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Mystification as an artistic strategy in Milan Kundera's work

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This article will examine the discrete aspects of Milan Kundera's employment of mystification – from the lyrical and emotional, via contradictions *per se*, before focusing on Kundera's multiple manipulations of historical fact – and assess the meaning and impact of his strategy. Remarkably, no critic to date has actually dealt with Kundera's systematic strategy of mystification. No one has as yet assessed its meaning and impact.ⁱ

Milan Kundera's literary texts are complex, polyphonic structures of interrelated motifs. Paradox is the leading principle of their construction, making them reminiscent of the drawings by Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898–1972), in which we never know exactly what follows from what, what is at the top and what is at the bottom, what is inside and what is outside. The animal is eating its own tail.

It is my contention that Kundera's texts should be viewed as provocations which are deliberately built up from seemingly convincing, authoritative statements. Kundera's texts explicitly say that, in the words of Milan Jungman, “the characters [in Kundera's texts] are born not of flesh and blood, but as *functions* of a particular problem or a theme which is being developed.” Moreover, “Kundera's characters are created *as a result of a new idea*, which has been evoked by a word (denoting a category) or by a basic situation.”ⁱⁱ

These *authoritatively made statements* are then further explained and re-confirmed by the introduction of fictional characters (various gestures are often the inspiration for the characters) and by the creation of situations. The narrator/commentator as well as the characters within the narrative thus express certain views, criticisms and political, cultural and philosophical preferences. The authorial narrator (who is only one of the many voices in the text) then analyses these views and enhances their “validity” by building up a fictional world. In effect, however, as Jan Matonoha has noted, “[i]t is particularly absurd that Kundera is trying to impose his own interpretation on the reader since the distortion of meaning and of experience is for him the main theme.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This paradox, as well as all the other contradictions in Kundera's texts, is *deliberate*. Kundera's highly sophisticated texts function on many layers, while a key element of their organisation are the subliminal contradictions he has placed within them. As with musical composition, the aesthetic quality of Kundera's literary works is the result of the complexity of their structures. The value of Kundera's writing is not based on the narrator's views, often negated or neutralised by opposing statements elsewhere in the work, but by their relationship with the general cultural context. Attempts to explain Kundera's philosophy, or paraphrase his beliefs, appear comically misguided. None of the critics, East or West, seem to entertain the possibility that Kundera's authoritative quips may be a part of a deliberate structure of mystification, where the quips themselves are not to be taken seriously. Some commentators mention the playful structure of Kundera's texts,^{iv} with David Lodge even wondering whether the theorising about the existence of “devilish” and “angelic” laughter in *The Book of*

Laughter and Forgetting could be meant seriously,^v but they still almost always take the meaning of Kundera's authorial voice assertions at face value.^{vi} Taking statements made by Kundera's narrator or Kundera's protagonists out of context, I will argue, negates or neutralises them.

Kundera's disruptive strategy is clearly related to postmodernism. According to postmodernists, reality is a conceptual construct, an artefact of scientific practice and language. Postmodernists sometimes argue that there is no such thing as Truth. Postmodernists manifest their distrust towards all ideologies. For postmodernists, even reason and logic are mere conceptual constructs and therefore are valid only within the established intellectual traditions in which they are used.^{vii} Kundera with his experience of communist ideology is justifiably sceptical towards all over-arching ideological schemes. However, his strategy of disruption is evidently intended to point to problems with human perception.

While Kundera's strategy can be easily related to postmodernism, it should be noted that, long before the arrival of postmodernism on the western cultural scene, already in the early 1950s, when Kundera was regarded as a member of the official pantheon of communist writers, he would invent fake quotes by classics of Marxism-Leninism, such as V. I. Lenin. Michal Bauer has questioned the point of such quotations, given that the texts were orthodox Stalinist material,^{viii} yet this question seems pertinent for the whole of Kundera's oeuvre. Throughout Kundera's whole literary career, whether he was a convinced communist or not, his literary working method seems ambiguous. He does present himself as a convincing proponent of certain approaches and ideas, yet, he always seems to subvert these by what he would call "unseriousness". Despite his techniques of camouflage, the aesthetic value of Kundera's literary works resides in their being constructions made of innumerable, many-faceted relationships between the motifs that make up the works and their context. The individual semantic elements of these constructions play only partial roles. They do not seem to be meaningful outside the context of all the other elements within the structure. To put it simply: *complexity, multifariousness and the game principle* serve as the carriers of aesthetic value in Kundera's works. It does not seem particularly important which *ideas* were used in the construction of these literary structures.^{ix}

Lyricism and emotionality

Kundera's narratives contain many instances of disrupted logic, indeed Kundera's own narrator explicitly warns us that his texts contain disrupted logic.^x For instance, it is logically impossible that the authorial voice "Milan Kundera", who says in the text of *Immortality* that he has created the characters out of certain "gestures", then meets them at a swimming pool or for dinner at a restaurant.^{xi} One of the most important principles of Kundera's texts is that very often Kundera's narrator criticises what Kundera's texts are actually guilty of themselves. Irrational lyricism and emotionality are often subjected to criticism, the novel, *Life is Elsewhere*, being a case in point:

"Lyrical poetry is a realm in which any statement is immediately accorded veracity. Yesterday, the poet said *life is a vale of tears*; today, he said, *Life is a land of smiles*; and he was right both times. There is no consistency. The lyrical poet does not have to prove anything. His proof is the pathos of his own experience."^{xii}

The authoritatively-made statements evident here make an impression due to their formal elegance. But their contradiction is formulated equally brilliantly. In the same novel the authorial voice criticises the main character, the poet Jaromil, for being a weakling who hides

in the world of poetry, in a fictional world. By contrast, the text of Kundera's play *Jacques and his Master*, dating to the same time as the novel, seems to sympathise with the characters for hiding in the world of fictional narratives:

“Jacques: I'm no lover of useless truths. Instance: that we are mortal. Or indeed, that this world is rotten. As if we didn't know. Jacques prefers to busy himself thinking up things to please his master, things like women with big bums, as preferred by Sir...”^{xiii}

Here lyricism, creativity and story-telling, the defiant construction of a fictional world, function as a consolation, protecting the characters and the audience from the inhospitable real world.^{xiv} Czech philosopher Václav Bělohradský has noticed that Kundera constructs a lyrical image of the author of his own books:

“At the beginning of a Kundera novel the author undergoes an anti-lyrical conversion. The author ‘steps away from himself, he can see himself suddenly from afar and is surprised that he is not the person he thought himself to be’. (...) But this prosaic truth of the novel does not seem to apply to these discoverers of the facts of life, the writers of novels. *It seems that the author is the only one who retains the ‘ontological’ privilege to ‘remain whom he thinks himself to be’.* (My emphasis.) (...) The authors of novels are not identical with their work.”^{xv}

Bělohradský seems to define exactly the major contradiction of Kundera's texts: the rules that apply to his characters and the events he describes in order to illustrate his philosophy do not apply to the author himself. Even though Kundera's texts contain strong warnings against *lyricism* and *emotion*, the most powerful passages of his works have a strong *lyrical charge*.^{xvi}

“Why do I imagine her with a golden ring in her mouth? I can't help it, that's how I imagine her. And suddenly a phrase comes back to me: ‘a faint, clear, metallic tone – like a golden ring falling into a silver basin.’” (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*)^{xvii}

“[Sabina] was thinking of the days of Johann Sebastian Bach, when music was like a rose blooming on a boundless snow-covered plain of silence.” (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*)^{xviii}

“In Paris the graves are as deep as the buildings are tall.” (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*)^{xix}

“She said to herself: when once the onslaught of ugliness became completely unbearable, she would go to a florist and buy a forget-me-not, a single forget-me-not, a slender stalk with miniature blue flowers. She would go out into the street holding the flower before her eyes, staring at it tenaciously so as to see only that single beautiful blue point, to see it as the last thing she wanted to preserve for herself from a world she had ceased to love. She would walk like that through the streets of Paris, she would soon become a familiar sight, children would run after her, laugh at her, throw things at her and all Paris would call her: *the crazy woman with the forget-me-not...*” (*Immortality*)^{xx}

In the introduction to *Jacques and his Master* the authorial voice expresses disgust at “Russian” emotionality while lauding French 18th century rationality, before saying: “*Suddenly, inexplicably I felt a burst of nostalgia* (my emphasis) *for Jacques le fataliste.*”^{xxi} How is the reader to understand this model author who gives preference to rationality on the basis of his sudden, inexplicable emotion? (Coincidentally, the expression “suddenly, inexplicably I felt” occurs regularly in Kundera's texts.)^{xxii} The model author who casts doubt

on everything and everyone, but he himself insists, despite clear contradictions embedded in his attitudes, that his attitudes and statements are unquestionable – that is a profound paradox, the intention of which must be to cast doubt on everything that Kundera says.

Contradictory statements

There are a number of other contradictory statements. As is well-known, in Kundera's novel *The Joke*, the main character Ludvík Jahn hates all his colleagues and "the whole world" because he imagines that they would have all voted by acclamation for his expulsion from university the way it happened in reality in his youth. This is a false argument^{xxiii} and the model author of the novel knows this very well, because in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the character of the head of the clinic where Tomáš works says: "In a society run by terror no statements whatsoever" (i.e. including voting by acclamation) "can be taken seriously. They are all forced and it is the duty of all honest men to ignore them."^{xxiv} In other words, Kundera knows very well what his character Ludvík in *The Joke* does not seem to know: that voting by acclamation in an authoritarian society, where the voter knows that he will be punished if he does not "vote" the way the authorities expect him to, is not a vote, but blackmail.

In *Immortality* Kundera's authorial narrator criticises what he sees as the Christian concept of European law.^{xxv} Allegedly, according to Christian European law, emotion excuses any crime. The narrator criticises this: "If you kill someone for money in cold blood you have no excuse; if you kill him out of unhappy love or jealousy, the jury will sympathise with you and Paul as your defence lawyer will request that the murder victim be accorded the severest possible punishment."

In *Immortality*, the narrator *criticises* the fact that according to the Christian concept of European law, if a crime is committed as a result of being emotional, the perpetrator is excused. The narrator here *criticises* the assumption that human beings cannot be expected to be responsible for their emotions. But in *Identity*^{xxvi} Kundera's narrator argues the opposite just as forcefully: we *cannot be* criticised for our emotions "because we have no control over them". Emotions are to be excused: "We can reproach ourselves for some action, for a remark, but not for a feeling, quite simply because we have no control over it."^{xxvii} The argument that human beings cannot be blamed for our emotions, that emotion is *uncontrollable*, and they cannot possibly be held to account for their actions which are the result of emotions, also finds expression in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: regardless of the effect upon his wife Tereza, Tomáš "lacked the strength to control his taste for other women. It would have torn him apart."^{xxviii}

Unsubstantiated assertions

Kundera's brilliant witticisms do not even need to contradict one another. The initial brilliance of their *stylistic form* gives way to doubts about the evidence for such assertions. The level of their implausibility varies: if Kundera's narrative voice says that the Town Hall at Prague's The Old Town Square was deliberately not rebuilt after having been destroyed in an air raid in 1945 so Czechs could display their suffering during the Second World War,^{xxix} it is unacceptable to most readers because they know other reasons for this.^{xxx} Would a woman really mock the fact that husbands take care of small children the way Chantal does when she is walking along a beach in *Identity*?^{xxxi} Would she see this as anti-erotic? Would a woman really say, as Chantal does, that the death of her child has liberated her?^{xxxii} In *The Book of*

Laughter and Forgetting the narrator introduces the main female character of the novel and states for dramatic effect: “I am giving her a name no woman has ever borne before: Tamina.”^{xxxiii} Google provides about 610 000 references for “Tamina”.^{xxxiv}

The prevalence of such unsubstantiated claims in Kundera's work undermines the absolute assertions Kundera's narrator continues to make. Is it credible when Kundera's narrator says that after Tomáš and Tereza had moved to the countryside, the secret police “stopped pestering them”^{xxxv}, when there is evidence that during the post-1968 invasion “normalisation era” in Czechoslovakia, ideological oppression was stronger in the countryside,^{xxxvi} where everyone knew everyone else, than in the anonymous cities?^{xxxvii} Given that psychiatrists describe hysteria as a state of unmanageable fear which has arisen as the consequence of previous, highly traumatic experiences, can it be defined credibly as “an imitation of feeling, a show of feeling, something that we *want* to feel”?^{xxxviii} Are war and culture really mysteriously connected, as Paul says in *Immortality*? Is it true that without war, there is no culture as asserted in the statement that “[t]he fact that no war has broken out in Europe for fifty years is connected in some mysterious way with the fact that for fifty years no new Picasso has appeared either[?]”^{xxxix} Does culture currently flower in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and in Congo because there is war in these countries? The above statements sound like a rather glib, Euro-centric generalisation. These assertions should rather be seen as intellectual provocations whose aim it is to challenge the reader.

Kundera's text is in continual conflict with the reader's experience. Kundera deliberately plays with the reader's conception of reality and history and casts doubt on it. In this, he follows a time-honoured tradition in European culture, starting with *Don Quijote*.^{xl} As Milan Jungmann wrote in the 1980s, “you gain the impression of a brilliant game, but at the same time you become aware that Kundera is cynically pulling your leg.”^{xli} Jungmann is mistaken: Kundera's writing method is not based on cynicism. He is an educator, deliberately employing provocation to warn against uncritical acceptance. The binary oppositions that underlie Kundera's witticisms ultimately undermine them. Laura in *Immortality* likes to define herself in terms of her physical body, Agnes, on the other hand, prefers to define herself in terms of her soul. Franz and Sabina in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are dialectical opposites par excellence. But the reader – as Kundera's text evidently intended – rebels against the interpretation of the world via binary contradictions. Existence cannot be reduced to such contrasts, or to Kundera's definitions and lists.

The pseudo-authenticity of historical facts

The superficial and banal nature of today's culture and civilisation, especially as manifest in the public discourse of politicians, intellectuals and the media, is a frequent object of criticism in Kundera's work. Facts are distorted and simplified in public discourse and myths and kitsch are created. Kundera's authorial narrator often makes excursions into the realm of what he presents as historical facts, citing “key events” which become a point of departure for his further philosophical argumentation. Precise and authentic quotation is not a defining feature of his technique.^{xlii} What then is the role of this semantic content within the overall structure of the literary text?

In his essays, Kundera admits to using historical events in a highly selective fashion. He uses only those “historical events” which contain “existential revelations”, i.e. which can be used to illustrate pre-conceived philosophical ideas. He goes as far as to say that historical fidelity is “a secondary matter” for him.^{xliii} He liberally distorts a given historical event to make it

conform to and reinforce the philosophic assertions he is trying to disseminate. Kundera is only too aware of Western European audiences' ignorance about societies outside Western Europe. When pretending to present "facts about Eastern Europe" to the Western reader, Kundera may be making fun of them, in line with his larger strategy to subvert readers and toy with them. In *Jacques and his Master* Kundera playfully foregrounds his methods:^{xliv}

Master: Death to people who rewrite what's already been written! I'd like to see them skewered and barbecued.

Jacques: Sir, people who rewrite are never barbecued, and everyone believes them.

Master: You think they'll believe the person who's rewritten our story? They won't look up the text to find out who we really are?^{xlv}

The implicit challenge expressed here is one I take up in the remainder of this essay, confronting primary sources with Kundera's "factual" assertions. In several instances it is clear that Kundera's quotations from the factual sources *were not exact*. When Kundera's fictional text changes the meaning of facts when including them in his works of fiction, my working hypothesis is that these subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) shifts must be the carriers of semantic content. The principal question is what is the *nature* of this semantic content?

Clementis's hat

The story of Clementis's non-existent fur hat is perhaps the most salient example of Kundera's technique of confusing the reader with highly convincing, false facts. This, as well as all the other instances of Kundera's "fake news", quoted here, can be read in two different ways: either as Kundera's plea, addressed to the reader, asking him to employ his critical faculties and always to check whether the assertions he reads are actually true to fact, or as Kundera's mockery of the reader, who, in his view, see above, will never look up the primary sources to see how things are in reality. The world wants to be lied to, that seems to be Kundera's conclusion.

The opening sentences of *The Book of Laughter and forgetting* have become famous to such an extent that people quote them as *historical fact*.^{xlvi} In fact, they provide the basis for a new mythology:

"In February 1948 the Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to harangue hundreds of thousands of citizens massed in Old Town Square. Gottwald was bareheaded. Clementis took off his fur hat and set it on Gottwald's head. Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and of course, from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald's head."^{xlvii}

The above is an extremely good story. A typical Kunderaesque mechanism clicks into operation here, the one cited above when Kundera criticises lyricism (see footnote 12).^{xlviii} Kundera's witticisms and anecdotes *seem authentic* because they are so extremely well written. The reader's knowledge that propaganda departments of Stalinist regimes, both in Russia and in Czechoslovakia, routinely removed politicians who had fallen from grace from official photographs, lends the story plausibility. The anecdote about Gottwald, Clementis, totalitarian oppression and the hat surely *must have happened*. But the reality is different. The conflict between reality and Kundera's fiction serves as a warning that plausibility should not

be automatically regarded as proof of veracity. The recipient of the message can be easily deceived by its slickness.

The technological supplement to the widely-read Czech newspaper *Mladá fronta Dnes*, published two photographs which refer to the famous picture of Klement Gottwald standing on a balcony at the Old Town Square, and which relate to the anecdote which Kundera narrates. The caption under the two photographs says: “Sometimes, the montage was much less ideological. On 9th February 1948 Vlado Clementis and photographer Karel Hájek cluttered up the picture.”



The Communist Party Chairman and Prime Minister Klement Gottwald during a speech at the Old Town Square in Prague.^{xlix}

The picture was not taken on the date of the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, i.e. on 25th February 1948, but on a totally different day, 8th February. It was not a “a great turning point in the history of Bohemia”. Clementis did not have a fur hat on, but a normal hat. Gottwald was not bare-headed and Clementis did not put a fur hat on his head. In short it is a complete fabrication.

“Divinity and shit”

The story of the death of Stalin’s son Yakov Dzhughashvili in a Second World War prisoner-of-war camp is yet another major example of how Kundera changes historical facts in order to be able to use them to forward his own theories of life. Since checking the real facts will immediately reveal that Kundera has distorted them, this casts doubt on the validity of all argumentation, presented by Kundera. Why would someone want to present an argument in the centre of which there are warning signs that it is false? Only to warn the reader that reality is unknowable and that he should be on guard.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera substantially changed a real event in order for it to be usable as a starting point for his argumentation. The novel includes a story about

how Stalin's son Yakov Dzhugashvili allegedly died. Kundera argues, quoting the *Sunday Times*, that Stalin's son Yakov Dzhugashvili, when held by the Germans in a prisoner-of-war camp during World War II, was so insulted when some British officers complained that he habitually left a "foul mess" in the camp's latrines that he irrationally committed suicide by hurling himself against the camp's electrified fence.¹ On this basis, Kundera develops a complicated philosophical argument, using the dialectical relationship between "Son of 'God' (i.e. Stalin's son)" and "shit" as a point of departure. He argues that Yakov Dzhugashvili, as the "Son of God" (i.e. Stalin) found it particularly offensive to be associated with excrement because "God does not defecate". The "highest of drama and the very lowest" are "vertiginously close", and Kundera sees the merging of the opposites in this story as evidence that "human existence loses its dimensions and becomes unbearably light."^{li}

The *Sunday Times* story referred to by Kundera differs considerably from what he has made of it, to serve his theorising. Relations between the British and the Russian prisoners-of-war in the German camp were highly strained. The constant bickering of the British and the Russian soldiers led to Yakov being accused – rightly or wrongly – of soiling the toilet. Yakov's suicide then may or may not have been directly related to this row.^{lii} But Kundera's text hints that "the dirtying of the latrine by excrement" was somehow an integral part of the "Russian soul" of Stalin's son^{liii} (There is a racist implication here that Russians simply "foul toilets", it is "within them".) Kundera then uses the unity of "divinity and shit" as a departure-point for an essayistic exposition about divinity and defecation. The original article published in the *Sunday Times*, does not support the idea that the deliberate soiling of the latrine was an "integral part of the Russian soul" but simply infantile revenge, perpetrated by a group of traumatised, hostile prisoners of war. The national stereotypes hinted at in Kundera's version, are not present in the original testimony. His theory about "the dirtying of the latrine by excrement" as an integral part of the "Russian soul", is unfounded.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the leading character Tomáš decides *on an impulse* to follow Tereza and to return to occupied Czechoslovakia (Kundera consistently says "to Bohemia"; he ignores the existence of the Czechoslovak state). The text implies that after Tomáš crossed the "Czech" (in reality, Czechoslovak) border, the shutters came down and the returnee had no possibility to get out to the West again. Kundera writes:

"Then Tomáš crossed the Czech border and was welcomed by columns of Russian tanks. He had to stop his car and wait half an hour before they passed. A terrifying soldier in the black uniform of the armoured forces stood at the crossroads directing traffic as if every road in the country belonged to him and him alone."^{liv}

Kundera deliberately (and understandably) creates here a simple and clear impression of an enslaved country. During the chaos that prevailed in the first few days of the invasion paradoxically it was possible to cross the Czechoslovak border to go to the West and back. Soviet soldiers did not control the border posts, these were fully under the control of – very liberal, under the circumstances – Czechoslovak immigration and customs officers. The borders were not closed until the beginning of the Husák era, sometime towards the end of 1969 – beginning of 1970, when Soviet troops had long disappeared from Czechoslovak roads, and were now permanently stationed in Czechoslovak barracks. The claustrophobic atmosphere described by Kundera, belongs to a much later time without Soviet soldiers in Czechoslovak towns and at Czechoslovak crossroads.

The same applies to the motif when, according to Kundera, "From the very beginning of the occupation, Russian military airplanes flew over Prague all night long."^{lv} This is again an

attempt to create the impression of a militarily violated country. But this motif is utterly fictitious. The noise of airplanes could be heard in Prague only in the night of the invasion, from 20th until 21st August 1968, when Soviet military transport aircraft landed at Prague Airport. There was no such noise at any other time. Kundera has deliberately opted here for a sentimentally dramatic, metonymic image to play up the suffering of the Czechs, caused by the invasion, an image intended solely for Kundera's Western audiences.^{lvi}

The meaning of all these elements has been shifted through literary stylisation in such a way that they would express and confirm Kundera's apodictic semantic gesture. But the meaning of the narrative does not follow from a convincingly constructed story. The meaning is forced upon the reader *ex post* on the basis of the narrator's pre-conceived philosophy, which however may change in the course of the given literary work or subsequent literary works.

“The Idiot of Music and the President of Forgetting”

Mystification seems to be Kundera's primary literary working method and it is provocatively enhanced by his insistence that *he is not inventing anything, he is quoting pure facts*. One blatant example is the history of the highly popular Czech singer Karel Gott's emigration to Germany in 1971 (not in 1972, as Kundera says). Kundera has contributed to the creation of the myth that the then Czechoslovak Communist Party General Secretary Gustáv Husák wrote a letter to the pop singer while he was in emigration because Husák's regime badly needed Gott, the “idiot of music”. Kundera writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:^{lvii}

“In 1972, when Karel Gott, a Czech pop singer, left the country, Husák became fearful. He immediately wrote a personal letter to him in Frankfurt, it was in August 1972, from which, not inventing a word I quote verbatim the following: ‘Dear Karel, we are not angry with you. Please come back, we will do for you whatever you wish. We will help you, you will help us...’ (...) The President of Forgetting and the Idiot of Music were two of a kind. They were doing the same work. ‘We will help you, you will help us.’ Neither could manage without the other.”^{lviii}

In fact, Husák never wrote to Karel Gott. On the other hand, after his defection to Germany Gott wrote twice to Husák. Gott's “trial run” emigration was intended as a protest against the singer's harassment in the first years of Husák's normalisation.^{lix} According to Gott,^{lx} Husák did react to his letters, though not in writing,^{lxi} but by sending a verbal message.^{lxii} In this chapter of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera has created a non-existent document, misquoted and misinterpreted facts, while insisting that he is “not inventing a word,” and “quotes verbatim”. The validity of his fictional world is reinforced by means of practical examples.

Semantic shifts

Kundera's texts contain many other statements connected with historical facts and authentic texts. The meaning of these have also been changed to support Kundera's outlook. In the preface to *Jacques and his Master*^{lxiii} and again in *Immortality*^{lxiv} Kundera quotes St. Augustine, who allegedly said: “Love *God* (my emphasis) and do as you like.” However, the

real text is different: “Love and do as you like.”^{lxv} St. Augustine’s statement is not an excuse for hysterical emotionality, as Kundera would have it, but a demand that whoever acts should do so on the basis of good will. These semantic shifts occur frequently in Kundera’s work. When, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the authorial voice quotes Gustáv Husák as saying “Children! You are the future,” it is evidently an ordinary political cliché. It is unlikely that Husák really hoped that society would become fully infantilised, as Kundera’s interprets it.^{lxvi} In *Identity*^{lxvii} Chantal points out that the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, was called “Little Boy”. Allegedly, it is a paradox that the new era of destruction was introduced by this tender word, implying a hopeful future. But Chantal does not mention that the other American bomb, dropped on Nagasaki, was called “Fat Boy”, which would disrupt the arbitrary link between the idea of the child and that of destruction. The chapter entitled “Lítost” in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, which argues that the meaning of the Czech term is “untranslatable”^{lxviii} is a comprehensive mystification,^{lxix} it is nothing of the sort.^{lxx} Yet even this fabrication has entered the category of facts: an internet list of “Twenty awesomely untranslatable words from around the world” includes “lítost” as a cardinal example.^{lxxi}

A considerable number of direct warnings in Kundera’s texts insist that such statements should not be taken at face value and that readers should use their own critical judgment. These warnings come from a number of different speakers. “I wish to make a categorical statement: no novel worthy of the name takes the world seriously,” says Kundera in his preface to *Jacques and his Master*.^{lxxii} Franz in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* knows that “in the end, no words are precise”,^{lxxiii} after all, he was accused of writing just “unverifiable speculation”.^{lxxiv} “You know perfectly well that at this moment, we are but the frivolous fantasy of a novelist who lets us say things would probably never say on our own,” Goethe warns Hemingway in *Immortality*.^{lxxv}

Playfulness

As Kundera says in his afterword to the Czech edition of *Immortality* (footnote 7) *playfulness* is an important principle in the construction of his literary texts. Numerous passages of unserious male ramblings also cast doubt on the seriousness of Kundera’s texts. This starts in *Laughable Loves*: “A thought took my fancy; I got really involved in it...” (and what then follows is a witty, but unconvincing male pseudo-argumentation).^{lxxvi} A man will use his argumentation to prove anything: for instance, that a woman can only be happy with a misogynist, or, on the other hand, with someone who loves womanhood.^{lxxvii} In *Immortality*, the lawyer Paul brilliantly criticises his own intelligent radio programme and explains why it should be abolished.^{lxxviii}

Words can convincingly prove anything, or its opposite, if we masterfully control the *form of expression*, Kundera seems to argue. Those who are masters of the form and style, deserve praise: “Nothing requires a greater effort of thought than arguments to justify the rule of non-thought.” (*Immortality*)^{lxxix} “The more absurd the proposition he was advancing, the prouder he was of it, because it takes a very great intelligence to breathe logical meaning into meaningless ideas.” (*Identity*)^{lxxx} This statement, even though it is related to a literary character in the text, is very close to Kundera’s poetics in which the *form* of the literary work plays a supremely important role. As previously stated (footnote 12) “the lyrical poet does not have to prove anything.” Everything depends on form and style.

Mystification

“I was born on the first of April’ [i.e. April Fools’ s Day]. ’That has its metaphysical significance,^{lxxxix} Kundera told Antonín Liehm in a February 1967 interview, thereby claiming the role of philosophical fool as his birthright,” as Marie Němcová Banerjee asserts.^{lxxxii} While Kundera relies on form and style to persuade the readers that his assertions are convincing, mystification is an important principle of his artistic creation. In this sense, Kundera walks in the footsteps of his great teacher, the French writer Denis Diderot. In “Eduard and God”, a short story from *Laughable Loves*, we encounter this for the first time:

Why do we consider telling the truth a virtue? Imagine that you meet a madman, who claims that he is fish and that we are all fish. Are you going to argue with him? Are you going to undress in front of him and show him that you don’t have fins? If you told him the whole truth and nothing but the truth, you would enter into a serious conversation with a madman and you yourself would become mad. And it is the same with the world that surrounds us. If I obstinately told a man the truth to his face, it would mean that I was taking him seriously. I must lie if I don’t want to take madmen seriously and become one of them myself.^{lxxxiii}

The statement relates to Kundera’s basic belief, expressed continually throughout his works, that the world is too unserious a place to be taken seriously. *Lack of seriousness* is a remedy which debunks pomposity, kitsch and lies, is a repeated motif. During Husák’s “normalisation” the “icy look” of seriousness (the angels had occupied all positions of authority, the generals and the dissidents) “had stripped the amiable costume of playful hoaxers from us”.^{lxxxiv} The fictional Věra Kundera likewise rebukes the fictional Milan Kundera in *Slowness*:

“You’ve often told me you wanted to write a novel some day with not a single serious word in it. A Big Piece of Nonsense for Your Own Pleasure. I’m frightened the time may have come. I just want to warn you: be careful. You remember what you mother used to tell you? ‘Milánku, stop making jokes. No one will understand you. You will offend everyone, and everyone will end up hating you.’”^{lxxxv}

Eduard’s argumentation in the story “Eduard and God” comes back in *Immortality*: Professor Avenarius, a character which can be seen as Kundera’s second fictional *alter ego* in this novel, explains to the fictional Kundera: “There is nothing more useless than trying to prove something to idiots. Joking no longer makes sense. The world takes everything seriously. Even me. And that’s the limit.”^{lxxxvi} It can be seen from these statements that whether speaking in his own voice or through the medium of his fictional characters, Kundera dissociates himself from what he sees as the sham seriousness of the world in which he lives. For him, the world is not authentic and convincing and the only way to react to it is by performing pranks. At the same time, these must be camouflaged so that only the most perceptive reader can discover Kundera's real views. Kundera's methods of camouflage seem elitist. His texts assume that most readers will take his apodictic statements at face value, without realising the need to work to discover the ambiguity and subversion that these statements contain. It is, as it were, only the “select few” who will discover Kundera's pranks and will laugh, along with him, at the “folly of the world”. In this, it would appear, Kundera has behaved consistently from the very beginning of his political and literary career, when he invented fake quotes by Lenin.

Conclusion

Milan Kundera has been playing with distorting facts and with presenting false information as facts since the beginning of his literary career in the 1950s. Undoubtedly, as a result of this he can be seen as a postmodernist writer, for whom reality, and even reason and logic, are mere conceptual constructs. Just like postmodernists, Kundera distrusts all ideologists and by including fake facts in his literary work, about which he asserts that they are verified, authentic information, he either encourages the reader to engage his critical faculties in order to discover the truth, or he mocks him and society for not being able to do this. In Kundera's view, game playing, playfulness, irony, provocation and comedy are essential ingredients for writing novels. He systematically creates constructions which are fatally flawed.

The complex, ambiguous structure of Kundera's literary texts continually cast upon themselves. Kundera seems to argue that whatever is said in *words* is illegitimate, because *words* are an extremely unsatisfactory instrument of cognition. This of course is a self-deconstructing argument, implying that if words are unreliable means of communication, even the assertion that words are unreliable means of communication cannot be communicated. This, however, probably deliberately, leads the author and the reader to a dead end.

Kundera's texts suggest that any argument can express reality only partially and is always incomplete. In this respect, his texts communicate their meaning clearly, namely the need for critical thinking. Or alternatively, even more reductively: if the validity of any rational interpretation is limited, because it is impossible to understand the world with our senses completely, then even the statement that it is impossible completely to understand the world with our senses has a limited validity.

This implies the world is unknowable. Kundera's texts seem to argue that the only result of trying to understand the world around us is the realisation that we must be vigilant and highly skeptical, but, even so, we will never comprehend reality. The subliminal contradictions in Kundera's texts serve to instil within us the conviction that human beings are unable to find out any reliable information about the world we live in. Since we will never uncover reliable information about our existential position, the only thing that remains is to play games in order to amuse ourselves in our ignorance. If Kundera's literary work may be seen as mystification, it is as *mystification subverting mystification, provocation subverting provocation*. "Insignificance is perhaps the wisdom that our age needs, an age which has learnt to laugh and which cultivates oblivion," says François Busnell of *L'Express* in his review of Kundera's latest work *The Feast of Insignificance*.^{lxxxvii} Perhaps this is a pointer that critics are finally beginning to understand Kundera's work.

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Notes

i In her as yet unpublished monograph *Milan Kundera's Fiction: A Critical Approach to Existential Betrayals*, Lanham, Lexington Books, Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming, 2019, Karen von Kunes argues that Kundera's extreme secretiveness about his personal life and circumstances and his extremely careful publication strategy may be related to an incident which took place in March 1950 when Kundera became entangled with the case of Miroslav Dvořáček, a returned defector and CIA agent who was reported to the police and sentenced to a long prison term in a communist labour camp. - Kundera's secretiveness seems clearly related to his strategy of mystification.

ii

Jungmann, "Kunderovské paradoxy". In *Cesty a rozcestí*, 214–254.

iii

Quoted in Čulík, "Milan Kundera a jeho *Nevědomost*: Lásky a odpor k vlastnímu hnízdu". In *Jak Češi bojují: Výbor z Britských listů*, 620, from Jan Matonoha's unpublished essay.

iv

Le Grand, *Kundera, aneb paměť touhy*, 23.

v

Lodge, "Milan Kundera and the idea of the author in modern criticism", 117.

vi

Lodge nevertheless does remark that *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* contains “many enigmas, contradictions and ambiguities which are not resolved. It never allows the reader the luxury of identifying with a secure authorial position that is invulnerable to criticism and irony” (Lodge, “Milan Kundera and the idea of the author in modern criticism”, 120). When interpreting Kundera’s novels, Květoslav Chvatík (Chvatík, *Die Fallen der Welt: der Romancier Milan Kundera*) follows Kundera’s assertions about his texts more slavishly than other critics; most other commentators are not far behind. See Misurella, *Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs*; Němcová Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera*; Salmagundi. *Milan Kundera: Fictive Lightness, Fictive Weight*, and many others. Interestingly, more recently, some authors point out ever more increasingly to the fact that Kundera’s texts are much more complex and are full of many more contradictions than was previously realised. For instance, François Ricard claims that the truths communicated by *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* elude “definitive formulations” (Ricard, *Agnes’s Final Afternoon: An Essay on the Work of Milan Kundera*, 138). Daniel Just also argues that “*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* retains a significant degree of ambiguity. “[Kundera’s] observations are often relativized by tentative expressions and conjectural phrases. A considerable space for uncertainty is accordingly left open” (Just, “Milan Kundera and the Poetics of Novelistic Truth”, 184). With regard to French literary criticism, various authors have remarked, as Gillian B. Pierce points out, that “he is still viewed with some ambivalence in some French literary circles, where he is ‘écrivain français d’origine tchèque’ or ‘romancier tchèque de nationalité française’. In some bookstores he still appears on the shelves under foreign or Eastern European literature or as an ‘écrivain d’expression française’” (Pierce, “‘Point De Lendemain’: Milan Kundera and the French Libertine Tradition”, 300). Helena Garnett makes the case that as long as Kundera continued to write in Czech, his status was not threatening to the French Academy, but that once he began writing in French, his contribution to French literature was questioned and his spare writing style immediately attacked as that of a non-native (Garnett, “Writing at the Margin: An Introduction to the Exile Novels by Andrei Makine, Milan Kundera and Rodica Iulian.”) - For a compact discussion of Kundera’s life and work and his liking of ambiguity, see Jan Čulík’s monograph chapter on Milan Kundera in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 232 (Čulík, “Milan Kundera”. In *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 232).

vii

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy>

viii

Michal Bauer has republished four orthodox, Stalinist articles by Milan Kundera from 1949, which came out a year after the 1948 communist take-over of power in Czechoslovakia (Bauer, “Mystifikátor Milan Kundera”). Lenka Jungmannová adds that it is very likely that Kundera wrote the play *Juro Jánošík* (1973) which was officially regarded as a play by the young author Karel Steigerwald. The play was performed in Prague as part of highly orthodox, neo-Stalinist celebrations. It is very likely that Kundera would have enjoyed such a prank enormously (Jungmannová, “‘Diderot miloval mystifikace’ a co Milan Kundera?”). It is well known that his other play, *Jacques and His Master*, was officially performed for many years from 1975 onwards in a theatre in Ústí nad Labem in Northern Bohemia. Kundera was a banned writer in Czechoslovakia at this time and the theatre people pretended that the play had been written by Denis Diderot. The play had a successful run of 226 performances between 1975 and 1989. (Čulík, “Milan Kundera”. In *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 232, 215).

ix

In this connection Kundera writes in his afterword in the Czech edition of *Immortality*: “What I have been trying to do is to make thinking (meditation, contemplation) a natural part of the novel and at the same time to create such a way of reflection which is specifically novelistic (that is, not abstract, but connected with the situation of the characters); not *apodictic, theoretical, serious, but ironic, provocative, questioning, even comic (...), to take away from the novel the oppressive imperative of plausibility, to give it playfulness in such a way that the reader could see in front of himself the characters ‘as though they were alive’ (...), but that he should not forget that their ‘being alive’ is only a fiction, it is magic, it is art, it is a part of a game, a novelistic game, and that he should enjoy following that game*”. (Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 364–365) (my emphasis). (The trouble is that if we accept the principle that we should always consider whether the statements made by Kundera, by his fictive authorial voice and by his characters, are provocations, we must accept the possibility that the above statement cannot be taken seriously and could also be a provocation. But again, this statement can be seen as both serious and non-serious. As I said above, the animal is eating its own tail.)

x

See the afterword to the Czech edition of *Immortality* (Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 365).

xi

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 11–12, 231, 234–235; in English: Kundera, *Immortality*, 3–4, 251, 255–257.

xii

In Czech: Kundera, *Život je jinde*, 250; in English: Kundera, *Life is Elsewhere*, 198. (This passage is longer in the Czech original than in the English translation, here the shortened version from the English translation is quoted.)

xiii

In Czech: Kundera, *Jakub a jeho pán: pocta Denisi Diderotovi*, 92; in English: Kundera, *Jacques and his Master*, 69.

xiv

An objection can be raised here that we are comparing statements from two different texts. But when we compare all texts by Kundera published since the 1960s, it becomes evident that the same motifs often recur and develop throughout his publications. The same motifs tend to re-appear as characteristics of different protagonists in different works. Thus it seems justifiable to argue that the canon of Kundera's works published since the 1960s can be seen as an interrelated whole. – It has been pointed out that Kundera's authorial voice is just one of many of the characters' voices that interact within the structure of his work. Hence it seems justifiable to compare statements made by the authorial voice to statements made by other protagonists of Kundera's narratives.

xv

Bělohradský, “Kunderův sen o absolutním autorství”, 1.

xvi

Michelle Woods points out that Kundera often underlines his lyrical passages by using various poetic devices such as alliteration (Woods, *Translating Milan Kundera*, 109).

xvii

In Czech: Kundera, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, 113; in English: Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 143.

xviii

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 87; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 93.

xix

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 115; the English translation does not contain this lyrical statement, see Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 123.

xx

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 28; in English: Kundera, *Immortality* 22.

xxi

In Czech: Kundera, *Jakub a jeho pán: pocta Denisi Diderotovi*, 7; in English: Kundera, *Jacques and his Master*, 9.

xxii

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomáš “had come to feel an inexplicable love” for Tereza (Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 11; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 6), in *Slowness*, “Mr. and Mrs. Kundera” “suddenly had the urge to spend the evening and night in a chateau”

(Kundera, *Slowness*, 3), etc. - Karen von Kunes (see note 1) argues that the concept of *chance* is one of the most important themes in all of Kundera's work.

xxiii

A thoughtful reader will realise this while reading *The Joke*, even though Jahn's argument is not questioned in the novel. Jahn's false argumentation serves a definite purpose in *The Joke*: it is a semantic marker, reminding the reader that in spite of priding himself on his male intellectual capacity, Ludvík Jahn seems somewhat autistic.

xxiv

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 163; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 180.

xxv

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 198–199; in English: Kundera, *Immortality*, 216–217.

xxvi

Kundera, *Identity*, 38.

xxvii

Of course, to make it more complex and more difficult to criticise, the argumentation is included in the narrator's analysis of the character Chantal's thinking.

xxviii

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 25; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 21.

xxix

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 125; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 136.

xxx

The neo-gothic town hall was unpopular even before it was destroyed by the Nazi army in May 1945, it clashed stylistically with the other, historical, buildings on this, perhaps most important square in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic. Since 1945 there have been numerous architectural competitions for a new town hall to be built on the Old Town Square but architects have found it extremely difficult to produce a design which would fit in the square, so no project has been realised (Racková, "Revoluční návrhy Staroměstské radnice").

xxxi

Kundera, *Identity*, 12.

xxxii

Kundera, *Identity*, 55.

xxxiii

In Czech: Kundera, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, 89; in English: Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 109.

xxxiv

Accessed on 2nd February 2019. "Tamina" is a Swiss hotel, a river in Switzerland, an Iranian cloned calf and also a female Christian name which is fairly frequently used in the United States. Considering how important classical music is in Kundera's life, it is likely that the name "Tamina" is derived from the name of the main character in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, Prince Tamino.

xxxv

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 255; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 282.

xxxvi

See for instance Viewegh's semi-autobiographical novel *Báječná léta pod psa* (*Wonderful Years of Lousy Living*, Prague, Československý spisovatel, 1992), where Viewegh's parents, intellectuals and active participants of the 1968 Prague Spring, move to a small town in the countryside after the Warsaw Pact invasion in order to avoid being exposed politically in Prague and become victims of the local communist boss of a state enterprise who runs the enterprise and the small town as though it was his mediaeval fiefdom. It is also clear from numerous personal testimonies given to the author of this article that the interaction of local people and local communist officials was really close in the countryside, so that Kundera's notion of an escapist haven where his protagonists find solace is somewhat unconvincing. Testimonies, gathered together by ÚSTR, the Prague-based Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, tend to confirm that oppression in the countryside was stronger than in cities, see for instance here: <https://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/vzdelavani/velke-male-pribehy/rok1989/porg18.pdf>. Zbyněk Unčovský (87) from the town of Bystré in the Czech-Moravian Highlands testifies that in the villages, people “were permanently afraid” of the regime. “During the forty years of communism, not a single person from our town was allowed to become a lawyer or a doctor,” says Unčovský, see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRUVoZj8sQk>. Such levels of oppression really did not exist in cities.

xxxvii

These factual inaccuracies may have been one of the reasons why Kundera's works, published in the West in the 1980s, received a cool reception from the dissidents in Czechoslovakia, while they were hailed by the critics in the West (who would not have been aware of these inaccuracies). For instance, Kundera was criticised for having the neurosurgeon Tomáš from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* sacked from his hospital job. Milan Jungmann pointed out that while the post 1968 Husák regime sacked intellectuals from many walks of life for political dissidence, it never dismissed medics. There was a decree banning the dismissal of medical doctors (Jungmann, “Kunderovské paradoxy”, 243).

xxxviii

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 201; in English: Kundera, *Immortality*, 219.

xxxix

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 129; in English: Kundera, *Immortality*, 136. – This view, as many others, is expressed by a Kundera literary *protagonist*, which in itself can be seen as a warning that no matter how brilliant and persuasive, the argumentation should not be taken seriously.

xl

This assault on the reader's certainties has a strong presence, for instance, in Latin American literature, in authors such as Borges and García Márquez. It is no accident that Kundera has befriended García Márquez. (In November 2008, García Márquez was one of the signatories of a proclamation, signed also by Salman Rushdie, Philip Roth, and Orhan Pamuk, which condemns the Prague-based *Respekt* weekly for accusing Kundera of “being a communist secret police informer”. (See Jakub Češka, “The process which turned Milan Kundera into an informer”, *Britské listy*, 8th June 2009, <https://legacy.blisty.cz/art/47276.html>).

xli

Jungmann, “Kunderovské paradoxy”, 217.

xlii

It is of course possible to object that Kundera's texts are works of *fiction* and authors of fiction do not need to use verifiable facts. If, however, a work of fiction deliberately creates the impression in the reader that it quotes *facts* and yet it does not do so, surely it is legitimate to ask what such deception *means*.

xliii

In *The Art of the Novel* Kundera says: “I behave towards history like a stage designer who constructs an abstract set out of the few items indispensable for the action. Of the historical circumstances, I keep only

those that create a revelatory existential situation for my characters. Fidelity to historical reality is a secondary matter as regards the value of the novel” (Kundera, . *The Art of the Novel*, 36–37, 44).

xliv

As ever, it is a question to what extent Kundera's *fictional* characters express the views of the authorial voice. As ever, Kundera seems to be hiding behind the fact that the following opinion is being given by fictional characters, thus creating playful ambiguity.

xl

In Czech: Kundera, *Jakub a jeho pán: pocta Denisi Diderotovi*, 90; in English: Kundera, *Jacques and his Master*, 67.

xlvi

Paulina Bren quotes this story in the introductory chapter on Czechoslovak history in her work *The Greengrocer and his TV*, a study of the value system of Czechoslovak post-1968 TV series. She does say that Kundera includes this story “in one of his novels”; the fact that novels tend to be fictitious however does not seem to enter this historian's mind (Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring*, 23). – The anecdote is also used by teachers in Czech secondary schools in their history classes to illustrate the “evils of communism”. (Personal testimony by Czech journalist Štefan Švec.)

xlvii

Full quotation: “In February 1948 the Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to harangue hundreds of thousands of citizens massed in Old Town Square. That was a great turning point in the history of Bohemia. Gottwald was bareheaded. Clementis stood close to him. Bursting with solicitude, Clementis took off his fur hat and set it on Gottwald's head. The propaganda section made hundreds of thousands of copies of the photograph taken on the balcony where Gottwald, in a fur hat and surrounded by his comrades, spoke to the people. Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and of course, from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald's head.” In Czech: Kundera, *Knih smíchu a zapomnění*, 9; in English: Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 3–4.

xlviii

“Lyrical poetry is a realm in which any statement is immediately accorded veracity.”

xlix

Technet, “Jak z fotografií mizeli nepohodlní lidé. Výlet do světa fotomontáže”.

l

“Not until 1980 were we able to read in the *Sunday Times* how Stalin's son Yakov died. Captured by the Germans during the Second World War, he was placed in a camp together with a group of British officers. They shared a latrine. Stalin's son habitually left a foul mess. The British officers resented having their latrine smeared with shit, even if it was the shit of the son of the most powerful man in the world. They brought the matter to his attention. He took offence. They brought it to his attention again and again, and tried to make him clean the latrine. He raged, argued and fought. Finally, he demanded a hearing with the camp commander. He wanted the commander to act as arbiter. But the arrogant German refused to talk about shit. Stalin's son could not stand the humiliation. Crying out to heaven in the most terrifying of Russian curses, he took a running jump into the electrified barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp. He hit the target. His body, which would never again make a mess of the Britishers' latrine, was pinned to the wire.” In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 221; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* 243.

li

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 221–222; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* 244–245.

lii

The Sunday Times account which Kundera refers to seems much more impartial than how Kundera interprets it. According to *The Sunday Times*, there was a permanent atmosphere of conflict between the British and the Russian POWs in the camp. The article does not side with either the British or the Russians. It is true that within the constant bickering in the camp, some British officers did accuse Stalin's son of fouling the latrine – *The Sunday Times* article, however, does not provide any evidence to prove that this was true or whether it was just a provocative accusation. The article continues: "The precise role played in these exchanges by Yakov Stalin, and indeed his responsibility for them, remains unclear. What does seem certain, however, is that the accumulated effect of constant bickering, rows, accusations – and finally the fight – broke the spirit of a man already suffering from confused emotions about his loyalties, his background and his future. That evening, at curfew, Yakov (...) demanded to see the camp commandant, claiming he was being insulted by the British prisoners, and when his request was turned down, he appears to have gone berserk. Wildly waving a piece of wood, he ran about the area of the camp, shouting in broken German, to the SS guards on duty, 'shoot me, shoot me'. Then, in what appears to have been a clear desire to kill himself, he turned and ran towards the three-stage electrified fencing-surrounding perimeter" (Simpson and Shirley, "The last days of Lieutenant Yakov Stalin").

liii

This is hinted at by the statement that Yakov cried out to heaven in the "most terrifying of *Russian* curses", my emphasis. But Yakov was actually not Russian, he was Georgian.

liv

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 35; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 33.

lv

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 36; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 34.

lvi

In the mid-1980s, when this novel was first published, most Czech readers would have still remembered that it was not the case that the invasion would be accompanied by aircraft noise for days and nights on end.

lvii

Historian Paulina Bren quotes this fictitious story as though it were a fact: "Gott, thinking himself too valuable to be bullied by [the Husák regime] rules, wrote to the Ministry of Culture in 1971 threatening to stay abroad. What followed was *documented* [*sic!*, my emphasis] by Milan Kundera in his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*." Paulina Bren then quotes the above fictitious story from Kundera's novel, including the sentence "The following is a verbatim quote from it. I have invented nothing" (Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring*, 56).

lviii

In Czech: Kundera, *Knihy smíchu a zapomnění*, 190–191); in English: Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 249. – *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* came out in English for the first time in 1980. In the new 1996 English translation by Aaron Ascher, made from the French, not from the Czech original, the name of Karel Gott was changed to "Karel Klos", possibly because Kundera was afraid that after the fall of communism, Gott could sue him for defamation. There are some other changes in the wording of the text. The quotation here has been adjusted to correspond to the 1981 Czech original. For a very long time, the Czech version of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was published only once, under communism, by the émigré publishing house 68 Publishers in Toronto. After the fall of communism, Kundera did not allow the work to be republished in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic until 2017. The other novel by Kundera which was not published in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic for a long time is *Life is Elsewhere*. It was finally published in Brno in 2016. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was not published in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic until 2006. Kundera always explained that he would have to revise his novels before allowing them to be published in his native country and that he had neither time nor inclination to do this. Weirdly, while the Czech reading public was not given wider access to these novels after 1989 (the only available copies were the rare, original 68 Publishers, Toronto editions from the 1970s and the 1980s), they were being freely published in translation in many European languages, including in the former communist countries of the Eastern Bloc.

Gott wrote this to Husák:

“Dear Comrade Husák!

I and my colleagues are currently working on the territory of Western Europe and I and my friends appear as citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic and wish to remain Czechoslovak citizens under all circumstances. If articles appeared in the Western press which said anything else, I would like to assure you that neither myself nor Jiří and Ladislav Štáidl [Gott's musician collaborators] have never said anything to justify such articles.

We want to fulfil our contractual obligations which keep us abroad at the present time and wish to return in front of our audience if we can make sure that the interference I have mentioned in my letter was only a part of a complicated process of normalisation.

Since I have not as yet received a clear answer from the relevant authorities and my first letter and request are dated 9th May of this year, I am writing to you again, trusting firmly that both myself and my two authors will find in your person and in your wisdom understanding for our complex situation which undoubtedly is not easy.” (Gott, *Dopis Gustávu Husákovi*). – For details about Gott's second letter see Vodrážka, “Dějiny jako velké zapomnění”. The Czech *Právo* daily says that Karel Gott's letter to Husák was allegedly written by Oldřich Bukovský, an employee of the Czechoslovak recording company Supraphon (Keilová, “‘Gottův dopis’ Husákovi napsal zaměstnanec Supraphonu”), but Vodrážka has proven by evidence, gleaned from archive documents, which the *Právo* journalist has not checked, that this cannot be true.

lx

Keilová, “‘Gottův dopis’ Husákovi napsal zaměstnanec Supraphonu”.

lxi

Did Kundera not realise that it was a typical feature of the communist regime never to put important matters down on paper? Or he was fully aware of this, but in order to make his text accessible, he used the simple fiction about Husák's “letter to Karel Gott”?

lxii

“Husák did invite us back, Kundera is right. But not in a letter, he sent a message via a trade mission. At that time there was no embassy, there was a Czechoslovak trade mission in Frankfurt, where they invited us and said that there was an offer from the highest boss and that it was not good to discuss this by telephone and in letters. He (*sic!*) also said that he guarantees to us that the matter will be cleared up and that there will be no persecution, that no one would harm us” (Bártová, “Karel Gott exkluzivně o svém spise: Já s StB netančil”).

lxiii

In Czech: Kundera, *Jakub a jeho pán: pocta Denisi Diderotovi*, 8; in English: Kundera, *Jacques and his Master*, 10.

lxiv

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 198; in English: Kundera, *Immortality*, 216.

lxv

St. Augustine. 7th Augustine's homily on St. John's first epistle, chapter 8.

lxvi

In Czech: Kundera, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, 184; in English: Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 239.

lxvii

Kundera, *Identity*, 29.

lxviii

“*Lítost* is a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery.” In Czech: Kundera, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, 131; in English: Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 167.

By designating the Czech word *lítost* as 'utterly untranslatable', Kundera was explicitly making his readers aware that they were reading a translation, says Michelle Woods and explains rather interestingly Kundera's strategy of making his assertion believable for the Western reading audiences (Woods, *Translating Milan Kundera*, 107).

The authoritative *Slovník spisovného jazyka českého (A Dictionary of the Literary Czech Language)* defines "*lítost*" thus: "Pain, sadness, nostalgia, sorrow. 2. The feeling of intensive compassion with someone." (*Slovník spisovného jazyka českého. II., H–L*. 569). This definition coincides with the definition of the English word "pity" in most English dictionaries. By creating this whole passage about the "untranslatability" of the word *lítost*, Kundera may have wanted to point to how difficult it is to overcome cultural incompatibility of the West and the East.

Untranslatable. <http://matadornetwork.com/abroad/20-awesomely-untranslatable-words-from-around-the-world/>

In Czech: Kundera, *Jakub a jeho pán: pocta Denisi Diderotovi*, 11; in English: Kundera, *Jacques and his Master*, 13.

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 88; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 94.

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 95; in English: Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 102.

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost* 221; in English: Kundera, *Immortality* 240.

In Czech: Kundera, *Směšné lásky*, 61; in English: Kundera, *Laughable Loves*, 111.

In Czech: Kundera, *Směšné lásky*, 141–142; in English: Kundera, *Laughable Loves*, 181–182.

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 129; in English: Kundera, *Immortality*, 136–137.

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 129; in English: Kundera, *Immortality*, 137. – This is again, a statement, made by one of the characters and it is not substantiated by anything but by the slick structure of the paradox. The way such a statement makes an impact on the reader is through form, i.e. "lyricism", see above, the quote referred to in footnote 12.

Kundera, *Identity*, 128.

Liehm, *The Politics of Culture*, 138.

Němcová Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera*, 3.

lxxxiii

In Czech: Kundera, *Směšné lásky*, 219; in English: Kundera, *Laughable Loves*, 239.

lxxxiv

In Czech: Kundera, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, 80; in English: Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 99–100.

lxxxv

Kundera, *Slowness*, 78.

lxxxvi

In Czech: Kundera, *Nesmrtelnost*, 338; in English: Kundera, *Immortality*, 372.

lxxxvii

As quoted on the cover of the French paperback edition of *La fête de l'insignifiance* (Kundera, *La fête de l'insignifiance*).