subjective judgment despite the overwhelming pressures of impersonal socio-historical forces and the condemnation that may be accrued due to current and traditional beliefs. With the dissolution of fascism and communism in Austria and Czechoslovakia respectively, these narratives can be counted as

testaments of the lingering effects of the deposed regimes, “remainders” of the effects of their ideologies, but they should also serve as permanent *reminders* of the complex undecidability and fragile yet tenacious insistence on continuity peculiar to human identity and inherent to its political matrix.

On the ethical level, the characters in both novels seek the “just balance”, or otherwise, the decision to return will reflect not only emotional attachments, perceived as needs, but also ethical responsibility towards one’s one history, always *vis-à-vis* the cruelty of History, which does not proceed according to the general vector of the truths, justice, needs or desires of the totality of personal histories. The subjective reality of the individual is occluded by the force of history but finds its refuge in the literary work. Whether one returns to one’s native land, putting the violent rupture of fascism or communism behind them, or chooses to continue living in the new home one has made elsewhere, the break with a certain continuity, with a period of one’s life, will not be avoided and, therefore, the story of the life that is abandoned will demand narration to fill the lacuna and justify the choice; both functions are felt as foundational for the present and future of the individual forging their identity in a conscious manner with respect to the community they elect to return to or remain with and also with respect to the one they forfeit.

Thomas Bernhard’s Franz-Josef Murau and Milan Kundera’s Irena and Josef produce an ideological discourse in response to the ideologies that formed their personal and collective histories. Thus the ideological experiments of fascism and communism construct highly self-aware ideological subjects. Those whose lives were touched by fascism and communism invariably are forced to take a position *vis-à-vis* these ideologies and so their personal narratives are both ideological and hence polemical, in a way that other personal literary narratives are not. Yet the sense in which the term “ideological” is to be understood differs crucially in these novels. To appreciate this difference, we may turn to the work of two philosophers who provide effective theoretical tools in their critical analyses of ideology: Paul Ricœur and Agnes Heller. Ricœur defines «the two phenomena of ideology and utopia within a single conceptual framework» designated as «a theory of cultural imagination» (Ricœur 1986, p. 308). Rather than describe ideology and utopia as «the inverse of each other», Ricœur argues that they «dialectically imply each other» and that «one cannot work without the other» (Ricœur 1986, p. 322, 323). Ricœur also puts forward a reconsideration of ideology and utopia that posits both a negative or “pathological” potential and a positive or “healthy”

function of each: when the one is used to harness and critique the dangerous tendencies of the other. In Ricœur's framework, fascism would illustrate the dysfunctioning of ideology (by its overvaluation and hegemony), while communism would stand for the dysfunctioning of utopia. Without this being in any sense an adequate description or definition of either fascism or communism (the study of both is still incomplete in social, historical, political and other theoretical discourses)¹, Ricœur's reconsideration of the work on ideology and utopia at the very least prompts questions on how one may negotiate a critical attitude given the inextricable entanglement in (and of) these discourses. The advantages of the novel primarily emerge, as Bakhtin has shown us, from its ability to consider the politico-historical in a variety of discourses yet through the prism of the subjective and individual.

How, then, do the protagonist/narrator in *Extinction* and the omniscient narrator in *L'Ignorance* manage to navigate without becoming immersed in the pathological versions of either ideology or utopia within which their narrators and protagonists were situated by force of circumstance? With great suspicion against any general coordinates of identity, it would seem; sifting through the stereotypical discourses of nation, *Heimat*, tradition, in order to reject any elements that may be amenable to the imperialist tendencies of "grand narratives", and embracing everywhere the manifestation of immediate and local personal affinities and the struggle of the individual for freedom to exercise their own will in choosing a personal destiny. In order to counter the insidious effects of noxious ideological formations and to guard against reactively falling into another pathological ideology, the narrative employs what Agnes Heller describes as «philosophical value discussion» and the narrators expose, covertly or overtly, the «ideological nature of their values» (Heller 1987: p. 135). The novels invite further personal reflection on these by making philosophical value discussion and critical self-reflection on the ideological nature of one's values the most significant element of the plot, inescapable to the reader's attention, since they make up a large portion of the text and are decisive factors in the trajectory of narrative action.

What is the prime mover for the trope of the return to the country of origin? The obligation, imposed on one by others, or one's one feeling of nostalgia, or even, as Kundera maintains, the weight of that archetypal text of return, the Homeric *Odyssey*. Nostalgia is an ancient

¹ See, for instance the works by Griffin, Kershaw and Bessel.

malady of the soul or, as Kundera suggests, antiquated. As such, it sits with difficulty on the personal agenda of modern individuals. Even Josef, who clearly has no desire or guilt associated with his Czech homeland, is interpreted by his old friend, N., as exhibiting an incomprehensible degree of love for one's country for an unrepentant émigré and also by the standards of the Czech youth of the day (Kundera 2003: p. 144-145). How can one identify a diaspora when one is unable to answer the questions that Josef poses to his old friend: «Dis-moi, est-ce que c'est encore notre pays?» and, «est-ce que quelqu'un aime encore ce pays?» (Kundera 2003: p. 144-145)

Everything changes, even the sound of the native language, after twenty years, when Josef returns. If so, nostalgia is a yearning for a non-existent *Heimat* and a “return” would be impossible for human beings. Kundera's novel suggests that return may be the best anti-dote to nostalgia: «on pense toujours à la douleur de la nostalgie; mais ce qui est pire, c'est la douleur de l'alienation; [...] Seul le retour au pays natal après une longue absence peut dévoiler l'étrangeté substantielle du monde et de l'existence». Does that mean nostalgia and return are predicated on the denial of alterity in our spatio-temporal existence? Can the desire to return be reconciled with Emmanuel Levinas' proposition of the ethical paradigm of Moses – going out of his native land never to return? Certainly, Levinas is making a metaphoric usage of myth in order to make the point of an alternative thinking and experiencing of alterity that would not consume it and then subsume it into a self-same subject. Kundera repeats Levinas' assertion in his novel by identifying return as the election of finitude over the infinity implied in the choice of prolonging the adventure, the journey away from the homeland without thought of return: «À l'exploration passionnée de l'inconnu (l'aventure), il préféra l'apothéose du connu (le retour). À l'infini (car l'aventure ne prétend jamais finir), il préféra la fin (car le retour est la réconciliation avec la finitude de la vie)» (Kundera 2003: p. 14). The confrontation Kundera stages between his anti-epic of return and the *Odyssey* is everywhere in evidence in the novel and is an overtly polemical reading of the ancient narrative which is anchored in a particular understanding of modern, existentialist individualism². Nevertheless, Levinas' ethical thought in this proposition offers a significant perspective for the examination of the ethics of return. That kind of philosophical discourse

² Kundera's novel foregrounds the incommensurable tension between the pre-modern and modern co-ordinates of human identity and self-understanding; it is by no means a critical analysis of human temporality or ethico-political thought in the *Odyssey* within the framework of its socio-historical production.

is not to be found in Kundera's digressions whose satirical aim is, after all, the debunking of the glamour and glory of return. Would Irena and others even have had to deal with the oppressive legacy of the *Odyssey* if the beach on which Odysseus wakes up had been transformed beyond recognition, the narrator asks. Yet both Odysseus and some thousand years later, Irena, do have to deal with the indifference and hostility of those left behind, who are always resentful of the arrogance of the returning hero/heroine that expects to pick up where they left off and cares little for the hardships and desires of those they had left behind. Indeed, this antagonism is comical in *L'Ignorance* but murderous in the *Odyssey*; a generic difference that confirms Kundera's adherence to the Bakhtinian definition of the polyphony and heteroglossia peculiar to novelistic form³.

In Bernhard's novel, although Murau loathes any suggestion of returning to Austria, the narrative is deeply respectful of the tragic impossibility of return for the Jews expelled to their deaths. Murau defends their right to return by the gift of his ancestral home to the Jewish community in Vienna. Thus both novels conceive and justify the question of "home" and "return" as always one of personal choice and responsibility by insisting on the priority of the individual in reaching ethical decisions, a priority which is based on a consideration of all relevant parameters and an investigation of both external and objective (political) parameters and internal, psychological and (ethical) criteria. Return is not an obligation but a choice.

Murau charts his wanderings from his ancestral home as so many stages of a willed estrangement in search of a new home that will fit his personal development and ethos, while Irena's departure, as others who fled the Communist regime imposed by the Soviet Union on Czechoslovakia, happens first and foremost because of external necessity which obfuscates, to some degree, the trajectory of individuality. Hence, there is a greater significance to be attributed to the return narrative in *L'Ignorance* as it has the task of confirming, in retrospect, this original decision and establishing its irreversible consequences for the present.

The exile cuts all links, including those that bind him to the belief that the thing called life has A Meaning guaranteed by the dead father. For if meaning exists in the state of exile, it nevertheless finds no incarnation, and is ceaselessly produced and destroyed in geographical or discursive transformations (Kristeva 1986: p. 298).

³ See Kundera 1986 and 1993.

Franz-Josef leaves, and finally settles in Rome, where he finds a near fullness of identity with a small select group of intellectual and spiritual friends, in a city which he sees as continually international and hospitable and therefore alive throughout centuries, as opposed to what he castigates: the deathly Austrian towns and cities ruled by a feudal elite maintained by an inner rule of exclusion of every form of difference to itself. For Franz-Josef, nostalgia as homesickness is a condition whereby one's "home" makes one sick, not one's absence from it. Franz-Josef would like to destroy these origins and so their claim that he "belongs" to them. The grounds for this destruction are his ethico-political opposition to their fascist and anti-human ideology, and the weapon he decides upon is exposure, critique and, as a *coup-de-grâce*, the gift of the estate to the Viennese Jewish community. For the collaborating Murau family, the Jews were the most alien of strangers, and their ejection of the Jews, the most violent of transgressions of the ethical law of *xenia*. Furthermore, the very structure of the nationalist aristocratic family was predicated on exclusion of the strange(r). To donate the ancestral estate to the Jews is tantamount to imploding its ideological structure. *Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall* reviews the ideological errors of Austria and ends with a symbolic honouring of the dead: not the familial dead but their enemies.

Murau's rejection of Wolfsegg is multi-faceted: it realizes itself firstly as a critical suspicion, then a spiritual alienation, then, a physical alienation (the years of wandering), and only completes itself with his re-education, following a fully aware rejection of the ideology of Wolfsegg. The rejection of Wolfsegg by a relentless Juvenalian exposure of its brutal, nationalist, materialist and conservative ideology is the premise for the development of an extensive philosophical value discussion, which, in the novel, appears as an obsessive monologue to Murau's Italian student, Gambetti, but in fact synopsis years of a philosophical value discussion undertaken by Murau through his literary and philosophical study and teaching and encounter with non-Germanic culture (as an estranging and emancipatory technique).

How does it qualify as what Heller describes as a «philosophical value discussion»? The answer is given by Heller in her designation of ideology as all that ties us with *interests* to our particular original situation. Murau has willed the complete estrangement and alienation from his parents and siblings as he became fully aware of «the ideological nature of their values» (Heller 1984: p. 135), which he could not share and which, in retrospect, in the personal narrative, account for the *feeling* of alienation that he invariably had when in Wolfsegg, especially after childhood. The final act for Murau, as indeed for

Bernhard, is *Extinction*, this book which is anything but an accident; it is the *chef d'œuvre* of a Romantic transformation and Nietzschean overcoming of the self – that self that was produced by its original socio-historical situation – by an act of destruction that aims to *extinguish* that socio-historical continuum. «*Ich werde damit alles auszulöschen versuchen, das mit einfällt, alles, das in dieser Auslöschung niedergeschrieben ist, wird ausgelöscht, sagte ich mir*» (Bernhard 1988: p. 542). When the unreformed actors/agents/subjects of that ideological world of domination (Heller) will die, their physical extinction will allow those they perhaps excluded to inherit their world; and if that world is to be given new historical/philosophical values, then those ideologies have to be recognized and *extinguished* if they cannot represent universal values and respond to radical needs. (Heller 1984: p. 163) To his family's exclusive focus on the acquisition of material wealth, which he sees modern Austria as following to its ultimate conclusion in moral and aesthetic degeneration, Murau opposes «“The wealth of the personality” [which] means the appropriation and development of all these material, psychic and spiritual abilities by every individual in the society» (Heller 1984: p. 169).

Following Ricœur's work on the re-examination of the discourses of ideology and of utopia with the aim of identifying and demarcating their positive productive force and area of conceptual overlap, it is possible to discuss how the enabling function of ideology and the critical philosophical tendency of utopia may elucidate the way for a recuperation of the two discursive formations so that the one may function as a safety valve against the reification tendencies of each that have arguably made both prey to corruptive and anti-progressive forces. Yet they succeeded in establishing themselves by virtue of the mask of realizing in the present or hypothetical future, a vision of peace, harmony and prosperity that were the objectives of longing for impoverished, oppressed and/or war-torn populations; thus the realities of destruction, death and suffering or merely unpopular political measures were excused as negligible if not necessary means to an end. Already, the mark of teleological thinking, in which the present is sacrificed towards an imagined future of a better life for the individual and the community, can be identified as a common fault line in the negative versions of ideology and utopia where there is no continual ethical and philosophical examination of action as it is happening in the present. Instead, the almost sacred deference of the ideological or utopian *telos* is upheld as both reason and justification for any single “step” along the way, while no dissent is tolerated whether in speech or action; this is treated as heinous and demonized with the fervour that

brings to mind religious fanaticism characteristic of pre-modern society. As such, both fascist and communist regimes, despite the particularities of their different geo-historical formations, have transposed eschatological and intolerant attitudes towards political communities into 20th century modern societies.

In his monumental tri-partite study, *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur ventures the argument that human identity is best understood in terms of continuity: «*Que quelque chose persiste en changeant, voilà ce que signifie durer. L'identité qui en résulte n'est donc plus une identité logique, mais précisément celle d'une totalité temporelle*» (Ricœur 1985: p. 55)⁴. Duration, understood as continuation, works by virtue of the functioning of retention.

*La retention est un défi à la logique du même et de l'autre; ce défi est le temps: «Tout être temporel "apparaît" dans un certain mode d'écoulement continuellement changeant et "l'objet dans son mode d'écoulement" est sans cesse à nouveau un autre dans ce changement, alors que nous disons pourtant que l'objet et chaque point de son temps et ce temps lui-même sont une seule et même chose» (Ricœur 1985: p. 54)*⁵.

While fascist ideologies predicated themselves on a notion of a specific “national/racial” community held up as an “ideal” for that imagined national group, and proceeded to expel all elements foreign to it, especially by designating other groups as “foreign” to the nation – irrespective of whether some of these groups may have anteceded the ideal “national” group of the fascist ideology by centuries of geo-political continuous existence in the same areas – communist ideologies tend to ground themselves in an ideal of individual identity on the basis of which they seek a universal political hegemony. The modernity of each is to be found in their disregard for any prerogatives based on the value of continuity for individual identity or groups and their refusal to submit any contesting claims of individuals or groups to philosophical value discussion. Therefore, under the spurious force of a rejuvenating and emancipatory “modern vision” of the world, they in fact reify human identity with greater violence than any notion of ‘traditional’

⁴ All translations from this edition are my own: «That something persists while changing, this is what duration means. The identity that results is therefore no longer a logical identity, but precisely that of a temporal totality».

⁵ «*Retention is a challenge to the logic of the same and the other; this challenge is time: Every temporal being “appears” in a certain mode of continuously changing flow and “the object in its manner of flow” is ceaselessly ever other again in this change, while we say however that the object and every point of its time and this time itself are one and the same thing*».

parameters and seek to freeze their image of individual and group according to the dictates of a theoretical discourse that offers a blueprint for social construction.

Both fascism and communism in the 20th century were inimical to history as continuity and their manifestos of a better future failed to materialize. Instead, the work of destruction never ceased and so “enemies” proliferated, since the present is indissociable from the past and can only make sense with respect to its narrative (i.e. historicity). As a result, imaginary and purely fantastical histories had to be invented (especially with fascism), or the emphasis was on creating the past backwards, through the work towards a totally new future (distinctive of communism). Though fascism is typically described as based on ideology, in the negative sense of the term only, and communism is typically designated as an attempt to create a utopia, the affinities of fascism and communism as ideologies in action would belie any binary opposition. Rather than treat this as accidental, possibly due to the corruption of the latter, one may instead question how these affinities make Ricœur’s thesis concerning the space of theoretical overlap between ideology and utopia of greater persuasive weight and demanding further serious scholarly attention.

In these two novels, we witness the effects of the establishment of fascism in Austria and communism in Czechoslovakia on the people who disagreed with these ideologies. The effects can be described as modes of permanent displacement and disruption, whether willed and chosen or not, which cause either unrealistic or unrealizable longing in the present. Both Bernhard and Kundera negotiate narrative solutions to the irreversible ruptures of their characters’ histories. They examine these longings as historical needs that must be addressed in the appropriate critical philosophical spirit in order for their main characters to be able to resume their existence as a continuity of the past with the present. Whether or not exile is self-imposed, the years lived by Bernhard’s and Kundera’s protagonists in other countries form another identity based on continuity again and undeniably informed by existential choices; therefore, the fantasy of the return is both dream and nightmare.

In the end, all can never be well again; one must forfeit part of one’s past if one returns to the country of origin or instead stays in the country of exile/immigration. Whether the choice is to return or to remain an émigré, the novels accomplish the work of the surgeon, making stitches in time (in the sense of continuity) for the caesuras opened up by the establishment of fascist and communist regimes. The novels also share an ironic attitude towards the idea of return to the native country, expressed in gentler, ludic mode in Kundera’s case

(aimed both at the uncomprehending French who mean well towards their Czech friends and the ignorant Czech émigrés whose nostalgia blinds them to the estrangement effect of their prolonged absence from their original homeland) but in harsher, Juvenalian satire in Bernhard's novel (aimed primarily at one's immediate family and their oppressive demands that the émigré returns and resumes his "responsibility" to family and land). Both novels underline the choice as one between conflicting fidelities and responsibilities to oneself and others but, even more so, to different parts of one's identity (in both senses of different temporal units of one's life and different dimensions of the self).

The literary texts insist on a sense of history, personal and collective, as reflection and apologia. Whatever their verdicts for the successful imposition of fascism or communism in their homeland, whether or not they condemn this imposition as indicative of collaboration with the regime (Austria) or decry it as the result of greater forces against which the country was helpless (Czechoslovakia), both narrators show us protagonists who seek a permanent release from this violent juncture of 20th century history and so reconfirm the choice to seek refuge and peace in the place they made their new home by concluding their long narrative adventure of inner conflict when return looms as threat or possibility with a decision to remain where they are and continue as they have been living in contentment. The difference of course is that Bernhard's Murau was already well-aware of this contentment and his narrative is a long justification of this decision, while Kundera's novel retains a distance between knowledgeable narrator and misled protagonists who have been living unaware of their happiness in their new surroundings and therefore are guilty of the denial of reality in favour of a pure fantasy of the "great return". In the spirit of Cervantes, Kundera's narrator blames literature for creating this erroneous and exaggerated fantasy of the "great return", naming the *Odyssey* as the original cause of sentimental nostalgia and misplaced values (one might say *mauvaise foi*). Kundera's novel is a polemical justification of the error and impossibility of return and every bit as much an autobiographical *roman à thèse* as is Bernhard's, despite the veneer of objectivity created by the voice of an omniscient, ironic narrator. Nevertheless, Kundera presents us with characters who make his point very well, as their nostalgia is indeed illustrated to be caused by the pain of absence and the lack of knowledge of the goings-on in their abandoned homeland, the latter cause acting simultaneously as the pin that bursts the bubble of the daydream of the "great return". One cannot claim of course the same degree of philosophical lucidity for both Bernhard's and Kundera's protagonists. The former entertains no

fantasy of return nor is ignorant of the situations developing after his departure from Austria. Irena, on the other hand, has only the knowledge current at the historical date of her departure and expected to be able to resume exactly at the point she left off, thus denying the reality of the consequences contingent on the effect of historical events and the ineradicable of that past lived through by the people she left behind.

Nostalgia would appear to be a malaise of mythification based on forgetfulness and characterized by illusion and ignorance in *L'Ignorance*. The return to the homeland and subsequent disillusionment cures one of the malady. We are prepared for this by the playful erudition of the narrator who presents us with an etymological inquiry into the origin of the word “nostalgia” in a variety of languages and believes he has hit upon the truth of the word hidden in one of the original meanings of the French term, which is “ignorance”. If ignorance is at the heart of the nostalgic émigrés, this is the ignorance of life and events in their homeland perpetuated by their absence and therefore lack of participation in the life of the state and its inhabitants, which includes even their old loves, friends and closest family. The Communist regime forced this ignorance by making communication between the dissident émigrés and their compatriots virtually impossible. Even those protagonists who entertain the idea of the *nostos* and a return discover that their ignorance has caused an insurmountable emotional and psychical alienation; a very real chasm between who they and these others (places and people) have become. The only cure for this disturbing alienation is to quickly return to their new home and embrace it this time wholeheartedly as their only own *nostos* because their only home is the life they have been living and not any external place or person. The narration suggests that to have “returned” to their native country would have necessitated a denial and rejection of everything they have done and become in the meantime, that is, of their very selves in the present.

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