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Enduring the Trap of Existence

*A Study of Three Novels
by Milan Kundera*

by

Jodi Cockerill

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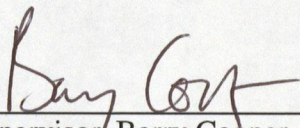
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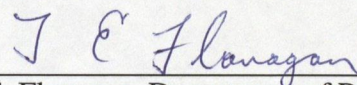
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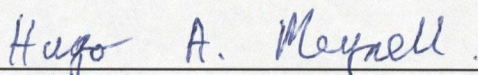
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Enduring the Trap of Existence: A Study of Three Novels by Milan Kundera" submitted by Jodi Cockerill in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



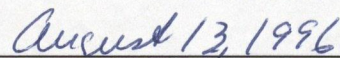
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ABSTRACT

The thesis is a study of three novels by Czech author, Milan Kundera. Broadly, it examines *THE JOKE*, *THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING*, and *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING* for Kundera's reflections on politics, humanity, history and the divine. Specifically, it critically examines Kundera's claim that "the world is a trap." Analysis of the novels prompts questions concerning interpretation: What is the relationship of literature to politics? Of art to life? Of author to reader? By use of Kundera's novels as an empirical base, the study engages these questions throughout.

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Many thanks to my parents, without whose support I would not be on Chapter Two. Thanks to my sister and Keagan, for their tireless efforts to divert me. Thanks also are due to John Kerr - President and C.E.O. of Lingnun Ltd. - for his timely assistance. And thanks, Herr Cooper, for always Thinking Big and for sending me to Prague.

For my Mom and Dad

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List of Main Characters

The Joke

Ludvik

Lucie

Kostka

Jaroslav

Helena Zemanek

Pavel Zemanek

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

Tamina

Mirek

Karel

Jan

Hugo

The Student

Goethe, Petrarch, Lermontov

Boccaccio

The Unbearable Lightness of Being

Tomas

Tereza

Sabina

Franz

CHAPTER ONE

The Novel and Life

Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.

- James Joyce
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

A novelist is struck by a phrase or gesture and from it, conceives the theme of his next novel. Time passes and many rewrites; the manuscript is sent to a publisher, then to the world. Journalists review it, critics search for hidden meaning. The novelist awaits the response and then protests: almost everyone has praised his work, but no one has understood it. Certain questions arise. Whose interpretation of a novel is authoritative, the author's or the reader's? To whom does the novel belong? What does it reflect anyway? The questions head towards the broadest and most significant one concerning written art: what is the relationship of literature to reality? Serious readers of imaginative texts - plays, novels, short stories, philosophical dialogues - must ask such questions before daring to interpret.

Some critics urge the reader to act as detective. The author's biography, historical context, diseases, disabilities and sexual habits must be investigated if his work is to be understood. According to this position, fictional characters and scenarios are lifted directly from life and the reader's task is to make the connections. South African author Nadine Gordimer characterizes it thus: "Literature is a tatty disguise to be gleefully unmasked; an intellectual cannibalism to be exposed. The writer's imagination is the looter among other people's lives."¹ Novelist Milan Kundera calls it "establishment modernism," and submits that it "would have the novel do away with the artifice of character, which it claims is finally nothing but a mask pointlessly hiding the author's face."² Another strain of

¹Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1.

²Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 66. All subsequent references will be parenthetical and will be included in the text as *AN*.

criticism would do away with the artifice not only of character, but of author. Michael Foucault, inspirer of "post-structuralism," suggests a novel solution to the problem of interpretation:

No longer the tiresome repetitions, Who is the real author? Have we proof of his authenticity and originality? What has he revealed of his profound self in his language? New questions will be heard: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where does it come from, how is it circulated, who controls it? What placements are determined for possible subjects?³

It appears the author has no agency, let alone imagination to call his own.

Opposite the detective schools of criticism stands the artist. In *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, Milan Kundera eloquently, adamantly, sometimes viciously, defends the artist. "You're not in your own house, my dear fellow," Stravinsky warned a conductor who wished to cut parts of his work in performance.⁴ Kundera demands a similar regard from those interpreting written art. As with musical scores, so with literature: an artistic work was born of a single human being, its creator. As an extension of the artist, the work belongs to him alone: "If a work of art emanates from an individual and his uniqueness, it is logical that this unique being, the author, should possess all rights over the thing that emanates exclusively from him" (*TB*, 271). According to Kundera, any separation of a work from its creator's intent is an abuse of the artist's rights.

What does Kundera say about imagination and life? In his fifth novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he interrupts the narrative to pose a question: "But isn't it true that an author can write only about himself?" No, it is not true; Kundera's characters begin where his own biography leaves off:

³Cited in David Lodge, "Milan Kundera and the idea of the author in modern criticism," *Critical Quarterly* 26, 1&2 (Spring & Summer, 1984), 108. Although Lodge is critical of the approach, he concedes that post-structuralism is "the liveliest and most innovative discourses of contemporary criticism" (108). A review of the secondary literature on Kundera supports his observation. While acknowledging this body of literature, we do not engage it here. For reasons beyond the scope of this thesis, we do not subscribe to the conception of subjectivity that underpins this line of literary criticism.

⁴Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, Linda Asher, trans. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 245. All subsequent references will be parenthetical, and included in the text as *TB*.

The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own 'I' ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about.

Thus, we have one writer's reflections on art and life. Through imagined experiences of imagined characters, an author explores lost alternatives.⁵ Of course, there is the matter of setting; Kundera's lost alternatives must function in a specific context. Midway through his fifth novel, the novelist establishes both the context and purpose of all his work: "The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become." We should be clear on it: Milan Kundera's novels are *investigations of a trap*. His characters were conceived for this lamentable purpose. "But enough," the narrative recommences: "Let us return to Tomas."⁶

* * *

This study is an analysis of three novels. The works to be examined - *The Joke*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* - were written by Milan Kundera.⁷ They are, respectively, his first, fourth and fifth novels, published in 1967, 1978, and 1985. That they were originally published in the Czech

⁵On the matter of characters, Kundera's testimony is roughly equivalent to Gordimer's, although Gordimer grants the character, not the author, primacy: "The writer is the Adam's rib of character," she concludes. And the character? "Imagined: yes. Taken from life: yes" (*Writing and Being*, 4, 15).

⁶Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Michael Henry Heim, trans. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 221. All subsequent references will be parenthetical, and will appear in the text as *ULB*.

⁷Why these novels and not his others? Or, why these and not all of them? An analysis of all of Kundera's novels would have proved too large a project for our purposes. Yet, an analysis of only one would have restricted the empirical base. The way out, in our view, was to examine three novels. Three novels offer sufficient material from which to discover Kundera's understanding of modern existence. We treat these three novels - Kundera's best-known, and arguably his best - as a representative sample of his work. In doing so, we imply that the portrayal of existence found in *The Joke*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is also found in *The Farewell Party*, *Life is Elsewhere*, *Immortality*, *Slowness* and *Laughable Loves*, a collection of short stories. Further, we imply that Kundera's themes and concerns have not changed substantially since *The Joke* was published 1967. In our view, both implications are supported by the novels.

language, that their main characters are Czech, and that they are set in Czechoslovakia is no surprise. For many years, Kundera was Czech.⁸ That they deal with life under a totalitarian tyranny is no surprise either. Kundera was a Czech in 1948, the year the Czechoslovak Communist Party overawed the liberal democratic government and instituted a Stalinist regime. He was still a Czech in 1968, when Soviet tanks invaded the country in order to stifle efforts to liberalize the regime. And he was still a Czech during "normalization" in the 1970s, when those who collaborated gained material rewards, and those who did not lost their jobs. It is no surprise, then, that these novels about contemporary Czech life address totalitarian reality. Yet, they also address much more. In Milan Kundera's novels, we find testimony about Czech life under a tyranny. Further, we find reflections on the nature of humans and modern society, on corporeal and historical aspects of existence, and on humanity's relationship to the divine.

Kundera's inquiry spans the breadth of human experience, and for this reason, we study his work. First, we learn from an author's experience, mediated through characters, what life is like in a totalitarian regime. Second, we consider the author's reflections on the source of the "totalitarian temptation." Third, we follow his reflections on history and the elusive divine, to see why he concludes that the world has become a trap. We also consider to what extent Kundera's novels are reflections *of*, rather than reflections *on* the experience of the Modern Era. Throughout, a general purpose informs our analysis. At risk of disgusting the artist, we treat his novels as sort of case study, in the hope of indicating literature's importance to the study of politics.⁹

Already, we have repulsed the novelist. He will accuse us of committing the deadly sin of criticism - a "political reading" of literature. Kundera especially mistrusts this kind; it is a "bad reading" undertaken by journalists and ideologues, and "sees only one aspect: the denunciation of a communist regime."¹⁰ Such a reading translates novels into political

⁸Kundera's Czech citizenship was revoked in 1979, four years after his emigration to France, and shortly after the French publication of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Glen Brand, *Milan Kundera: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), xv).

⁹Sindey Fazio also has written on the political implications of Kundera's work, but refers primarily to essays. She consults the novels "only as necessary for explication of theoretical notions" ("The Unbearable Heaviness of Politics: Milan Kundera on Aesthetics, Being and Political Consciousness" (Louisiana State University, Unpublished MA Thesis, May 1992), 10-11). We take an approach opposite Fazio's, yet draw similar conclusions in the end.

allegories; reflective passages become treatises, and complexities are simplified to ideological statements. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* becomes a meandering tale of a communist's fall from grace.¹¹ *The Joke* becomes indictment of Stalinism, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* a story of persecuted Czech intellectuals. Kundera's opus is received as a contribution not to his art, but to the Czechs' political struggles. Resentful of being classified as a "political novelist," the artist revolts: "Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story."¹²

Kundera justifies his reaction in his theory of the novel, articulated in *The Art of the Novel* and *Testaments Betrayed*. From these "practitioner's confessions," we learn that ideological convictions yield poor art: "The author who writes a novel in order to settle scores (personal or ideological) is headed for total and certain aesthetic ruin" (*TB*, 27). Journalists and ideologues seek moral positions, and the political novelist delivers. In doing so, he reveals he is no better than his worst interpreters. Certainly, he is no novelist. Most of us "require that someone be right: either Anna Karenina is the victim of a narrow-minded tyrant, or Karenin is the victim of an immoral woman" (*AN*, 7). Yet, Tolstoy censured neither Anna nor Karenin. Tolstoy's restraint reveals his knowledge of what all great novelists know, of what Milan Kundera also knows: the novel is "*a realm where moral judgment is suspended.*"

Suspending moral judgment is not the immorality of the novel; it is its *morality*. The morality that stands against the ineradicable human habit of judging instantly, ceaselessly, and everyone: of judging before, and in the absence of, understanding. From the viewpoint of the novel's wisdom, that fervid readiness to judge is the most detestable stupidity, the most pernicious evil (*TB*, 7).

¹⁰As cited in Ian MacEwan, "An Interview with Milan Kundera," *Granta* 11 (1984).

¹¹See Norman Podhoretz, "An Open Letter to Milan Kundera," *Commentary* 78 (October 1984). See also Robert Boyers, "Between East and West: A Letter to Milan Kundera," *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹²Kundera responded thus in 1980, during a television discussion of his work. In a later interview, he explains: "I had the sense that people read me as a political document; everybody, whether they were on the right or the left. I was angry, and felt offended....It is not literary critics but journalists who interpret your work. And so in that sense, at first, I did suffer from their interpretations and I had to defend myself against them. And I think I succeeded. Now they seem to understand, more or less" (Ian MacEwan, "An Interview with Milan Kundera," 24-25).

In the novel, one finds the polar opposite of the "most pernicious evil": it is an "imaginary paradise of individuals," where "no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin, but where everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin" (AN, 159).

How did the novel's paradise come to be? According to Kundera, it was the medium's inheritance from European philosophy. In *The Art of the Novel*, he reminds us that modern European philosophy predated the writing of novels. First came Descartes: *cogito ergo sum*. The "self" was released from the Medieval Christian shell called the soul, and the human subject became the new point of reference. Philosophers now pondered the miracle not of Cosmos, but of the "thinking thing" that perceived it. Cervantes invented Don Quixote, and "the European novel" - a new art form, attitude, morality and history - was born. Kundera explains the significance of it:

In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world.

To take, with Descartes, the *thinking self* as the basis of everything, and thus to face the universe alone, is to adopt an attitude that Hegel was right to call heroic.

To take, with Cervantes, the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in *imaginary selves* called characters), to have as one's only certainty *the wisdom of uncertainty*, requires no less courage (AN, 6).

Descartes discovered that man, not God, is the center of being; Cervantes invented a form by which to investigate the new center. The task of illuminating reality - taken up first by religious dogma, and lighting briefly on the philosophical treatise - settled finally on the novel. To each transition, Kundera attributes an enhanced awareness of the human situation, and to each, a less certain claim to truth. Christian saints burned hot with Revelation; Enlightenment philosophers basked in their reasonableness. But, the novelist - of what could he be certain? Kundera poses the question to himself: "To what am I attached? To God? Country? The people? The individual? My answer is ridiculous as it is sincere: I am attached to nothing but the depreciated legacy of Cervantes" (AN, 20). Milan Kundera is certain only of his art.

We now might perceive why Kundera shuns political readings of his work. Cervantes set the task of the novel, "to challenge, constantly, the principal notions on

which our very existence is based."¹³ Balzac, Flaubert, and Tolstoy, Joyce, Kafka, and Musil accepted the task; Orwell and Solzhenitsyn ignored it.¹⁴ For the former group, each novel offered a set of new selves and a revealing situation. Events unfolded, characters responded, and previously unknown truths about existence were revealed.¹⁵ For the latter, characters represented certain "types," faced predictable evils, and issued strong moral messages. According to Kundera, novels like *1984* and *The Cancer Ward* are treatises disguised as novels, and aesthetic disasters as a consequence.¹⁶ To would-be political novelists, he offers his advice: "the novelist's job is to say things that only the novel can say. If you don't do that, why write a novel?"¹⁷ And to would-be political readers, he cautions: "Political thought is capable of rendering only a very small part of reality."¹⁸ The purpose of his own novels, despite their observations of political events, is to reveal unexamined aspects of modern existence, not to indict the events themselves.

¹³MacEwan, "An Interview with Milan Kundera," 37.

¹⁴Kundera's work has been compared to that of Orwell and Solzhenitsyn. The novelist does not favour the comparison. Regarding Orwell's *1984*: "Orwell's novel is firmly closed to poetry; did I say novel? it is political thought disguised as a novel; the thinking is certainly lucid and correct, but it is distorted by its guise as a novel, which renders it imprecise and vague" (*TB*, 224). Regarding Solzhenitsyn: "Perhaps I am unfair to Alexander Solzhenitsyn' - he laughs at the thought of his unfairness - 'but his work does not raise new issues regarding human existence. It is the denunciation of a system translated into the language of a novel'" (Antonio Caballero, "Preserving Memory," *World Press Review* (July 1982), 61).

¹⁵"The novel's objective is to assimilate an understanding of this kaleidoscope of characters. Each one has his own truth and each has a different view of the world....You see, all of a sudden we find ourselves in the universe of ambiguity. Well, the novelist wants to take hold of this ambiguity and say to his reader: do not simplify the world!" (Jordan Elgraby, "Conversations with Milan Kundera," *Salmagundi* 73 (Winter 1987), 7).

¹⁶According to this criterion, Dostoevsky's novels are also disastrous. Irving Howe tells us that, before beginning *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky wrote: "I mean to utter certain thoughts; whether all the artistic side of it goes to the dogs or not...even if it turns into a mere pamphlet" (*Politics and the Novel* (New York: Avon Books, 1967), 24). Kundera seems to find Dostoevsky a difficult case. While he acknowledges Dostoevsky's artistic skill, even includes him in his history of the novel, he mistrusts his predecessor's intentions. See note twenty-six in Chapter Six for the exchange between Kundera and exiled Russian poet Joseph Brodsky concerning Dostoevsky.

¹⁷Cited in Fred Misurella, "Milan Kundera and the Central European Style," *Salmagundi* 73 (Winter 1987), 37.

¹⁸Alain Finkielkraut, "Milan Kundera Interview," *Cross Currents*, Ladislav Matejka and Benjamin Stolz, eds. (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1982), 15. As Fazio indicates, Kundera's conception of political thought is limited: "Kundera's understanding of the political is as distinctly ideological. He would undoubtedly find it difficult to conceive of politics as an inquiry into what it means to be human and live, with others, in a community" ("The Unbearable Heaviness of Politics: Milan Kundera on Aesthetics, Being and Political Consciousness," 10-11).

Still, we are left with our problem of interpretation. A political reading clearly will not suffice. Turning to academic publications, we find a secondary literature ranging from the admirable to the competent to the ridiculous.¹⁹ Much of the commentary is not useful; indeed, much of it settles only briefly on the novels.²⁰ Kundera himself has observed the tendency, and derides it in the case of Kafka scholarship: "Despite the astronomical number of its texts, Kafkology goes on elaborating infinite variants on the same discussion, the same speculation, which, increasingly unconnected to Kafka's work, feeds only on itself" (*TB*, 42).

Setting aside Kundera's Kafkologists, we find helpful commentary in the work of several Czech intellectuals - some of them Kundera's friends, some writers, and some academics. From these we learn of Kundera's background: that he was involved with the 1968 Writer's Congress during the final days of the Prague Spring, that his books were banned in the early 'seventies, that he left Prague for Paris in 1975, and that he quarreled with Václav Havel on political matters. Most of these Czech intellectuals experienced with Kundera the same dislocations. Many also faced the problem of writing in exile, in a language few understand. Thus, even when they do not refer to his work directly, the observations of Kundera's Czech contemporaries are often illuminating.²¹

However illuminating, though, they must not divert us from the novels. The Czech social context of the 1960s did not produce *The Joke*, Kundera did. The novelist agrees. Whether we praise or ridicule his work, we must acknowledge his sovereignty over it. At some point, then, we should consult the sovereign. How would Kundera have us interpret his novels? Are we allowed to interpret them at all? Kundera's essays reveal that we are

¹⁹The admirable literature is engaged throughout the study, and cited in the bibliography.

²⁰Kundera makes a useful distinction between genuine literary criticism and reckless theorizing. In *Testaments Betrayed*, he defines literary criticism as "meditation, as analysis," involving "several readings of the book it means to discuss." He adds that it is "deaf to the implacable clock of topicality" (24). On this point, we agree with him. The emphasis here will be on reading the novels themselves, not the discourses surrounding them.

²¹These observations (those that have been translated into English) also will appear throughout the study and in the bibliography.

allowed, and indeed, that good criticism is essential. Yet, the only good criticism is that capable of perceiving originality:

[G]rasping the *value* of a work requires the utmost knowledge and competence....To define the value of a novel, of a film, is to try to grasp what is new and irreplaceable in what it contributes, to articulate what previously unknown aspects of existence it has discovered. Let us consider the critic, therefore, as a *discoverer of discoveries*.²²

Finally, we arrive at Kundera's criterion for literary criticism. We must discover discoveries, and for this we need "the history of the novel." "[A]s a novelist," he reports, "I have always felt myself to be within history, that is to say, part way along a road, in dialogue with those who preceded me and even perhaps (but less so) with those still to come" (*TB*, 16). It is not human history (vicious, uncontrollable), but the history of an artistic progression spanning about four centuries, "from Cervantes to Faulkner."²³ The history of this art form has two elements - composition and exploration of existence. The two are distinct, yet intimately tied (*TB*, 16).

In terms of composition, the novel's history is like "the two halves of a soccer game" complete with an overtime period. In the first half, novelists' styles were playful and digressive. Rabelais, Cervantes and Diderot created characters for no clear purpose, and abandoned their plots for long stretches; their humour was vulgar, capricious, often overstated (*TB*, 59). The first half, animated by "the spirit of the nonserious," ended late in the eighteenth century. It was repressed by the "demand for plausibility" of the second. This second half was the period of rich, theatrical scenes lavishly described. According to Kundera, Balzac's and Dostoevsky's novels read like stage instructions; their scenes are "artificially concentrated, dense," and eschew ordinary events (*TB*, 130). The great Flaubert reclaimed quotidian reality with his *Madam Bovary*. Joyce fulfilled the effort with *Ulysses*, in which he explored a single day in the life of a single character. At the same time, the "pleiad of Central European authors" - Kafka, Musil, Broch and Hasek - restored digression and good-humoured vulgarity to their genre. More recently, the mood of South and Latin American novelists is "astonishingly close to [the novel's] earliest beginnings;

²²Milan Kundera, "On Criticism, Aesthetics and Europe," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1988), 13.

²³Lois Oppenheim, "Clarifications, Elucidations: An Interview with Milan Kundera," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1988), 10.

nowhere else today does the old Rabelaisian sap run so joyfully as in the work of these non-European authors" (*TB*, 31). We find the same sap in Kundera's work, especially in his most recent, *Slowness*, which we are told contains "not a single serious word in it."²⁴ Kundera calls his own period the "*third (over overtime) period*." In this phase, beginning with Flaubert, the first half was recovered from the confining second; its playful elements were restored. Near the end of its history, the novel has been given its "*entire historical experience for a grounding*" (*TB*, 75).

The novel's series of existential discoveries is related but not identical to its stylistic development. As the Modern Era progressed, it "discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one." Prior to overtime, Cervantes and Rabelais "inquired into the nature of adventure" (*AN*, 5). Flaubert examined the torpor of the ordinary through the character Emma Bovary. Through Kirilov, Dostoevsky probed the terrifying logic of irrational ends rationally pursued. And through Anna Karenina, Tolstoy discovered "the causeless, incalculable, even mysterious aspect of human action" (*AN*, 57). Early in the overtime period, the search for the "inner infinity," begun by Richardson in the eighteenth century, resumed by Flaubert, and later by Proust and Joyce, was broken off by Kafka. "Enough psychology!" Kafka declared, and the ball passed to the Central Europeans.

With Kafka, inner infinity gave way to the immobilizing external. The "pleiad of Central European authors" - Kafka, Broch, Musil and Hasek - revealed the defining features of the twentieth century. In *The Trial*, "the monster [that] comes from outside" is an overwhelming beurocracy. In Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, it is a murderous world without values. In Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, it is war - sudden, unannounced, and total. Most horrifying of all, in Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*, it is war as a comedy. In these novels written between the world wars, Kundera perceives a "foreboding about totalitarianism." Their foreboding was historically realized in Kundera's own generation. In Kundera's own work, the monster from without becomes history: "For us, history is concrete, palpable. It is war. It is a political regime. It is the end of Europe. It is absolutely graspable - *grasping* - and we're in it: caught. Hence, the trap."²⁵

²⁴As cited on the dust-jacket of *Slowness*, Linda Asher, trans. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996).

We must make a note of it. At the end of the history of the novel, we have come full circle. We are to assess Kundera's novels as they succeed in portraying the world as a trap.

Thus far, his portrayals have been well received. Kundera is hailed as a world-class novelist and a fierce intelligence. In 1968, the poet Louis Aragon proclaimed *The Joke* "[o]ne of the greatest novels of the century."²⁶ Fellow practitioners also have noticed his work. According to Josef Skvorecky, Kundera's Czech friend and fellow novelist-in-exile, "Milan, like all great writers before and after the death of the novel, refreshed our somewhat tired genre by his inimitable personality."²⁷ American author Philip Roth has long admired it; Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez recognize its affinity with their own.²⁸ John Updike and Italian novelist Italo Calvino are Kundera's perceptive critics, yet do not debate his technical skill.²⁹ As for literary critics, most of the "discoverers of discoveries" fête him as a master of the form. Antonín Liehm, for example, deems him 'the most pertinent ironist of the human fate in the latter part of the century.'³⁰ Kundera's American translator regards him as an "astonishingly inventive author."³¹ And so we have the consensus: Milan Kundera is a literary virtuoso, his technique is exquisite, original and economic, equal parts art and philosophy. Those in the know praise him, and as far as they go, we agree. No one can doubt it: Milan Kundera is a surpassing technician. But, how does he rate as an "explorer of existence?" For

²⁴ "Prague: A Disappearing Poem," 94.

²⁶ Louis Aragon, "Ce roman que je tiens pour une oeuvre majeure," preface to Milan Kundera, *La plaisanterie*, (Paris: Gallimard/Folio, 1968).

²⁷ "Milan Kundera's Contribution to the Art of the Novel," *Milan Kundera and the Art of Fiction*, Aron Aji, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 6.

²⁸ Philip Roth, "Afterword: A Talk with the Author," afterword to *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Peter Kussi, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 229-37; Carlos Fuentes, "The Other K," *Milan Kundera and the Art of Fiction*, Aron Aji, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992) 9-26.

²⁹ John Updike, "Czech Angels," *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 509-15. Italo Calvino, "On Kundera," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (East-Haven: Inland Book Co., 1989), 53-57.

³⁰ "The World of Milan Kundera," *Dissent* 30.1 (1983), 113.

³¹ "Milan Kundera, 'Dialogues with Fiction,'" *World Literature Today* 57 (Spring 1983), 206.

Kundera, this is half the task: "Every novel, like it or not, offers some answer to the question: What is human existence, and wherein does its poetry lie" (AN, 161)?

Indeed, what is human existence? Is it really a trap? Once the novel has had its say, we still must discuss its answers. Perhaps the labour could be divided, the poetry assigned to the discoverers of discoveries and the content to fellow explorers of existence, no matter what their discipline. Kundera might take some convincing here. We know his belief that the novel has surpassed religion, Enlightenment philosophy, even phenomenology, as the fitting medium of existential inquiry.³² Yet, we also know he admires Hannah Arendt, Husserl, Heidegger and Nietzsche, all of these *modern philosophers* whose form was declared a spent force. Yet we find, oddly, that Kundera's novels draw on these authors' work, especially on Nietzsche's.

What might Kundera admire in Nietzsche's philosophy? He says it is its rapprochement with the novel. Nietzsche's style was digressive, experimental. His "refusal of systematic thought" produced an "immense *broadening of theme*." With Nietzsche, "for the first time," philosophy was concerned "not [with] epistemology, not aesthetics or ethics, the phenomenology of mind or the critique of reason, etc., but *everything human*" (TB, 175). Here, we must query Kundera's assimilation of facts. Were philosophers latecomers to "everything human," or were novelists? Has Kundera forgotten the ancients? Long before Nietzsche, before Cervantes and even Christ, the best philosophical minds reflected on broad themes. Plato, not Cervantes, discovered "philosophical anthropology;"³³ Heidegger, Husserl and Arendt would revive it in this century. And Plato, not Nietzsche, first inquired non-systematically. Nietzsche's preferred form was the aphorism; Plato's was the dialogue, and before him, Heraclitus used aphorisms.

³² "There are metaphysical problems, problems of human existence, that philosophy has never known how to grasp in all their concreteness and that only the novel can seize" (Oppenheim, "Elucidations, Clarifications," 9). In *The Art of the Novel*: "all the great existential themes Heidegger analyzes in *Being and Time* ...had been unveiled, displayed, illuminated by four centuries of the novel" (5).

³³For an account of Plato's anthropological principle, see Vol. 3 of Eric Voegelin's *Order and History: Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 82-88.

Thus far, Kundera has not convinced us that the novel has eclipsed philosophy. Nor has he convinced us that we should read his novels from within his history of the novel. Indeed, a more penetrating analysis might come from *outside* that history, perhaps even from outside the medium. Our own study will proceed in the tradition of classical philosophy. With a view to the broadest themes, we will study three novels - *The Joke*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* - as works through which Kundera articulates his experience of the world as a trap. By retaining the author's imaginative role, we avoid reducing art to biography. Yet, by insisting that he imagines novels, not reality, we retain the tie between art and life. We assume that besides writing novels, the novelist is a character in the larger, infinitely more complex world of human existence; that he lives in a certain time and place, and speaks a certain language; that, he is governed by a certain regime; that willingly or reluctantly, he perceives the issues of his day and reflects on them, and finally, that he considers perennial questions, and interrogates their source. We assume that the artist's life informs his work. In Milan Kundera's case, we find that it does.

The study progresses from the novelist's testimony on outward symptoms of disorder - political and social symptoms - to his reflections on hidden causes - human nature, history, the indifference of the cosmos, and the uncertainty of the self. As we move toward the causes, the going becomes more difficult; we find less testimony, and more speculation. In Chapter Two, we consider Kundera's testimony concerning the political life of the Czechs. In Chapter Three, we move to reflections on human nature, presented through minor characters and an essay on "kitsch." Beginning in Chapter Four, we turn to heroes and heroines. In Four, we learn from Sabina of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Ludvik of *The Joke* how modern life has become a trap. In Five, we inspect the trap further, then observe how Tomas, Kundera's wisest hero, gains brief release from it. We meet the heroines - Lucie, Tamina, Tereza - in Chapter Six. Here, we consider the source of their souls' sickness and their withdrawal from the world. In Chapter Seven, we return to the novelist. After having presented Kundera's reflections, after having gathered the testimony and laid it before us, we finally must ask: is it reliable? Is Kundera reliable? Here, we try to assess Kundera's competence, not as an artist, but as "an explorer of existence."

Has the novel dispensed with philosophy? Through a satisfying interpretation, we will try to show that it has not. Yet, we are in an awkward place, now that we have disregarded instructions. Perhaps we can appeal to another artist for support. Novelist David Lodge calls Kundera's statement concerning *The Joke* and Stalinism "a statement of authorial intention, which we are not bound to accept. It is, indeed, a consciously simplistic description of *The Joke*."³⁴ Or we might appeal to a political philosopher. When discussing Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, Eric Voegelin submits that "the basis for the analysis of a literary work must be the work itself":

if the author has expressed himself on the meaning of his work, such utterances are most valuable if they clear up obscure points; but if...the utterances of the author are in open conflict with the text of his work, then the meaning offered by the text has to prevail.³⁵

In the end, we appeal to the texts. In our shared concern for an "immense broadening of theme," we read Milan Kundera's novels. Leaving the matter of technique to experts, we reflect instead on the artist's reflections. In doing so, we hope to show that we have *understood*, not as artists, professors of literature, or journalists, but as students of political philosophy who also inquire into "everything human."

³⁴Lodge, "The Novel and the Concept of the Author in Modern Criticism," 110.

³⁵Eric Voegelin, "On Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*," Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* Vol. 12 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 134-35.

CHAPTER 2

Symptoms

In this chapter, we read these novels for their testimony as to what life is like under a totalitarian tyranny. It is Kundera's least favoured reading. Yet, it would be wrong to pass over the novels' political content if its insights are penetrating. Kundera has observed the unique position of Central European artists during the Communist period: "The importance of this art does not lie in the fact that it pillories this or that political regime, but that, on the strength of social and human experience of a kind people here in the West cannot even imagine, it offers new testimony about mankind."¹ Kundera was a Czech during the Communist era. We find it is a distinct component of his art.

In the course of examining the novels' political content, we hope to show that literature is a fitting medium by which to reflect on political reality. The writer places his characters in a particular setting. Because he creates novels, not reality, he draws on familiar sources. His characters, though imagined, correspond to people he has encountered. His settings, though condensed fit the novel, are usually places he knows. Equipped with an artist's eye for detail and writer's precision with words, Milan Kundera is well suited to observe political aspects of his surroundings. From his observations, we learn about life in a tyrannical regime. We also establish the novels' context, on which later chapters of our study build.

The Joke, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are set in Czechoslovakia after World War II. The historical setting of *The Joke* spans from 1948 to the mid 1960s - politically, from the Communists' putsch in 1948 through ten years of Stalinism, to the years anticipating the "Prague Spring" in 1968, a time when the Czechs briefly managed to "blunt, soften and lighten the weight of the existing political system."² *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* covers the same period, yet

¹Milan Kundera, "Comedy is Everywhere," *Index on Censorship* 6 (Nov-Dec 1977), 6.

extends to the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the ensuing years of "normalization" in the 1970s.³ *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is set in the years directly preceding and following the invasion. The three novels' temporal setting spans nearly forty years, from the Communists' accession of power in 1948, to the years just prior to their loss of it in 1989. Thus, we have the novels' time. What do we learn about the place?

It appears there is something wrong with Prague, formerly Central Europe's cultural capital. Kundera explains in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "Prague, as Max Brod said, is the city of evil" (*BLF*, 216). Evidence of repeated invasions is physically present in the city's architecture, street names and monuments. The Russians invaded in 1968. Before them, Nazis invaded in 1939. Before them, the Austrians conquered Bohemia in the eighteenth century, and before them, the Catholic princes conquered the Hussites in 1621. With each invasion came monuments of conquest: Baroque cathedrals, Austrian monarchy, statues of Stalin, statues of Lenin. With each came renewed threats to the Czech culture and language. Building up and tearing down, changing place names then restoring them, had become so commonplace that in Kundera's own time, the city of evil was a city of ghosts:

Wandering the streets that do not know their names are the ghosts of monuments torn down. Torn down by the Czech Reformation, torn down by the Austrian Counter-Reformation, torn down by the Czechoslovak Republic, torn down by the Communists; even the statues of Stalin have been torn down. In the place of those destroyed monuments, statues of Lenin are nowadays springing up in Bohemia by the thousands, springing up like weeds among ruins, like melancholy flowers of forgetting.⁴

Outside Prague, the Czech countryside is strewn with remnants of the ages of Christendom and Communism. Even in the landscape, the two ages conflict. In *The*

²Milan Kundera, "Preface to the French Edition of *Mirákl* (*The Miracle Game*)," Sam Solecki, ed., *The Achievement of Josef Skvorecky* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 27.

³By "normalization," we refer to the official "back to normalcy" policy pursued by the Czech Communist government in the years following the Russian occupation in August, 1968. By that policy, reform-minded Czechs were systematically replaced by Soviet collaborators, not only in government but in the universities, hospitals, cultural journals, and communications media (A.H. Hermann, *A History of the Czechs* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 1975), 285). The "back to normalcy" policy maintained an unpopular regime for nearly twenty years, until November, 1989.

⁴Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Aaron Asher, trans. (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 216. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in the text as *BLF*.

Unbearable Lightness of Being, Sabina recalls that "after the Communist coup all the castles in Bohemia were nationalized and turned into manual training centers, retirement homes, and also cow sheds" (109). In *The Joke*, the remaining patches of nature are littered with iron pylons, workshops, factories and rubbish heaps. Chipped ceramic angels adorn the lawns of Ludvik's small home town; ornamental bas-reliefs that have "lost their meaning" adorn the houses. Ludvik's stroll through the town of his youth evokes no pleasant reminiscences: "How ugly, this Morava (a river so brown it seems to run liquid mud instead of water and how depressing its bank: a street of five two-story middle-class houses, each standing separately like a freakish orphan."⁵ This Czech town, like other Czech towns, stands forlorn and abandoned.

Other passages attest to the novels' social setting. In *The Joke*, we learn that, in the 1950s, many Czechs were sent to labour camps. Following his expulsion from the university and the Communist Party, Ludvik worked in the coal mines. One of his comrades was sent there because "he had insisted on doing cubist paintings at school" (*Joke*, 56). In art and literature, only "social realism" was permitted, and in the theatres, Czechs watched Soviet films encouraging them to denounce friends and family members. Even Moravian folk music had changed. Jaroslav, another character in *The Joke*, reports that traditional themes of love and loss had been replaced by socialist ones: "We sang about ploughing up old border plots to make one immense collective field out of a multitude of private ones" (154). And Ludvik witnesses "the welcoming of new citizens to life," a Communist rendition of the Christian rite of baptism (172).

We find still more testimony in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Not only were many Czechs hanged in the 1950s, but many lost their jobs in the 1970s. People emigrated or simply disappeared; authors' books were banned; street names were changed to Russian, and the names of those who supported the Prague Spring were "carefully erased from the country's memory, like mistakes in a schoolchild's homework" (*BLF*, 19). Tomas of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was one of those who lost their jobs. Because he refused to recant an article written before the invasion, he made an abrupt

⁵Milan Kundera, *The Joke*, Michael Henry Heim, trans. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 29. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in the text as *Joke*.

descent from surgeon to window washer. Through Tomas, Kundera observes the human toll of "back to normalcy":

During the five years that had passed since the Russian army invaded Tomas's country, Prague had undergone considerable changes. The people Tomas met in the streets were different. Half of his friends had emigrated, and half of the half that remained had died. For it is a fact which will go unrecorded by historians that the years following the Russian invasion were a period of funerals: the death rate soared (*ULB*, 228).

Whether "hounded to death" by the secret police, "fleeing from the love of the [hated] Party," or simply sickened by their nation's plight, Czechs died: "the hopelessness pervading the entire country penetrated the soul to the body, shattering the latter" (*ULB*, 229).

We have recounted Kundera's testimony on recent Czech history. Because he is a novelist, not a historian, it is not detailed or precise. Rather, it is "personal testimony" as Gordimer defines it: the author is "piecing together the chronicle of an era torn apart by silencing decrees, which without this witness would remain blown about in the gutters of time."⁶ We read the novels (alongside those of Solzenhitsyn) as efforts to record ruinous events before they are forgotten. Yet, we must not mistake them for history books. Historical details, while instructive, never form more than the background of Kundera's work:

If the writer considers a historical situation a fresh and revealing possibility of the human world, he will want to describe it as it is. Still, fidelity to historical reality is a secondary matter as regards the value of the novel. The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence (*AN*, 44).

It appears that as "explorations of existence," novels are to be preferred over histories. Here again, the medium facilitates understanding. Gordimer states it succinctly: "If you want to read the facts of the retreat from Moscow in 1815, you may read a history book; if you want to know what war is like and how people of a certain time and background dealt with it as their personal situation, you must read *War and Peace*."⁷ In Kundera's novels, we find people of a certain time and background dealing with totalitarianism as their

⁶Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 22.

⁷Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 21.

personal situation. To illustrate, we examine three such situations - Ludvik's trial by his peers in *The Joke*, Tomas's interrogation by the secret police in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and Kundera's account of his own life in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

We begin with Ludvik, and with Kundera's first novel. *The Joke* indeed is a love story, yet it is also the story of four Communists whose secular religion has failed them. One of the Communists is Ludvik. Although physically, Ludvik exists in the present (Czechoslovakia in the 1960s), mentally, his past consumes him. The events leading to his expulsion from the university and Party are presented as a personal recollection, narrated by Ludvik and prompted by a walk in the desolate Czech town that looks like Ostrava.

Ludvik states that his "first major disaster...might well be recounted in a lighthearted and even amusing tone" (*Joke*, 31). He is neither lighthearted nor amused, however; his memories are not pleasant, yet he will not let them alone. Ludvik calls us back to 1948, to the Communists' rise to power in post-World War II Czechoslovakia, only three years after the Nazi occupiers had been expelled by the Russian Army. No ordinary transfer of power, the Communist revolution transformed Czech life. Ludvik recalls the new spirit that reigned: "It was the first year after February 1948; a new life had begun, a genuinely new and different life, and its features, as I remember them, were rigidly serious" (*Joke*, 31). They were especially serious about joy. The adherents of Marxism had resolved permanently to celebrate their heady triumph over the enemy classes. Officially known as "*the historical optimism of the victorious class*," it was a "grave joy," "a solemn and ascetic joy, in short, Joy with a capital J" (*Joke*, 32).

Unfortunately, our hero sometimes forgot his Joy. As an intelligent and engaged twenty-year old student, he received generally positive evaluations of his commitment to the revolution from the Student Union. Consistently, though, his file included reports of an "intellectual" air, and "traces of individualism." Some of the Comrades told him he had a strange smile. ("And if I do? That's how I express my Joy.' 'No, you smile as though you were thinking to yourself.'"⁸) Ludvik then began to change: "I began to keep tabs on

⁸The observations of Ludvik's comrades were portentous. In her famous study of totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt notes that a suspect in a totalitarian regime is not a suspect in the conventional sense: "He is never an individual whose dangerous thoughts must be provoked or whose past justifies suspicion, but a 'carrier

my smiles, and soon I felt a tiny crack opening up between the person I had been and the person I should be (according to the spirit of the times) and tried to be" (*Joke*, 32).

An infatuation with the beautiful Marketa soon tripped him up. Initially, Marketa had planned to spend two summer weeks with Ludvik in Prague. She was sent instead to a two week party-training course; she wrote to him that she was happy at the camp, that she had profited from the prevailing "healthy atmosphere," and that she was certain "the revolution in the West would not be long in coming." Ludvik's response is that of a spurned, immature lover:

As far as that goes, I quite agreed with what she said; I too believed in the imminence of a revolution in Western Europe; there was only one thing I could not accept: that she should be so happy when I was missing her so much. So I bought a postcard and (to hurt, shock and confuse her) wrote: Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik (*Joke*, 34).

The postcard was written hurriedly and sent. It, along with all his letters to Marketa, was read. Reprisals came in September. The District Party Secretariat decided that Ludvik was a nihilist and a Trotskyite and should be relieved of his post at the Student Union. The student chairman of the Natural Sciences Division recommended expulsion from the Party, pending the Comrades' approval. Years later, Ludvik recalls the events' culmination:

everyone present (and there were about a hundred of them, including my teachers and my closest friends), yes, every last one of them raised his hand to approve my expulsion not only from the Party but (and this I had not expected) from the university as well" (*Joke*, 47).

The following year, he was placed in the black insignia, the class of soldiers who were the socialist republic's enemies, who were not entrusted with arms, and whose task was to work in the mines. Thus, we learn that at specific historical junctures, the failure to keep tabs on one's smiles can be damning.

Ludvik's descent from the university to the mines, from the Communist Party to the black insignia could only have occurred in a certain historical setting. The scenes of his trial and expulsion are testimony in a dual sense. Not only were they a character's personal

of tendencies' like the carrier of a disease" (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1979), 424).

experience, they were typical of the Stalinist period of Czech history. The plenary meeting of the Natural Sciences Division shaped Ludvik's perception of humanity: "the image of that lecture hall with a hundred people raising their hands, giving the order to destroy my life, comes back to me again and again" (*Joke*, 76). It also indicates what life is like when "the optimism of the victorious class" turns its rigid smile on less optimistic citizens. Finally, Ludvik's experience invites further reflection: what were its causes and effects? Our novelist delivers on this matter too. According to Kundera, the basic causes were Christian, and the effects were Kafkaesque.

When Ludvik was expelled from the Party, he was, in a sense, damned. Despite his atheism, he saw the world as a Calvinist would; his were Communist variants of the categories of hell and paradise, damnation and salvation, sin and redemption.⁹ His description of his revolutionary faith reads as a secular version of Calvin's doctrine of predestination:

[W]e felt participation in the proletarian revolutionary movement to be, so to speak, not a matter of *choice* but a matter of *essence*, a man either was a revolutionary, in which case he completely merged with the movement into one collective entity, or he was not, and could only *want* to be one; in that case, he would always consider himself guilty of not being one (*Joke*, 46).

When the Party decreed that Ludvik had failed to merge with the movement, he began to question his innocence. Years later, the comparison to Christianity occurred to him:

Looking back on my state of mind at the time, I am reminded by analogy of the enormous power of Christianity to convince the believer of his fundamental and never-ending guilt; I also stood (we all stood) before the Revolution and its Party with permanently bowed head, and so I gradually became reconciled to the idea that my words, though genuinely intended as a joke, were still a matter of guilt (*Joke*, 46).

In *The Joke*, the parallels between Christianity and Ludvik's faith extend to the entire movement. The "invincible logic" by which the Party Secretariat established Ludvik's guilt resembles medieval attempts to root out false believers: "Perhaps if you'd thought things through, you might not have written it. As it is, you wrote what you really felt. As it is, we know who you are. We know you have two faces - one for the Party, another for everyone else" (*Joke*, 38). In this novel, Kundera perceives a phenomenon that some

⁹Ludvik persists in viewing existence through pseudo-theological categories long after his disillusionment with Communism. This tendency will be examined again in Chapters Four and Seven.

political philosophers also have perceived: certain phrases, a certain relentless logic, a fervent pursuit of perfection animates both revolutionary socialism and Christian fanaticism.¹⁰

Whatever the causes of Ludvik's downfall, we cannot mistake the effects. In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera observes that "[t]here are periods in modern history when life resembles the novels of Kafka" (AN, 105). Certainly, the circumstances of Ludvik's expulsion resemble the trial of Josef K., who finally quit searching for the crime that would justify his impending execution. The more Ludvik denied he was a Trotskyite, the more he was accused of failing to resemble the Trotskyite on the postcard:

I came to realize that there was no power capable of changing the image of my person lodged somewhere in the supreme court of human destinies; that this image (even though it bore no resemblance to me) was much more real than my actual self; that I was its shadow and not it mine; that I had no right to accuse it of bearing no resemblance to me, but rather that it was I who was guilty of the non-resemblance; and that the non-resemblance was my cross, which I could not unload on anyone else, which was mine alone to bear (*Joke*, 50).

We find a second piece of testimony regarding Czech political life in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In this novel about "love, chance, jealousy, fidelity, restlessness, and treason,"¹¹ Tomas is interrogated by a man from the secret police. The incident began with a story from classical antiquity. In an article submitted to a Prague literary journal before the Russian invasion, Tomas related the myth of Oedipus to the moral problems of Czech society.

By the 1960s, everyone knew that the Communist authorities in Central Europe - Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia - had been unduly harsh with non believers. Kundera recalls that people began to call those authorities criminals. He suggests an alternative interpretation: "Anyone who thinks that the Communist regimes of Central Europe are exclusively the work of criminals is overlooking a basic truth: the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the

¹⁰For similar observations presented in a non-fictional medium, see Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987). See also Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966). On the matter of "Christian fanaticism," Kundera appears to believe there is no other sort of Christianity.

¹¹Kundera cited in Antoine de Gaudemar, "The Novel as Homeland," *World Press Review* (May 1984), 74.

only road to paradise." When some denied that such a road existed, the enthusiasts took offense: "They defended that road so valiantly that they were forced to execute many people." "Later," Kundera concludes, "it became clear that there was no paradise, that the enthusiasts were therefore murderers" (*ULB*, 176).

The enthusiasts saw it differently. They attested that Stalin, the object of their misplaced faith, had deceived them. At the time of the executions, they had believed their deeds were necessary. In their hearts, they were innocent. For the enthusiasts' accusers, the question of whether they knew they were murdering became central. For Tomas, it was peripheral. "It was in this connection," Kundera reports, "that Tomas recalled the tale of Oedipus: Oedipus did not know he was sleeping with his own mother, yet when he realized what had happened, he did not feel innocent." Tomas applied Oedipus's moral rigour to the Communists, and wondered how they could feel no guilt: "How can you stand the sight of what you've done? How is it you aren't horrified? Have you no eyes to see? If you had eyes, you would have to put them out and wander away from Thebes" (*ULB*, 177). He wrote an article stating his position, submitted it to the Czech Writers' newspaper, and soon forgot it.

Then came the invasion, then normalization. Tomas was asked, first by the chief surgeon at his hospital, and then twice by a man from the Ministry of the Interior, to retract his article. His experience illustrates the means by which Communist authorities procured Czechs' collaboration with the regime. It also illustrates the means by which the Czechs' moral standards were eroded.¹²

When Tomas was interrogated by a member of the Secret Police, he was confused. The man's congeniality threw him off. Tomas found it difficult to be rude, much less to lie to him. After discussing the article over a bottle of wine, he berated himself for giving too much away, for treating his interrogator as though he were a friendly acquaintance. Kundera observes the situation's absurdity: "It is a tragicomic fact that our proper upbringing has become an ally of the secret police. We do not know how to lie." In a

¹²Where Kundera's novels only suggests the extent of the moral erosion, Václav Havel's essays address it directly. See, for example, "The Power of the Powerless," Paul Wilson, ed., *Václav Havel: Open Letters* (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 125-214.

regime that is not moral, however, the moral individual must learn how and when to lie, and then lie unflinchingly. According to Kundera, Tomas's confusion was natural. The sustained practice of lying requires some force of will:

When you sit face to face with someone who is pleasant, respectful, and polite, you have a hard time reminding yourself that *nothing* he says is true, *nothing* is sincere. Maintaining nonbelief (constantly, systematically, without the slightest vacillation) requires a tremendous effort and the proper training - in other words, frequent police interrogations. Tomas lacked that training (*ULB*, 186).

Tomas soon realized that it would be much easier to tell the man what he wanted to hear. He also realized that everyone expected it of him. Earlier, the chief surgeon had offered a ready justification; he told Tomas that he was needed at the hospital, and that a retraction would be meaningless in any case:

[S]ince to retract an idea is impossible, merely verbal, formal sorcery, I see no reason why you shouldn't do as they wish. In a society run by terror, no statements whatsoever can be taken seriously. They are all forced, and it is the duty of every honest man to ignore them (*ULB*, 180).

Tomas was tempted by this suggestion from a man whom he respected. Yet, he soon realized that people *wanted* him to retract: "although he had never given people cause to doubt his integrity, they were ready to bet on his dishonesty rather than on his virtue" (*ULB*, 181). Those who had signed statements smiled conspiratorially. Those who had refused also smiled, because his retraction would make their refusals more courageous. "And suddenly Tomas grasped a strange fact: *everyone* was smiling at him, *everyone* wanted him to write the retraction; it would make *everyone* happy" (*ULB*, 183)! Tomas's fictional experience illustrates a real aspect of totalitarian regimes. Hannah Arendt observes that, in such regimes, "mutual suspicion...permeates all social relationships" and "creates an all-pervasive atmosphere even outside the special purview of the secret police."¹³

A naive reading of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* suggests that Kundera is presenting the thesis and antithesis of moral virtue. At one pole, there Oedipus, the man who did not realize his crime as he committed it, but punished himself when he discovered it. At the other pole, there is secret police, which commit crimes daily with full knowledge of its crimes' effects. The majority of Czechs are arrayed in the middle. They are the

¹³*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 430.

Communist enthusiasts who deny their guilt, and those who collaborate in order to protect their families, jobs or self-interest. In this historically realized moral dystopia, political power belongs to the secret police, the least virtuous of all, and the most virtuous are punished. It is a society where Aristotle's good man and good citizen are thoroughly opposed, and where the good man must learn to lie. Here, as with Ludvik's trial, the absurd becomes real in a particular political setting.¹⁴

Our third piece of testimony is taken from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. In his fourth novel, Kundera tests his medium; in exploring two themes - laughter and forgetting - he uses several different plots, characters, and genres. One character he offers in the novel is himself. Published after Kundera left the country, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* deals openly with the novelist's own travails during the Communist era. Here we find Kundera's account of his fall from the Communist Party, his life as a "déclassé" intellectual, and his decision finally to leave his country.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera reiterates a neglected fact: because the Czech Communists resisted the Nazis, and because the Russians liberated the Czechs in 1945, the Communists appeared more patriotic than their weak opponents.

So the Communists took power in February 1948 with neither bloodshed nor violence, but greeted by the cheers of about half the nation. And now, please note: the half that did the cheering was the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the better (*BLF*, 10).

Things soon went wrong; "thousands and tens of thousands" of Czechs, including many Communists, went to jail or work camps. Others, like Kundera himself, were expelled from the Party. His chronicle of the period spanning from his expulsion to his decision to leave Prague is highly personal testimony, combining Czech history with the author's experience of it.

As a play on *The Joke*'s theme of serious joy, Kundera offers the "ring dance" in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. "Dancing in a ring is magic," Kundera explains; "a ring dance speaks to us from the ancient depths of our memories." Set to a simple folk

¹⁴We will revisit the scene in Chapter Six. Once we have explored Tomas's character and the grounds of his apparent virtue, our naive interpretation will require revising.

melody, it is a swirling ring of people, laughing, joyful and innocent; "they are united not by *marching*, like soldiers or fascist formations, but by *dancing*, like children" (BLF, 88). In those early years of Communism, the young Czechs' daring creeds and their ring dances were a heady mixture. "I too once danced in a ring," Kundera recalls. Like Ludvik, though, "one day I said something I should not have said." He was expelled from the party. "That is when I understood the magical meaning of the circle....once a circle closes up...there is no way back" (BLF, 65). Kundera was suddenly an outsider. Yet he had also become an observer. In Section Three of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, he records what he saw.

June, 1950, at "God knows what anniversary:" Thousands of young people danced in the center of Prague. Milada Horakova, National Assembly representative of the Socialist Party and Zavis Kalandra, Czech surrealist poet, had been hanged the day before. Knowing this, the young Czechs danced their ring dances "all the more frenetically, because their dance was a demonstration of their innocence." Paul Éluard, surrealist poet and friend of Kalandra, had denounced his friend the day before. Today, though, he was dancing with the young Czechs and reciting exquisite verse. Unable to join in, Kundera looked on:

I wandered through the streets of Prague, rings of laughing, dancing Czechs swirled around me, and I knew that I did not belong to them but belonged to Kalandra, who had also come loose from the circular trajectory and had fallen, fallen, to end his fall in a condemned man's coffin, but even though I did not belong to them, I nonetheless watched the dancing with envy and yearning, unable to take my eyes off them And that is when I saw him, right in front of me (BLF, 93)?

Kundera had seen Éluard with a ring of young Czechs. And then before his eyes, the ring lifted into the air, like "a great wreath flying off":

I ran on the ground below and looked up...there below them was Prague with its cafés full of poets and its prisons full of betrayers of the people, and from the crematorium where they were incinerating a Socialist deputy and a surrealist writer the smoke ascended to the heavens like a good omen, and I heard Éluard's metallic voice:

"Love is at work it is tireless."

And I ran after that voice through the streets so as not to lose sight of the splendid wreath of bodies gliding over the city, and I realized with anguish in my heart that they were flying like birds and I was falling like a stone, that they had wings and I would never have any" (BLF, 95).

December, 1972: Kundera recapitulates recent events.

Eighteen years after his execution, Kalandra was totally rehabilitated, but some months later Russian tanks burst into Bohemia and soon tens of thousands of people were in turn accused of betraying the people and its hopes, some of them thrown into prison and most of them driven from their jobs, and two years later (twenty years, that is, after Éluard soared away over Wenceslaus Square), one of these newly accused (I myself) was writing an astrology column in an illustrated Czech magazine for young people (*BLF*, 95).

Milan Kundera, novelist and teacher, spokesman for artists at the 1967 Fourth Writers' Congress, was unemployed. To earn some money, he agreed to write an astrology column. No one was permitted to hire him, so he wrote under a pseudonym. If the authorities were to discover him, the magazine's editor would lose her job. Kundera wrote horoscopes for two years. When he was caught, the fiancé of R. (the name Kundera uses for the young editor) let him know by means of a hand-delivered note. When Kundera met R. secretly, he learned she would no longer be allowed to work. "Only then did I understand definitively that I had become a bearer of ill tidings and could not go on living among the people I loved if I wished them no harm, and that the only thing remaining for me to do was to leave my country" (*BLF*, 75). In 1975, he emigrated to France.

These three scenes, all of them central to the novels, offer testimony concerning the political life of the Czechs. Yet, how do we know that the novels' testimony is accurate? The authorities who revoked Kundera's citizenship claimed he was lying.¹⁵ The novelist himself has observed the difficulty of discerning truth from fiction in a society where "the sense of the real is inexorably being lost."¹⁶ Perhaps Kundera himself has lost his sense of the real. We cannot rule out the possibility. Certainly, the novels include some bizarre passages, especially *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Two children wearing paper rhinoceros snouts take flight into the sky, others play eternal rounds of hopscotch on an abandoned island; devils mock angels and angels whinny back at them. Tamina believes

¹⁵Since 1989, we have known for certain that Kundera's portrayal of the regime was more truthful than that of the discredited Communists. Recent political events do not remove the interpretive problem of establishing Kundera's credibility, however. Thus, we proceed as though the events of 1989 have not yet occurred.

¹⁶ Kundera, cited in Howard Eiland, "The Novel in the Age of Terminal Paradoxes," *Gettysburg Review* 4 (Autumn 1988), 711.

ostriches are talking to her, and Paul Éluard floats into the sky. The question then arises: is it the Czech Communists who are disordered, or Milan Kundera?

Two other scenes offer cause for concern: the first is found in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the second in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In the first scene, the character named Tamina is escorted by the Angel Raphael in a red sports car to Paradise. The angel tells her it is a "place where things are as light as the breeze. Where things have lost their weight. Where there is no remorse" (*BLF*, 224). When Tamina arrives, she discovers that Paradise is an island populated by naked children who are at once playful and quarrelsome, innocent and malicious, and who will not let her alone. The children shout at her, pinch her, and eventually rape her. Afraid she'll be forced to endure their games for eternity, Tamina finally drowns herself. In the scene in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza has a nightmare in which she is naked, singing and marching around a swimming pool with other naked women. Her husband, Tomas, is perched with a pistol in a basket above the pool. He shouts at the women to stop and do knee-bends, and shoots those who do them improperly. When Tereza later recalls the dream, it terrifies her:

Not only were their bodies identical, identically worthless, not only were their bodies mere resounding soulless mechanisms - the women rejoiced over it! Theirs was the joyful solidarity of the soulless....Tereza sang with them, but did not rejoice. She sang because she was afraid that if she did not sing the women would kill her (*ULB*, 57).¹⁷

Although the women who marched with Tereza would have killed her, they were not malicious. Neither were Tamina's young tormentors: "The small boy who urinated on her when she lay beneath him tangled in the volleyball nets gave her a beautiful, innocent smile a day or so later." The children did not hate Tamina, and they were not particularly bad. "Her misfortune," Kundera explains, is that "she is beyond their world's border. Humans do not revolt against the killing of calves in slaughterhouses" (*BLF*, 255). Tereza, in her dreams of death, and Tamina, in her journey towards death, stop over in a place where they are treated like calves in a slaughterhouse. Neither woman knows why she is there, or when she will be allowed to leave.

¹⁷For a different, yet complementary interpretation of the same passage, see Chapter Six.

So what of it? Is there more to these scenes than an artist's overwrought imagination? On the basis of the evidence, we conclude that there is. First, there is Gottwald's hat, which indicates Kundera's ability to distinguish reality from invention. Second, there is the correlation between Kundera's dream images and reports of the dream-like quality of life in a totalitarian regime. Each piece of evidence will be examined in turn.

Passages in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* indicate that Kundera is aware that reality seems to be slipping away, and that he must safeguard his own sense of it. In the novel's opening paragraphs, he recalls the Communists' accession of power in February, 1948. Standing in Old Town Square with hundreds of thousands of Czechs, Kundera cheered as Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped onto the balcony of a Baroque palace. He carefully recreates the scene: "Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing close to him. It was snowing and cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. Bursting with solicitude, Clementis took off his fur hat and set it on Gottwald's head" (*BLF*, 3). A photograph was taken and widely circulated. Then came the trials:

Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history and, obviously, out of all the photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. All that remains of Clementis is the cap on Gottwald's head (*BLF*, 3).

So begins the novel about memory and forgetting. A political regime declares that one of its major authorities never existed, and only those who remember that Clementis placed the hat on Gottwald's head can know the truth. In such a regime, fallible memory becomes the only reliable source of historical knowledge. Understandably, Kundera treats the photograph as a rare gift. For a sane individual existing in a disordered context, the photo assumes metaphysical significance.

Having gained reasonable assurance of Kundera's sanity, we now must address the novels' dream elements. Surely, Paul Éluard did not levitate into the sky with a ring of dancing Czechs, just as angels in red sports cars do not kidnap women. Yet, perhaps Kundera means to convey something by his mixture of the mundane with the fantastic. Indeed, when they are read in light of his political experience, Kundera's bizarre scenes become meaningful. We should recall that Kundera is a Central European author writing

in the twentieth century. In Tereza's dreams, and in Tamina's journey towards death, we find a distinctly modern version of hell.¹⁸ Such a hell has been realized in this century. There have been places where people are treated like cattle, prodded and eliminated, and where imperious youths preside; often, the youths are not malicious, but they could easily kill tens and hundreds if given the order. The question of who lives and who dies here is arbitrary; someone might be shot for doing knee-bends improperly, or for no reason at all. As Hannah Arendt observes, one finds unreality in concentration camps like nowhere else on earth. Sense is replaced by nonsense, coherence by incoherence, and nightmares become real. The camps are earthly approximations of hell. They produce not only physical anguish, but the spiritual despair that intelligibility is lost, and that the human will is useless.¹⁹ Kundera is aware that the unreal was realized in the camps, and his novels' dream elements reflect that awareness.

His portrayal of totalitarian reality as a dream suggests he is a reliable analyst of political disorder. Political philosopher Eric Voegelin observes that modern ideological societies are defined by the "identification of dream and reality as a matter of principle."²⁰ For Voegelin, a critic of such regimes must escape this operative principle. To a reliable critic, the world around him will seem mad and incoherent. It takes on the "weird, ghostly atmosphere of a lunatic asylum," and he represents it as such. Judging from his novels, Kundera is such a critic. He presents the occasion on which Paul Éluard takes flight as a demonic circus. And he presents the Communists' idyll as an illusory, destructive and unattainable goal:

[A]ll human beings have always aspired to an idyll, to that garden where nightingales sing, to that realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man and man against other men, but rather where the world and all men are shaped from one and the same matter. There, everyone is a note in a sublime Bach fugue, and anyone who

¹⁸Maria Nemcová Banerjee, whose interpretation of Kundera's novels is one of the best available, calls this the "most obvious level of interpretation" (*Terminal Paradox* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 179). In Chapter Seven, we will return to the scene, to see whether the less obvious level of interpretation is tenable.

¹⁹"The difficult thing to understand is that, like such fantasies, these gruesome crimes took place in a phantom world, which, however, has materialized, as it were, into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data" (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 445).

²⁰Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 170.

refuses to be one is a mere useless and meaningless black dot that need only be caught and crushed between thumb and finger like a flea (*BLF*, 11).

Kundera's message seems clear: we should mistrust the dream of paradise on earth. Tamina longs for a place where she can forget her sorrows, where all is new and innocent, and "where things are light as a breeze." What she discovers, what the Czechs discovered under Communism, is a new sort of hell.²¹ According to Kundera, the exchange is inevitable, where both hell and paradise depend on the abolition of privacy:

André Breton sang the praises of the house of glass where all that is private is public. Franz Kafka created the world where K. loses all that is intimate; he is even followed and scrutinized in his bed. The abolition of the private realm is paradise for Breton; it looks more like hell in Kafka's world. But we are dealing here with two faces of a single archetype, which is paradisaical and hellish at the same time."²²

Expressed in religious terms, the two faces of this single archetype are heaven and hell. Expressed politically, they are the idyll and the concentration camp. According to Kundera, concentration camps are defined not by violence but by lack of privacy: "Brutality and violence are merely secondary (and not in the least indispensable) characteristics. A concentration camp is the complete obliteration of privacy" (*ULB*, 137).

Thus, we have the novelist's answer to our inquiry concerning life in a totalitarian regime: it is like living in a concentration camp. Tereza in particular senses it. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, we learn that after 1968, bugging devices were used liberally. At this time, the private discussions of Czech novelist Jan Prochazka were broadcast over the radio. It all reminds Tereza, accustomed since childhood at her mother's house to a total lack of privacy, of a concentration camp: "When a private talk over a bottle

²¹The testimony of Polish writer, Czeslaw Milosz, suggests that Kundera's choice of terms is apt: "The adjective 'demonic' applied to Marxism is not an exaggeration. First of all, the number of people killed and tortured to death in its name surpasses many times the total number of victims of Hitler's National-Socialism. Second, a doctrine promising 'the withering of the state' has led to the emergence of an all-powerful state and its omnipotent police. Third, instead of ending the oppression of man by man and getting rid of alienation, a realm of nearly absolute alienation came into being, where the individual does not belong to himself, both literally and figuratively" ("Central European Attitudes," *Cross Currents* 5 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986), 104).

²²Finkelkraut, "Milan Kundera Interview," 23.

of wine is broadcast on the radio, what can it mean but that the world is turning into a concentration camp" (*ULB*, 137)?

The world? Yes, she means the whole world. When confronted with the practice of bugging apartments in her own country and with public nudity in the West, Tereza is convinced: privacy is being obliterated everywhere. As a girl, she endured years of her mother's unashamed nakedness. Public nudity became her symbol for the complete loss of privacy. When Tereza showed her photos of the '68 invasion to a Swiss magazine editor, and was shown another photographer's pictures of a nude beach, she said they were the same. "[E]ven I find it difficult to explain what she had in mind when she compared a nude beach to the Russian invasion," Kundera confesses (*ULB*, 69). In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we find our explanation. Jan is an emigré to France, an erotic adventurer, and the novel's final character. As he walked on a French nude beach, he was "overwhelmed by a strange feeling of affliction, and from the haze of that affliction came an even stranger thought: that the Jews had filed into Hitler's gas chambers naked and en masse" (*BLF*, 226).

In the Czechoslovakia of these novels, there are bugged apartments and interrogations. In Western Europe, there are nude beaches, and orgies with the spontaneity of military drills. "Almost from childhood," Kundera observes, Tereza "knew that a concentration camp was nothing exceptional or startling but something very basic, a given into which we are born and from which we can escape only with the greatest of efforts" (*ULB*, 137). Tereza identifies the outward symptoms of what might be a debilitating affliction. If the world is a concentration camp, can there be quality of life? Why would we want to live here? If life must be so miserable, is it worth enduring? These are questions for later chapters. In this chapter, we have discovered a global concentration camp. In the next, we examine the characters who staff it.

CHAPTER THREE

Disease

Through Tereza and the others, Kundera offers his metaphor of modern social existence: it is a global, imminent concentration camp. Yet, we have still to discover *why* the world is becoming that way. Who staffs the camp, and why do they do it? What sort of people wish to turn nightmares into reality? For Kundera, the answers to these questions can be found only through study of the human animal:

No civilization and no ideology has a monopoly on totalitarianism. Its roots are anthropological. Each of us has had the experience of totalitarian practice within the social microcosms (the family, the army); each of us knows the totalitarian temptation.¹

Tereza's mother refused her daughter privacy because Tereza was young and she was old. For her, the totalitarian temptation stemmed from her knowledge of her ugliness, and her desire to ridicule beauty. We find many other motives in the novels. Kundera explores them not as an anthropologist, but as a novelist would; he creates characters, confronts them with situations, and then lays bare the reasons governing their behaviour.² His method will perplex those who assume that totalitarianism is to be explained solely by the study of political forms - of diplomatic policy, nationalization of industry, or even fidelity to an ideology.³ Kundera's novels imply that such explanations overlook the decisive one: the irruption of individuals' totalitarian temptation into political life.

¹Finkelkraut, "Milan Kundera Interview," 22.

²We should qualify this. *The Joke* is the only novel by Kundera in which characters' actions are not interrogated by the narrator. In this novel, the characters themselves narrate the story. Yet, we are no less aware of their motives and temperaments. By observing the interpretations of Helena, Jaroslav, Kostka and Ludvik of the same events, we come to know them as well as we know the characters in the other two novels.

³In an interview with Alain Finkelkraut, the novelist disparages political thought for its blindness to the anthropological causes of political events: "It [political thought] sees nothing of what goes on behind the scenes in political systems: not the concrete life of the individual, the destinies of nations, not cultural transformations, nor the great collisions of civilizations - Moslem, Russian, Chinese, Western, etc. - which have different visions of man and the world, of time and of death" ("Milan Kundera Interview," 16).

Perhaps an attentive observer could not conclude otherwise. In another era, a philosopher once suggested that the political regime is man written in large letters. Informed by personal experience, Kundera appears to concur. For our part, we proceed from the novels' portrayal of the Czech regime to their portrayal of the Czechs. In this chapter, we meet more characters - Alexej, Ludvik, Mirek, Kostka, Jaroslav, Zdena, Helena, Zemanek - who appear in the order of intensity of faith.

We deal first with Alexej, *The Joke's* Communist martyr. Little more than a teenager, Alexej landed in the black insignia when his father, a well-placed Communist official, was executed. Still a faithful Party member, Alexej resolved to continue the revolutionary struggle within the barracks. The black insignia was no less a stronghold against the enemy class than the front lines. Alexej publicly renounced his father. He denounced the camp's commander, and wrote letters claiming the commander was a saboteur. He was expelled from the Party, but again showed his loyalty by assuming his father's guilt: "My father was arrested for espionage," he explained to Ludvik. "Do you understand what that means? How can the Party trust me? It is the Party's *duty* not to trust me" (*Joke*, 98). The Party had classified Alexej as an enemy; the Party was infallible; when once he had believed himself innocent, he now saw he was guilty. His guilt had been proved by his expulsion. Alexej then took the honourable route of a Communist in whose body the class enemy lurked: he killed himself.

Through this puny, pathetic young character, Kundera depicts the eagerness with which ideologically consistent Communists assume their guilt. Alexej's conspiracy theories and tortured logic indicate the effort required to defend the Party's innocence in face of its manifest crimes.

As we know, Ludvik was no Alexej. While he pitied Alexej, Ludvik later confesses that "he had never been a friend of mine, the virulence of his faith was alien to me" (*Joke*, 115). Alexej was a zealot; his intelligence was subsumed to ideological convictions, and thus he refused to see the regime's crimes. Ludvik, on the other hand, saw the crimes as crimes, and his own internment as one of them. But at one time, he too had believed. So had Kundera. What about these two? Where Alexej is pitiful, Ludvik is not; he is one of Kundera's more intelligent, "the better half." In 1948, this half also was taken with the Communists. If they were so intelligent, then why?

Kundera knows the answer. Experience had taught him that the Communist idyll is beyond human reach. Yet experience had also taught him the sources of its appeal. With its historical materialism, its grand program, and its poetry, the Communists' "entirely new world" where the nightingales sing enchanted the bright young Czechs.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera submits that the better half of the Czechs supported the Communists because they were smarter:

Yes, say what you will, the Communists were more intelligent. They had an imposing program. A plan for an entirely new world where everyone would find a place. The opponents had no great dream, only some tiresome and threadbare moral principles, with which they tried to patch the torn trousers of the established order (*BLF*, 11).

As an added feature, the Communists declared their "entirely new world" to be historically inevitable. Marxism not only promised an idyll, it offered a science of history to prove it would soon be with us. The masses of the hopeful were told they had only to *participate*.⁴ Ludvik recalls the heady days prior to his expulsion:

[W]hat had attracted me to the movement more than anything, dazzled me, was the feeling (real or apparent) of standing near the *wheel of history*. For in those days we actually did decide the fate of men and events, especially at the universities;...we were bewitched by history; we were drunk with the thought of jumping on its back and feeling it beneath us; admittedly, in most cases the result was an ugly lust for power, but (with a bit of good will) there was still (and especially, perhaps, in us, the young), an altogether idealistic illusion that we were inaugurating a human era in which man (all men) would be neither *outside* history, nor *under the heel of history*, but would create and direct it (*Joke*, 71).

With their Marxism, young Czech Communists believed they had not only understood, but tamed history. To this attraction, Kundera adds another: as much as it pretended to be scientific, the Communist revolution was poetic. Indeed, it *relied* on poetry. The novelist explains in an interview with Alain Finkielkraut:

Marxism was the grandiose attempt to explain the world in terms of total rationality. Having failed, it picked up a lyre and descended into the irrational, just as Orpheus did. It has become a symbolic system, a kind of poetry, of beauty.⁵

⁴For a precise analysis of Marxism's call to action, see Chapter XV of Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁵"Milan Kundera Interview," 22.

In the opening pages of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera presents Mirek, a character who had both accepted his historical destiny, and succumbed to the movement's poetry. As dutiful Communists, Mirek and his girlfriend attended the meetings; they hired and fired, decided other people's fates. The "interminable meetings" were sometimes tedious. Yet, sometimes, they were supremely affecting:

[T]he moment they stood up to utter some extreme opinions, (it was necessary to castigate the class enemy ever more harshly, to formulate this or that idea in ever more categorical terms) they felt like the figures in heroic paintings: he, gun in hand, falling to the ground with a bleeding wound in his shoulder, and she, clutching a pistol, ahead to where he can no longer go (*BLF*, 24).

Kundera often describes the poetry that animated the Czechs' revolution. To the young, who were acquainted not with death, but with images of sacrifice and redemption, the revolution seemed heroic. The leaders of the movement realized their members' love of lyricism and exploited it. Czech poets and musicians were instructed to celebrate the revolution, and years of purges masked by poetry ensued. In an interview with Antonín Liehm, Kundera reflects upon that stage of his life: "I am still able to remember vividly this state of passionate lyrical enthusiasm which, getting drunk on its frenzy, is unable to see the real world through its own grandiose haze."⁶

Eventually, the real world encroached on the haze. For Ludvik and Kundera, the first sobering realities were their expulsions, followed by the denunciations and hangings of Czech citizens. We learn that their subsequent horror at the new regime was shared by many of their generation:

Timid lovers held hands on the movie screens, adultery was harshly suppressed by citizens' tribunals of honor, nightingales sang, and the body of Clementis swung like a bell ringing in the new dawn of humanity.

And then those young intelligent, and radical people suddenly had the strange feeling of having sent into the world an act that had begun to lead a life of its own, had ceased to resemble the idea it was based on and did not care about those who had created it. Those young and intelligent people started to scold their act, they began to call to it, to rebuke it, to pursue it, to give chase to it (*BLF*, 12)

⁶As cited in "Milan Kundera," Antonín Liehm, ed., *The Politics of Culture*, Peter Kussi, trans. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), 145. For Kundera's sustained exploration of the link between poetry and revolution, see *Life is Elsewhere* (Peter Kussi, trans., (New York: Penguin Books, 1986)). We will return to Kundera's discussion of lyricism in Chapters Five and Seven.

According to Kundera, the Prague Spring marked a whole generation's attempt to recall the deed of its youth.

The Alexeys and the Ludviks - if these produced the Communist idyll's ill-fated martyrs and resisters, then we still must meet its guardians. Through the characters of Kostka, Helena, Zdena, and Jaroslav, Kundera depicts these as well. In these characters, we find a less fervent belief in Marxist ideology, but a stronger attachment to the Marxist regime. For these, the appeal of the Communist idyll is its readiness to censure or endorse matters usually considered private. In practice, Communism might serve the spurned woman. It is pervasive enough to have glorified Jaroslav's beloved Moravian folk music. It is close enough to certain Christian doctrines to have prompted Kostka, a faithful Christian, to support it. Each of these characters take what they need from Communism, both its theory and practice, to achieve personal goals. At the same time, each underplays the regime's excesses. According to Kundera, these are the sort that tend the idyll, even as they realize that their garden of paradise has grown monstrous.

We deal first with Kostka, Kundera's representative Calvinist in *The Joke*. Kostka remembers meeting Ludvik in 1947, "at one of those turbulent meetings that racked all institutions of higher learning in those days." Ludvik was a student, and Kostka a lecturer; both supported the ascendant Communists. Yet Kostka was one of the few Christians who sided with the Communists. He recalls being chastised by other Christians for supporting "a movement that inscribed godlessness on its shield" (*Joke*, 208). Yet, he saw through its apparent godlessness the call to adopt a truly Christian life. Communism was a coded appeal for Christians to imitate Christ:

The churches failed to realize that the working-class movement was the movement of the humiliated and oppressed supplicating for justice. They did not choose to work with and for them to create the kingdom of God on earth....And now they reproach it for being godless. The Pharisees! Yes, the socialist movement is godless, but I see in this a casting of divine blame on us, on Christians. Blame for our hardheartedness toward the poor and suffering (*Joke*, 209).

According to Ludvik, Kostka is "a strange character, at once scrupulously moral and oddly unsettled and unstable" (*Joke*, 5). A few months after Ludvik was expelled, he left the university of his own will, convinced that the persecution of his Communist colleagues was a "coded appeal" to abandon his comfortable lectureship and live a godly life: "I

requested to go among the ordinary people" (*Joke*, 213). He went to a collective farm, which he left some years later to become a bricklayer.

Like Ludvik, Kostka perceives the movement's appeal: "The revolutionary era from 1948 to 1956 had little in common with skepticism and rationalism. It was an era of great collective faith" (*Joke*, 224). Yet, where Ludvik had been sickened by the era's fanaticism, Kostka praises it, and hopes it will soon acknowledge its Christian origins. For Ludvik, the recent slackening of fervour was a relief. For Kostka, it marked a dangerous lapse. In an imagined dialogue with Ludvik, he recalls the Stalinist period nostalgically, and with full knowledge of its excesses:

This was a cruel religion. It did not elevate you or me among its priests; perhaps it injured both of us.. Yet despite this the era that has just passed was a hundred times nearer to my heart than the era that seems to be approaching today: an era of mockery, skepticism, and corrosion, a petty era with the ironic intellectual in the limelight, and behind him the mob of youth, coarse, cynical, and nasty, without enthusiasm, without ideals, ready to mate or to kill on sight (*Joke*, 225).

As for Ludvik's expulsion from the Party, Kostka likens it to the execution of a boy in Calvinist Geneva who dared to mock God. In both cases, mockery cannot be tolerated: "All I'm trying to say is that no great movement designed to change the world can bear sarcasm or mockery, because they are a rust that corrodes all it touches" (*Joke*, 242). Kostka clearly has not rejected the possibility of a terrestrial paradise. Nor has he abandoned his belief that Communism, shorn of its rationalist language, will be the means by which a Christian terrestrial paradise is realized. Whether Communist or Christian, Kostka's saints would surrender themselves to their higher purpose: "great things on this earth can be created only by a community of infinitely devoted men who humbly give up their lives to a higher design" (*Joke*, 243). Ludvik would be condemned in Kostka's idyll, as certainly as he had been in the Communist one. Through Kostka, Kundera means to show that the totalitarian temptation is as strong in men of God as in Communists.

We turn now to two of Kundera's women: Helena of *The Joke*, and Zdena of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. These two are not heroines. Kundera plainly does not like them, but knows them well enough, because they are typical.⁷ In the novels, some of

the Communist Party's most loyal devotees are women, and the reasons inspiring their loyalty are hardly political. For Zdena, her Party affiliations are all that she, a lonely, ugly woman, has; her faithful service masks her disappointment in love. And Helena, whom Kundera knows "by heart," is a mediocre woman indebted to the Party because it helped her catch a husband.

First, we consider Helena. As a mother, journalist and aging, neglected wife, Helena displays a feminine version of the totalitarian temptation. She became a Communist out of coincidence rather than conviction. The early days of the Czech communist regime were also the days when she first met her husband, Pavel Zemanek. She has come to identify the two completely. Her memories of the revolution remind her of when she was young and pretty and first loved Pavel:

Pavel is my youth, Prague, the university, the dormitory, and most of all the Fucik Song and Dance Ensemble....that's where I met Pavel, he sang tenor, I sang alto, we gave hundreds of concerts and demonstrations, we sang Soviet songs and our own socialist-construction songs and of course folk songs...I fell so in love with Moravian folk songs they became the leitmotif of my existence (*Joke*, 16).

The two eventually married, but only when the Party Committee forced it. Judging from Pavel's terse proposal, Helena concludes that "they must have been pretty tough on him, morals were pretty strict in those days, people really overdid it, but maybe its better to overdo morality than immorality the way we do now" (*Joke*, 18). The Party was her stick, one not available to women in non-totalitarian regimes. When Pavel later strayed, Helena drew closer to that other symbol of her youth: "I just clung to the Party more tightly than ever, the Party is almost like a living being, I can tell it all my most intimate thoughts now that I have nothing to say to Pavel" (*Joke*, 20).

She is aging and no longer pretty. Like Kostka, she endorses Communism's identification of the public with the private. She resents the slackening of morality that has

⁷At least, they seem typical. In an interview with Jordan Elgraby, Kundera states: "I had known a number of women who were who were mediocre, women like Helena in *The Joke* (her I knew by heart)" ("Conversations with Milan Kundera," 23). Characters like Helena recur throughout his work: in *Laughable Loves*, the nurse Alzhbeta; in *The Farewell Party*, the nurse Ruzena; in *Immortality*, Laura. They are lusty, even somewhat attractive, but selfish and not intelligent. Characters similar to Zdena also recur: in *Laughable Loves*, the directress in "Edward and God," in *Life is Elsewhere*, Jaromil's first girlfriend, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the lonely schoolteacher, Madame Raphael. These women are intelligent, yet lonely, ugly and ridiculous.

accompanied political reform. Yet Helena's concern is that the regime must enforce marital fidelity. Based on her own experience of Communism, she equates political freedom with youth and license, and hates all three:

I hate those young girls, those little bitches, so sure of themselves and their youth and so lacking in solidarity with older women....it would have been much simpler to forget my girlish dreams of love, forget them and cross the border into the realm of that monstrous freedom where shame, inhibitions, and morals have ceased to exist (*Joke*, 21).

At work, she punishes infidelity wherever she has influence, and her co-workers resent her. Deluded Helena, by this time a rigid Stalinist, stands fast: "people call me a bitch, a fanatic, a dogmatist, a Party bloodhound...but they'll never make me ashamed of loving the Party and sacrificing all my spare time to it. What else do I have to live for" (*Joke*, 19)?

Kundera presents Zdena, the girlfriend in the heroic portrait of Mirek's youth in Part One of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Twenty years after the revolution, she is still faithful to the Party. Mirek rejected both the Party and Zdena long ago. He later supposes that she remained loyal to the regime because she was a fanatic. On this point, Kundera corrects him, and reminds us of the ease with which love spills into politics: "That was not true. She remained faithful to the party because she loved Mirek....What looked like political fanaticism was merely a pretense, a parable, a demonstration of faithfulness, disappointed love's coded reproach." Kundera envisions her reaction to the Russian invasion:

I imagine her on a beautiful August morning awakening with a start to the terrible din of airplanes. She runs out into the street, where panic-stricken people tell her that the Russian army is occupying Bohemia. She breaks into hysterical laughter! Russian tanks have come to punish all the unfaithful! At last she'll see Mirek's downfall (*BLF*, 22)!

For reasons having nothing to do with politics, Zdena was elated by the Czechs' political disaster. A totalitarian conqueror was her agent of revenge.

Mirek recalls another puzzling scene. One day he found Zdena crying over the death of the Russian statesman, Masturov, whom she had never met. Another day, stone-faced, she reproached him for making love to her "like an intellectual." He was puzzled by her use of the word. At the time, the term "intellectual" denoted a category of political undesirables; it did not concern love. Yet for Zdena, the two were interchangeable:

For one reason or another, Zdena was displeased with him, and just as she was capable of imbuing the most abstract relationship (the relationship with Masturbo, whom she didn't know) with the most concrete feeling (embodied in a tear), so she was capable of giving the most concrete of acts an abstract significance and her own dissatisfaction a political name (*BLF*, 7).

Given the Communist regime's failure to distinguish private from public concerns, Zdena's confusion is not surprising. Yet, it is politically significant. Through years of ideological fanaticism, she discharged a desire to possess Mirek. For her, and for Helena, the psyche's jealousies and resentments are not addressed as such, but instead sanctioned, incorporated and amplified by a regime. Personal disorders gain political release and the entire society suffers. Not only do the women themselves continue to suffer, but they gain political influence, and cause others' suffering. We observe that the spiritually sick tend their idyll as the means to conceal their sickness.

We next meet Jaroslav, the folklorist. He and Ludvik had been childhood friends in their Moravian village, and played together in a cimbalom band as teenagers. When Ludvik went to Prague, Jaroslav went to Brno to study musicology and folklore. He remembers that when Ludvik came home for a visit in 1947, he was transformed. The newly converted Communist exhorted his band never to play clichéd, bourgeois music, and to play only Moravian folk songs, the "original and genuine art of the people," in celebration of socialism. Jaroslav was surprised; Ludvik's invectives against modern musical culture were like those of the "most conservative Moravian patriots," who also "heard the pipes of Satan in the strains of the Charleston" (*Joke*, 138). Still, "his words did have a kind of attraction for us. His ideas corresponded to our innermost dreams. They elevated us to a historic greatness" (*Joke*, 139).

Ludvik's ideas (the Communist's ideas) soon were realized in practice. Jaroslav could hardly believe it. Folk art had been restored to the Czechs by a Communist regime: "Young people stopped dancing the tango and boogie-woogie. They grabbed one another's shoulders and danced circle dances. The Communist Party went all out to create a new way of life" (*Joke*, 141). Although Jaroslav first had resented Ludvik's invectives, he and his band joined the party in 1949: "the Communist Party supported us. So our political reservations quickly melted away" (*Joke*, 142). The new art was to present socialist content in national form. Jaroslav's cimbalom band became famous. It toured

abroad, played not only traditional pieces, but also new songs celebrating Stalin, the harvest, cooperative farms.

By the time of Jaroslav's narrative, the regime had quit promoting Moravian folk music, and the Czechs had lost interest. In that loss, he saw not only the end of his success, but also the death of both his culture, and his own source of meaning. The Czech youth neither cared about nor understood their heritage. Jaroslav's own son, Vladimir, was one of the modern ones who preferred guitar and American pop to the antiquated Moravian polyphonies. To Jaroslav, the obvious rift with his son was tied to the regime's abandonment of folk music. He felt very old when he realized he had become an anachronism: "Fatigue. Suddenly I wanted to say goodbye to it all" (*Joke*, 279). At the end of *The Joke*, in his final performance, Jaroslav has a heart attack.

There is yet another sort of Communist. In the novels, we find people for whom the regime is not so much a repository of misplaced hopes as a vehicle for self-promotion. As a self-promoter of the slick, sophisticated kind, Kundera offers Pavel Zemanek, Helena's husband. We encounter him first through Helena. They met, she recalls, on the revolution's first anniversary. As a salute to the leader of the Italian workers' movement, Zemanek climbed onto the stage and had the crowd sing an Italian revolutionary song, while Togliatti stood tearfully by (*Joke*, 16). That night, she fell in love with him. Ludvik also liked Zemanek at that time. When the affair with Marketa came up, he was relieved to discover that Zemanek was the new Chairman of the Natural Sciences division. Zemanek knew Marketa; he knew how gullible and exuberant she was, how fun to tease. But Ludvik soon was shocked by his friend's metamorphosis. Zemanek himself presided over the meeting that condemned him; "that prodigious stage manager," delivered "the opening address on me and my errors (effective, brilliant, unforgettable)" (*Joke*, 46).

In later years, Zemanek made the fashionable ideological transitions. When people began criticizing Stalin in 1956, Helena remembers, Zemanek also criticized, but "when they calmed down Pavel calmed down too, he didn't want to risk his cushy lectureship in Marxism at the university" (*Joke*, 20). When Ludvik met him years later, he found that Zemanek "was still jovial and complacent, invulnerable, still enjoyed the favor of the angels" (*Joke*, 269). He was with his lover, a young student. She told Ludvik that Zemanek was the favourite teacher on campus; he said what he thought and stood up for

the young (*Joke*, 271). In Zemanek, we find an ideal politician. Intelligent, showy, appealing - his principles appear firm, but are infinitely flexible. He is the sort who would succeed in any popular regime, at any time, anywhere. Zemanek's attachment to Moravian folk music, to Marxist dogma, or to the 'sixties moral liberation was no more than a desire always to be praised.⁸

To recap: we have met a pubescent fanatic, three crestfallen intellectuals, a Christian sermonizer, two manipulative women, a folklorist, and a consummate politician. It is a fairly typical collection. The characters' typicality is significant; it illustrates the ease with which people adjust to life in a totalitarian tyranny. The horror Kundera reveals is not that totalitarianism cannot be lived with, but that it can. Such regimes encourage citizens to meddle, to judge, to refrain from thinking. The novels suggest that most people are only too willing.

Of course the new regime did not suit the better, more intelligent half, and some members of it actively resisted. While most Czechs dozed comfortably in "the soft, sweet embrace of the Russian empire," these few signed petitions, published pamphlets and articles and appealed to Western Europe for help. In both his novels and his essays, Kundera is often critical of these people known as "dissidents." In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we learn some reasons why. In Part One, with the sureness of a surgeon, Kundera turns his analytical scalpel on Mirek.

⁸In this chapter, we address particular characters, not the "average Czech" who occasionally appears. In *The Joke*, we meet the Communist official who presided over the "welcoming of new citizens to life." Ludvik knows the man; he had been a schoolmate, "one of the less memorable students: neither well-behaved nor rowdy, neither sociable nor solitary, mediocre in his studies - in short, he was inconspicuous." Most important, he was blind to the regime's transgressions. Upon hearing that attendance of such ceremonies was "a touchstone for evaluating people's sense of citizenship and their attitude towards the State," Ludvik observed that "the National Committee was stricter with its believers than the Church was with theirs. Kovalik smiled and said that could not be helped" (*Joke*, 173).

Other characters - a store clerk in *The Joke*, Mirek's mechanic in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and the chief surgeon at Tomas's hospital - passively oppose the regime, and thus are kind to Kundera's heroes. A notable exception is the gatekeeper who will not raise the gate because she recognizes Mirek as a dissident. For this woman, the Russian invasion had been "a signal of new life, out of the ordinary." "She saw that people who ranked above her (and everyone ranked above her) were being deprived, on the slightest allegation, of their powers, their positions, their jobs, and their bread, and that excited her; she started to denounce people herself" (*BLF*, 8). Mirek, formerly a scientist, and now a roofer, is surprised that the woman has not been promoted. In the end, it appears that the vengeful worst half, the least intelligent, are the Czech Communists' loyal supporters.

"It is 1971, and Mirek says: The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (*BLF*, 4). The Communists doctored history; they stripped libraries of books and denied the Czechs Kafka, Seifert, even Clementis. As a means of countering the Communists' efforts, Mirek kept a diary and all his correspondence; he recorded everything he and his friends discussed. The secret police already knew him. He had appeared on television before the invasion, when the reformers had gained some influence. Like Tomas, Mirek refused to recant his opinions and he lost his job after the invasion. We might expect Kundera to praise Mirek's steadfastness. Instead, he indicates how Mirek, the dissident, was not so different from Mirek, the young Communist: "He was in love with his destiny, and even his march toward ruin seemed noble and beautiful to him" (*BLF*, 14). He still craved a life that was remarkable, picturesque, and heroic. "His connection to his life was that of a sculptor to his statue or a novelist to his novel" (*BLF*, 15). Imprisonment would have been a noble conclusion to a noble story.

It appears that Communists and dissidents are cut from the same cloth. Sabina confirms it in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. To her, dissident spokespeople and Communist leaders are essentially identical, right down to the long index fingers they point as they speak. In Switzerland, Sabina attended a meeting of émigré Czechs. The speaker demanded to know what she had done to fight Communism. To Sabina, the émigré speaker was the same: "He didn't care whether his fellow countrymen were good kickers or painters; he cared whether they had opposed Communism actively or just passively, really and truly or just for appearances' sake, from the very beginning or just since emigration" (*ULB*, 96).

Sabina is one of the few characters who has always rejected the Communist idyll. Even her Western friends and her earnest lover, Franz, longed to realize "the brotherhood of mankind on earth." Sabina cringed at the thought of it. She hated demonstrations, whether Communist May Day parades, or protests against malnutrition in Ethiopia. Her friends did not understand her, but Kundera does: "She would have liked to tell them that behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison" (*ULB*, 100). She even had a name for the object of her distaste - "kitsch." Kundera's reflections on Sabina give rise to the extended essay on kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Elsewhere, he affirms the

essay's significance: "All of that meditation on kitsch is vitally important for me, there is a great deal of reflection, experience, study, even passion behind it" (AN, 80). Later in this study, we find that kitsch is central to Kundera's diagnosis of modernity. Accordingly, we now introduce it.

We are told in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that kitsch is a world-wide phenomenon glorifying life's basic images - images of children gaily laughing, of shy lovers holding hands, or of resistance fighters struggling. It comes in many different varieties - American, leftist, conservative, poetic, totalitarian. In Western countries, advertisers and the mass media convey all brands of it to eager consumers. In countries with totalitarian governments, propaganda departments feed a single brand to the entire population. All varieties are unified by a propensity to ignore complexity, to reduce reality to readily digestible categories, and to promote the myth of a single humanity. Leftists throughout the world have their kitsch; theirs is the "Grand March" of history culminating in the universal brotherhood of mankind. "Political kitsch" is a broad one; it reduces reality to a struggle between left and right, oppressed and oppressors, good and evil. "American kitsch" promotes traditional values and the American way. But Kundera is not deceived: no matter what its position on the details, all kitsch is based on a single principle. Our novelist states it bluntly: "kitsch is the absolute denial of shit" (ULB, 248).

It is an odd declaration, based on an awkward theodicy of excrement. According to Kundera, if man was really created in God's image, then God must have shit. If He did shit, then Genesis got it wrong. Creation, Being as such, is not inherently good. By this formulation, the dispute between believers in divine Creation and believers in evolution is unimportant. "Much more real is the line separating those who doubt being as it is granted to man (no matter how or by whom) from those who accept it without reservation" (ULB, 247). Those who doubt being accept that shit exists. They suspect an intrinsic flaw in Creation, and doubt that the dream of paradise (either in the mythic past, present, or future) is attainable. By contrast, the acceptors of Creation believe that the world is intrinsically good and must be glorified as such. Kitsch, Kundera maintains, is the product of a belief in the intrinsic goodness of Creation. It extols paradise and exhorts a

return to it. At the same time, it excludes shit - "everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence."(*ULB*, 248).⁹

Communist kitsch celebrates the Communist idyll, and thus celebrates being. Throughout the past half century, Czech children marched in May Day parades not to express "political agreement with Communism; no, theirs was an agreement with being as such" (*ULB*, 249). Significantly, kitsch is not restricted to social movements. It also finds personal expressions. In his scrawny wife, Vlasta, Jaroslav sees "the poor servant girl" of countless Czech fables; his is a folkloric kitsch. Kostka believes he is God's meek servant, content to earn his bread among the ordinary people. Mirek and Zdena struggled together against bourgeois demons, until she went the way of the Communist martyr, and he the way of the dissident. And Helena subscribes to the kitsch of motherhood. Whatever her accusers might say, she does only what is best for her child. As readers, we observe that Jaroslav's wife is sharp-tongued and deceitful, that Kostka is a negligent husband and father, that Mirek hates Zdena because she is ugly, and that Helena, who wants only what is best for her child, is planning a liaison with Ludvik. It appears that kitsch is the means by which to discount reality. For each character, kitsch's appeal resides in that selectivity; certain aspects of reality can be regarded as real, and the undesirable aspects can be discarded.

At the political level, Kundera informs us the repository is the Gulag. At the personal level, perhaps it is the garbage can. Zdena is ugly, and Mirek once loved her. She is the sole blemish on the novel of his life. How irregular, that a handsome, enigmatic intellectual once had loved an ugly woman! Worse still, Zdena mentions their love to whomever will listen, and she has kept Mirek's love letters. Kundera observes Mirek's frustration: "Zdena insisted on remaining on the opening pages of the novel and did not let herself be crossed out" (*BLF*, 15). Mirek imagines what he would do if he were to acquire the letters: "Stopping at the first garbage can, he carefully holds the parcel between two fingers, as if it were besmirched with shit, and drops it in among the filth" (*BLF*, 24). He

⁹In a review of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Italian novelist Italo Calvino is not convinced. He offers the following "metaphysical objection" to Kundera's essay on kitsch: "I would object that for pantheists and for the constipated (I belong to one of these two categories, though I will not specify which) defecation is one of the greatest proofs of the generosity of the universe (of nature or providence or necessity or what have you). That shit is to be considered of value and not worthless is for me a matter of principle" ("On Kundera," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (East-Haven: Inland Book Co, 1989), 57).

drives all the way to Zdena's house to retrieve them, but she refuses to hand them over. Kundera records the reaction: "he longed to hit her over the head with the big glass ashtray on the coffee table between them and take away the letters" (*BLF*, 25). In service of his brand of kitsch, this noble resistor wished to knock out his former girlfriend. We observe how readily the violent impulse comes to him, and how opposed to his political principles are his efforts to cross Zdena from the novel of his life. "Mirek rewrote history just like the Communist Party, like all political parties, like all peoples, like all mankind" (*BLF*, 30).

Like all mankind, perhaps, but not like all men and women. Sabina sees kitsch for the "beautiful lie" that it is. Thus neutralized, kitsch loses "its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness" (*ULB*, 256). But how many have Sabina's strength and insight? She appears to be in the minority.

We now have our answer to the question posed in this chapter. Mankind, as always, needs its kitsch. The totalitarian temptation springs from the desire to block out unappealing aspects of reality. So long as Alexej, Jaroslav, Kostka, Mirek, Zdena and Helena cannot do without their beautiful lies, they will endorse regimes like the Czech Communist one. And so, we have our anthropological factor. It is a necessary condition for the trap of modern existence. Yet, we still do not have our sufficient condition; how and when do such regimes emerge in human history? In the remaining chapters, through the experiences and observations of Kundera's main characters, we trace the "disintegration of values" and observe its irruption into both characters' lives, and contemporary Czech history.

CHAPTER FOUR

Diagnosis

In Chapter Two, we examined the novels' political testimony. In Chapter Three, we turned to reflections on the totalitarian temptation, observed characters' response to the Communist idyll and introduced kitsch. In Chapter Four, we follow Kundera still further, from reflections on human nature to reflections on history and the structure of being. Such themes have preoccupied humans for centuries; they are fundamental questions of existence, and the core concerns of philosophy. That they are entertained in these novels is evidence of Kundera's aspirations. Milan Kundera is not simply a writer of stories, but a thinker in his own right. Accordingly, we address his texts not just as stories, or even as testimony, but as the result of his effort to understand existence, from the relation of the soul with the body, to its relation with the cosmos. We find that these novels differ from philosophical essays in form, not necessarily in content. In both media, individuals interrogate the sources of order and disorder in their social context, in the universe, and within themselves.

In this study, we read literature, not philosophy, and so we must attend to the requirements of the form. Our first problem is one not encountered when interpreting philosophical texts. Of the characters presented in these novels, we must determine whose experiences Kundera deems authoritative. Through whom does he present his own experience of existence? Which characters represent him? We must be careful here. We found in Chapter One that literature is not autobiography. Yet we also found that it reflects the author's experience of reality. Kundera affirms as much in *Testaments Betrayed*:

Of course, every novelist, intentionally or not, draws on his own life; there are entirely invented characters, created out of pure reverie; there are those inspired by a model, sometimes directly more often indirectly; there are those created from a single detail observed in some person; and all of them owe much to the author's introspection, to his self-knowledge (265).

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera attests that he is "equally fond and equally horrified" by all his characters. But perhaps he has overstated it: is he really equally fond of them all? Even a casual reading of *The Joke* suggests he is fonder of

Lucie than of Helena. And if both Ludvik and Jaroslav are Kundera's unrealized possibilities, Ludvik is nearer to the author's own experience. We know it not only because we know a little of Kundera's life, but because of the way he presents the two characters. When we first meet Jaroslav, he is dreaming of the distant past. His language is anachronistic, even trite. Several times in his narrative, he admits he prefers the fantasy world of Czech folklore to reality. Ludvik, on the other hand, does not indulge in fantasies. With a "malicious obstinacy characteristic of reflection," he prefers to know the truth about the world, painful as it is. Undoubtedly, Kundera sees Ludvik's reflections as more authoritative than Jaroslav's.

Perhaps this is as it should be. The novelist's task is not to act as a judicious parent, preferring no child over the rest, but to create characters of varying insight and intelligence. Some of those characters - Helena, Zdena, Alexej, Kostka and Mirek - are created so we might see offending aspects of human nature. To that end, they are indispensable, but not loved. Zdena is faintly repulsive, and Helena is pathetic. Alexej is a deluded young man with acne and grandiose pretensions. Also deluded are the more intelligent "men of principle," Mirek and Kostka, who clearly irritate their creator. Their professed convictions, whether political or religious, are somehow hollow. These men adopt moral positions so that they may be admired for their courage, their humility, and their scruples.

How to proceed?¹ We begin with Kundera's method of selection. In his essay on kitsch, the novelist separates the manifold of personalities into two basic types: "those who doubt being as it is granted to man" and "those who accept it without reservation." The essay's tone and content indicate that Kundera himself is a doubter of being. Mirek, Zdena, Helena, Kostka, Jaroslav, Alexej are not. Any insights that might be offered by these are suspect, likely to reflect only the character's brand of kitsch.² We are left with

¹We might be tempted to confine the analysis to the narrator's digressions and essays. Yet, even these are bound tightly to characters' experiences. "Even if I'm the one speaking, my reflections are connected to a character," Kundera states in the *Art of the Novel*. "I want to think his attitudes, his way of seeing things, in his stead and more deeply than he could do it himself....Yes, it is the author speaking, but everything he says is valid only within the magnetic field of a character" (80).

²Peter Kussi, translator of *The Joke*, *The Farewell Party*, and *Immortality* agrees that Kundera's characters can be divided thus: "[S]elf-deception is such a striking element in Kundera's stories and novels that his protagonists could really be divided into two moral types: those who are satisfied to remain self-deluded and

Sabina, Ludvik, and Tomas, and with Kundera's sad, fragile heroines - Lucie, Tamina and Tereza.

In the chapters that follow, these characters will lead us further into Kundera's trap of existence. They may find it hard going. Depending on their fortitude, they will engage in some apparently bizarre behaviour. One will be bitter, callous, even predatory, another withdrawn; one may wish to flee, another to fall. The weakest of them may consider suicide. In each case, the character assimilates one fact: that the world is a trap. Already, we have seen the political and anthropological aspects of it. We find there are others. Some characters, particularly Tereza, experience their own bodies as a trap. Others, particularly Ludvik, chafe in the trap of human history. Others still, Sabina and Tomas, resent the senseless moral imperatives that inhibit their freedom. In the current chapter, we examine Sabina and Ludvik, two of Kundera's "intellectuals."³ From these two we discover the trap's outlines. In Chapter Five we consider the balms of mockery and seduction that make modern life bearable, as well as Tomas's heroic attempt to gain release. In Chapter Six, we consider Lucie, Tereza, and Tamina. Here, we discover why these women are ill-equipped to endure the trap of existence, much less to escape it. We also return in Chapter Six to the predicament of the Czechs, and reconsider it in light of Kundera's other explorations.

First, we return to Sabina, whom we left in Chapter Three. She is a painter who moved from Prague to Geneva in 1968, later to Paris, and finally to America. Because she is enviably detached, we begin with her. Outside the novel, Kundera professes his admiration of her: "Sabina is a woman endowed with a strong mind. I might even go so far as to suggest that her thinking is the most lucid in the novel, perhaps, as well, the coldest and most cruel. The other characters do not think as clearly as she does."⁴

those struggling for a measure of self-awareness" ("Milan Kundera: Dialogues with Fiction," *World Literature Today* 57 (Spring 1983), 207).

³In an interview with Antonín Liehm, Kundera submits that "intellectuals constitute the only segment of society capable of unmasking and analyzing itself." (*The Politics of Culture*, 137). According to his criteria, Sabina, Tomas of ULB, Ludvik of *The Joke*, and Karel, Jan, and Kundera himself in *BLF* are the novels' intellectuals. Significantly, Tereza, Tamina, and Lucie are not, as will be shown in Chapter Six.

⁴As cited in Elgraby, "Conversations with Milan Kundera," 23.

Sabina's insights issue from her artistic sensitivity to kitsch. She discovered both the power and repugnance of kitsch early in life, not intellectually, but intuitively. As a child living in Czechoslovakia during the Stalinist era, she had been forced to attend Communist youth camps, to march in May Day parades, to sing joyful children's songs. The young Sabina resented the uniformity no less than the mindless, cheerful aesthetic bound up with it. Communism was a forbidding father, its decrees indistinguishable from those of her own father, a Calvinist preacher. When she was fourteen, Sabina fell in love. Her father discovered it and did not let her go out alone for a year. He also forbade her love for modern art; himself a painter, he detested cubism. In art school, she discovered that the Communists also detested cubism. "Her longing to betray her father remained unsatisfied: Communism was merely another father, a father equally strict and limited, a father who forbade her love (the times were puritanical) and Picasso, too" (*ULB*, 91). Her distaste for Communism was that of a thwarted creative soul: she wished to paint abstract art, but was told to paint collective farms and Russian statesmen in a fastidiously realistic style.

On coming to Western Europe in 1968, Sabina discovered the same aesthetic throughout the world. Detergent commercials, anti-communist slogans, and noisy rock music all were symptoms of a pervasive phenomenon, the "total ugliness" of kitsch. Outside *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera defines kitsch as "a kind of absolute artistic opportunism capable of drawing on anything in order to move people emotionally."⁵ Sabina was disgusted to find that Western Europeans subscribed freely to it, without being forced to by a political regime. Worse still, they attempted to turn her own life into it. At exhibits in Geneva, she was labelled a "political artist" who had struggled her whole life against Communist oppression. Her reaction was visceral: "My enemy is kitsch, not Communism" (*ULB*, 254)! In Sabina's sharp response, we find a notable parallel between the character and her creator, Kundera. Prompted by the same situation, Kundera issued the same warning in same tone to those making the same mistake. It is one of many instances where Kundera's own experience - in this case, of the misinterpretation of his work - animates his characters' fictional lives.

⁵As cited in MacEwan, "An Interview with Milan Kundera," 29.

Sabina's exclamation is telling for another reason. She indicted Communism not because it was immoral, but because it was ugly, and mentioned nothing of the murders, purges, or legal abuses. Her reticence is significant; it firmly places her in the camp of those who "doubt being." We must be clear on it: in Kundera's microcosm, no *moral* objections to Communism are accredited. The novelist has divided humans into two types, not as they are good or evil but as they affirm or doubt being. Communist kitsch affirms being, and in support of its basic principle, oozes an effluent it calls art. Anti-communist kitsch also affirms being, and yields a different variety of the same effluent. We find in Chapter Six that kitsch can be judged only as bad art. It cannot be morally indicted when moral indictment assumes fixed principles. Sabina censures kitsch only because it is ugly. As for the truth of existence, her art reflects her suspicions. She once described her paintings to Tereza: "On the surface...an impeccably realistic world, but underneath, behind the backdrop's cracked canvas, something different, something mysterious or abstract." "On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth" (*ULB*, 63). Of all Kundera's heroes and heroines, Sabina's insights into the truth of reality are the most concise and least painfully won.

Sabina is unique among Kundera's women. She is sensual yet not flirtatious, and never succumbs to self-pity. She intuits that existence is unintelligible, perhaps meaningless, but does not dwell on it. Instead, she abandons herself to the "sweet lightness of being" in a world for which nothing is certain. In her, we have one of Kundera's unrealized possibilities. So long as she can shut out kitsch, Sabina's life is a pleasant adventure. Her rejection of kitsch has justified a string of rebellions against externally imposed duties. Betrayal, "breaking ranks and going off into the unknown," enchants her; betrayal is "magnificent."⁶ She betrays again and again - first her father, then her husband, then her lovers, then her Czech homeland - pressing further and further into the unknown, finally to America. Each betrayal makes her feel freer, lighter, more independent. Sabina's casual rejection of an inherent order to existence marks her as unique. As we will see, she is perhaps the strongest of Kundera's characters.

⁶Banerjee indicates that Sabina's name might be an allusion to the minor 19th century Czech poet, Karel Sabina, "who achieved memorable notoriety in the history of his nation as the paradigm of the political turncoat" (*Terminal Paradox*, 223).

Sabina is intelligent, but she does not philosophize; perhaps her desire to live lightly precludes it. Not so for Ludvik, whose insights into human existence are deeply imprinted scars, won through painful experience. A "scholar," Ludvik continually replays the battle that ruined him. The longest narratives in *The Joke*, indeed, the novel's entire plot centers on Ludvik's recollection of his past and revival of his battles. In the early chapters of *The Joke*, we learn of Ludvik's pain through Helena, whom he was preparing to seduce:

But I'm a married woman, I protested, I can't just run off into the woods with a strange man, and Ludvik responded jokingly that he wasn't a man, he was a scholar, but how sad he looked when he said it, how sad (*Joke*, 24)!

Ludvik always looked sad; his life story was his chronic affliction. Certainly, his youth was difficult. From Jaroslav, we learn that his father was lost in a German concentration camp in the Second World War, that he and his mother were left with no income. To continue school, Ludvik accepted charity from the family of his hated aunt. He was expelled from the university and the Party when he was twenty, and his term in the mines lasted five years. After he left the mines, though, his life began to improve. Eventually, he graduated; Jaroslav attests that he "found an excellent job as a scientist"; he obviously gained many opportunities with women, and retained enough connections with old friends to have found Kostka a medical position in his home town. Yet, the sadness persists, and the reader wonders why.

As Ludvik's narrative progresses, we understand. The plenary meeting of the Natural Sciences Division, ostensibly a political event, was a definitive personal one. Ludvik was altered by it in two respects. First, it offered an unpleasant insight into human nature and changed his perception of humanity. He confesses that, whether fair or unfair, the lecture hall filled with friends and colleagues voting his downfall had become his definitive image of mankind:

I don't mean to sound pompous, but the truth remains: the image of that lecture hall with a hundred people raising their hands, giving the order to destroy my life, comes back to me again and again....Since then, whenever I make new acquaintances, men or women with the potential of becoming friends or lovers, I project them back into that time, that hall, and ask myself whether they would have raised their hands; no one has ever passed the test (*Joke*, 76).

There was a second effect. Ludvik began to doubt the tenets of his faith. His trial had left him shaken: "Broken off, my studies, my participation in the movement, my work, my friendships; broken off, love and the quest for love; in short, everything meaningful in the course of life, broken off" (*Joke*, 53). And for what purpose? In the initial phase of his internment, Ludvik quizzed history; he berated it; history had abused him, one of its faithful, a promising young Communist. But why? He could not decode history's message. Yet he had not lost faith. In spite of his mistreatment by the Communists, he retained the core tenet of the creed. He still believed that history held an answer, that where the Christian God had been discredited, history provided the ordering force of human life. In fact, he did not think to renounce history until Lucie left him. Failure not in politics, but in love, prompted him finally to declare history indifferent, even hostile to humanity. Accordingly, we turn to Ludvik's embarrassing failures in love.

By the time of his narrative, fifteen years after his expulsion, Ludvik is incapable of love. His diabolic manipulation of Helena, when contrasted with his naive ardour for Marketa, indicates much has changed. It appears he has learned to master women; he was not always as self-assured. First, there was Marketa, with whom Ludvik was overly sardonic in an effort to hide his "schoolboyish agitation." Then there was "the blond" he met at Ostrava. He remembers that she asked to borrow a hundred crowns, and that he was gullible: after servicing two of his camp-mates behind a tractor, she pulled him toward her and whispered her affection. Ludvik promptly forgot the shabbiness of the union: "all at once I genuinely felt she was a nice girl, in love with me and worthy of my love" (*Joke*, 61). Dismayed by his vulnerability, by the "limited erotic horizons" at Ostrava, and by the outlets found by his comrades in the black insignia (from constant masturbation, through brief marriages, through indiscriminate whoring), he shut off all thoughts of love. At about the same time, he began to lose hope of regaining his "lost destiny." Incredulity gave way to despair, and anger to sadness:

Sadness over the sudden realization that there was nothing exceptional about what I had been through, that I had not chosen it out of excess or caprice or an obsessive desire to know and experience everything (the sublime and the despicable), that it had simply become the fundamental and customary condition of my existence....And I felt fear. Fear of that bleak horizon, fear of that destiny. I felt my soul shriveling, I felt it retreating, and I was frightened by the thought that it could not escape its encirclement (*Joke*, 62).

Enter Lucie, the girl whose name means "light." The eclipse of Ludvik's soul might been total, but retreated instead. Ludvik's account of his formative experiences ends not with

his trial ("my first major disaster") but with Lucie's departure from Ostrava. With that departure, his callous, deprecatory personality was set. A knowledge of Ludvik's relationship with Lucie is critical to knowing his character. His failed attempt to seduce her sealed his outrage at history.

He met her at the cinema when he had just resigned himself to his new life. Later, he recalls there was "a kind of clairvoyance at work." She was young and had a drab sort of beauty. But he was affected most by her "singular slowness;" "she seemed almost to be *sitting slowly*; she didn't look around, didn't let her eyes wander" (*Joke*, 66). With Lucie, Ludvik needed none of his masks, she was not a Communist, nor even educated. "[S]he knew nothing of history, she lived *beneath* it; it held no attraction for her, it was alien to her" (*Joke*, 72). Ludvik spent his days on leave with her. He wrote her love letters and she brought him flowers from the cemetery. Their relationship was chaste until the day he saw her in an evening dress: "I was bowled over by the *revelation of her body*" (*Joke*, 80). In the following weeks, he tried to see Lucie alone in her room, and urged her to show her love physically. She promised many times that she would, but not that day. Their final encounter, certainly Ludvik's second major disaster, was the occasion for his unwelcome, definitive epiphany:

I got down on my knees, I kissed her feet, I begged her. But she went on crying and saying I didn't love her.

Suddenly I was seized by an insane rage. I felt there was a supernatural force standing in my way, constantly tearing out of my hands everything I wanted to live for, everything I desired, everything that was mine: I felt it was the same force that had robbed me of my Party, my Comrades, my studies at the university, of everything, and always senselessly and for no reason. I understood that the same supernatural power was now opposing me in the person of Lucie, and I hated her for having become its instrument; I hit her across the face, because it wasn't Lucie I was slapping, it was that hostile force; I shouted that I hated her, that I didn't want to see her, that I never wanted to see her, that I never wanted to see her again (*Joke*, 111).

Ludvik's final meeting with Lucie sealed his rejection not only of his Marxist faith, but of the possibility of redemption by any means. When Lucie left Ludvik, his light was extinguished. He lost all hope, and his stance towards existence was cast.

What had the scholar finally learned? Several years later - the day after he met Lucie by chance, the day he had seduced Helena in error - he was convinced that if history had a design, it was to thwart human aspirations. His own life contained too many errors;

indeed, it had been "conceived in error," and his failed revenge against Zemanek was added evidence of it.⁷ He could not even call his major mistakes his own. The generation of young Czechs who had condemned him had been mistaken. Alexej's father was posthumously rehabilitated in 1956; his murder also was a mistake. Similar errors abounded, they were everywhere, "so common and universal that they didn't represent exceptions or faults in the order of things; on the contrary, they constituted that order" (*Joke*, 288). In such an order, arbitrariness reigns. Human decision is impotent, there is no intelligibility, no justice, not even memory. Vengeance against Zemanek was impossible when the handsome, successful Zemanek had forgotten even that Ludvik was expelled.

Ludvik's task is to realize that not only the political and social, but the *extra-human* context of life is a bewildering trap. His insight contravenes not only the Communists' faith in historical necessity, but the Christians' faith in a loving God. On seeing a Baroque pillar of saints and clouds and angels, Ludvik lamented the beautiful lie it conveyed. As he watched the saints try to climb to heaven, he noted his own distance from the indifferent sky. A "persistent sensation of a dusty void" came over him:

the monument jutted up in the middle of the square like a piece broken off from the heavens that couldn't find its way back; I thought to myself that we too had been *cast out* into this oddly deserted square with its park and restaurant, cast out irrevocably, that we too had been broken off from something; that we imitated the heavens and the heights in vain, that no one believed in us; that our thoughts and our words scaled the heights in vain when our deeds were as low as the earth itself (*Joke*, 179).

Love and politics: for Ludvik, they expose the nature of humans, the malice of history, and the indifference of the universe. He is no longer capable of love: "Not since reaching maturity have I been able to establish a true relationship with a woman...I have never, as they say, been in love with a woman" (*Joke*, 76).⁸ Nor can he love, or even respect himself. Conscious of humanity's baseness, he does not deny that he, too, is

⁷In an interview with Antonín Liehm, Kundera states: "I was born on the first of April. That has its metaphysical significance" (*The Politics of Culture*, 138).

⁸In the same interview with Liehm, granted shortly after *The Joke* was written: "Today when I hear anyone mention the innocence of childhood or one's sacred duty to increase and multiply or the justice of history, I know what all this really means. I've been through the mill" (*The Politics of Culture*, 24).

despicable. That he did not raise his hand in a crowded assembly does not absolve him of the potential to do it: "I'm honest enough to laugh at myself: why would I have been the only one not to raise his hand? Am I the one just man" (*Joke*, 77)?⁹ The mature Ludvik can no longer distinguish guilt from innocence, because the categories now seem irrelevant.

We are told that it has not always been this way. At one time, innocence and guilt were distinct. No one laughed at the saints, no one questioned the gods, love was love, pain was pain, and jokes were funny. Yet, Ludvik's life has shown him that that age is gone. His *values* have been devastated, replaced by a new cynicism, more painful but more honest than his former innocence.¹⁰ The modern world is responsible:

[M]y life had been robbed of values that were to have provided its foundations, and that were in origin pure and innocent; yes, innocent: physical love, however devastated in Lucie's life, is innocent, just as the songs of my region are innocent, just as the cimbalom band is innocent, just as the hometown I hated is innocent....The fault lay elsewhere and was so great that its shadow had fallen far and wide, on the world of innocent things (and words), and was devastating them (*Joke*, 313).

The shadow, according to Ludvik/Kundera, is human history. We return to it in Chapter Six.

For now, we return to Hannah Arendt. Tereza asserted in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that the world was becoming a concentration camp. A comparison of Arendt's descriptions to Ludvik's experience might reveal more of what she meant.

Arendt reports that as a first step in the "historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses," camp administrators at all levels dispense with categories of guilt and innocence. Actions brought about by the human will no longer determine whether one will be punished or go free. There are criminals and politicals in the camps, but most are innocent victims. Martyrdom and villainy are impossible in a context that recognizes

⁹Here too, Kundera seems to share Ludvik's self-appraisal: "But not only love for others, love for oneself was shattered [by the experience of Stalinism] too. In my generation...our egos don't live in much harmony with themselves. I, for example, don't particularly care for myself" (*The Politics of Culture*, 23).

¹⁰We use the term "value" in the same way Kundera does, as it appears in Nietzsche's philosophy. Values are at once a source of meaning and a guide for human conduct. As they are fundamentally arbitrary, they are continually diminished by successive generations, then finally shattered, redefined and shored up by strong wills. See Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Meridian Books, 1965), Chapter Three. Ludvik appears to have derailed at the "shattering" station.

neither, and the suffering of individuals is senseless.¹¹ Senseless or not, they suffers: "the reality of concentration camps resembles nothing so much as medieval pictures of Hell." Herded into a place where nothing is intelligible, where good and evil no longer apply, where personal narratives are superfluous and personal decisions inconsequential, victims suffer both physically and spiritually:

[T]he human masses...are treated as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of any interest to anybody, as if they were already dead and an evil spirit gone mad were amusing himself by stopping them for a while between life and death before admitting them to eternal peace."¹²

Ludvik discovers that the political horror named by Tereza and recorded by Arendt is the truth of human existence. It lacks justice and intelligibility; it precludes love, redemption and heroism. Yet, he insists it is the real world honestly depicted. Now we understand why the other characters need their kitsch. Ludvik's news is frightening; the point to be gotten is that there is no point.¹³ Such news calls for reconsideration of the ordering forces of human life. Nothing can be taken for granted. God may be loving, but is more likely an incorrigible joker if he exists at all.¹⁴ The moral categories of good and evil are no longer relevant in a world for which victims and persecutors are interchangeable. Worse still, there is no redemption to be found in love or politics. Is there any hope, then? What if we require meaning to survive? How do we find it, if there is no external source of it?

¹¹Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 449-451.

¹²Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 445.

¹³Ivan Klíma, Kundera's Czech contemporary agrees that Ludvik's resolution is Kundera's own: "I would say that Kundera's (post-existential) philosophy tries to see man cleansed of his lost illusions. It is cruel and hopeless in the bleak candour with which it attempts to define the fate of man in the contemporary world, in time and history. In this, it is the philosophy of the second half of the century" (Translated from the Czech in Robert Porter, *Milan Kundera: A Voice from Central Europe* (Aarhus, Denmark: Arkona, 1981), 40-41).

¹⁴We find an expression parallel to Ludvik's in the final section of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "Jan imagines that the Greek gods at first passionately participated in the adventures of humans. Then they settled in on Olympus to look down and have a good laugh. And by now they have been asleep for a long time" (296-97).

These are questions for other characters. Ludvik cannot help us here; his life was spent discovering Kundera's truths, not resolving their implications. In the next chapter, we consider Tomas, who might convince us to prefer life to death, in spite of the pain entailed in it.

As it is, we leave another unrealized possibility to his torment. By the time of his narrative, Ludvik's moods oscillate between resignation and fear. If he has any pride left, it is not in his scruples, or in his dubious moral conduct, but in his honesty. Kostka, Helena and Jaroslav deceive themselves; they believe they act out of good intentions when they do not. But Ludvik is honest - honest about others, honest about himself, honest about history and its traps. His old friends and adversaries no longer understand him. Jaroslav believes he is enchanted, "like the fairy tale prince's bride when she's changed into a snake or toad" (*Joke*, 158). Kostka believes he is in hell: "*To live in a world in which no one is forgiven, where all are irredeemable, is the same as living in hell. You are living in hell, Ludvik, and I pity you*" (*Joke*, 235). Lucie has said nothing to him since that day in his room. Fifteen years later, she appears to him as the mute witness of his latest humiliation, "riding (unrecognized and unrecognizable) ceremoniously (and mockingly) through my life" (*Joke*, 265).

CHAPTER 5

Relief

In Chapter Four, we left Ludvik in his misery. His apprehension of the truth of existence has marked him. With his former friends, he is sometimes aloof and sometimes vitriolic. With most women, he is predatory. With Helena, he is diabolic. His detachment from other humans betrays his disgust for them - in this state, it is impossible to befriend people, let alone to love them. In the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera describes the condition of *litost*, a Czech word with no precise translation, but "I find it difficult to imagine how anyone can understand the human soul without it" (*BLF*, 166). Having a first syllable that sounds like "the wail of an abandoned dog," *litost* is "a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery" (*BLF*, 167). Kundera does not relate the term to Ludvik, but it fits his condition. Several years after Lucie has left him, Ludvik vividly recalls the day his head lay in her clothed lap: "And I felt like crying out: why must I be adult in everything, sentenced as an adult, expelled, branded a Trotskyite, sent to the mines as an adult, why only in love am I forbidden to be adult and forced to swallow the full humiliation of immaturity" (*Joke*, 110)? Several years had passed, and the misery of his youth still tortured him. But how long must a dog wail before he is anesthetized? Before he chokes himself on his leash?

We cannot leave things as Ludvik left them. His bleak resignation at the end of *The Joke* - the "searching eager fall" from a world whose meaning had been devastated - cannot sustain human life. And so we ask Kundera whether there are some balms that might ease Ludvik's misery, or perhaps even cure it. The novels yield some possibilities. In this chapter, we examine Kundera's prescriptions for relief from the modern human condition: first, the salves that make it bearable, and second, the more lasting relief that is found in love and art. Various characters and digressions in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* help us in the first instance. In the second, we rely on Tomas.

How might Ludvik have eased his *litost*? First, we examine the ways he could not have. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera offers two "customary

remedies": the first is love, the second, poetry. When one is loved, his misery is forgiven. He also dispels his own torment by tormenting his beloved. Kundera offers an example: The student (whom he does not name) went swimming with his girlfriend. She was a former athlete, and he a poor swimmer. She outswam him and he slapped her: the undertow was dangerous, she might have drowned! When the girl began to cry, the student "took pity on her and put his arms around her, and his *litost* melted away" (*BLF*, 167). As we know, Ludvik had tried love once before. When Lucie repelled his advances, it made him - "a naked man lying in the lap of a fully dressed woman" - appear ridiculous. He slapped her and shouted that she should leave. Apparently Lucie did not know the rules of *litost*; instead of staying and hugging him tight, she left. No longer capable of love, contemptuous of women, the mature Ludvik can find no comfort in love. So, what about poetry?

Poetry soothed Kundera's student in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Due to a reluctance to discuss birth control, the student had missed an opportunity to sleep with a woman. Certainly, it was grounds for *litost*. The woman in question had already returned to her husband in the country, and all that remained of their fumbling encounter was the note she wrote. For the student, a lover of poetry, the note was enough. Although at first his *litost* simmered as he sat in a Prague restaurant, Prague's great poet, Petrarch, soon dissolved it.¹ On seeing the student's note, Petrarch snatched it from the his hand, read its text aloud, "read it several times in a row in a sonorous, melodic voice as if it were verse," and magically dispelled the *litost* (*BLF*, 211). The medium of verse had made the student's ridiculous encounter seem sublime. According to Kundera, the ability to bathe the truth in beautiful illusion is poetry's magical property.

Could poetry have eased Ludvik's torment? Perhaps it would only have aggravated it. As a young Czech Communist, he too had succumbed to the revolution's poetry. For Kundera, it is a noteworthy piece of history that the Czech Stalinist regime revered its poets. In his third novel, *Life is Elsewhere*, he traces the relationship between poetry and revolution to their common basis in the "lyrical attitude," a stance for which all actions are heroic, all experiences absolute, and nothing of the mundane or ridiculous every occurs.²

¹The Petrarch in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is not the Italian Renaissance poet. For an explanation of Kundera's choice of names, see Chapter Seven, page 2.

If we are to understand the novelist's distaste for poetry, we should briefly enter the microcosm of his third novel.

The novel's main character, Jaromil, is a young Czech poet. After the Communist putsch in 1948, the new regime instructed him to write poetry "for the people." Significantly, the Communists wanted *only rhymes*. "Was the revolution's fondness for rhyme only an accidental preference?" "Hardly," Kundera responds:

In rhyme and rhythm resides a certain magic power. An amorphous world becomes at once orderly, lucid, clear, and beautiful when squeezed into regular meters. If a woman *weary of breath* has *gone to her death*, dying becomes harmoniously integrated into the cosmic order."³

In *Life is Elsewhere*, Kundera concludes that a violent political movement relies on measured verse to conceal its crimes. Intoxicated by a shared sense of destiny, poet and revolutionary are drawn together in service of their cause. The two need each other. The immature poet believes his passage into manhood will be sanctified by bloodshed. For his part, the revolutionary absolves his crimes in the purifying stream of verse. As we saw in Chapter Three, both Ludvik and Kundera had once been drawn in by the poets' revolutionary universe. Later, they were trapped in it. Where recent history has exposed poetry as a dangerous variant of kitsch, Ludvik undoubtedly does not enjoy verse. Indeed, we find that if relief is to be found for him, it is in the parodies of both poetry and love: in mockery and seduction.

We begin with mockery. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we are told that laughter is the poet's anathema. Petrarch explains to his young disciple that "[l]ove is poetry, poetry is love:"

"Laughter, on the other hand," Petrarch went on, "is an explosion that tears us away from the world and throws us back into our own cold solitude. Joking is a barrier between man and the world. Joking is the enemy of love and poetry" (*BLF*, 199).

² Our study does not include *Life is Elsewhere*, Kundera's extended study of the lyrical attitude, because its topic also informs the three novels being examined. The novel is well worth reading, though, especially for those interested in the link between art and revolution. For our purposes, the discussion of *Life is Elsewhere* is limited to the work's application to the characters in this study.

³*Life is Elsewhere*, Peter Kussi, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1986), 193.

For Kundera, however, joking is one of the only pleasures remaining to the victims of modern existence.

As the title suggests, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is about laughter. We soon learn there are two kinds. Kundera presents his thesis in the form of a cosmological fable concerning angels and devils. First, he corrects our assumption that angels are agents of goodness and devils of evil. "Angels are partisans not of Good but of divine creation. The devil, on the other hand...refuses to grant any rational meaning to that divinely created world" (*BLF*, 86). In fulfilling his subversive mission, the devil invented laughter. The devil's laughter mocked creation, and thus was delightfully blasphemous. The first angel to hear the devil's laughter realized its corrosive power, and developed a laughter to combat it. But we should not confuse the angel's with the devil's laughter, when with his spasmodic whinny, the angel "meant to rejoice over how well ordered, wisely conceived, good, and meaningful everything here below was" (*BLF*, 87). Kundera then stages a duel between meaning and non-meaning for cosmic domination. The angel faced the devil at a great banquet, and the weapon of choice was laughter:

Thus the angel and the devil faced each other and, mouths wide open, emitted nearly the same sounds, but each one's noise expressed the absolute opposite of the other's. And seeing the angel laugh, the devil laughed all the more, all the harder, and all the more blatantly, because the laughing angel was infinitely comical (*BLF*, 87).

Kundera's cosmology of laughter is a variation on his discussion of kitsch. Just as kitsch has its opponents and adherents, so the angels and devil have their partisans. As with kitsch, the cosmic battle is waged among humans, between heralds of absolute meaning and their adversaries, the doubters. Kundera suggests that, to this point European history, the angels have dominated. In Medieval Christendom, Calvin's Geneva, Stalin's Russia and Gottwald's Czechoslovakia alike, the angels have forcibly exterminated their mocking opponents. To this day, their hegemony continues. Currently, angels occupy "all positions of authority, all the general staffs;" they have "taken over the left and the right, the Arabs and the Jews, the Russian generals and the Russian dissidents" (*BLF*, 99). More alarming still, they have occupied laughter. Though we now call two "absolutely opposed internal attitudes" by one name, Kundera insists they are distinct: "there are two laughs, and we have no word to tell one from the other" (*BLF*, 87).

In light of the reflections in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we now apprehend how Joy with a capital "J" could have coexisted with an era of seriousness described in *The Joke*. When asked at the plenary committee meeting how the Comrades in German concentration camps might have reacted to his postcard, Ludvik revolted. Later, he recalls his reply: "If they had read my postcard," he told the committee, "they might have laughed" (*Joke*, 191). "Then, Zemanek spoke. He said he was unable to find anything humorous in my anti-Party pronouncements" (*Joke*, 192). Read in terms of Kundera's cosmology, Joy with a capital "J" was a historical incarnation of the angels' laughter. Ludvik's joke embodied the devil's laughter, and thus was hostile not only to "the spirit of the times," but to Creation itself. Ludvik's joke reminded the committee that an older, more authentic laughter threatened the reign of meaning. Its humour contained the devil's power to reveal the artifice of Joy with a Capital "J," and thus could not have been tolerated.

Ludvik's experience confirms that there is relief in mockery, but also that too much mockery cannot be lived with. Ludvik, mocker of a movement, was confronted at the plenary committee meeting by a battalion of angels. And Ludvik, mocker of Christian saints, laughed long and hard at a Baroque monument in a small town square: "Look, Helena, look at those saints climb! Look at them fighting their way up? How they'd love to get to heaven! And heaven couldn't care less about them! Heaven doesn't know they exist, the winged yokels" (*Joke*, 183). But Ludvik, mocker of himself, believes his life was conceived in error. To ally oneself wholly with the devil is to consign oneself to hell, where nothing, least of all a single human life, is meaningful.

Kundera suggests that humanity's prognosis would be best if the cosmic battle were to remain undecided:

The good of the world...implies not that the angels have the advantage over the devils (as I believed when I was a child) but that the powers of the two sides are nearly in equilibrium. If there were too much incontestable meaning in the world (the angels' power), man would succumb under its weight. If the world were to lose all its meaning (the devils' reign), we could not live either (*BLF*, 86).

The novelist calls for a balance between the two forces.⁴ His call reveals what he perceives to be the basic problem of modern life: the elimination of meaning from the world would ruin the mockers as certainly as the angels. But where does one find meaning when he has discovered the angels' deception?

Once again, we leave the problem of creating meaning to Tomas. We have first to discuss seduction, Kundera's second prescription for relief. Mockery is to be used sparingly. In small doses, it offers fleeting satisfaction, but in large ones it is lethal. A slightly messier satisfaction is the seduction of a woman. Kundera's distinctive sense of the erotic infuses all three novels. Outside the novels, he confirms his enjoyment of sexual love, and links hedonism to a need to escape an overly politicized world.⁵ Kundera attributes part of his eroticism to Prague, that "erotic paradise" where "beneath the cover of official morality, hedonism and a wise light-heartedness reign." He tells us that, in a totalitarian regime, sexuality becomes "the only arena for freedom and self-realization."⁶ In light of such statements, we would be tempted to treat the novel's erotic scenes simply as escapism, or as adult play. Perhaps this was true of Czech reality during the Communist era, but it is not true of the novels. The relief Kundera's heroes seek in seduction is neither hedonistic nor light-hearted.⁷ Leaving his heroines aside for now, we turn to his heroes' erotic episodes and to the reasons they engage in them.

We first should examine technique. Kundera's weak male characters - Franz in the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Hugo and the student in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* - perform the conventional love-making routine.⁸ Kundera's preferred

⁴Fazio indicates the connection between Kundera's cosmology and his aesthetic aspirations: "[t]he distinction between two kinds of laughter, angelic and devilish, is ironic at its core, because it reveals two extremes in one expression" ("The Unbearable Heaviness of Politics," 42). Many times, Kundera has reiterated that *irony* is the novel's stance. A cosmos for which a stable equilibrium between the angels' and devils' laughter holds is ironic in essence. This prompts us to pose the further question: Does the artist need the angels in order to subvert them? The devil needs meaning in order to mock it. Does Kundera need illusion in order to unmask it?

⁵"If I had to define myself," Kundera offers in the preface to his play, *Jacques et son Maître*, "I would say I am a hedonist trapped in a world politicized in the extreme" ("An Introduction to a Variation, 471).

⁶Alain Finkielkraut, "Milan Kundera Interview," 25.

⁷In an interview with Ian MacEwan, Kundera notes the significance of the characters' sexual experiences: "[w]hen my characters make love, they grasp, suddenly, the truth of their life or their relationship" ("An Interview with Milan Kundera, 30).

characters - Ludvik, Tomas and Karel from Part Two of the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* - do not. Their seductions are not randomly unconventional, though; on the contrary, they follow a similar scheme. To illustrate, we consider three scenes:

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: Tomas is in the flat of a woman "who looked like an odd combination of giraffe, stork, and sensitive young boy," ostensibly to wash her windows (ULB, 202). They are standing in her bedroom, facing each other.

In *The Joke*: Ludvik has maneuvered Helena to his friend's flat. She has been talking about her husband, while Ludvik stands guard in the opposite corner of the room.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: Karel has just met Eva. She offers to perform a striptease, but demurs when she learns he has no rock albums. Karel watches her from across the room. Then,

Tomas: "Strip!"
 Ludvik: "Take off your clothes, Helena."
 Karel: "Shut up and strip!"

In Tomas's case, Kundera explains the command's purpose:

That was Tomas's way of unexpectedly turning an innocent conversation with a woman into an erotic situation. Instead of stroking, flattering, pleading, he would issue a command, issue it abruptly, unexpectedly, softly yet firmly and authoritatively, and at a distance: at such moments he never touched the woman he was addressing (ULB, 68).

Ludvik instructs Helena three times to undress; she would prefer it if the lights were off, and if Ludvik were to come closer. Her seducer is unmoved. As alert as "a man who is guarding and ravaging his fugitive prey," he wants first to behold her naked (*Joke*, 194). Tomas's woman has spunk; to his command of "Strip!" she shouts, "No, you first!" Disconcerted by her mimicry, Tomas forces her onto her back, producing the "frightened expression of equilibrium lost," then grabs her under her knees and lifts her legs, which suddenly look like "the raised arms of a soldier surrendering to a gun pointed

⁸ Kundera connects the conventional routine with weakness and ineptitude. Sabina characterizes her Swiss lover thus: "Franz's weakness is called goodness. Franz would never give Sabina orders. He would never command her, as Tomas had, to lay the mirror on the floor and walk back and forth on it naked. Not that he lacks sensuality; he simply lacks the strength to give orders" (ULB, 111). Later, she compares him to a "gigantic suckling puppy."

at him" (*ULB*, 206). Karel's friend performs an agonizing strip tease to the strains of Bach while Karel observes.

All three men are satisfied with their encounters: Ludvik believes he had sacked Pavel Zemanek's "secret chamber," Tomas finds the stork woman's "clumsiness mixed with ardor" quite unique, and Karel is thrilled with his tenacious new mistress. In each case, the situation's eroticism depends less on the woman than on the experience engendered through her. And in each case, the experience is acquisitive. Ludvik seduces Helena in a failed attempt to regain his past. Tomas pursues women as his method of ontological inquiry; he wishes to find in each the "strongbox hiding the mystery of a woman's 'I,'" accessible only through sexual conquest. And Karel imagines himself a great chess player who has demolished all his opponents. In a particularly satisfying session with his wife and mistress, he shouts "I'm Bobby Fischer! I'm Bobby Fischer!" as the women cringe.⁹

The novels' most telling sexual incident is Kundera's own, recorded in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The secret police had just discovered that Kundera was writing horoscopes for R.'s magazine; she had been interrogated the day before, and wished to meet Kundera in an empty flat in a Prague suburbs. Out of fright, her intestines churned all morning, and during the meeting with Kundera, she often went to the toilet. Much to her shame, R.'s body betrayed her fear. For Kundera, that fear made her desirable. He recalls the revelation of his young friend's body:

She had never offered me the smallest gap through which I could have caught sight of a glimmer of her nakedness. And now, like a butcher knife, fear had suddenly cut her open. I had the impression of seeing her before me like the carcass of a heifer hanging from a hook in a shop.

Evidently, the image of fresh, raw beef was erotic; it produced in our novelist a "wild desire to make love" to his friend there on the daybed:

⁹We must not assume that simply because Kundera shares his heroes' sense of the erotic, he fails to see the humour in it. In *BLF*, Karel's two lovers find his crowing ridiculous. Ludvik's plan backfires on him. Only Tomas, the most enlightened of Kundera's libertines, is not humiliated in some way by a woman. Yet he is rueful, even apologetic about the two-hundred or so he has had in his lifetime.

More exactly: a wild desire to rape her. To throw myself on her and seize her in a single embrace along with all her unbearably exciting contradictions, with her perfect clothes and her rebellious intestines, with her reason and her fear, with her pride and her shame. And it seemed to me that lying hidden in these contradictions was her very essence, that treasure, that nugget of gold, that diamond concealed in her depths. I wanted to pounce on her and tear it out of her. I wanted to contain her entirely, with her shit and her ineffable soul (*BLF*, 105).

And what was the cause of this unexpected desire? John Updike links it to the regime, suggesting that Kundera's urge was one of those "surges of violation and exposure, which the pressures of the Communist world make possible."¹⁰ It is a compelling idea, probably correct, but Kundera's own account fits more neatly: "It may be that the insane desire to rape R. was merely a desperate effort to grab at something in the midst of falling" (*BLF*, 106). The novelist had lost control over his public existence. His books had been banned, no one could hire him, and his name was no longer in the phone book. So far as the Czech regime was concerned, he never existed. His young friend's fear sent her on countless trips to the bathroom. It appears that Kundera's fear provoked a desire to engulf the girl, and that rape was sole imaginable means to achieve it.

The novels' heroes reflect Kundera's experience. Futile as it may seem, these characters seek through acquisition of women, to conquer some aspect of the untamable cosmos.¹¹ Through Helena, Ludvik tries to conquer history, to recall his past and avenge it.¹² Through each woman he seduces, Tomas seeks to gain a piece of the universe. Women attract him for the same reason surgery does. As he leaves the flat of the client who looks like a stork, Tomas feels the blasphemous joy of "having acquired yet another piece of the world, of having taken his imaginary scalpel and snipped yet another strip off the infinite canvas of the universe" (*ULB*, 207). In the session with his wife and mistress,

¹⁰Updike, "Czech Angels," 513.

¹¹In rare cases, Kundera's heroes make love without taming the universe. Tomas and Sabina, Karel and his mistress Eva are hedonist pairs; they have sex and friendship, but are never constrained by "the diabolical ties" of love. These are the only pairings for whom eroticism is the light-hearted fun that Kundera attests once reigned in Prague.

¹²Regarding Ludvik's sense of the erotic, Kundera reveals that "we suddenly see that his sexuality is based on vengeance. The whole book is based on this single act of intercourse" (MacEwan, "An Interview with Milan Kundera," 31). The expert seduction of Helena should also be read as revenge against his failed attempt to seduce Lucie. In this early love scene, Ludvik appears ridiculous.

Karel pretends he has achieved an "abolition of chronology and a rebellion against time." His mistress resembles a haughty woman he admired as a child. When he makes love to her, he imagines that he has traversed time and tamed the body of that older, unattainable woman. All three men, in their most satisfying encounters with women, enjoy the brief illusion that they can govern the ungovernable - history, fate, the mysteries of "I" and the universe.

Their illusions of control soon are deflated, though. Ludvik's pleasure at his "beautiful act of demolition" gives way to "sheer horror" when he discovers that Helena and Zemanek are about to divorce. The experiential fix accompanying Tomas's seductions always dissipates, and he is impelled to find another woman the next week or so. If Kundera had raped his friend, it would not have changed his situation of ostracism. Despite the best efforts of these men, fate, fortune and history remain unbowed. In each case, Kundera and his heroes come to realize the futility of their seductive missions. Underneath their bravado, a vague yet palpable fear of the trap of existence persists.¹³

That the fear persists suggests that, in themselves, mockery and seduction cannot sustain life. At best, they are a temporary relief. At worst, if relied on too heavily, they negate meaning. By way of his joke, Ludvik ridicules the angels for their excess of meaning. By way of seduction, he tries to punish the cosmos for its lack of it. From Ludvik's series of disasters, Kundera's truth emerges: no one can challenge either history or the angels and expect to win. And so we are thrown back into Ludvik's vertigo, suspended between the need for meaning and awareness that there is no external source of it. Through Jan, in the final part of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera presents the problem of "the border:"

It takes so little, so infinitely little, for someone to find himself on the other side of the border, where everything - love, convictions, faith, history - no longer has meaning. The whole mystery of human life resides in the fact that it is spent in the immediate

¹³The characters' stance towards reality is indicated by their stance towards women. Early in his life, Tomas learned to "desire but fear" women (*ULB*, 12). In Part Five of *BLF*, Boccaccio (the lone writer of prose in a room full of poets) claims he is a misogynist, and that misogynists are "the best of men." He then divides the male population into "worshippers or poets" and "misogynists." The former revere "traditional feminine values such as feelings, the home, motherhood, fertility, sacred flashes of hysteria and the divine voice of nature within us, while in misogynists or gynophobes these values inspire a touch of terror" (*BLF*, 182). We learn that love of femininity is another variety of kitsch. Yet, Tomas and Boccaccio do not doubt femininity. On the contrary, they feel and *fear* it.

proximity of, and even in direct contact with, that border, that it is separated from it not by kilometers but by barely a millimeter (*BLF*, 281).

The trick to survival is to occupy the millimeter on the side of meaning. To this end, vigilance and steady balance are required. Further off on the one side, the angels diligently till and weed their earthly paradise. On other side, there is a dizzying void with the devil's laughter ringing across it. The novels' heroes and heroines skirt the border on the side of meaning, the only region where authentic life is possible. Yet, as Ludvik demonstrates, they are in mortal danger. We have seen already the ease with which angels hurl skeptics over. Add to that the danger of flagging strength. Vertigo, or a fear of heights might cause the weaker characters to fall. And what is the best means of holding one's footing? Enter Tomas, Kundera's fictional response to the problem of meaning. And enter Nietzsche, the philosopher whose work induced the conception of Tomas.¹⁴

"I have been thinking about Tomas for many years;" Kundera introduces yet another unrealized possibility. Tomas's task will be to remove us from the difficult place where Ludvik left us. Tomas has lived for some time with Ludvik's hard-won resolutions. He realizes the impotence of human decision, yet he also knows that life requires him to decide. Like Ludvik, Sabina and his namesake, Tomas is a doubter. Indeed, it the source of Sabina's affection for him: "The reason I like you," she would say to him, "is you're the complete opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch you would be a monster" (*ULB*, 12). Of all his mistresses, Sabina is Tomas's favourite, and he her favourite lover.

In the opening passages of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera immerses us in his version of Nietzsche's eternal return. He then offers Tomas's defining situation: "I saw him standing at the window of his flat and looking across the courtyard at the

¹⁴Our study introduces Nietzsche's philosophy because the novels introduce it. We examine the novels from a "Nietzschean perspective" only where the material requires it. We also confine our study to Kundera's Nietzsche. Because Kundera is a novelist, not a philosopher, he is permitted some license. Because his thoughts on Nietzsche are subordinate to his development of Tomas, we should not be surprised if his presentation of Nietzsche is imprecise. Nor should we be unduly concerned that he has misrepresented Parmenides' opposition of light vs. darkness as lightness vs. weight. "Here again," Banerjee observes, "as with Nietzsche, Kundera gives us only the shadow of a Parmenidean world picture as it appears on the screen of Tomas's mind" (*Terminal Paradox*, 200). Both Banerjee and Petra von Morstein ("Eternal Return and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, (East-Haven: Inland Book Co, 1989), 65-78) explain how Nietzsche's eternal return relates to Kundera's presentation of it. In this study, we are neither concerned nor qualified to assess Kundera's use of Nietzsche's thought. Instead, we try to understand how and why he uses it.

opposite walls, not knowing what to do" (*ULB*, 6). This time, the decision concerns Tereza. She is a waitress from a provincial Czech town, and has just spent a week with him at his Prague flat. Tomas cannot decide whether he should call her back for good. On the one hand, "he feared the responsibility. If he invited her to come, then come she would, and offer him up her life." On the other, he had come to feel "an inexplicable love" for her. Should he call her back? Which decision would be the right one? We are invited to connect Tomas's dilemma to Nietzsche's eternal return. Tomas perceives the inefficacy of human decision in a world where things happen once, and then are forgotten. The linear flow of existence, on both historical and individual levels, appears to be a permanent feature of human life. Historically, a battle happens once, many suffer and die, then it is forgotten. Individually, a decision is made and consequences follow. Whether the decision was good or bad, however, it can never be repeated. In both cases, participants go in blind. Presented with certain options (should we make war or refrain? Should I love this woman or leave her?) we cannot indicate the correct course, because we cannot live alternate lives and compare the results. "*Einmal ist keinmal*, says Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all" (*ULB*, 8). Thus construed, human decision appears meaningless.

Nietzsche's "mad myth" of eternal return offers a solution.¹⁵ According to Kundera, it "implies a perspective from which things appear other than as we know them: they appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature" (*ULB*, 4). From the perspective of eternal return, everything that has happened, that is still to happen, would recur infinitely. Nietzsche observes the weight of it: "If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you, as you are, or perhaps crush you."¹⁶ "It is a terrifying prospect," Kundera agrees. "In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called

¹⁵ From *The Gay Science*: "The greatest stress: How, if some day or night a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you, 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you - all in the same succession and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a dust grain of dust'" (Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, ed. and trans. (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), 101-02).

¹⁶*The Portable Nietzsche*, 102.

the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens (*das schwerste Gewicht*)" (*ULB*, 5). According to Nietzsche, it is also the source of our greatest joy. Eternal return affirms the existent. Whoever embraces its perspective, who says "yes" to the whole of life recurring forever, has etched his own life's meaning in the canvas of the eternal.

Kundera is undecided. He agrees there is a sweet anguish in weight: "in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man's body" (*ULB*, 5). With the heaviest burden comes the exquisite anguish of merging with eternal. With lightness, on the other hand, comes the sensation of soaring; our movements are "as free as they are insignificant." Sabina affirms that lightness can be pleasurable. Her life attests to the appeal of an existence for which things happen only once, then are done and forgotten. A world without eternal return entails the pleasure of irresponsibility. After all, "there is an infinite difference between a Robespierre who occurs only once in history and a Robespierre who eternally returns, chopping off French heads" (*ULB*, 4). In this novel, Kundera entertains Nietzsche's offer to choose. He wonders which would be the right decision: the crushing fulfillment of eternal return, the ephemeral buoyancy of linear time. "What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?"¹⁷ Tomas is Kundera's fictional response to that question.

The composition of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is not linear; Kundera consciously obscures the time sequence by offering a particular event here, one before it later, another later first; he describes the same moment first as it appears to Tereza, later to Tomas, and later still to Sabina. Indeed, the novel's design seems to affirm return where its content often denies it. In the microcosm of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera lingers on the causes and effects of each character's major decisions, and carefully considers them from different points of view.¹⁸ Thus, we come to know Tomas's biography as the details are required, rather than at the outset of the novel.

¹⁷That Tomas poses the problem of weight vs. lightness indicates his rejection of the perspective of eternal return. As von Morstein indicates, "[b]elief in a world of eternal return precludes the opposition between lightness and weight" ("Eternal Return and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*," 71). If one believes that what occurs occurred before, and will recur over again, he does not query the thing's significance.

¹⁸Fazio suggests that the novel is organized around each character's "existential code," the aesthetic device by which Kundera reveals a character's existential problem: "Rather than a chronological accounting of events, the novel meditates on what defines the identity of each character, in an attempt to understand the nature of man's beings, how it is that humans exist, and where the self is to be found." ("The Unbearable

At first, it appears that Tomas preferred lightness. He once had had a wife and a son, with whom he lived "a scant two years," before divorcing. When his ex-wife made things difficult, he decided never to see his son again. Angered by Tomas's callousness, his own parents refused to see him. "Thus in practically no time he managed to rid himself of wife, son, mother and father" (*ULB*, 12). He resolved not to be burdened by personal attachments in the future. Although he needed women, he kept them at a distance. "He was not always understood," Kundera confesses. Still, he was content. He had an enviable position at a Prague hospital and all the women he needed. His life was a constant erotic amusement. Then, Tereza came a second time to Prague. Tomas claimed her and her suitcase, "it was large and enormously heavy," and took them both home (*ULB*, 10).

Kundera places his hero in a typical predicament: a woman he is not sure he loves has given her life to him. Tomas's reflective temperament conveyed the weight of it. By claiming Tereza and her baggage, he had assumed a heavy responsibility. But had he even chosen it? With other women, he never allowed them to sleep overnight. With Tereza, however, he had been offered no choice. On her first visit to Prague, she fell sick and went to sleep in his bed with him. Tomas's was alarmed by her effect on him: "He had come to feel an inexplicable love for this all but complete stranger; she seemed a child to him, a child someone had put in a bulrush basket daubed with pitch and sent downstream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed" (*ULB*, 7). Tomas felt both horrified and supremely fulfilled. His lightness had been disrupted, though. Lightness was women, his bachelor lifestyle, and the pleasant monotony of a life without responsibility for anyone. Weight was Tereza. By default, he had chosen weight over lightness. But how had it happened?

In Kundera's view, the metaphor did it: "Tomas did not realize at the time that metaphors are dangerous. Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love" (*ULB*, 11). Knowing that he just as easily might not have met Tereza, Tomas produced a metaphor by which his new burden seem fated and beautiful. She was the child sent to him in a bulrush basket. Of course, he knew better; his path to Tereza, the

Heaviness of Politics," 31). In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera admits that he realized characters' existential codes were made up of "certain key words" as he was writing *ULB*: "For Tereza: body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas: lightness, weight" (20).

product of "six laughable fortuities," was not divinely intended. Even so, he made their meeting meaningful by an act of imagination. By way of his metaphor, Tomas transformed six laughable fortuities into a sanctified love. Light became heavy.

What was it but an artistic act? Beside Tomas's transformation of the burden of Tereza into his fate, Kundera places the final movement of Beethoven's last quartet. "*Es muss sein!*", the motif guiding "*der schwer gefasste Entschluss*" (the difficult resolution) originally had been a joke over money. Beethoven transformed a light-hearted situation - "a certain Dembscher's" timid "*Muss es sein?*" - into a jocular, "*Ja, es muss sein!*" and one year later, into the solemn, weighty resolution of his last quartet: "*Es muss sein!*" "So," concludes Kundera, "Beethoven turned a frivolous inspiration into a serious quartet, a joke into metaphysical truth" (*ULB*, 195). Relying on his music's fearsome authority, Beethoven sanctified the existent ("Yes, it must be!"). The timid Dembscher became the mouthpiece of God. "The weighty resolution is at one with the voice of Fate (*Es muss sein!*) ; necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value" (*ULB*, 33).

Probably, Beethoven only intuited the significance of his creative act. He would probably have required Kundera, or better still, Nietzsche to account for it. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche offers a startling revelation: "Only as an esthetic product can the world be justified to all eternity." The human artist is elevated to position of supreme importance, although, usually, he is only dimly aware of it: "our consciousness of our own significance does scarcely exceed the consciousness a painted soldier might have of the battle in which he takes part."¹⁹ According to Nietzsche, the battle is waged between "two creative tendencies," "the two art sponsoring Deities," Apollo and Dionysus. The Apollonian tendency, best represented in sculpture and Homer's epic poetry, celebrates existing forms as beautiful and necessary. Like dreams, Apollonian art produces "deep delight." And like dreams, it presents illusion as reality. The Apollonian illusion endows existence with meaning. In doing so, it helps us endure the horrors of indifferent, chaotic nature. Taken alone, however, it presents only a sketch of reality. To apprehend the fullness of it, we must also acknowledge Dionysus, the untamable god of revelry and

¹⁹Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Francis Golffing, trans. (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc.), 42.

intoxication. Hostile to speech and individual forms, Dionysiac art is dance and music. It represents primordial nature before human reason, individuation, or culture. According to Nietzsche, Dionysus reminds us of the truth concealed by the Apollonian illusion: although as individuals, societies, and civilizations, we exist, we need not have. Moreover, we soon will cease to, and return to the eternal flux that once gave us life.

Nietzsche's conception of reality is evident in Kundera's novels, especially in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The distinction between Apollonian and Dionysiac tendencies reminds us of Sabina's discussion of her paintings: "On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth." The serene Apollonians' horror when confronted with strife and natural disasters mirrors Ludvik's horror at the force of history. In his fall from Communism, the realm of the Joy and illusory meaning, we see the Apollonian's disillusionment. And in Tomas, we find the paralysis born of knowledge. According to Nietzsche, Homer's Olympian heroes were decisive because they believed their illusion was real. The contrast between Homer's and Kundera's heroes is striking. Where the Trojans battled the Greeks without thinking to ask why, Tomas stares out windows, not knowing what to do.

He still might relieve his paralysis, though. Through art, we are told, "that sorceress expert in healing," the hero revives his flagging will and transform fits of nausea into animating images that make life bearable. In Kundera's language, we might say that the artist creates weight (meaning) from lightness. The novelist proposes that human lives are composed in the same way Beethoven composes a sonata, or Tolstoy a novel: "Guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence (Beethoven's music, death under a train) into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual's life" (*ULB*, 52). Guided by his inclination to make light become heavy, Beethoven transformed a joke into a metaphysical statement. Guided by the same inclination, Tomas imagined Tereza had been sent to him. For her part, Tereza *knew* Tomas was her destiny.²⁰ Why else would he have entered the restaurant where she

²⁰According to von Morstein, Tereza has implicitly said "yes" to Eternal return. While the lightness/weight opposition is a critical problem for Tomas, Tereza does not notice it: "Such opposition is not part of Tereza's life....Coincidences which Tomas would try (in vain) to explain are immediately meaningful and compelling for her." Von Morstein's observation reveals how leading one's life as Tereza did, "according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress" predisposes her to accept Eternal Return. It also precludes revolt. Tomas and Sabina resented "duty." Tereza did not even perceive it.

worked? Why else would this attractive stranger have ordered a cognac, when the music of Beethoven, her favourite composer, was playing on the radio? Kundera offers his assistance: "If a love is to be unforgettable, fortuities must immediately start fluttering down to it like birds to Francis of Assisi's shoulders" (*ULB*, 49). Tereza tended her love for Tomas by discovering beauty in its circumstances.

Without realizing it, Tereza made light become heavy. When Tomas indulged his sense of beauty, he escaped his paralysis. His acceptance of Tereza and her heavy suitcase was an invitation to create further meaning from nothing, to abandon lightness after having abandoned himself to it. Having renounced the values imposed by others, he had still to create value for himself. Our final task in the chapter will be observe the process.

First, we must consider Tomas's renunciation of duty. As we saw earlier, he rid himself of the duties of husband, father and son at a stroke. Prior to Tereza, he avoided any attachments to women. In political life, he was equally independent. When pressed by the chief surgeon to retract his Oedipus article, his pride kept him from it. He also refused when the secret police approached him, preferring to become a window washer than to pretend he held repugnant beliefs. But then, he refused to sign a petition requesting amnesty for Czech political prisoners. And we also must remember his infidelities. Considered in terms of conventional morality, the decisions do not add up.

Each decision should be considered in light of the reasons behind it. Concerning his son, Tomas rebelled against the duty of fatherhood: "Why should he feel more for that child, to whom he was bound by nothing but a single improvident night, than for any other" (*ULB*, 11)? Concerning his infidelity, he loved only Tereza, and thus saw no more reason to give up mistresses than "to deny himself soccer matches" (*ULB*, 21). When two dissidents (one of them his now-grown son) told him that it was his duty to sign their petition, Tomas again revolted: "Duty? His son reminding him of his duty? That was the worst word anyone could have used on him" (*ULB*, 219). All Tomas's decisions were based not on moral conventions, but on the dictates of his incisive intelligence. In this regard, as Nietzsche might attest, Tomas is a modern hero: "My demand upon the philosopher is known, that he take his stand *beyond* good and evil and leave the illusion of

"From her perspective," von Morstein explains, "one cannot question or deny what is given" ("Eternal Return and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*," 74-75).

moral judgment *beneath* himself."²¹ Considered in terms of good and evil, Tomas's actions might be censured. In terms beyond good and evil, they are laudable. The character's intellect told him that prevailing conceptions of fatherhood and fidelity were ridiculous. Why should he have been bound by them, then, any more than by the senseless demands of a tyrannical regime?

After meeting Tereza, Tomas grew stronger still. One by one, our hero cast off the accoutrements of his lightness and finally, exhausted, found both freedom and value. The second series of betrayals began when he followed Tereza to Prague from Switzerland. By returning to an occupied country, he rejected the political freedoms of a democratic regime. By his refusal to sign the retraction, he implicitly rejected the profession he loved. He spent the following two years on an erotic holiday, washing windows and keeping his daytime appointments with women. One day, however, even womanizing seemed like an onerous duty. Tomas finally rejected his libertine lifestyle, formerly the symbol of his freedom, and moved with Tereza to the country. By that time in his life, Tereza's well-being was the sole standard by which he judged his actions. When considering whether he should sign the dissidents' petition, he realized that he must think first of Tereza. "There was only one criterion for all his decisions: he must do nothing that could harm her" (*ULB*, 219). From a stance beyond good and evil, Tomas finally had chosen as his life's moral standard the well-being of the woman of six laughable fortuities.

More importantly, he had discovered an escape from the trap. Tomas's renunciation of surgery and women marked a change in his stance toward existence. Instead of wishing to possess the world, he freely withdrew. He had escaped all imperatives, both externally imposed and internally felt ones. In his imagination, he had even rejected his ideal life's partner. Toward the end of the novel, Tomas had a dream about a woman he had never met, one who "radiated calm," and with whom he felt completely happy. The woman called to his mind the myth of the hermaphrodite told by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. She was the lover's version of *es muss sein*. Even if he found her, Tomas resolved to reject his fated other half. By the end of his life, he had concluded that a great love is not fated, but the expression of one's freedom.

²¹Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 500.

Thus, Tomas discovered an escape from the trap of the world. Tereza, the woman who was not his fate, became his ultimate value. Through his love of Tereza, he escaped all imperatives, both societal and those imposed by the Creator Itself: "[L]ove is something that belongs to us alone and enables us to flee the Creator. Love is our freedom. Love lies beyond, *"Es muss sein"* (ULB, 236).²² Love properly construed, not the poets' love of womankind, but love for a particular, imperfect woman served as Tomas's source of meaning. By the end of his life, he had discovered the solution that always eluded Ludvik. Tomas generated weight from nothing at all, and thereby gained a brief release from the trap of existence.²³

²²Again, we sense that Kundera and his favourite characters do not doubt Creation, but sense and fear it. His description of love as *escape* from the divine directly opposes the Christian conception of love as a response to God. According to the Christian tradition, neither freedom nor love of other humans is possible if one does not love God. Kundera's love is the opposite. It is the love not of a human who doubts Creation, but of one who revolts against it.

²³According to von Morstein, Tomas's final resolution of the weight/lightness opposition was his "Yes" to the perspective of eternal return. Regarding Tomas and Tereza and their love, she writes: "At the end of their life which fulfills his initial vision of their common death, the perspective implied by eternal return supersedes his perspective from transience and fleetingness. The magical formulae of necessity and fortuity are both invalidated. The process of their invalidation is his story" ("Eternal Return and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*," 76).

CHAPTER SIX

Complications

Through Tomas, we learned that even when the trap of existence is discerned, survival is possible. By use of a keen intellect and strong will, Tomas generated values capable of sustaining both an authentic and a meaningful life. A difficulty arises, though. What of those who lack the will? And what are the prospects for survival of those for whom Kundera's trap is felt, rather than intellectually probed? Tereza and Tamina only intuit Kundera's trap. These women are beset by a vague perception that nothing is certain, not memory or love, even the soul's existence in the body. The reader fears they may not survive. We also fear for Lucie. These three women do not kitschify the trap, as Kundera's deluded characters do. They do not berate it as Ludvik does, or briefly transcend it like Tomas and Sabina. They merely endure. In this chapter, we examine their stance of endurance - another of Kundera's possibilities. We consider the situation defining each woman, their similarities, and the traits that enable Kundera's heroes to love them. We also consider their ambivalence towards their bodies. Finally, we compare these women's handling by Kundera's heroes to the Russians' handling of the Czechs. In Kundera's imaginary universe, the strong conquer the weak at every level: totalitarian regimes conquer culture, the Russians conquer the Czechs, and Kundera's heroes conquer the women who love them. But first, we examine the characters of Tereza, Tamina and Lucie.¹ We find that their shy, sad souls are exposed, and so are more likely than Sabina or Kundera's heroes to succumb to the trap of the world.

Tereza, for example. As we know, she came to Tomas twice, uninvited and bearing a heavy suitcase. Before that, she was a waitress in a provincial Czech town. And before that? "Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach" (*ULB*, 39). When she first went to meet Tomas, her intestines churned. Once again, the body that both fascinated and horrified her had betrayed her. The horror and fascination proceeded from her mother.

¹Howard Eiland agrees that the three women are similar. He suggests that Tamina's story "may be seen as a continuation of Lucie's and a partial anticipation of Tereza's in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*" ("The Novel in the Age of Terminal Paradoxes," *Gettysburg Review* 4 (Autumn 1988), 715).

Because Tereza resembled what had been her own beauty, her mother took her revenge. She renounced her own modesty and her daughter's as well: strode through the house naked with the blinds up, belched in public, and refused to allow the adolescent Tereza privacy. Kundera attests that the deprivation of privacy had had a lasting effect: "if Tereza has a nervous way of moving, if her gestures lack a certain easy grace, we must not be surprised: her mother's grand, wild and self-destructive gesture has left an indelible imprint on her" (*ULB*, 46). She developed a habit of looking in the mirror, not out of vanity, but in an attempt to glimpse her soul. Sometimes she saw only a younger version of her mother. On those occasions, Tereza feared her mother was right; she was just a body among other ordinary bodies.

But what did it mean? And if her body was ordinary, then what about her soul? Was she unique at all? She kept these questions in the back of her mind as she served the drunks in the restaurant. One day, Tomas entered. He was an attractive stranger from out of town; he had a book; he ordered a cognac; Beethoven was playing on the radio. Tereza, who detested the local drunks, who loved to read books, who loved Beethoven's music, knew she belonged to him: "He called to her in a kind voice, and Tereza felt her soul rushing up to the surface through her blood vessels and pores to show itself to him" (*ULB*, 48).

We turn now to Tamina, the woman Kundera confesses is his favourite. Breaking all rules of fiction writing, Kundera permits us in Part Four of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* to observe Tamina come to life and acquire a name. We might only observe, though; she belongs to Kundera, and he is a jealous papa:

This time, to make it clear that my heroine is mine and only mine (I am more attached to her than to any other), I am giving her a name no woman has ever before borne: Tamina. I imagine her as tall and beautiful, thirty-three years old, and originally from Prague (*BLF*, 109).²

Though originally from Prague, Tamina had emigrated with her husband to Western Europe shortly after the invasion. Her husband's fate was similar to Tomas's; he had been demoted several times, then lost his occupation altogether. When the two finally left

² Banerjee explains that the passage is Kundera's nod to his precursor, Cervantes. Cervantes closed *Don Quixote* with these lines: "For me alone Don Quixote was born, and I for him. His was the power of action, mine of writing" (*Terminal Paradox*, 146). In following Cervantes' lead, Kundera claims the novelist's legacy as his own.

Prague, his former colleagues signed a public statement denouncing him. Betrayed by their Czech friends, the two exiles had only each other. Then Tamina's husband died.

Now she was a waitress in a small café, and customers liked her because she did not interrupt. Perhaps she was thinking about her husband. Kundera describes her situation: "I imagine Tamina's present (which consists of serving coffee and offering her ear) as a raft adrift on the water, with her on that raft looking back, looking only back" (*BLF*, 110). With no desire for a new lover, she carefully tended her memories of her husband. Lately, though, her memories had been fading, and she was becoming concerned. She was the only one who remembered her husband! If she were to forget him, he would disappear from the world entirely! She might have been concerned for herself. If Tamina were to forget her husband, then she would have had no reason to live. To boost her failing memory, she was desperate to retrieve some notebooks she had left behind in Prague. The notebooks were journals about her life with her husband. Then, she would know where they spent their vacations, what his pet names were, what they argued about. She wanted simply to remember her past, "to give back to it its lost body. What is urging her on is not a desire for beauty. It is a desire for life" (*BLF*, 119).

And who is Lucie? Outside *The Joke*, the novel, Kundera confesses that she is like no woman he has met:

[O]f all the women I have known in my life, Lucie represents the only type which I have not encountered. Never, in reality, have I known a truly simple woman....Lucie was a kind of counterbalance to my own visceral cynicism; she was an experience beyond my own experiences.³

A mystery even to her creator, Lucie is one of Kundera's most unnerving and opaque characters. Next to Ludvik, she is the most important character in *The Joke*, yet she does not contribute a narrative of her own. We learn of her only from Ludvik and Kostka. These men had developed their own myths of her life, and she silently bore them.

We first meet Lucie through Ludvik, who saw her at a cinema in Ostrava. At that time, she was nineteen. She had had an unhappy childhood, her parents used to beat her, and she had run away. We learn from Kostka that before coming to Ostrava, Lucie had

³Elgraby, "Conversations with Milan Kundera," 23.

been sent to a reformatory on a morals charge. After Ostrava, she ran to the Bohemian countryside, lived in haystacks and abandoned farmhouses, and survived on milk and scraps of bread. When she was finally caught by state authorities, she went to work at the state farm. There, she met and fell in love with Kostka. When Kostka moved to Ludvik's village, Lucie married a man from the village and moved there as well. She took a job at the local barbershop where, several years after leaving Ostrava, she gave Ludvik a shave.

As we saw in Chapter Four, Ludvik sensed in Lucie a "tranquillity, simplicity, and modesty" that he lacked. If, for Ludvik, Lucie had been his "usherette into the everyday world," for Kostka, she was the innocent, pagan fairy, "Vagabondella" whose wounded soul required saving. As Lucie's self-appointed confessor, Kostka finally learned her dark story. Before meeting Ludvik, when she lived in her home town, Lucie had been raped by six boys. She was sent to the reformatory, then to Ostrava and Ludvik.

Although the particulars of their lives differ, the three women share certain traits and experiences. First, they learn early in life to recoil from other people. Tereza's humiliation in her mother's house remained with her the rest of her life. Neither Lucie's own parents nor the boys from the village had loved her. Tamina's relations with her family were strained, and all her Czech friends had betrayed her. Subsequent experience only reinforced the women's mistrust. Tereza distrusted the leering drunks who were her customers, and feared other women as potential mistresses of Tomas. Lucie was considered strange, and suffered at the hands of men who wished to possess her. And Tamina's French customers spoke only of their holidays, their children, and the orgasms they would have. None of the women had close friends, and none seemed to want children.

Neither Lucie, Tamina nor Tereza was ambitious, although each was intelligent. Tereza had a talent for photography, and was even offered a job shooting garden shots for a western European magazine. She turned it down immediately: "My husband is my life, not cactuses" (*ULB*, 71). When she returned to Prague from Switzerland, she worked behind a bar. Tamina was content to wait tables for a meager salary. Lucie was a hairdresser. Significantly, all three shunned politics. Although Czech politics intruded on their lives, they were not interested in being loyal Party members. Lucie, as Ludvik indicates, was unaware of careers, parades, and causes. Tereza photographed the Russian

invasion only as a means to forget personal sadness. And Tamina was no longer concerned about anything but her husband. These women were immune to the Communist's promises of great careers, historical relevance, or social emancipation. Significantly, they also were immune to Communism's resisters. All three lived apart from politics, like Lucie, "beneath the wings of history."

And if our heroines could not turn to typical justifications of their lives - to career, to friends, children, or historical relevance? Each yearned for escape from a social context she found ugly and oppressive. Each intuited Kundera's survival techniques for a world grown meaningless and ugly. She lived for her beloved, and beyond him, for life. Tereza lived for Tomas, Tamina for her dead husband, and Lucie (we guess) for Ludvik, then Kostka. Since the day she met him, Tomas was Tereza's ultimate value. Tamina felt the same about her husband. His memory was the sole thing she valued in the world. As for elusive, inscrutable Lucie, we assume that Kostka was correct in explaining why she settled in his town: "she wants to be near me. She needs me. She needs to hear my voice now and then. To see me at Sunday services. To meet me in the street" (*Joke*, 244).

The women lived for their beloved, and beyond that for life. For Lucie and Tereza, "life" meant not only nature, but culture - "something higher." Lucie once confessed to Ludvik that she was not like the girls at the dormitory, she was "serious" and liked to go to the movies. Tereza also felt she was different. Since childhood, she thrilled at the possibilities outside her mother's house. As an adult, she read novels, listened to Beethoven, and practiced her languages. We learn of Tamina only in the negative. She suffered the conversations of her French acquaintances, but did not take part.

Sometimes, the women's desire for life called for a return to nature. At the end of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza keenly felt Prague's oppressive atmosphere:

She wanted to tell Tomas that they should leave Prague. Leave the children who bury crows alive in the ground, leave the police spies, leave the young women armed with umbrellas. She wanted to tell him that they should move to the country. That it was their only path to salvation (*ULB*, 170).

When she got there, she was finally happy. In the country, she found a rhythmic, seasonal existence that suited her; she herded cows and read books, and was almost content. Lucie took comfort in nature as well; indeed, she was almost pre-societal. Ludvik guesses that

she gave him flowers from the cemetery because she preferred gestures to speech: "perhaps, having always been sparing of words, she longed for that mute stage of evolution when there were no words and people communicated by simple gestures, pointing at trees, laughing, touching one another" (*Joke*, 79). Tamina also was drawn to nature's silence and solitude. She later recalls the day spent with her husband in a small Alpine village: "she experienced a feeling of liberation and relief. They were in the mountains, marvelously alone. Around them unbelievable silence reigned....silence for her husband and for herself; silence for love" (*BLF*, 80).

Perhaps it was this last quality that appealed to Ludvik, Tomas, and Tamina's husband. The men may have sensed that these women promised the only possible earthly paradise, not the Communist idyll, but one attained by two people who love each other, and who shun politics and society. Over and again, Ludvik credits Lucie as the saviour who lit the way as he groped out of "the regions where the Alexeys live in desperate torment" (*Joke*, 88). When he met Lucie, he remembers, he found a new reason to live:

And suddenly (after six months of Siberia) I'd found a completely new and unexpected opportunity for life: I saw spread before me, hidden beneath history's soaring wings, a forgotten meadow of everyday life, where a poor, pitiful, but lovable woman was waiting for me - Lucie....She knew nothing of the *great* and *contemporary* concerns; she lived for her *small* and *eternal* concerns. And suddenly I'd been liberated; Lucie had come to take me off to her gray paradise" (*Joke*, 72).

When she left Ostrava, mourned her absence the rest of his life: "I longed for her as one longs for something definitively lost" (*Joke*, 164).

Tomas was luckier than Ludvik; he followed Tereza to her paradise. In "Karenin's Smile," the final part of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, we glimpse their private idyll. Tomas and Tereza had left Prague for good; they had sold their things, and bought a cottage and garden in a Czech country village. Where once Tomas's life had been light, it now was rooted in the country with Tereza. Every day, Tomas drove a truck and hauled equipment while Tereza herds heifers. Communist spies and officials rarely intruded on the collective farms. The couple was at the same time sad and happy: "The sadness meant: we are at the last station. The happiness meant: we are together. The sadness was form, the happiness content. Happiness filled the space of sadness" (*ULB*, 313). Soon after, they died together, their bodies "crushed to a pulp" under the weight of Tomas's truck.

Tomas and Tereza's paradise was the opposite of the Communists' idyll. Where the latter required "the abolition of the individual and the rejection of limits," Tereza's and Tomas's idyll was based on the close intimacy born of "rupture."⁴ "The hero of the private idyll," François Ricard observes, "is always a deserter."⁵ Ricard's observation reveals that Kundera's heroines are also opposed to kitsch.⁶ These women could have imagined no more grueling an existence than a life in the Communist idyll. Lucie and Tamina ran from it, one to the country, the other to Western Europe. Tereza hated it. These women may not have articulated their rejection, and may not even have realized it, but they rejected kitsch. In this rejection, they reveal their basic compatibility with Kundera's doubting heroes. But do they have the heroes' strength?

Jan, in the seventh part of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, offers cause for concern:

The woman he had loved most (he was thirty at the time) would tell him (he was nearly in despair when he heard it) that she held on to life by a thread. Yes, she did want to live, life gave her great joy, but she also knew that her "I want to live" was spun from the threads of a spider web (*BLF*, 281).

The reader never discovers what became of the woman. We know only that Jan has moved on, that he soon will emigrate to America, and that he has just attended a laughable orgy. Perhaps we should place Kundera's heroines alongside this woman. Aside from her love of her husband, Tamina had a "terrific desire to live." It was the same for Tereza; when she was offered the option of death in her dreams, she could not assent. It was also the same for Lucie, whose desire for life led her to flee. Yet, we find that the "I want to live" of these women was timorously advanced, contingent on having something to live for. They could live with the cruelty of their social environments, of parents, friends, and governments, by minimizing their contact with these realities. At the same time, they

⁴François Ricard, "The Fallen Idyll: A Rereading of Milan Kundera," Jane Everett, trans., *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, (East-Haven: Inland Book Co, 1989), 20.

⁵"The Fallen Idyll: A Rereading of Milan Kundera," 23.

⁶In a move similar to Kundera's division of mankind into doubters and affirmers of Being, Ricard divides characters according to their "idyllic conscience." He first distinguishes "the Idyll of Innocence" (the angels and Communists' idyll) from "the Idyll of Experience" (that shared by Kundera's lovers) then submits that "I believe, in fact, that it is possible to define the existential dynamics or 'law' of all Kunderian characters by the idyll each carries within (or that carries each character), that is, by each one's particular 'idyllic conscience'" ("The Fallen Idyll: A Rereading of Milan Kundera," 19).

could not live without loving and knowing they were loved. Nor could they live without a sense of their uniqueness. For Tamina and Tereza, assurances of both were bound up in sexuality. Unlike Kundera's strong characters, his heroines could not easily engage in physical love in the absence of emotion. Tamina and Tereza attempted it, but find they lack the strength. When each woman resolved to use her body as a sexual instrument, she found she could not. Tamina wanted to vomit, and Tereza wanted to die.⁷

Urged on by her "desire for life," (not a desire for Hugo) Tamina slept with Hugo. She would have done anything to retrieve the notebooks, and Hugo had promised he would get them for her. He was the first man she had been with since her husband. She was disgusted by the act, but kept her mind trained on the notebooks. Later, Hugo informed her he was no longer going to Prague. Tamina was horrified, not only by the information, but by the sudden awareness that she could no longer recall making love to her husband. The revolting memory of sex with "this boy with bad breath" had eclipsed her memories of love, and "she vomited, doubled up and vomited" (*BLF*, 159). After that, she gave up retrieving her notebooks. Cut off from even the memory of her husband, she could think of no good reason why she should continue living. She still served coffee, but never telephoned Prague again. According to Kundera, she lost "the sparkle of solicitous concern, which used to attract customers. The desire to offer them her ear had gone away" (*BLF*, 221).

When Tereza attempted to separate bodily from physical love, she nearly ruined her marriage. Banerjee submits that Tereza's single act of infidelity was "a suicidal gesture of exhaustion."⁸ After several years with him, she still could not understand Tomas's infidelity. She could not see how he separated the soul's love from the body's expression of it. In an effort to learn, she went to bed with a stranger. Kundera insists that it was not

⁷Lucie also had trouble with sexual experiences. Kostka describes Lucie's capture by the authorities in an abandoned farmhouse as "*the situation of rape*" and adds that rape was the "very essence of her fate" (*Joke*, 221). She had suffered at least five attempts to intrude on her soul's calm: first, repeatedly, from the boys from her town, second, from Ludvik, the soldier whom she loved, third, from the men in the farmhouse who rifled through her underwear and trapped her against the wall, fourth, by Kostka, her confessor, and fifth, by the husband who beat her. In the first two instances, when it appeared that her body was desired, but not her soul, she ran away. Kostka wanted her soul. She willingly gave her body only to him, and then wished to remain near him.

⁸Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox*, 231.

revenge. "[S]he merely wished to find a way out of the maze. She knew that she had become a burden to him; she took things too seriously, turning everything into a tragedy, and failed to grasp the lightness and amusing insignificance of physical love" (*ULB*, 143). Rather than convincing her of physical love's lightness, though, her experiment made her all the more afraid that Tomas would fall in love with one of his mistresses. She based her conclusion on her own experience with the stranger: "If at the moment the man in the inner room had addressed her soul, she would have burst out crying and fallen into his arms" (*ULB*, 160). Her experiment in infidelity had nearly ruined her relationship with Tomas, one for which "the fragile edifice of their love...rested on the single column of her fidelity" (*ULB*, 169). Tereza's hands began to shake and she wanted to die.

In Tereza, we find Kundera's sustained investigation of the soul's relationship to the body. Tereza cannot seem to convince herself the two are distinct. In this, she is pre-modern, even pre-historic; not only Descartes' thinking thing and the Medieval Christian soul, but the immortal soul of *all* religions requires the duality of body and spirit. Yet, Tereza has doubts. What if her body were to change shape? Would she be the same? Her concern for her soul's uniqueness reveals she intuitively senses Kundera's trap. Where Ludvik's point of contact with it is history, Tereza's is her body.

In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera acknowledges the trap's pre-historic level: "That life is a trap we've always known: we are born without having asked to be, locked in a body we never chose, and destined to die" (26). Tereza's situation is more terrifying than fear of death, though. She fears she *has no soul*, even while she is living. The unthinkable emerges in her nightmares. Kundera tells that the image of singing and marching in formation with other naked women is "for Tereza the quintessential image of horror." He then tells us why:

Not only were their bodies identical, identically worthless, not only were their bodies mere resounding soulless mechanisms - the women rejoiced over it! Theirs was the joyful solidarity of the soulless. The women were pleased at having thrown off the ballast of the soul - that laughable conceit, that illusion of uniqueness - to become one like the next (*ULB*, 57).

Tereza's "quintessential horror" is not pre-historic; it is tied to the modern contraction of the soul into a self. If she had lived before Descartes, she may have feared her soul would go to Hell, but she would not have doubted that she had one. In Kundera's trap, however,

“the ballast of the soul” is not oriented toward the eternal; its existence is thereby called into question. Tereza’s soul has no visible proof of itself. And it cannot seek assurance from the divine where, in the microcosm of these novels, the divine is a more laughable conceit even than the soul.⁹ With the possibility of communion closed to it, Tereza’s soul compensates. It poses questions about itself and its body to itself:

Looking at herself, she wondered what she would be like if her nose grew a millimeter a day. How long would it take before her face began to look like someone else’s?

And if various parts of her body began to grow and shrink and Tereza no longer looked like herself, would she still be herself, would she still be Tereza?

Of course. Even if Tereza were completely unlike Tereza, her soul inside her would be the same and look on in amazement at what was happening to her body (*ULB*, 139).

We learn that Tereza’s interior dialogues have carried on since childhood. So has her longing for paradise - a natural paradise “in the bosom of regularly recurring seasons.” When she tends her animals (“the thread binding [mankind] to paradise”) she is filled with a contentment she had not known in Prague. Tereza’s response to the trap of existence is the most surprising of all Kundera’s unrealized possibilities. By way of escape to her country idyll, Tereza manages to rediscover her soul.

Of course, Tomas’s decision to come along was critical. Tereza could not have restored her soul without Tomas’s eventual indulgence of her inexplicable need for him to give up women. We find that, so long as his infidelities continued, Tomas negated Tereza’s restorative efforts:

She had come to him to make her body unique, irreplaceable. But he, too, had drawn an equal sign between her and the rest of them; he kissed them all alike, stroked them alike, made no, absolutely no distinction between Tereza’s body and the other bodies. He had sent her back into the world she tried to escape, sent her to march naked with the other women (*ULB*, 58).

We cannot help but notice the disparity between them, or between Kundera’s other weak and strong characters. In spite of her suffering, Tereza cannot leave Tomas. Sabina, by contrast, blithely abandons Franz because he depends on her. When she endures sex with Hugo without love or attraction, Tamina trains her soul entirely on her notebooks. When

⁹Our understanding of the divine and corporeal poles of human experience is informed by the theory of human consciousness presented in Eric Voegelin, “On the Theory of Consciousness,” Gerhart Niemeyer, ed. and trans., *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 14-35.

Ludvik seduces Helena without love or attraction, his gloating self stands watch. As for Lucie, Jan finds beauty in rape, the act that Kostka declares is "the essence of her fate":

Many years ago, in my former country, some friends and I put together an anthology of things our mistresses said while making love. Do you know what word came up most often?...The word 'no'. The word 'no' repeated in succession: 'No, no, no, no, no, no, no...' The girl arrives to make love, but when the boy takes her in his arms, she pushes him away and says "no," giving the act of love the red glow of that most beautiful word and turning it into a miniature imitation rape" (*BLF*, 286).

The contrasts reveal the essential inequality between Kundera's strong and weak characters. We cannot be assured that the strong will not exploit the difference. Given the stance of the strong "beyond good and evil," the prognosis for the weak becomes dubious.

Kundera's strong characters are not so bad, of course. The thought that he may have caused Helena's suicide distresses Ludvik. In a belated surge of concern, he rushes on the scene to rout her out of her outhouse.¹⁰ Kundera is restrained from raping his friend by her "two anguished eyes fixed on me (anguished eyes in an intelligent face)." "[T]he more anguished those eyes, the greater my desire to rape her - and all the more absurd, idiotic, scandalous, incomprehensible and unachievable" (*BLF*, 106). And Tomas is restrained from leaving Tereza by that old "Devil's gift of compassion" - "the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy" (*ULB*, 20). When she had her dreams and recounted them, when her teeth chattered as he spoke to other women on the phone, Tomas felt Tereza's pain intensely. Indeed, his compassion caused him finally to take her to the country. We should be clear on it: in the end, it was deeply rooted *feeling*, not free decision, that caused Tomas to end his wife's suffering. Kundera's strong characters are not entirely without moral sentiments.

Yet, what place do moral sentiments have "beyond good and evil?" And when has "beyond good and evil" consisted in acting on one's feelings? Perhaps we overestimate Tomas. Perhaps there are heroes in these novels who are stronger than he is. Of course, there is Sabina, who shuns all feelings. There is also the man from the secret police, whom we first encountered in Chapter Two.

¹⁰Banerjee: "Conscience is the unacknowledged ghost in the machine of Kundera's absurd world, situated beyond the limits of inquiry in the consciousness of his characters and narrators" (*Terminal Paradox*, 24).

Throughout Tomas's interrogation, the man from the Ministry of the Interior remains opaque. Kundera does not offer his name, nor much description. We know only that he is "a man of about fifty whose portliness added to his dignity" (*ULB*, 185). We gather that he is good at his job. Soon after entering Tomas's office, he had Tomas sharing a bottle of wine with him. He then flattered the doctor with knowledge of the details his career. All at once, he grew quite grave: "Then tell me, Doctor, do you really think that Communists should put out their eyes?" Sadness gave way to shock when Tomas retorted that the article had been cut. But who would have cut his article? Did Tomas recall the person's name? "Not until that point did Tomas realize that he was under interrogation" (*ULB*, 187). Our hero had been tripped up by a practiced manipulator, whose motives could only be guessed. Tomas left their first meeting "extremely displeased with himself." At their next meeting, he declined to share a drink. Like "a chess player who is letting his opponent know he made an error in the previous move," the secret policeman responded that he understood perfectly (*ULB*, 190). Later, when Tomas declined to sign the proffered statement, he "spread his arms in feigned amazement (the same gesture the Pope uses to bless the crowds from his balcony)" and instructed him to think it over (*ULB*, 191). Tomas went home, and offered his resignation to the hospital the next day. We gather he never saw the portly man again.

Alongside Tomas's interrogation, during which the vigilant Kundera declined to comment on his interrogator, we should consider his testimony concerning Gustav Husak. In the sixth section of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera introduces Husak: "after Benes, Gottwald, Zapotocky, Novotny and Svoboda, he is the seventh president of my country, and he is called the President of Forgetting" (*BLF*, 217). The Soviets installed him after the invasion in 1968. It seems he was a genius at removing the entire nation's memory: "Not since 1621 has the Czech people experienced such a devastation of culture and intellectuals." The task required systematic removal of Czech books from libraries and bookstores, substitution of Czech place names with Russian ones, and replacement of Czech records of their history with Russian versions. By the time Kundera wrote the novel, Husak had made remarkable progress: "In moments of clear-sightedness, the Czech people can see the image of its own death near at hand. Neither as a fact nor as an inescapable future, but nonetheless as a quite concrete possibility. Its death is right there with it" (*BLF*, 218).

In the same section of the same novel, Kundera reports knowledge of an extraordinary letter:

In 1972, when Karel Klos, a Czech pop singer, left the country, Husak became fearful. He immediately wrote a personal letter to him in Frankfurt, from which, inventing not a word, I quote the following: "Dear Karel: We want nothing from you. Please come back, we will do for you whatever you wish. We will help you, you will help us..." (BLF, 249).

We are then told that Husak wished Klos to play rock to the Czech citizenry. Just as the Stalinists had relied on poetry, Husak sought to use rock music to procure the Czechs' agreement with the regime. The letter reveals an intimate understanding of kitsch. No less than Sabina, Tomas or Kundera, Husak also stood apart from kitsch. Rather than shunning it, though, he used it to manipulate his fellow Czechs. Perhaps he is closer to our doubters than we first thought; if anything, Husak's project displays a fundamental *disagreement* with being. Why else, if not to challenge Creation, would someone work so diligently to reorganize reality? In light of Husak's letter, we should reconsider the Communists' understanding of kitsch.

Outside the novels, Kundera observes that the Communist authorities who ruled after the Russian invasion were "no longer fanatical (as in the 1950s) or guilt-ridden (as in the 1960s) but openly cynical."¹¹ Perhaps these cynical authorities had learned the lessons that Kundera, Ludvik and Tomas also had learned. Indeed, they may have discovered the same truths Ludvik discovered, that human life is inherently purposeless, and that there is no inherent order to existence. The implications of Ludvik's stance were discerned early on, before Ludvik, and before even Kundera discerned them. In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche observed that the prospect that God is dead would liberate the strong.

Indeed, we philosophers and "free spirits" feel as if a new dawn were shining on us when we receive the tidings that "the old god is dead"; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, anticipation, expectation....the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea."¹²

¹¹"Preface to the French Edition of *Mirákl* (*The Miracle Game*)," 30.

¹²Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 448.

As Nietzsche indicates, the sea is open. In these novels as in twentieth-century reality, Kundera's heroes are not alone on it.

So why would Kundera indict Husak? He clearly despises his mode of self-expression. To understand why, we should consider Kundera's reflections on Czech culture. In 1967, he delivered a controversial address at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union. One year prior to the Russian invasion, he urged the Communist Party to stop censoring Czech art. In that speech and in several essays written since his emigration, he justified political liberalization on cultural grounds. A brief digression from the novels may help clarify our understanding.

In the nineteenth century, Czech intellectuals instituted a national revival in answer to the question confronting all small nations: "To be or not to be? And if so, why?" Henceforth, the Czechs would have to justify their ancestors' decision "through the only possible justification of a nation's existence: its culture."¹³ If the Czechs could offer their art as a proof of their cultural worth, they would earn their claim to nationhood. And so, the Czechs' "tender culture" began to mature, especially in the period between the wars.¹⁴ Following independence in 1918, Prague became one of Europe's important artistic and philosophical centres. It was the city where Kafka wrote his novels, where Czech surrealist poetry flourished and the structuralist school of criticism originated. "With the work of Kafka and Hasek, Prague created the great counterpart in the novel to the work of the Viennese Musil and Broch." With his musical compositions, Leos Janacek established the Czechs as musical innovators. And with their structuralism, the Prague Linguistic Circle "protected avant-garde art against the narrowly ideological interpretation that has dogged modern art everywhere."¹⁵ As an aesthetic product, the Czech nation had just

¹³"Speech to the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers Union, June 27-9, 1967," Appendix to Dusan Hamsik, *Writers Against Rulers*. D. Orpington, trans. (London: Hutchinson Press, 1971), 169.

¹⁴Of the period from 1918 to 1938, when Czechoslovakia existed as an independent, democratic state, Kundera observed a dramatic change in Czech cultural life: "In the brief space of twenty years a whole constellation of geniuses fell to creating works that raised Czech culture, in all its individuality, up to European standards again for the first time since the age of Comenius" ("Speech to the Fourth Writers' Congress," 171). For a detailed discussion of Prague's former eminence, see Milan Kundera, "Prague: A Disappearing Poem."

¹⁵Milan Kundera, "A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out," 105.

proved itself when, in 1938, Neville Chamberlain and Eduard Deladier gave a third of it to Hitler.

From 1939 to 1960, Czech culture served ideologues. Between 1939 and 1945, the Nazis nearly eradicated it. Between 1948 and 1960, as Kundera's novels indicate, culture served the Communist regime.¹⁶ Soviet-style Stalinism, complete with its purges, executions and imprisonments continued until 1960. By 1965, however, the Communist Party had been discredited. All Czechs knew that the political trials had been staged and that Communism had destroyed the economy. For a time, the Party relented; it relaxed censorship and travel restrictions, ceased torturing resisters and fabricating trials, and permitted criticism of economic policies.¹⁷ Czech cultural leaders saw their chance: "what had been banned returned to the stage in the 1960s. And that was the real war, the war of a culture fighting for its life, for its survival."¹⁸

During the years prior to the Prague Spring, Milos Forman directed Czech films, Václav Havel wrote his first plays, Czech philosophers Jan Patočka and Karel Kosík dared once again to hold seminars. Kafka was rehabilitated, and there was no shortage of Czech novelists - Josef Skvorecky, Bohumil Hrabal, Ivan Klima, Pavel Kohout, Milan Kundera. According to Kundera, "the films, the novels, the plays and the works of philosophy born in Central Europe during this period often reach the summits of European culture."¹⁹ In the relative freedom of a decaying Communist tyranny, Czech culture flourished. Again, the Czechs had justified their existence to the world. Again, though, a hostile conqueror invaded, and again, the West averted its eyes. In an interview with Alain Finkielkraut, Kundera submits that "the *massacre of Czech culture*" was the "most incredible

¹⁶"Immediately after the Prague coup, a major campaign was organized 'against cosmopolitanism' - by which the Communists meant Western culture. Instantly, the entire modern intellectual heritage of my country was blacklisted" ("Prague: A Disappearing Poem," 101).

¹⁷A.H. Hermann, *A History of the Czechs*, 274-77.

¹⁸"Prague: A Disappearing Poem," 101. Ever the cosmopolitan, Kundera notes the similar situation of Quebec, a spiritually independent nation that finds itself occupied by the foreign conqueror, Canada: "The people of Quebec are living in a privileged moment: their culture, young and unfinished, has yet the possibility of creating itself...of laying its foundations, of defining itself" ("On Criticism, Aesthetics, and Europe," 15).

¹⁹"A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out," 97.

consequence of the Russian invasion in 1968."²⁰ Husak's government replaced an authentic, thousand year old European culture with Russian propaganda and Communist kitsch. Husak's policy prescribed the intrusion of kitsch on genuine art; thus, it was to be indicted.

We now have Kundera's critique of totalitarianism. In keeping with his essay on kitsch, it is based not on moral but aesthetic principles. "What I hold against the critique of totalitarianism is its simplistic Manicheanism. Totalitarianism is seen solely as the embodiment of evil. This critique leaves all the 'poetry' that is linked to this evil and constantly engenders it intact."²¹ In *Life Is Elsewhere*, however, we learn that the poetry of Stalinism was an especially cunning variety of kitsch. The novel explains both Stalinism's appeal, and the grounds on which it is to be rejected. According to Kundera, his critique based on aesthetics surpasses the conventional "good vs. evil" routine.

Yet, what if totalitarianism is shown to improve culture? He has considered the possibility:

In Prague we used to say cynically that the ideal political regime is a decomposing dictatorship, where the machine of oppression functions more and more imperfectly, but by its mere existence maintains the nation's spirit in maximum creative tension. That's what the 1960s were, a decomposing dictatorship.²²

In his speech to the Czech Writers' Congress, Kundera suggested that even Stalinism could be justified by art: "the miraculous soil of art turns suffering into gold. It even turns the bitter experience of Stalinism into a paradoxical, indispensable asset." The degeneration of a "great humane movement" into a parody of itself would offer Czechs artists material for years to come:

What is history? What is Man in history? What, indeed, is Man at all? No one could give the same answer to any of these questions after experiencing such changes as before. This greater knowledge might prove to be that liberating transcendence of old limits, that

²⁰MacEwan, "Milan Kundera Interview," 17.

²¹MacEwan, "Milan Kundera Interview," 23.

²²"Preface to the French Edition of *Mirákl* (*The Miracle Game*)," 26.

crossing of the boundaries of traditional wisdom about Man and his destiny which could confer upon Czech culture a meaning, maturity and greatness."²³

Where the sole criterion for assessing a regime's legitimacy is aesthetic, and where social and political disorder provides material for great art, Kundera's condemnation of totalitarianism loses its force.

There are other problems. According to Sabina, one of the strongest characters, beauty requires devastation to heighten its effect. Sabina once visited a church in a Czech country village. Mass was in progress. Because the regime persecuted religion, the only people in attendance were the extremely old and the extremely devout. To her surprise, Sabina found the mass beautiful. "From that time on," Kundera reports, "she had known that beauty is a world betrayed...Beauty hides behind the scenes of the May Day parade" (*ULB*, 110). In the same way, Ludvik recovered his love of Moravian folk music at the end of *The Joke*:

I could love it because this morning I had found it (unexpectedly) in its forlornness and in its *abandonment*; ...this abandonment had purified it; purified it like someone with not long to live; illuminated it with an irresistible *ultimate beauty*; that abandonment was giving it back to me"(*Joke*, 312).

Sabina found its rituals beautiful only after the church had been destroyed. Moravian folk music was purified for Ludvik only when it emerged from the kitsch of social realism. For our part, we wonder how far Kundera means us to take Sabina's proposition. Does beauty require kitsch to heighten its effect? Is a world betrayed is the only thing that is beautiful?

Kundera's definition of beauty raises still more questions. In an interview with Jordan Elgraby, he explains: "The author unveils a realm of reality that has not yet been revealed. This unveiling causes surprise and the surprise aesthetic pleasure or, in other words, a sensation of beauty." In the same passage, kitsch is defined as "beauty outside knowledge." "One describes what already has been described a thousand times over in a light and lovely manner. The beauty of 'a thousand times already told' is what I deem 'kitsch.'"²⁴ Thus, it appears that the criterion dividing kitsch and beauty is *novelty*. We

²³"Speech to the Fourth Writers' Union," 176.

²⁴Elgraby, "Conversations with Milan Kundera," 6.

proceed with an example of Kundera's: the music of Leos Janacek. Its economy and its "*unexpected juxtaposition of emotions*" reveal new possibilities for composition, hence it is beautiful. As another example, there is Kafka's "bureaucratic maze." In *The Trial*, Kafka revealed both a world betrayed and a surprising new possibility for modern life. How indebted we are to him! His novels turned recent history into kitsch. Because of Kafka, "history had only to make its entrance in order to mime what fiction had already imagined."²⁵ Indeed, without Kafka, history itself might have revealed the new and surprising; we might have lauded this century's innovation - its concentration camps - as beauty on a formidable scale.

Our final, horrendous position reveals the difficulty of replacing moral with aesthetic standards. Kundera's categories of beauty and kitsch include no fixed standard by which to discern beautiful from ugly, let alone justice from injustice or good from evil. When kitsch displaces evil, and beauty goodness in the analysis of political reality, intense confusion arises. Recalling the Stalinist era, Kundera confesses that it was "a tremendously confusing situation. Moral orientation became extremely difficult, sometimes impossible."²⁶

Perhaps his desire to dispel the confusion has prompted his nostalgia the simpler period of Enlightenment humanism. Kundera admires Diderot, Voltaire and the Age of Reason no less than Nietzsche's feverish irrationality. In Diderot's time, "universal European values" included toleration and respect for individual rights. These values were sanctified not by art, but by human reason. The irrationality of the Russian occupation provoked in Kundera "an inexplicable pang of nostalgia for 'Jacques le Fataliste'."²⁷ We

²⁵"Prague: A Disappearing Poem," 94.

²⁶Liehm, "Milan Kundera," 141.

²⁷"An Introduction to a Variation," 469. The piece is Kundera's introduction to his play, *Jacques and his Master*, written as a variation on Diderot's eighteenth-century novel, "Jacques le Fataliste." Kundera contrasts the Enlightenment's spirit of "reason and doubt, of play and the relativity of human affairs" to the climate of Dostoevsky's novels. Initially, he had been asked to do a stage adaptation of *The Idiot*, but declined: "I...realized that even if I were starving, I could not do the job. Dostoevsky's universe of overblown gestures, murky depths and aggressive sentimentality repelled me." Kundera then condemns the "Russian soul," as the source of his nation's current predicament. The exiled Russian poet, Joseph Brodsky, responded to Kundera's critique by reminding him that "the political system that put Mr. Kundera out of commission is as much a product of Western rationalism as it is of Eastern emotional radicalism. In short,

find the same nostalgia in Ludvik's sorrow over his "devastated world," and in Kundera's pain over his fall from Communist's circle dance.²⁸ It is only nostalgia, however. Diderot's world is gone, just as universal European values are gone. Hermann Broch deftly indicates the process in *The Sleepwalkers*:

It is always the adherent of the smaller value system who slays the adherent of the larger system that is breaking up; it is always he, unfortunate wretch, who assumes the role of executioner in the process of value disintegration, and on the day when the trumpets of Judgment sound, it is the man released from all values who become the executioner of a world that has pronounced its own sentence.²⁹

According to Kundera, we now live in a world for which values have disintegrated, and culture has bowed out. It is the trap's newest contour, and was historically realized in the last half of the twentieth century. In Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, totalitarian regimes systematically destroyed living cultures. Worse still, no one in the West appealed to universal European values - the larger value system - in defense of Central Europe.

We now might interpret the novels' more troubling aspects. First, there is Kundera's ambivalent portrayal of dissidents. On the one hand, he resents the ravaging of Czech culture. On the other, he cannot accept dissidents' moralizing. The result is a portrayal of Czech resisters swinging from Kundera's bland deprecation of Mirek, to Sabina's disgust with the émigré Czechs, to Tomas's wistful condescension. Tomas thought of the dissident editor with "a nostalgia akin to love." He wished good and evil could be as clear to him! Yet, the editor was an anachronism. "He was convinced he was right, and for him that was a sign not of narrow-mindedness but of virtue. Yes, that man lived in a history different from Tomas's: a history that was not (or did not realize) it was a

on seeing a Russian tank in the street, there is every reason to think of Diderot" ("Why Milan Kundera is Wrong about Dostoevsky," 479).

²⁸A few of Kundera's critics have noted the influence of humanism on the novels. Bruce Donahue observes that, "despite the modernity of Kundera's work, his art evinces a deeply felt allegiance to a traditional humanism....[U]nderlying his irony is not limitless relativism, skepticism, and despair but a profound affirmation of meaning, values, and humanism" ("Laughter and Ironic Humor in the Fiction of Milan Kundera," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* (Winter, 1984), 67-68). Peter Petro places Kundera's work in the context of his Czech predecessors: "the spiritual legacy of secular humanism and ethical relativism that dominated the Czech cultural, and particularly the literary, scene between 1918 and 1938" ("Milan Kundera's Search for Authenticity," *Canadian Slavonic Review*. 24.1 (March 1982), 44).

²⁹Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers*, Willa and Edmund Muir, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 637.

sketch" (*ULB*, 223). In these three novels, a dissident might be a buffoon, or naively noble. Ultimately, though, he is deluded. Either he has not yet heard that good and evil have been discredited, or he refuse to hear it.

Then, why would Tomas have invoked the Oedipus myth? At first mention of it, he seems to make the kitschy claim that the Communist authorities had committed an immoral, irreparable evil against their fellow Czechs. Initially, he had been "so pleased" by his analogy because it fit the Czech situation so well:

When Tomas heard Communists shouting in defense of their inner purity, he said to himself, As a result of your "not knowing," this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and you shout that you feel no guilt? How can you stand the sight of what you've done? How is it that you aren't horrified? Have you no eyes to see? If you had eyes, you would have to put them out and wander away from Thebes (*ULB*, 177).

In a later conversation with the dissident editor, he is not sure: "But it's all a misunderstanding! The border between good and evil is terribly fuzzy....The myth of Oedipus is a beautiful one, but to treat it like this..." (*ULB*, 218) Perhaps Tomas realizes that he cannot use the Oedipus myth as a moral lesson when he rejects the categories that give it meaning. In Kundera's hands, the Oedipus myth is a beautiful story, and nothing more.³⁰

And what of the destruction of the Czech culture? In a world of disintegrating values, no moral appeals can prevent the strong from subduing the weak. Tomas enjoyed seducing women; seduction was his "imaginary scalpel" by which he opened "the prostrate body of the world." Husak was more ambitious, he preferred to reconfigure rather than expose reality. Tomas operated on his patients and his women. Husak turned his scalpel on the Czechs' culture and collective memory. In another microcosm, it might be possible

³⁰ Banerjee suggests that Kundera used the Oedipus myth because he wished to emphasize not responsibility, but human freedom: "Whatever else one may read into the tragedy, Oedipus' gesture of self-mutilation is the culmination of a rising tide of horror. But it is also a multifaceted symbolic act of self-definition that reveals Oedipus' spirit at the moment of exercising a residual option for freedom." (*Terminal Paradox*, 238) According to Banerjee, Oedipus put out his eyes not because he felt responsible for Thebes' destruction, but because he *refused to see* what he was helpless to change. This certainly would be compatible with the novel's theme of freedom v. necessity. However, it is not the use implied by Kundera: "When Oedipus realized that he himself was the cause of their suffering, he put out his own eyes and wandered blind away from Thebes" (*ULB*, 176).

to censure Husak's project and methods. In Kundera's, however, there is no more basis to censure them than there is to censure Tomas for the damage done to Tereza.

The results of their efforts were identical. Tomas induced in Tereza the same vertigo that the invasion induced in the Czechs. In the case of the Czechs, their brief "carnival of hate" aimed at the Russians soon gave way to resignation. Intellectuals fell, bureaucrats rose, the death rate soared, and Czech culture withered. In the case of Tereza, she came to welcome her own destruction. Both she and the Czechs suffered from "vertigo," the "heady, insuperable longing to fall" (*ULB*, 76). Vertigo impelled Tereza to return to her mother, and later to Prague from Switzerland. Although she had first been disgusted by her country's capitulation to the Russians, she was later drawn to it:

The very weakness that had driven Tereza and Tomas from the country, suddenly attracted her. She realized that she belonged among the weak, in the camp of the weak, in the country of the weak, and that she had to be faithful to them precisely because they were weak and gasped for breath in the middle of sentences (*ULB*, 73).

Tereza, no less than the Czechs, has shown her weakness. She displays the physical symptoms: her hands shake, she teeters as she walks, drops things, and wants to fall. Worse still, she wants to take Tomas with her: "I want you to be old. Ten years older. Twenty years older!" This time, Kundera knows what she meant: "I want you to be weak. As weak as I am" (*ULB*, 73).³¹ For Nietzsche, it is the way of the world: "the strong will create the beautiful," and the weak will "negate life."³² Her vertigo indicates her distance from Tomas. So why should Tomas have remained with her? Kundera's logic leaves little question that he should have deserted Tereza. Neither does it leave much question about whether the Czechs should have been deserted. The question might be whether she, or they, deserved even to live. Tereza dreamed that Tomas ordered her to be executed at Petrin Hill. Apparently senseless, the dream contained the logical application of her husband's creed. Tereza was weak, the Czechs were weak. Perhaps the greatest favour to her would be to send her to Petrin Hill, and the greatest favour to the Czechs

³¹There are hints in *BLF* that Tamina's husband also was stronger than her: "Her husband had been cheerful, brilliant, strong, and she, feeling much weaker, had the impression that, try as she might, she would have been unable to wound him" (122).

³²Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 534.

would be for the Russian conqueror to liquidate a culture that had given up trying to justify itself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death and the Novel

I remember Paris in 1968. We were standing in front of Les Deux Magots like poor relations whose house had just burned down and Milan Kundera said, "I only hope I die soon. There's been too much of everything. How much longer do you think we can last?"

- Joseph Skvorecky¹

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera dedicates his novel "in the form of variations" to Tamina: "It is a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina goes offstage, it is a novel for Tamina" (BLF, 227). In this chapter, we inquire of Kundera, loving creator and author of her fate: did Tamina really have to die as she did? Here, we shift from the novels' portrayal of existence to the question of why the author portrays it as he does. Kundera has concluded that the world is a trap, and his novels bear out his conclusion. Yet, we must recall from Chapter One that we find in the novels, not the real world, but an *imaginary* one evincing the author's experience. As interpreters, we must try to discern something of the experience that informs these novels. In this chapter, we focus on the novelist's stance toward both his art and existence. Significantly, we do not try to prove or disprove his stance. It would be useless in any case, where the existence of God and the meaning of the cosmos are not propositions to be proved. We attempt instead to discern why Kundera might *prefer* to deny an intelligibly structured universe. To this end, we follow Kundera as he claims for the novelist the title of modernity's seer, as he declares the death of European culture, and as he refuses to question the assumptions he believes are killing it. Finally, we consider whether these novels' portrayal of existence should be regarded as reliable. We have followed Kundera through his trap. Now, we seek to discover why he created it.

We turn first to the means by which Kundera claims all rights to explore existence. Openly declared in *The Art of the Novel*, the novelist's preeminence is also suggested in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. In Part Five of that novel, none other than the great

¹Cited in Jan Kott, "The Emigrant as Hero: *The Engineer of Human Souls*," Sam Solecki, ed. *The Achievement of Josef Skvorecky* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 132.

Goethe appears in the person of an unnamed Czech poet.² The occasion is a gathering of Czech poets at their Writers' Club in Prague. The year is 1977, and Kundera cannot use the poets' real names. So he calls them by the names of past greats: the bright young lecturer is Voltaire; the wise, old poet is Goethe. Lermontov, Petrarch, Verlaine and Yesenin are there, and so is Boccaccio. Significantly, Boccaccio is different; he writes only prose: "it is obvious that Poetry has not kissed his brow and that he does not like verse." Kundera looks on from a high-rise in France with windows facing east towards Prague. The tear in his eye, "like a telescope lens, brings me nearer to their faces" (*BLF*, 177).

The ensuing conversation is a rare moment of humor. Petrarch tells the story of an overwrought girl who came in the night to his apartment and declared her love for him. Boccaccio makes frequent, wry interjections about Petrarch's fondness for hysterical females. Lermontov does not believe a word of it, and is informed he is merely jealous. Voltaire, the scholar, takes gleeful swipes at his work, but Goethe deals the cruelest blow of all; Lermontov's trouble, he declares to Petrarch in a stage whisper, "is hypercelibacy" (*BLF*, 187)!

The writers' caprices carry late into the evening. Petrarch and Lermontov spar, and Boccaccio derides them all equally. Throughout the discussion, the great, the wise Goethe presides. A "lover of harmony," he indulges Petrarch and Lermontov, yet twits them with witty reminders of their failings and excesses. At the end of the night, however, comedy gives way to pathos. The very drunk Goethe, whose legs have failed him, asks his companions to leave him alone to die. A pathetic scene ensues: Holding "their patriarch," "the Olympian god" by the arms and legs, the poets stagger down several flights of stairs and deposit their baggage on the sidewalk outside. Lermontov elects himself as the old man's chaperone, and squires him home to his harsh wife in a taxi.

What is the purpose of this touching scene, by turns witty and sad? On close reading, we find more than mere entertainment. Indeed, we find Kundera's aspirations not

²Banerjee reveals that Goethe is Jaroslav Seifert, a revered Czech poet who first was noticed during the avant-garde movement of the 1920s and won the Nobel Prize for poetry in 1984 (*Terminal Paradox*, 172). Kundera's imaginary gathering occurred in the 1960s, when Czechs and foreigners were still permitted to read Seifert's poetry.

only to discredit poetry, but to succeed Goethe as the possessor of wisdom for a new era. Once again, we observe the poet transforming truth - in this case, a garden variety hysteric - into beautiful illusion: "And the girl stood there in the middle of the room with the metal bar in her hand, beautiful and majestic like Joan of Arc with her lance!" (*BLF*, 184). We see how easily Petrarch's libido is inflamed, and how readily he calls it love. As another, embittered variant of the lyrical attitude, Kundera presents the slighted Lermontov. All the poet's talent, pride and impassioned verse cannot disguise his anguish at his very short legs. Kundera tells us that Lermontov is the "genius of that sorrow my sad Bohemia calls *litost*." It is a genius springing not from strength or insight, but from the simmering torment of hypercelibacy. Again, we learn the lesson: lyrical poetry may be at once terrible and sublime, but it is not wise.

Once a musician, then a poet, Milan Kundera defected to writing novels. Disgusted by the excesses that accompanied the revolution's use of the lyricism, he "betrayed" poetry. Henceforth, his task was to destroy poetic illusion with its opposite, with the novel's perspective - "the perspective of irony, of demystification, of the relativization of truth, of feelings, of attitudes."³

There is also the matter of succession. Petrarch and Lermontov appeared ridiculous not only to Boccaccio, but also to Goethe. And what of Goethe? Is he not wise? In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, he is witty, noble and dignified: "his face is still handsome, his eyes are still lovely and wise" (*BLF*, 176). He is also a surpassing poet, the "father of them all," of Boccaccio no less than the poets. Yet, the Olympian God is dying. In the novel's first English translation, the chapter in which Goethe is carted down the stairs is called "The Poet Descending." Lermontov reveals the descent's significance:

Lermontov said to the student: "Do you realize what you're seeing? You're a student, you don't know anything about life. But this is a great scene! They're carrying a poet. Do you know what a poem it would make" (*BLF*, 196)?

Perhaps it would make a better novel. The only characters with sufficient insight to understand both Petrarch and Lermontov are Goethe and Boccaccio. Goethe is wise, but Boccaccio is too. His is a different sort of wisdom. Goethe is a poet and indulges his young disciples; Boccaccio, who is not a poet, mistrusts them. Goethe is dying. Elsewhere in the novel, we learn that the world he represents - one evincing intelligibility,

³"Conversation with Milan Kundera," Victoria Nelson, trans., *Three Penny Review* 24 (Winter 1986), 11.

revering dignity - is dying with him. The new world is neither intelligible nor dignified; it is the world of Descartes and Nietzsche, one for which nothing is certain, not even God or one's self. And so, the question arises: who will succeed Goethe as the supreme articulator of the modern condition?

Already, we have Kundera's answer. "The novel has accompanied man uninterruptedly and faithfully since the beginning of the Modern Era" (AN, 5). The novel alone possesses a wisdom suited to modernity. It alone explores the relativity of truth and allows all voices to be heard, including those of skeptics and the weak. In Milan Kundera's novels, moreover, we hear an additional voice - that of the presiding artist. It is the voice of experience, a former musician and poet who later defected, of a former Communist who later rejected politics, a novelist foretelling the end of his art form. As one of the last novelists of his genre's history, Milan Kundera could well be the last to utter its four centuries of accumulated wisdom.

From his vantage point at the summit and near the end, the novelist reflects on the state of the world. It appears that it is in cultural ruins. We now witness the end not only of the Modern Era, but of a civilization. Kundera holds the ideology of progress responsible: "Those who are fascinated by the idea of progress do not suspect that everything moving forward is at the same time bringing the end nearer and that joyous watchwords like 'forward' and 'farther' are the lascivious voice of death urging us to hasten to it" (BLF, 246). In the *Art of the Novel*, Kundera explains further. We have entered an unprecedented phase of human history, the phase of "*terminal paradoxes*." The novelist does not doubt that the terminal paradoxes, faithfully chronicled in the history of the novel, will bring on the end of Europe. If we list them now, we will certainly recognize them; they infuse Kundera's work and have revealed themselves in our study:

Paradox Number One: The age of reason christened by Descartes has produced the "triumph of irrationality." "In the course of the Modern Era, Cartesian rationality has corroded, one after the other, the values inherited from the Middle Ages." The result has been the world without values that Broch foretold, one where the strong dominate the weak, and "mercy" and "justice" have become antiquated terms.

How has this paradox revealed itself? According to Kundera, it has been in the eclipse of culture by politics. Repressive political regimes - the Czech, Polish and Hungarian, for example - have systematically destroyed those nations' cultures. The rationality that was first discovered by the Greeks, and later deified by Descartes, Voltaire, and Diderot, has disappeared under bland cynicism on the one hand, and secular fanaticism on the other. Worst of all, Europe has failed to notice the passage. In this century, Western Europeans have accepted the cultural death of Central Europe without protest.

Paradox Number Two: When God departed, original sin was erased from humanity's conscience. At the beginning of the Modern Era, it was decided that the world is composed not of Christian and heathen societies, but of millions of "thinking things." Only then could paradise on earth have been deemed possible. "The Modern Era has nurtured a dream in which mankind...would someday come together in unity and everlasting peace" (AN, 10). But history has revealed that this dream is an illusion. In a comment on *The Joke*, Kundera explains: "lured on by the voice of utopia, they [Ludvik, Helena, Kostka and Jaroslav] have squeezed their way through the gates of paradise only to find, when the doors slam shut behind them, that they are in hell."⁴ It appears that our efforts to earn earthly redemption has created only "ambulant and everlasting war" (AN, 10). Humanity is now united not by peace and brotherhood, but by universal violence and shared misery.

Paradox Number Three: Cervantes's world of boundless adventure has snapped shut on its inhabitants. Don Quixote battled imaginary monsters - the windmills blocking his path. In Balzac's novels, history appeared as a train carrying passengers to further adventure. In the twentieth century, Kafka, Hasek, Musil and Broch would represent it as an immobilizing, hostile force. These novelists were the first to apprehend what every Central European now knows: history is a trap, "impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible - and inescapable" (AN, 11).

Paradox Number Four: In its obsession with gaining answers, the era that gave birth to the novel is killing it. Like the Modern Era, the novel was born of the questioning spirit. Yet, humanity and the novel soon parted ways. In human history, the questioning

⁴As cited in Liehm, "The World of Milan Kundera," *Dissent* 30.1 (1983), 112.

spirit acquired a compendium of scientific facts. The love of questions gave way to a desire for answers. The novel, by contrast, maintained its birthright: it refused to offer answers. Because it presents truth as relative, the novel is "as essential to our insanely ideological world as is bread." Yet, because it discharges its wisdom on "a world grown alien to it, it is becoming increasingly irrelevant" (*AN*, 19).

The death of the novel is at hand; the era that spawned it now seeks to destroy it. In totalitarian regimes, Kundera's art faces a violent death, "inflicted by bans, censorship, and ideological pressure" (*AN*, 13).⁵ In the non-totalitarian world, the mass media slowly suffocates it, as does "graphomania," the "obsession with writing books" that arises in societies boasting general affluence, political stability and advanced social atomization (*BLF*, 127).⁶ In totalitarian countries, bookshelves are crowded with literary mediocrities because all the great literature has been removed. In democracies, the same situation holds because no one wants great literature anymore. Kundera bemoans the end of his art form and the end of Europe: "the 'children of the novel' have abandoned the art that shaped them. Europe, the 'society of the novel,' has abandoned its own self" (*TB*, 27).

Where will these paradoxes end? According to Kundera, they will end in the death of Europe. Western nations' acceptance of the Russian invasion in 1968 was the first sign:

Faced with the eternity of the Russian night, I had experienced in Prague the violent end of Western culture such as it was conceived at the dawn of the modern age, based on the individual and his reason, on pluralism of thought and on tolerance. In a small Western country I experienced the end of the West. That was the grand farewell.⁷

There are other indications. All aspects of European culture are dying, not only the novel, but music, sculpture, and painting. With his daring introduction of a twelve-tone system of composition, Schoenberg brought on the end of music, of Moravian folk songs, Ellington and Stravinsky alike (*BLF*, 247). Modern painters and sculptors are no longer known. University students can name television stars, but not modern composers.

⁵In support of Salman Rushdie, Kundera includes Muslim theocracies in the category of totalitarian censorship (*TB*, 27).

⁶Kundera offers his theory of "graphomania" in Part Four of *BLF*. It is a phenomenon related to the culture of self-assertion that has emerged in stable democratic regimes.

⁷"Introduction to a Variation," 476.

Indeed, they cannot even name the ancients: "The world of Graeco-Roman antiquity and the world of Christianity, those two mainsprings of the European spirit which give it its strength and tension, have almost disappeared from the consciousness of the educated young Czech."⁸ In the end, we become as innocent as children. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera recalls Gustav Husak's address to a group of Young Pioneers:

He said, 'Children! You are the future!' and now I realize these words have a meaning that was not initially apparent. Children are the future not because they will one day be adults but because humanity is becoming more and more a child, because childhood is the image of the future (*BLF*, 257).

Now we understand the full meaning of Tamina's fantastic island. For Kundera, the island of children mindlessly gyrating to rock depicts mankind's descent into infancy. At the end of the Modern Era, we face the possibility of existence without culture. At the end of Europe's history, we are thrown back across the border, from the realm of meaning to the terrifying void of unjustified existence. According to Kundera, it is the most ironic paradox at all. At the beginning of the Modern Era, Descartes asserted that we were "master and proprietor of nature." Now we are masters of nothing at all: not our politics, nor history, nor cultures, nor even our own bodies. "The planet is moving through the void without any master. There it is, the unbearable lightness of being" (*AN*, 41).

What to do? There appears to be no hope. We are invited to accept Kundera's dire predictions and then to join him in his grief. Yet, before joining him, we first must decide whether to believe him. The decision calls for careful analysis of the novelist's claims. Careful analysis reveals flaws. And analysis of Kundera's possible motives suggests *why* his claims are flawed. Stepping outside Kundera's paradoxes, we first examine them.

In many cases, the novelist seems to assume that reality changes as ideas of it change. This is true of his comments not only on God (Who once was here, but left when we dismissed Him) but also on Communism. Regarding "the poetry of Marxism," for example:

A single stanza of this poetry has hypnotized our entire era: the idea that the human era is divided into two parts - prehistory (the realm of necessity where man is at the mercy of unknown laws) and true history beginning with the proletarian revolution (when man

⁸Speech to the Fourth Writer's Congress," 173.

finally becomes master of his destiny). But the little tricks that history plays are nasty: at the time of their prehistory, man and the nations enjoyed a certain possibility of mastering their destiny. On the other hand, from a time coinciding more or less with the October Revolution, we entered the age of determinism and of total dependence....The happy atheism of the past is replaced by the melancholic atheism of our own time.⁹

Another paradox. But what is it, really? First, the author identifies a rhetorical illusion (in this case, Marxism's pre-history/history dichotomy). Then, rather than dismissing what he knows is an illusion, he accepts it as real, and uses it to critique of itself. The exaggeration follows ("from a time coinciding more or less with the October Revolution, we entered the age of determinism and of total dependence"), and Kundera has explained nothing. Both the rhetoric (the pre-history/history dichotomy) and its underlying assumption (atheism, whether happy or melancholy) are left unexamined.

A similar mechanism holds for each of Kundera's terminal paradoxes. The novelist perceives the offending assumptions, perceives the destructive effects, yet refuses to question their fallibility. First, he laments the erosion of values that began when "God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe" (*AN*, 6). Next, he declares that we cannot attain paradise on earth. Third, he concludes that history is unkind. Finally, he opposes the dogmatism demanding scientific proofs with the dogmatism asserting that all truth is relative. If we were to ask Kundera to defend his claims, he probably would not see the need. They are modern claims, after all, and Kundera is a modern man. If he had the patience, he might take us in hand and reiterate the basics, explain that there is no God, that He was replaced long ago by a fearsome beast called History, that we now doubt because Descartes doubted, and we now value because Nietzsche told us to; finally, he might advise us that in the future, we should stop asking foolish questions if we wish to be taken seriously.

Still, he is handling perennial questions as though he knows the answers. The answers cannot be proved, nor can they be refuted. Indeed, they persist throughout human history, as questions not for intellection but for human experience. Entire historical epochs are built around them. Entire societies leave trails of texts symbolizing experiences either of affirmation or denial. Ours is an era of denial; Kundera knows it, we know it; churches, school-children and the modern mass media know it. With his "terminal

⁹Finkelkraut, "Milan Kundera Interview," 22.

paradoxes," Kundera identifies the implications of the era's denial. He perceives that his trap originated with the modern assumption that the self is the locus of existence. What is more, he deftly represents the suffering induced by that assumption. Tereza fears they have lost their souls. Ludvik fears a life cut off from meaning. The novelist fears his terminal paradoxes, yet resigns himself to them. The doubter of being refuses to doubt his doubts, and his interpreters must ask why. Why, when Kundera perceives the trap so clearly, does he accept its foundational assumptions? Might he have motives? Are there reasons why he would prefer to deny, rather than affirm a source of meaning, order and intelligibility to human life that is independent of "the self"?

In *Testaments Betrayed*, we discover some clues. As Kundera knows, the Modern Era offers tangible rewards to its artists:

The Modern Era made man - the individual, a thinking ego - into the basis of everything. From that new conception of the world came a new conception of the work of art as well. It became the original expression of a unique individual. It is in art that the individualism of the Modern Era was realized and confirmed, found its expression, its glory, its monument (*TB*, 271).

The artist boldly stakes his claim: "Modern art: a revolt against the imitation of reality, in the name of the autonomous laws of art" (*TB*, 160). We then place it beside Tomas's claim about love: "love is something that belongs to us alone and enables us to flee the Creator" (*ULB*, 236). We then consider Sabina's thrill at her betrayals, and Ludvik's "feeling of pleasure, if not joy or relief" at the "acute awareness of my own lowness" (*Joke*, 179). We then observe that these are confessions not of doubters but of souls in revolt. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we find further evidence of revolt. First, we observe Kundera's reason why we write: "everyone is pained by the thought of disappearing, unheard and unseen, into an indifferent universe, and because of that everyone wants, while there is still time, to turn himself into a universe of words" (*BLF*, 147). Then we learn why we want other writers dead:

By writing books, a man turns into a universe, and it is precisely the nature of a universe to be unique. The existence of another universe threatens it in its very essence. And because it will never be given to anyone to be *everything*, all of us who write books are *nothing*. We are unrecognized, jealous, embittered, and we wish the others dead (*BLF*, 147).

It appears from the evidence that Kundera may be more concerned to deify himself than to offer a faithful articulation of reality. Perhaps he, like Husak, prefers to reconfigure rather

than represent existence. If this is the case, then explorers of existence might justifiably part ways with him.

What if the trap Kundera artfully represents as universal is his own? If it is, then the author takes pains to conceal the fact. Kundera heads off unwanted conclusions by bullying his interpreters. Besides the novels themselves, we must contend with two tomes - one set of interviews, and one set of essays - explaining precisely how art is to be interpreted. In *Testaments Betrayed*, we are told not to Kafkologize: "I have always, deeply, violently, detested those who look for a position (political philosophical, religious, whatever) in a work of art rather than searching it for an *effort to know*, to understand, to grasp this or that aspect of reality" (*TB*, 91). We are informed of the dangers of "kitsch-making interpretation" whose only function is to "kill off works of art" (*TB*, 145). Finally, we are told never, ever to deviate from the history of the novel (as explained by Milan Kundera) when interpreting a novel. Thus, we start and end in Kundera's trap, permitted only to gape his exquisite design of it.

What are we to do in face of Kundera's twits, instructions and admonitions? If we were to set them aside, we might observe how he has placed his characters in a universe without food, air or water, one in which human life is impossible. In *The Joke*, not only our own Ludvik is stripped of his illusions, but Kostka, Helena, and Jaroslav are as well. For attempting to appear decent when she is not, Helena receives harsh punishment; at the end of the novel, we find her in an outhouse wallowing in her excrement. Kostka is forced to acknowledge that he is a negligent father, a seducer, and nothing more: "O God, is it truly so? Am I so wretchedly laughable? Tell me it is not so!...In this chaos of confused voices, I cannot seem to hear You" (*Joke*, 246). And Jaroslav grieves that he cannot see his son behind the veil at the village's annual Ride of Kings: "Of what am I sure in this world if I don't have even that certainty" (*Joke*, 276)? At the end of *The Joke*, not only Ludvik, but every one of Kundera's characters has been ruined; their lives resemble nothing so much as the ruined Czech setting.¹⁰

¹⁰François Ricard makes a parallel observation concerning the reader's experience as she reads Kundera's novels:

What he has "before his eyes" is soon no longer a story, but the simulacrum of a story; characters are characters no more, but shadows; the resort town is no longer a watering hole, but a kind of cardboard stage, lighted by a paper moon, and crossed by costumed extras who no longer known in which play they are acting....In the end nothing collapses, no ruins strew the

Now, let us look at Tamina's life. Every day at the coffee shop, she stands behind the counter and suffers the conversation of idiots. In the two years since the death of her husband she has not met a single person interested in listening to her. Then there is the episode with the ostriches. On a trip to the zoo, she encounters six ostriches moving their beaks as though they are trying to talk, but no sounds emits from them. Tamina is fascinated. Later, she tells Hugo that it is like something "out of a terrifying fairy tale": "they were trying to tell me something very important. But what? What were they trying to tell me" (*BLF*, 130)? Kundera dispels the mystery. The ostriches have come to tell her nothing at all:

Tamina will never know what those great birds came to tell her. But I know. They did not come to warn her, scold her, or threaten her. They are not interested in her. Each one of them came to tell her about itself. Each one to tell her how it had eaten, how it had slept, how it had run up to the fence and seen her behind it (*BLF*, 145).

The message is clear: behind the inanity of the French social chatter is the inanity of the ostriches. Behind the inanity of the ostriches, there is that of the children's island. At all levels of existence, Tamina finds no meaning, no relief, and no escape while she remains alive.¹¹

"Every day," Nietzsche instructs the physician of the weak, "*a new dose of nausea.*" Every day, a new dose for Tamina, administered by Kundera, her loving creator. The revolting coition with Hugo is followed by the failure to retrieve the notebooks, followed by more months of banal French conversation, by the island of the children. And there on the island, Tamina plays endless rounds of hopscotch, suffers endless attacks from the children, is raped many times, and netted in volleyball nets; she

soil, no explosion is heard, things seem in no way changed; rather, they seem emptied, false, fragile, struck by a definitive unreality.

"Satan's Point of View: Towards a Reading of *Life is Elsewhere*." John Anzalone, trans. *Salmagundi* 73. (Winter 1987), 59.

¹¹It is interesting to read Kundera's novels in light of the testimony of an actual concentration camp inmate. Viktor Frankl found relief from his surroundings from the same sources identified by Kundera - in art, humor, nature, and contemplation of his beloved. Yet, for Frankl, these indicated the generosity, not the poverty of the universe beyond the camp (Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984)).

endured their games day after day, until finally, exhausted, she swims away and dies.¹² And who is her tormentor? In such a deliberately distorted universe, we can reproach no one but Kundera for the fate of the one he loves best.

* * *

Milan Kundera has been hailed as an inheritor of literature's greatest traditions. Some call him a modern tragedian.¹³ Yet, Kundera himself is not convinced; he asks whether tragedy is possible in a world for which values are disappearing. Kundera observes of Ludvik's situation that "[h]is tragedy lies in the fact that the joke has deprived him of the right to tragedy. He is condemned to triviality."¹⁴ In Chapter Six, we found that Sophocles' Oedipus myth is misplaced in his work. Indeed, when the possibility of tragedy appears, Kundera swiftly and deliberately subverts it. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the chapters chronicling the deaths of Tamina and Kundera's father (according to Banerjee, tragic chapters) are followed by "a note of callous indifference."¹⁵ In the novel's final section, neither Tamina nor Kundera's father are mentioned again. Instead, Kundera introduces Jan, the bored, middle-aged Czech émigré who is preoccupied with his own concerns and knows nothing of Tamina.¹⁶ Despite the occasional semblance of tragedy, it appears these novels are not tragic.

¹²Updike also notes Kundera's apparent callousness: "Yet in her final appearance [Tamina] seems allegorized into nothing, and the episode almost whimsical. As in the case of Nabokov, a private history of fracture and outrage is rendered kaleidoscopic by the twists of a haughty artistic will" ("Czech Angels," 514).

¹³Bruce Donahue writes that "real tragedy in its most traditional form is found in Kundera's works" ("Laughter and Ironic Humor in the Fiction of Milan Kundera," 68). Jane Bennett places Kundera in the same category as Sophocles, insofar as each exposes "our dilemmas to the reluctant gaze of a populace unaccustomed to tragic thinking" "Kundera, Coetzee, and the Politics of Anonymity." Daniel W. Conway and John E. Seery, eds. *The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal*. (New York: St. Martin's 1992), 163).

¹⁴Cited in Liehm, "The World of Milan Kundera," 112.

¹⁵Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox*, 185.

¹⁶Kundera likens the final section of *BLF* to Chopin's piano Sonata No. 2, Opus 35; the movement following the funeral march is "altogether strange...fast and short, with no melody, absolutely unsentimental: a distant gust, a muffled sound that heralds the ultimate forgetting" (*AN*, 90).

Neither are they comic. Robert Porter credits Kundera with a characteristic Czech touch, "the ability to turn an historical tragedy into a literary comedy."¹⁷ Updike concludes the opposite: Kundera is "deft and paradoxical," but gloomier even than Kafka or Gogol, whose "traditional religious resignation" converted depression to "cosmic humor."¹⁸ For his part, Kundera declares that comedy "brutally reveals the meaninglessness of everything" (AN, 126). Where other authors write comedy to make the tragic bearable, Kundera contends with "the horror of the comic":

[I]t's not there to make the tragic more bearable by lightening the tone; it doesn't *accompany* the tragic, not at all, it *destroys it in the egg* and thus deprives the victims of the only consolation they could hope for: the consolation to be found in the (real or supposed) grandeur of tragedy (AN, 104).

Far from being comic, Kundera may be the gloomiest author to have darkened his medium. Certainly, he has outdone his contemporaries - Bohumil Hrabal, Ivan Klíma and Josef Skvorecký - authors whose clouds of Czech melancholy do not fail to lift long enough to enjoy a good joke.

Can we fault the novelist for failing to write tragedies and comedies, though? He has stated it many times: irony, "the unmasking of illusions," is his business. There is plenty of unmasking in the novels. Characters trapped in Kundera's failed paradise confront the *illusion of hope* and the *reality of despair*, the *illusion of meaning* and *reality of non-meaning*. Sabina opposes the *intelligible lie* to the *unintelligible truth*. Ludvík discovers that the human will, apparently *free*, is actually *useless*. *Paradise* turns to *hell*, and the angels and the devils battle it out.¹⁹ Many paradoxes, but what have we learned about human existence? Human existence is neither heaven nor hell, but what lies between them. Yet, we find very little in the novels of what lies between. At times, it seems they are designed for maximum artistic effect, not as serious attempts to explore reality.²⁰

¹⁷"Milan Kundera and His Novel *The Joke*," *Trivium* 8, (1973), 9.

¹⁸"Czech Angels," 512.

¹⁹Ian MacEwan asks Kundera about his tendency to dualize reality. "Between this cynicism and this mindless circle dancing you don't seem to offer us much." Kundera responds: "I'm not a priest. I can't tell people what to believe." ("An Interview with Milan Kundera," 28).

²⁰Charles Molesworth wonders if there is not something more: "the impressiveness at the level of skill and complexity doesn't obviate the growing sense of futility at the level of affect. As one follows the

In the end, we discover an irony of our own. Based on critical examination of three novels, it appears that the hated "political reading" is the most useful. In asking himself what "hitherto unknown segment of reality" was discovered in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, one of Kundera's political readers responds thus: "In my opinion, the answer has to be: the distinctive things Communism does to the life - most notably the spiritual or cultural life of a society."²¹ Having explored the whole of Kundera's trap, the metaphysical as well as the social and political aspects, we come to agree with Podhoretz. Kundera's novels are useful pieces of testimony concerning life in a Communist regime. As for their metaphysical content, we have cause to suspect their reliability.

So, what should be done with Kundera's metaphysics? In the course of this study, we have appealed many times to Voegelin. We gratefully appeal to him once more. In his essay on Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, Voegelin offers advice to "the critical reader" who encounters a literary text displaying limited insight into the human condition, but a great deal into the author's own. Even in the presence of undeniable technical skill, the "critical reader" still might "hold his own:"

He is not obliged to pretend that disease is health, or that men who suffer in public do not bore him *à dormir debout*. Above all, he need not pretend that the loss of reality from which they suffer so gorgeously is not a pretense that keeps their suffering going.²²

Voegelin reminds us that our compassion has limits. In face of such gorgeous suffering, and having endured more than enough of it, the critical reader is permitted, finally, to *close her book*.

novels along one is increasingly struck by the homogeneity of the narrator's sensibility." Later, he asks: "Are we stuck in the tradition of the 'art novel,' that great Western European aesthetic achievement of the last one hundred years that is constantly threatened with the chill of empty perfection? Has the wisdom of the novel become no more than another term for sardonic irony" ("Kundera and *The Book*: The Unsaid and the Unsayable," *Salmagundi* 73, (Winter 1987), 79)?

²¹Podhoretz, "An Open Letter to Milan Kundera," 55.

²²"On Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*," Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 12 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990), 164.

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