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Review of Matei Vişniec's *Mr. K Released* (translated by Jozefina Komporaly)

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Vişniec, Matei. *Mr K Released*. Translated from Romanian by Jozefina Komporaly. Seagull Books, 2020.

Did Kafka's famous protagonist Joseph K die like a dog at the end of his novel *The Trial*? What if the death sentence had not been executed and he had been released? There is a well-known precedent. Hamlet contrived to outwit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and have them sentenced to death instead of him. This apparently secondary event opened the door to one of the most performed and debated drama of the twentieth century, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The Romanian-born French author Matei Vişniec's personal experience as a poet and underground playwright under Romania's totalitarian regime inspired him, in a similar manner, to reopen the epilogue of Kafka's book and explore what happened in the aftermath of the bloody collapse of Communism in his native country.

Matei Vişniec's prolific dramatic work is steeped in Kafka's enigmatic, surreal and absurd universe. The author confessed in the preface that he wrote this novel as a tribute to Kafka. He disclosed to his readers that when he left Romania in 1987 and settled down in Paris, he felt like a prisoner released from jail who did not know what to make of his freedom. It occurred to him that the shock of suddenly gaining one's freedom could be as traumatic as the shock of losing it. Consequently, it is not surprising that the forty-two chapters of this book can be read as forty-two disturbing episodes in the life of a released prisoner who suffers from chronic post-traumatic stress disorder, agoraphobia, autism, memory loss and other neuroses.

Following his unexpected release, albeit not confirmed by the prison governor, Mr. K starts drifting around the squalid surroundings of the ever-expanding prison reminiscent of Kafka's claustrophobic atmosphere. During his encounters with a host of outlandish characters resembling the inmates of Forman's film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Mr. K's mind begins to doubt the practical value of his newly-found freedom. The reader will be baffled by Mr. K' ambivalent reluctance to dive into the new world of freedom granted to him by the prison authorities. There is a distinct mood of refusal on the part of Mr. K to leave the cosy life he had managed to carve out for himself in the penitentiary. He finds affinities with the prison's cook, Rozette, the 'fat but pretty woman' and spends long hours with the dumpy cheerful tailor who never finishes his suit, preferring to offer him lengthy guided tours of his collection of old rags. Besides post-traumatic stress disorder, Mr. K appears to be suffering from a type of masochistic Stockholm syndrome when he recounts with tolerant sympathy the torture he had suffered at the hands of the sadistic prison guard, Fabius.

Anybody reading this novel should not expect to simply find a sequel to Kafka's *The Trial* because the author has shifted the focus from the notion of glaring injustice to the ambiguity of freedom. 'The Fear of Freedom', a concept developed by the German philosopher Erich Fromm in the book with the same title, could offer the key to understanding Mr. K's reluctance to leave his confinement. Fromm believed that there are two types of freedom, 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. However, Mr. K seems to be hovering in a limbo between his nostalgia for the safety of incarceration and his newly-granted release which he only dares to use by drifting in and out of prison. In his utter confusion, Mr. K risks a further prison sentence by providing food and boots to a prison escapee who was hiding near a pile of rubbish in one of the prison's sprawling courtyards. When he goes into his town with his old guards to

bring bread supplies for the prison inmates, Mr. K works out a complex strategy to make the townsfolk believe that he had not been released. Such increasingly irrational conduct is symptomatic of his fear of freedom gradually turning into chronic paranoia.

Mr. K is a classic case of what Jean-Paul Sartre called “mauvaise foi”, self-delusion. Sartre’s maxim, “man is condemned to be free” which the French philosopher altered substantially after he became more familiar with Stalin’s atrocities, takes on an ironic twist in Vişniec’s novel because Mr. K prefers the devil he knows and that leads to his split-personality. The catalogue of psychological disorders that Mr. K and the characters in this novel suffer from is not an arbitrary coincidence, their neurotic aberrant behaviour is mirrored in one of Vişniec’s most performed plays around the world, *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients* which brings the author very close to surrealist directors like Luis Buñuel. The story of Mr. K’s release from prison unfolding as a film script with burlesque hallucinatory sequences is probably closer to Buñuel’s *The Phantom of Liberty*, than it is to Kafka. The theatrical-cinematic quality of the narrative comes as no surprise since Vişniec has established his name primarily as a dramatist and his plays follow in the tradition of playwrights like Artaud, Ionesco, Beckett, and cinema directors like Buñuel and Antonioni. Had he been alive, Orson Welles might have been tempted to make a film based on *Mr. K Released* as a sequel to his 1960 black-and-white movie starring Anthony Perkins, inspired by Kafka’s *The Trial*. In a manner similar to Matei Vişniec’s conceptual framework, Orson Welles had found a different angle from Kafka’s which allowed him to capture a different insight of the grotesque and nightmarish elusiveness of justice in a paranoid society. Vişniec has added his own personal dimension to Kafka’s work, the elusiveness of freedom in a society crippled by totalitarianism.

Translating Matei Vişniec’s work from Romanian into English is an extremely painstaking process because of the elliptical structure of the dialogues and the ambiguity of speech. The translator, Jozefina Komporaly, Senior Lecturer in drama, who also edited an anthology of Vişniec’s plays published by Seagull Books, explored the author’s vast literary output and has provided an excellent English version of the original story.