

KUNDERA'S ARTFUL EXILE: THE PARADOX OF BETRAYAL

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ABSTRACT

YAUHENIYA SPALLINO-MIRONAVA: Kundera's Artful Exile. The Paradox of
Betrayal
(Under the direction of Hana Píchová)

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera who has lived in France since 1975 is all too familiar with betrayal, which punctuates both his life and his works. The publication of his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in 1984 sparked a heated debate among some of the most prominent Czech dissidents at home and leading Czech intellectuals in exile. Accusations of betrayal leveled against the author are central to the polemic, but the main area of contention addresses the larger questions of the role, rights, and freedoms of a writer of fiction, as expressed by two branches of Czechoslovak culture: exilic and dissident. By examining the dispute surrounding Kundera's best-known novel and tracing the trajectory of the betrayals he allegedly committed in exile, I seek to investigate the broader philosophical issue of a novelist's freedom, to delineate the complexities of an exilic writer's propensity to betray, and to demonstrate, using Kundera's own conception of the novel as a genre, that his betrayals are in fact positive, liberating, and felicitous.

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INTRODUCTION.

Betrayal and Exile

*Expect everything, you who are exiled.
You are flung away, but you are not set free.*

Victor Hugo

The perils of living in exile, a unique state of in-betweenness experienced by those transplanted across geographical, political, cultural, and linguistic borders, is a prominent theme in the works of Milan Kundera, who has lived away from his homeland since 1975. His most notable novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* [*Nesnesitelná lehkost byti*] (1984), depicts the émigrés' existential struggle to bridge the past with the present, to remain true to their heritage and to not fall victim to the new cultural environment by complete assimilation. This novel represents Kundera's response to his own existential situation, with which he had to come to terms both as an individual and as an artist. Unlike his characters, however, who fail at finding a balance between remaining faithful to their native land and integrating into life in the adopted country, Kundera was able to turn his émigré experience¹ into artful exile.

The success of an émigré's efforts to resolve the existential dilemma engendered by the exilic condition depends, above all, on overcoming a profound sense of betrayal.

¹ The discussion of an émigré's existential dilemma in this thesis is generalized on the basis of exile as experienced by those emigrants (mostly intellectuals) who fled or were forced to leave their native country in Eastern Europe for political reasons in the 1970s-1980s. It excludes refugees and people displaced by war, persecution, or natural cataclysms.

Forced to tread the treacherous terrain of exile, emigrants have to cope with the inescapable feeling of unfaithfulness that haunts them from the moment they cross the geographical border, whether only temporarily or permanently. The first betrayal they must contend with is, thus, the act of emigration itself, which is perceived by an émigré as a sign of disloyalty.

Having betrayed the homeland physically, an émigré continues to betray it spiritually. Distanced from the native land and forced to adjust to an alien culture, anyone living in exile is bound to be burdened with feelings of guilt for having to choose the foreign over the native in order to become a functioning member of a new society. The process of adaptation—of making the foreign culture one’s own—is accompanied by the process of growing increasingly detached from one’s cultural heritage. An emigrant ceases to be actively involved with the domestic culture, stops participating in it, loses touch, and may find it difficult to follow its development. “Emigration is hard from the purely personal standpoint,” Kundera reflects in *Testaments Betrayed* (1993), “[...] people generally think of the pain of nostalgia; but what is worse is the pain of estrangement: the process whereby what was intimate becomes foreign.”² Plagued with feelings of alienation, of the past irrevocably slipping away, an émigré perceives assimilation to a new culture as necessarily compromising his/her own, and the process of growing accustomed to the new cultural environment feels like giving up his/her own

² Kundera, Milan, *Testaments Betrayed* (NY: Harper Perennial, 2001), 92. In all subsequent citations throughout this paper, this collection of essays is denoted as *TB*.

cultural heritage. Successful integration, which is a necessary first step for survival in the new territory, is perceived by an émigré as a second betrayal—a spiritual one.

Creative individuals living outside of their homeland are even more likely to commit betrayals in exile and to experience them more acutely. For them, the tormenting sense of being unfaithful is exacerbated by what Kundera calls “an émigré’s artistic problem”:

the numerically equal blocks of a lifetime are unequal in weight, depending on whether they comprise young or adult years. The adult years may be richer and more important for life and for creative activity both, but the subconscious, memory, language, all the understructure of creativity, are formed very early; for a doctor, that won’t make problems, but *for a novelist or a composer, leaving the place to which his imagination, his obsessions, and thus his fundamental themes are bound could make for a kind of ripping³ apart.*⁴

Having betrayed his/her country as an individual, a writer in exile is predisposed to continue to betray it as an artist as well. The risk of betrayal lurks behind an author’s choice of what audience to write for, and in what language, as well as what to write about and how. The considerations of language, audience, subject matter, and style are inextricably connected. Any writer’s potential readership depends to a large extent on the language, in which he/she writes, and the latter, in turn, determines the public that will be able to appreciate the book as conceived, in the original. Language is also largely responsible for the stylistic nature of the work, while the choice of the target audience may have an effect on its themes and the narrative. Thus, betraying one element often prompts a sense of betrayal of another. Choosing to write in the adopted tongue in order

³ The pain and torment of exile is emphasized in this violent image.

⁴ *ibid.*, 92, emphasis added.

to reach a potentially wider audience, for example, is perceived by an émigré author as a betrayal of the readers in his/her homeland, since composing in a foreign language, he/she writes, first of all, for a foreign audience. It also represents a betrayal of his/her own language, an instance of giving up on it and privileging the foreign over the native. To succeed as a writer in exile, one must “mobilize all his powers, all his artist’s wiles”⁵ to overcome feelings of guilt for three counts of betrayal—physical, spiritual, and artistic.

Milan Kundera is all too familiar with betrayal, which punctuates both his life and works. He has been charged with betraying his country, language, and Czech readers and accused of taking too many liberties with depicting Czech history. However, as a writer who has always sought freedom—artistic freedom above all,—he has been betrayed by his homeland and, ironically, by those who fought for freedom within its borders. He has also been betrayed by the West, where he sought refuge, where freedom is proclaimed to be the highest virtue, and where people really believe they are free. Reading his novels through the prism of their own expectations of what exilic writing should be like, both sides tried to impose their own sets of shackles on an artist who defied any efforts to confine his works to politics, ideology, morality and who was not afraid to go against what was expected.

Kundera’s novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* sparked a polemic, to which accusations of betrayal are central. At the core of the debate, which involved some of the most prominent Czech dissidents at home and leading Czech intellectuals in exile, however, is the issues of the very function of fiction and the role and rights of a novelist.

⁵ *ibid.*, 92.

It is with this question in mind that I aim to undertake a detailed analysis of the dispute surrounding the novel. The many betrayals Kundera has been accused of inevitably lead one to ponder broader philosophical issues concerning literature. In Chapter One, the discussion of Kundera's betrayal of his native tongue will touch on such conceptual ideas as the discourse of fidelity in translation, the notion of the original text, and an author's right to revise his works. Chapter Two will engage questions of the role of the author's biography in critical interpretation of his works and of the place of morality in fiction, which are central to the analysis of Kundera's alleged betrayal of his Czech readers in favor of the Western audience. Finally, Chapter Three will illuminate perhaps the most serious betrayal allegedly committed by Kundera in exile—his portrayal of Czech history—and will focus on the problem of faithfulness to reality and the danger of a purely political reading of his novels.

By examining the debate surrounding Kundera's novel and tracing the trajectory of his alleged betrayals in exile, I strive neither to rehabilitate nor to condemn him. I seek to investigate the broader philosophical issue of an author's freedom, to delineate the complexities of an exilic writer's propensity to betray, and to demonstrate, using Kundera's own conception of the novel as a genre, that his betrayals are in fact positive, liberating, and felicitous. They represent his efforts to escape the tyranny of the original, of the expected, and of truth, and to exercise great freedom as an author. In all of the purported breaches of fidelity, Kundera has remained faithful to himself as an artist. He has not betrayed the testaments of the great novelists like Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz, in whose footsteps he himself says he is following, and in the great

European novelistic tradition started by Cervantes and Rabelais, he has found his true homeland.

CHAPTER I.

Language: The Tyranny of the Original

The first artistic betrayal committed by Kundera in exile is on the level of language. It was prompted by his own feeling of having himself been betrayed, for when he was “robb[ed] [...] of [his] freedom to publish for the sake of political power”⁶ in communist Czechoslovakia, the writer was betrayed by his government. The years when Kundera was writing for the desk drawer, after a ban on his works in his homeland following the Soviet invasion of 1968, represent a paradoxical “situation of ‘absolute freedom’ in absolute un-freedom” [“situace ‘absolutní svobody’ v absolutní nesvobodě”⁷]. Kundera himself later described those years in terms of freedom: “... nikdy jsem se necítil tak *svobodný* jako během oněch několika let v Čechách po ruském vpádu, kdy mi nebylo dovoleno publikovat... Prvně jsem v životě psal *absolutně svobodně*, protože jsem věděl, že tyto knihy v Čechách nikdy nevyjdou a nebude je číst žádný cenzor” [“... I have never felt as *free* as during those few years in Czechoslovakia after the Russian invasion, when I was not allowed to publish... For the first time in my life I wrote *absolutely freely* because I knew that those books would never appear in

⁶ Garfinkle, Deborah, “Betraying K: Milan Kundera on Exile and the Translator’s Art,” in *Modern Czech Studies*, ed. Alexander Levitsky, Masako Ueda (Providence: Brown University, 1999), 59-60.

⁷ Chvatík, Květoslav, *Svět románů Milana Kundery [The World of Milan Kundera’s Novels]* (Brno: Atlantis, 1994), 70. This and all subsequent translations from Czech into English are mine unless otherwise noted.

Czechoslovakia and that no censor would read them”].⁸ Such liberation, however, defined above all by freedom from pressure and censorship, precludes any possibility of the writer’s works reaching an audience and can thus hardly be seen as truly free. The author hinted at the sinister undertones of such freedom in a grim metaphor: “For the seven years I was out of work there was no question of getting anything published. In other words, *I was a corpse*, someone who no longer existed. But I was happy!”⁹ The limitations of such freedom in the context of Kundera’s life and artistic philosophy become all the more obvious in light of the author’s belief in openness to criticism, to the chance of being misunderstood, to the potential of provoking a harsh response and, yes, even perhaps of being considered a betrayer. “I want to feel utterly free with the writing of fiction,” Kundera said in a conversation with Jordan Elgrably in 1987, “and to feel free means to be able to risk incomprehension, failure, even hostility to your work.”¹⁰ The ideal artistic freedom, according to Kundera, is inconceivable without an audience. Thus, it could never be achieved in the Czechoslovakia of the 1970s. Only exile could offer the writer a sense of artistic freedom.

Exile, however, only brought to light another betrayal, and this time it was committed by the West. Even though Kundera’s emigration to France in 1975 was initially a euphoric, liberating experience on the personal level—

⁸ Quoted in Chvatík, *Svět románů Milana Kundery*, 70, emphasis added.

⁹ Elgrably, Jordan, “Conversations with Milan Kundera,” Interview with Milan Kundera (*Salmagundi* 73 (1987): 3-24), 21, emphasis added.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 20.

Osvobození od politiky, od jejího všudypřítomního tlaku, osvobození od věčných politických diskusí a jejich stereotypního a neplodného obsahu. [...] ...Neumíte si představit mou euforii hned v prvních čtrnácti dnech ve Francii. Začal jsem svůj druhý život a vše bylo pro mne dobrodružstvím: lidé, řeč, krajina i rozhovor se sousedy,

[Freed from politics, from its omnipresent pressure, freed from perpetual political discussions and their stereotypical and fruitless content. [...] ... You cannot imagine my euphoria right during the first fourteen days in France. I started my second life, and everything was for me an adventure: the people, the speech, the country and conversations with the neighbors],¹¹—

he did not start to exploit his new artistic freedom immediately. The years of 1972-1978, three of which were spent in France, is the longest period of the writer's artistic silence. His silence, however, should not be seen as induced by exile, for, as Kundera himself observes, *Farewell Waltz* [*Valčík na rozloučenou*] (1972), his last novel written in Czechoslovakia, was written as his "farewell" both to his country and to his literary career: "Když jsem roku 1972 v Praze dopsal *Valčík na rozloučenou*, titul znamenal zcela nedvojsmyslně, že je to má poslední kniha, rozloučení s mým spisovatelským povoláním. Byl jsem přesvědčen, že jsem už řekl, co jsem chtěl říct" ["When in 1972 in Prague I finished writing *The Farewell Waltz*, the title signified quite unambiguously that it was my last book, my farewell to my writer's calling. I was certain that I had already said everything I wanted to say"].¹² On the contrary, Kundera's experience in exile gave him the impetus to go back to literary activity, prompting him to review the translations of his works.

Kundera was aware of the fact that his two works, *Life is Elsewhere* [*Život je jinde*] (1973) and *Farewell Waltz*, written before his exile, would not be available to the

¹¹ Chvatík, *Svět románů Milana Kundery*, 78.

¹² Quoted in Chvatík, *Svět románů Milana Kundery*, 80.

Czech readers in his homeland. Writing in his native tongue, he produced them for an unknown audience, primarily foreign. Having secured a contract with the French publishing house Gallimard, he put his trust in the translators who were “the first reader[s] of his novels,”¹³ and on whose expertise the life of those works depended: “my novels *lived their lives as translations*; as translations, they were read, criticized, judged, accepted or rejected.”¹⁴ Translation of Kundera’s novels, thus, was not intended simply to extend and prolong their lifetime; it ensured their very life and was fundamental for their existence.

When, after emigrating to France, Kundera reviewed the existing translations of his novels, he was shocked by their unfaithfulness to his originals. “Alas, our translators betray us,”¹⁵ he confesses in an interview with Olga Carlisle. In *The Art of the Novel* (1986), he recounts his first encounter with the translations of *The Joke* [Žert] (1967):

In 1968 and 1969, *The Joke* was translated into all the Western languages. But what surprises! In France, the translator rewrote the novel by ornamenting my style. In England, the publisher cut out all the reflective passages, eliminated the musicological chapters, changed the order of the parts, recomposed the novel. [...] The shock of *The Joke*’s translations scarred me forever. All the more because for me, since practically speaking I no longer have the Czech audience, translations are *everything*.¹⁶

¹³ Woods, Michelle, “Original and Translation in the Czech Fiction of Milan Kundera” (*Translation and Literature* 10.2 (2001): 200-221), 216.

¹⁴ Quoted in Woods, 210, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Carlisle, Olga, “A Talk with Milan Kundera,” Interview with Milan Kundera (*New York Times* 19 May 1985. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/kundera-talk.html>>).

¹⁶ Kundera, Milan, *The Art of the Novel* (NY: Harper Perennial, 2000), 121, emphasis in the original. The abbreviation *AN* will be used to denote this collection of essays in subsequent citations.

Kundera came to consider translation in general his “nightmare”¹⁷ and felt betrayed as an artist, alienated from his own work.

It is significant that, in Kundera’s opinion, it is not only and perhaps not so much faithfulness to the original language that must be maintained for a translation to be successful; rather, it is faithfulness to the author’s original idea and style: “For the translator, the supreme authority should be the *author’s personal style*.”¹⁸ Quite often, the considerations of style and language are closely associated, inseparable. To those translators who try to avoid linguistic awkwardness at all cost and argue that it “isn’t said in English,” Kundera replies, “[B]ut what I write isn’t said in Czech, either!”¹⁹ In cases like this, fidelity to the author’s personal style fully corresponds to fidelity to the original language, while attempts to find a less clumsy rendition in the target language lead not only to distortions in style, but also in thought. “[Y]our writing is made to seem flat, it is rendered banal, even vulgar,” Kundera asserts. “The same applies to your thought. And yet for a translation to be good it takes so little: to be faithful, *to want to be faithful*.”²⁰

When Kundera “uncovered [the] massacre”²¹ that the French translation of *The Joke* was, in his view, he embarked on a mission to review and revise the translations of

¹⁷ In a conversation with Jordan Elgrably, Kundera says, “Translation is my nightmare. I am apparently one of the rare writers who reads and rereads, checks over and corrects his translations—in my case in French, English, German, even Italian. I know, therefore, better than most of my colleagues, what translation means. I’ve lived horrors because of it” (17-18).

¹⁸ *TB*, 106, emphasis in the original.

¹⁹ Elgrably, 18.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 18, emphasis in the original.

²¹ *ibid.*, 18.

his works, a process that consumed an inordinate amount of his time and energy for several years:

I [...] decided [...] to put some order into the foreign editions of my books. This involved a certain amount of conflict and fatigue: reading, checking, correcting my novels, old and new, in the three or four foreign languages I can read, completely took over a whole period of my life. ... The writer who determines to supervise the translations of his books finds himself chasing after hordes of words like a shepherd after a flock of wild sheep—a sorry figure to himself, a laughable one to others.²²

As a result, the so-called definitive versions of the novels were produced in English and French. It has been noted, however, that these texts differ remarkably from the 1967 Czech original.

In her article “In Search of *The Joke*: An Open Letter to Milan Kundera,” Allison Stanger details the numerous “discrepancies between the old and new versions of *The Joke*,”²³ which, although “not radical enough to require two titles,”²⁴ still are significant, and argues that Kundera altered the novel “for marketing purposes.”²⁵ While not challenging his right as an author to rework his novels, she finds it problematic and unfair that the modifications introduced in the definitive versions have not been carried over into the original-language text. Ending her open letter with a charged question: “[S]houldn’t the speakers of your mother’s tongue have the benefit of those stylistic adjustments you have made in the novel in presenting it to an admiring world-wide

²² AN, 121.

²³ Stanger, Allison, “In Search of *The Joke*: An Open Letter to Milan Kundera” (*New England Review* 18.1 (1997): 93-100), 98.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 99.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 99.

audience?”²⁶ Stanger implies that if, as Kundera states, “[t]he French translations have become, so to speak, more faithful to the Czech originals than the originals themselves,”²⁷ the fact that the new version is not available in Czech constitutes an act of betrayal on the author’s part of his Czech readers. Caleb Crain echoes her sentiments in “Infidelity,”²⁸ essentially accusing Kundera of having revised the text in order to make it more appealing to the Western readers, and suggesting that the definitive versions of the novel may also represent Kundera’s betrayal of his original and, thus, of himself as an author.

Kundera’s attempt to counter a betrayal committed by his translators leads him to a double betrayal, it may seem. But the issue is far from unambiguous. The implication that Kundera betrayed himself by introducing substantial textual differences in the definitive versions of the novel is rather specious. If one takes into account the writer’s conception of the art of good translation as being above all faithful to the author’s style and intent, Kundera’s reworking of the text should not be seen as contradictory. That he took an opportunity presented by what he considered poor, unfaithful translations of his works to revise his novels, to develop them and bring them “closer to an aesthetic ideal of each of the novels [*The Joke* and *Farewell Waltz*]²⁹ is hardly inconsistent with his idea of authorship. He is quoted as saying:

Because what an author creates doesn’t belong to his papa, his mama, his nation, or to mankind; it belongs to no one but himself; he can publish it

²⁶ *ibid.*, 100.

²⁷ Kundera, Milan, “Author’s Note,” *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (NY: Harper Perennial, 1996), 313. In all subsequent citations throughout this paper, the abbreviation *BLF* is used to refer to this novel.

²⁸ Crain, Caleb, “Infidelity” (*Lingua Franca* Oct. 1999: 39-50).

²⁹ Woods, 216.

when he wants and if he wants; he can change it, revise it, lengthen it, shorten it, throw it in the toilet and flush it down without the slightest obligation to explain himself to anybody at all.³⁰

And in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* [*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*] (1978), he writes: “It is the inviolable right of a novelist to rework his novel.”³¹ He exercises that right not because “[i]n the world of the novel, publics just do not matter,”³² but rather because “the only language worth being faithful to is the verbal music of prose.”³³ Kundera’s involvement and creative reengagement with his texts during the lengthy process of re-translation is not tantamount to a betrayal of himself as an artist and a novelist. On the contrary, it testifies to his fidelity to his ideal and to his courage to remain faithful to himself even in the face of hostile reception and the potential of being misunderstood. This is an example of precisely that paradoxical act of betrayal that becomes liberating.

The charge that Kundera betrayed his Czech readers is more difficult to refute. Examining the publication history of *The Joke*, Michelle Woods demonstrates that “Stanger’s contention that Kundera deliberately makes his novel more palatable for a Western audience through the alterations made in his revisions of the translations [...] is flawed.”³⁴ She points out that the 1991 Czech version has been “informed”³⁵ by the

³⁰ Kundera, Milan, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 98.

³¹ *BLF*, 15.

³² Garfinkle, 59.

³³ *ibid.*, 60.

³⁴ Woods, 205.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 205. Woods supports her claim with specific evidence: “In 1991, Kundera did not authorize the reprinting of his 1967 edition of *Žert*, as Stanger mistakenly contends; in fact, in this latest Czech edition, there are over 220 textual modifications from the original 1967 Czech one” (205).

translations, that the text has evolved over a period of twenty-four years “rather than remaining a static and unimpeachable entity,” and that the designation of “definitive” should not be taken to signal the text’s linguistic and semantic fidelity to the original, but rather to distinguish these translations from the previous non-definitive translations not authorized by the author.³⁶ However, if Kundera introduced substantial changes into the “definitive” versions not to appeal to a Western reader, as Stanger suggests, but to bring them closer to his ideal conception of the novel, the revised Czech text, which still does not entirely correspond to the “definitive” translations privileged by Kundera, can be seen as being further removed from the proto-text of *The Joke* as conceived by the author than the authorized texts in French and English. This fact lends some credence to Stanger’s claim that the Czechs feel betrayed, having access only to what can be seen as a less-than-perfect version of the novel in their and Kundera’s native tongue.

Another charge that may be brought up against Kundera on the linguistic level has to do with him engaging in an act of what can be termed self-translation—a conscious effort to adjust his style, to “write sentences that [are] more sober, more comprehensible”³⁷ in order to make his texts suitable for translation. Kundera himself attributes his change of style after emigration to a conscious effort to minimize potential issues in translation: “The need for translations prodded me to wash my tongue, to strip my words down to their most basic meaning.”³⁸ It is tempting to charge the writer with

³⁶ *ibid.*, 209.

³⁷ Kundera, Milan, “Comedy is Everywhere” (*Index on Censorship* 6 (1977): 3-7), 4.

³⁸ Quoted in Kussi, Peter, “Milan Kundera: Dialogues with Fiction” (*World Literature Today* 57.2 (1983): 206-209), 209.

yet another betrayal, for, as he himself professes, it is for the sake of the Western audience that he revised his method.

Two questions are helpful in elucidating this alleged act of unfaithfulness to Kundera's native Czech: how drastically does the style of his novels written in exile differ from that of his earlier texts, and to what extent does this change represent a break with his initial aesthetic? Since the detailed analysis of these issues remains outside the scope of this thesis, it suffices to say that the change in Kundera's manner of writing induced in exile should be seen as an evolutionary, not a revolutionary development. Kundera's emigration and his reliance on translators may have merely prompted a hyper-conscious engagement with stylistic concerns and stimulated a more rapid and deliberate maturation of style. It is quite feasible that such an organic change would have occurred anyway. As Květoslav Chvatík suggests, having to write for translators may have encouraged Kundera to only further refine the writing technique that he had already established in his earlier novels and bring it closer to his conception of "the art of the novel" as "the art of the word":

Kunderův jazykový styl bývá označován za intelektuální, racionalistický, ba dokonce 'bezbarvý' [...]. Neznám však druhého romanopisce, který by byl tak přímo posedlý odpovědností za přesnost každého slova, za odstranění nežádoucích konotací i za rytmus, intonaci a tempo vět. [...] Kunderův styl může být s těžší definován lépe než jako fanatismus přesností. [...]

Je přirozené, že Kunderova snaha o přesnost jazykového výrazu dosáhla nového stupně, když byl izolován od českých čtenářů a byl nucen psát pro překladatele. [...]

Neznamená to rezignaci na češtinu nebo jazykovou šed', nýbrž návrat k významovým kořenům slov, k meditaci nad jejich etymologií ve stopách básníků a filozofů.

[Kundera's linguistic style is often described as intellectual, rational, even 'colorless' [...]. Yet, I do not know of another novelist who would be so obsessed with the dedication to the accuracy of every word, to elimination

of any undesirable connotations and to the rhythm, intonation, and tempo of sentences. [...] Kundera's style can hardly be defined better than as fanaticism of precision. [...]

It is natural that Kundera's attempt at the precision of linguistic expression reached a new level when he was isolated from the Czech readers and was forced to write for translators. [...]

It does not signify a resignation from the Czech language or language grayness, but rather a return to the semantic roots of words, to meditation on their etymology in the footsteps of poets and philosophers.]³⁹

Thus, the style of Kundera's novels written in exile does not represent a radical departure from that of the texts written at home. Neither does such a linguistic adjustment constitute a betrayal of the Czech language. In fact, such "[a] cleansing of the language"⁴⁰ only creates additional challenges in translation, for the limpid, clear, simple style, extremely difficult to capture in a different language, demands even greater exactitude and finesse from the translator. It is important to note that once he established (or rather perfected) his writing style, Kundera did not change it again, even after he realized that it posed new difficulties in translation. Having developed a style that was in accord with his aesthetic philosophy, he remained true to himself as an artist.

Kundera's last linguistic betrayal may be the most serious yet. "No, I don't believe I could situate a novel (should I go on to write another one) in France, for example,"⁴¹ Kundera proclaimed in a conversation with Jordan Elgrably in 1987. Yet, since then, the author has not only used France as a setting for several of his novels, but actually switched to writing, first, his essays, and later, his novels in French. Adopting a foreign language, especially in the artistic realm, may itself be seen as a betrayal of one's

³⁹ Chvatík, *Svět románů Milana Kundery*, 80-81.

⁴⁰ Kundera, "Comedy is Everywhere," 4.

⁴¹ Elgrably, 10.

native tongue. The case of Kundera's unfaithfulness to Czech, however, is exacerbated by the fact that none of his novels written in French have been translated into his native language. Kundera seems to be privileging the Western readers over his former fellow compatriots again, for *La Lenteur* [*Slowness*] (1995), *L'Identité* [*Identity*] (1998), and *L'Ignorance* [*Ignorance*] (2000) are available in over twenty world languages,⁴² but not in Czech.

Despite the fact that Kundera sees himself as the best candidate for translating his French novels into Czech, this charge against him is most well-founded and difficult to disprove. Brian Ward suggests that “[i]t is as if Kundera feels *abandoned* and *betrayed* by the underlying culture and people of his former homeland, which have remained, as much as by its ‘particularly loathsome regime,’ which has disappeared.”⁴³ And on the other hand, as Corine Tachtiris notes, “[s]ince he has not granted permission for the translation of any of his French-language novels into Czech, readers in his homeland feel left out, *betrayed* by Kundera’s devotion to the French and Anglo-American literary systems in preference to their own.”⁴⁴ Even this betrayal, however, should be placed into a broader context of his life and creative career. It, too, represents a step in his growth as an author and thinker in exile. More so than in any other instances of betrayal perhaps,

⁴² The three novels are available not only in English, German, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian, but also in Farsi, Lithuanian, Romanian, Catalan, Norwegian, Finnish, Serbian, Danish, Arabic, Hebrew, Korean, Polish, Swedish, and Turkish. One can read *Slowness* and *Identity* in Slovenian, Greek, Hungarian, and *Slowness* and *Ignorance* in Japanese, Macedonian, Portuguese, and Vietnamese. Both *Identity* and *Ignorance* have also been translated into Albanian. Estonian readers have access to *Slowness* in their native tongue. Additionally, Thai and Latvian translations of *Ignorance* are available, as well as Croatian and Urdu translations of *Identity*.

⁴³ Ward, Brian, “A Big Piece of Nonsense for His Own Pleasure: The Identity of Milan Kundera” (*Limina* 8 (2002): 144-155), 150, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Tachtiris, Corine Elizabeth, “Branding World Literature: The Global Circulation of Authors in Translation” (2012, <<http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/93838>>), 130, emphasis added.

this one manifests a larger, more complex issue: Kundera's strained relationship with his homeland and, more generally, the greatest threat that haunts the terrain of exilic existence—the constant vacillation between a successful integration into an adopted land, which engenders the often uneasy feeling of being at home among strangers and an outsider at home, and a failure to integrate, which leads to an inescapable feeling of homelessness. A closer investigation of this dilemma in the next chapter is not undertaken with the aim of absolving Kundera of this betrayal, but merely with the goal of putting it in perspective and rendering it less incontrovertible.

CHAPTER II.

Audience: The Tyranny of the Expected

The publication of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in 1984/85⁴⁵ gave rise to a great wave of accusations and harsh criticism against Kundera. Milan Jungmann, a distinguished Czech critic, recipient of several literary prizes awarded by the Czech Academy of Sciences,⁴⁶ and also a prominent dissident at the time, offers perhaps the most elaborate critique of the novel and its author in his article “Kunderovské paradoxy” [“Kunderian Paradoxes”]. The publication of the article in the 1986 issue of the émigré journal *Svědectví* [*Testimony*] launched a heated debate between Czech émigrés abroad and dissidents at home, as Jungmann himself notes: “Kunderovo dílo se stalo ohniskem, v němž se soustředí krizové problémy dvou větví české demokratické kultury, ineditní domácí a exilové” [“Kundera’s works became the epicenter, in which critical problems of two branches of Czech democratic culture, domestic and exilic, are concentrated”].⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Written in Czech, the novel first came out in French translation, published by Gallimard in 1984. The first English translation (by Michael Henry Heim) was released the same year by Harper & Row in the United States. The novel was published in Czech twice, in 1985 and 1988, by Toronto-based 68 Publishers and had to be smuggled into communist Czechoslovakia, where the author was banned. The novel was not published in Kundera’s homeland until 2006.

⁴⁶ “Literární ceny. Milan Jungmann” [“Literary Awards. Milan Jungmann”] (*Ústav pro českou literaturu*. <<http://www.ucl.cas.cz/ceny/?o=134>>).

⁴⁷ Jungmann, Milan, “Kunderovské paradoxy” [“Kunderian Paradoxes”] in *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře (1945-1989)* [*From the History of Czech Thinking about Literature*], ed. Michal Příbáň (Praha, 2005: 312-338), 312. Further citations of this article will reference it as “KP.”

Although Kundera's novel serves as the focal point of the polemic, the main area of contention addresses the larger questions of the role, rights and freedoms of a writer of fiction, as expressed by two branches of Czechoslovak culture: exilic and dissident. There is a hint of famous Kunderian irony in the whole affair surrounding his best-known novel: not only in the fact that Jungmann's article had to be published in the West, for the critic and the novelist were censored in Czechoslovakia at the time, but also in that the dissidents who were fighting for freedom in their and Kundera's homeland were denying artistic freedom to arguably the most famous Czech author.

Jungmann's "Kunderian Paradoxes" is fully representative of the views on the value and meaning of Kundera's fiction held by the Czech dissident community and will, therefore, serve as the centerpiece for my analysis of the polemic. An otherwise insightful critic, Jungmann completely misreads *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, partly because his interpretation of the novel is conducted predominantly through the prism of Kundera's biography. At the heart of the literary critique of Kundera as an artist lies a personal attack on Kundera—a man who has betrayed his Czech roots, distanced himself from his native country and its freedom-fighters, and even refashioned his identity as a writer and an individual.

The fact that Kundera is quoted as saying in 1985, "I am not en émigré. France is my only real homeland now,"⁴⁸ perhaps only served to fuel the charge that he is not a Czech author any more. Accusing Kundera of catering to the West, seeking popularity

⁴⁸ Carlisle.

above all, chasing fame and success, Jungmann argues that Kundera engages in kitsch behavior, creating from details of his real biography a myth for foreign readers. He cites Kundera's statement about his status as a writer and an intellectual in Czechoslovakia—"byl jsem *celkem neznámý autor*... Došlo k obrovské perzekuci českých intelektuálů a české kultury. Byl jsem v oficiálních dokumentech označen jako jeden z původců kontrarevoluce, moje knihy zakázány a moje jméno vyřazeno dokonce i z telefonního seznamu. To všechno díky *Žertu*..." ["I was a totally unknown author... It came down to immense persecution of Czech intellectuals and Czech culture. In official documents, I was labelled as one of originators of contra-revolution; my books were banned, and even my name was erased from the telephone directory"]⁴⁹—to show how the author manipulates the facts of his life to fashion a new autobiography for the benefit of the Western audience. By foregrounding his persecution in his homeland after the Soviet invasion, while denying his popularity in Czechoslovakia and concealing his early pro-Communist verse and his active engagement with the Communist enterprise, Kundera, according to Jungmann, obscures his past and consciously distances himself from it: "Kundera v intencích své filozofie kýče [...] zavrhuje všechno, čím byl spoluvůrcem *socialistické* kultury, v čem byl v zajetí avantgardních představ o socialismu jako říší svobody a nového lidství, zavrhuje i to, v čem se přel s křiviteli této vize" ["Kundera, with intentions of his philosophy of kitsch [...], dismisses everything, in which he was a co-creator of socialist culture, everything, in which, captivated by avant-garde ideas of socialism, he saw features of freedom and of new humanity; he dismisses even those

⁴⁹ Quoted in Jungmann, "KP," 320, emphasis added.

points, about which he had argued with those who distorted that vision”].⁵⁰ He does so, Jungmann asserts, to appeal to the Western reader.

One of the first to respond to Jungmann’s critique and to point out the inconsistencies in his arguments was Josef Škvorecký, a prominent Czech author who, like Kundera, emigrated from Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion. It was his Toronto-based publishing house, “Sixty-Eight Publishers,”⁵¹ that released the Czech original of Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in 1985. In “A Few Comments on Milan Jungmann’s ‘Kunderian Paradoxes’” [“Několik poznámek ke ‘Kunderovským paradoxům’ Milana Jungmanna”], Škvorecký notes, for example, that Kundera’s declaration that he was a “totally unknown author” [“celkem neznámý autor”] is inaccurate only when understood exclusively in the context of Czech culture. It is true, however, in the broader frame of reference. Despite having occupied a prominent place in the intellectual life of Czechoslovakia, Kundera was indeed unknown in world literature until his emigration when “his name entered the dictionary of Western literature for the first time with the novel⁵² *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*” [“jeho jméno přešlo do slovníku západní literatury prakticky teprve románem *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*”⁵³]. Jan Trefulka puts even this statement in perspective:

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 323, emphasis in the original.

⁵¹ Škvorecký’s publishing house was thus named to commemorate the Prague Spring of 1968 and was dedicated to publishing books (both Czech originals and English translations) by exiled Czech and Slovak writers and by Czech authors whose works were banned in Czechoslovakia at the time. Released in the West, these books had to be smuggled into Czechoslovakia.

⁵² This novel was first published in French translation in 1978. The English translation was released in 1980.

⁵³ Škvorecký, Josef, “Několik poznámek ke ‘Kunderovským paradoxům’ Milana Jungmanna” [“A Few Comments on Milan Jungmann’s ‘Kunderian Paradoxes’”] (*Svědectví* 20 (1986): 619-626), 620.

Kundera má nakonec pravdu, když říká, že půl života prožil jako relativně neznámý český intelektuál. Vždyť kdo skutečně zasvěcený uznával jeho tehdejší verše za velkou poezii (i když opravdu vždycky vzbuzovaly publicistickou pozornost, protože o kousek překračovaly vymezené hranice), koho zajímaly státní ceny a referáty ve Svazu spisovatelů? Byl veličinou v provincii provincie.

[Kundera is right, after all, when he says that he had lived half of his life as a relatively unknown Czech intellectual. Hardly anyone really knowledgeable recognized his poems of the time as great poetry (even if they really always aroused journalistic attention because they crossed defined boundaries a bit); who was interested in state prizes and reports of the Writers' Union? He was a celebrity within the province of a province.]⁵⁴

Whether viewed within the broader international frame of reference or interpreted in the narrower Czech context, Kundera's definition of himself as a relatively unknown intellectual is valid, which does not simply render Jungmann's arguments inconsistent, but completely undermines the critic's case against the novelist in this regard.

Jungmann's claims about Kundera's unprecedented popularity⁵⁵ in the West, which the author purportedly pursued at all cost and for which he was willing to sacrifice his allegiance to his homeland, are also flawed. Although Kundera is "undoubtedly the most successful Czech author in the West" ["bezespornu nejúspěšnější český autor na Západě"],⁵⁶ his works do not enjoy absolute, unconditional commendation, at least in the United States, Škvorecký points out. His first three novels were by no means bestsellers,

⁵⁴ Trefulka, Jan, "Past na kritika" ["A Trap for a Critic"] (*Obsah* č. 4, 1987), 124.

⁵⁵ The view that Kundera was chasing success in the West is also advanced by Jiří Hájek. In his 1972 essay, "Eugene Rastignac of Our Age" ["Eugene Rastignac naší doby"], he describes *The Joke* in precisely the same terms: "Nebud' me však k autorovi nespravedliví: nechtěl ani touto knihou nic než mít úspěch" ["Let's not be unfair to the author: with that book, he did not want to achieve anything else other than success"]. Jiří Hájek, "Eugene Rastignac naší doby," in *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře (1945-1989)*, ed. Michal Příbání (Praha, 2005: 299-312), 310.

⁵⁶ Škvorecký, 619.

and even after the publication of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, his writings have sparked substantial criticism, and not just literary.⁵⁷ The reception of Kundera's works was not always favorable in Germany either, Květoslav Chvatík reveals⁵⁸ in his own response to Jungmann, who, in his opinion, simply does not know the Western book market well enough: “Stavět ho na roveň producentům čtiva pro masového čtenáře může jen kritik, který naprosto nemá představu o poměrech na západním knižním trhu. Kundera byl a zůstává i nadále přes všechny úspěchy autorem pro relativně úzkou vrstvu náročných čtenářů” [“Only a critic who simply has no idea about the conditions of the Western book market can put him on the level of producers of fiction for mass readers. Kundera was and remains still, despite all the successes, an author for a relatively narrow

⁵⁷ Škvorecký elaborates:

není přesně říct, že jeho dílo je přijímáno ‘bez nejmenších kritických pochyb.’ [...] v USA Kundera, zdá se mi, prorazil teprve svým čtvrtým románem, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*. První tři, *Žert*, *Život je jinde* a *Valčík na rozloučenou*, se nesetkaly s přijetím bezvýhradným, ani to nebyly velké bestsellery. I dnes, kdy řada lidí Kunderu skutečně a bez výhrad obdivuje, objeví se občas kritický hlas, i když ne vždy *literárně* kritický.

[It would be incorrect to say that his work is accepted ‘without the smallest critical doubts.’ [...] in the United States, it seems to me, he broke through with his fourth novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The first three, *The Joke*, *Life is Elsewhere*, and *Farewell Waltz*, did not meet with unconditional acceptance; neither were they big best-sellers. And even today, when a number of people really admire Kundera without reservations, a critical voice emerges, even if it is not always a *literary* critical voice.] (619, emphasis in the original)

⁵⁸ Chvatík explains, “*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, první román napsaný Kunderou v zahraničí, byla například v Německé spolkové republice recenzována značně rozpačitě, neboť nejen čtenáři, ale ani kritici nedokázali interpretovat jednotu tématu dějově na sobě nezávislých a přece v sobě se zrcadlících příběhů” [“*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the first novel written by Kundera abroad, was, for example, received rather unsurely in Germany, for neither the readers nor the critics were able to interpret the unity of narrative themes that are independent of one another and of plotlines that still mirror one another”]. Květoslav Chvatík, “Hranice literárněkritického psychologismu a normativismu” [“The Border of Literary-Critical Psychologism and Normativism”] (1986), in *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře (1945-1989)*, ed. Michal Příbáň (Praha, 2005: 339-343), 340.

layer of discerning readers.”]⁵⁹ Thus, Jungmann’s allegation that Kundera became “a writer for simpletons”⁶⁰ in an attempt to procure success at any cost is shown not only to be unsubstantiated, but patently false.

While Škvorecký and Chvatík point out how short-sighted Jungmann’s critique is, Petr Král, in his article “Paradoxes of Kunderologists” [“Paradoxy Kunderologů”], offers an explanation of what may have provoked such a negative reaction from Czechoslovakia’s most prominent critic. He finds that Kundera fell out of favor with the Czech dissidents precisely because he was not one of them: “Kunderovi ovšem, kromě věhlasu, škodí i něco jiného: to, že není trpitel” [“There is something else, besides renown, that is damaging to Kundera: the fact that he is not a martyr”],⁶¹ “upadl tedy v nemilost už proto, že vůči disidentům neprojevil povinnou úctu” [“he fell out of favor here simply because he did not express the necessary reverence towards the dissidents”].⁶² This sentiment is echoed in Jan Trefulka’s response to Jungmann as well: “řekneme to zřetelně a jasně, Kundera banalizuje, snižuje například úsilí Charty 77 i snahu českých intelektuálů, kteří zůstali doma a čelí domácím poměrům” [“Let’s say that explicitly and clearly: Kundera makes banal, belittles, for example, the endeavor of

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 341.

⁶⁰ In his response to Jungmann, Chvatík writes, “[Jungmann] představuje Kunderu jako autora málem pro prost’áčky,” “[a] vysvětluje to Kunderovou snahou ‘být čtenářsky úspěšný za každou cenu’ [Jungmann ‘presents Kundera as a writer mainly for simpletons,’ “[and] explains it with Kundera’s effort to ‘be popular with readers at all cost’] (339); “Potíž není jenom v tom, že si Jungmann sám odporuje, ale především v tom, že onu nezřízenou Kunderovu touhu po úspěchu ničím nedokládá” [“The problem is not only in that Jungmann contradicts himself, but above all, in that he does not support Kundera’s unrestrained craving for success with any arguments”] (340).

⁶¹ Král, Petr, “Paradoxy Kunderologů” [“Paradoxes of Kunderologists”] (1986), in *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře (1945-1989)*, ed. Michal Příbáň (Praha, 2005: 344-347), 344.

⁶² *ibid.*, 345.

Charter 77 and the effort of the Czech intellectuals who stayed at home, confronting the domestic conditions”].⁶³ As a writer in exile, Kundera had the freedom to write about his homeland in a way that would show that he sympathized with the dissidents’ struggle. That he did not, that he instead exploited his freedom for other artistic goals appears to have meant to them that he was not with them, but against them. Ironically, in accusing Kundera of betraying their cause, Jungmann imposes the same limitations on the writer’s freedom as the regime forced on the dissidents:

zrada na domácím ‘dissidenství’ a amorálnost v pojetí erotismu. [...] Jungmann [...] vystupuje zároveň jako představitel—a mstitel—oné paralelní moci, již se dnes v české kultuře stali Charta a chartisté. Postoje, které tlumočí, se přitom dost hrozivě podobají těm, které tak dobře známe od představitelů moci oficiální: jejich opoziční postavení nebrání disidentům v tom, aby se k těm, kdo k nim nepatří, chovali s netolerancí, samopáskou sebejistotou a uzavřeností vůči každé kritice, jaké jsou osudově vlastní všem institucím.

[a betrayal of domestic ‘dissidents’ and amorality in the conception of eroticism. [...] Jungmann [...] acts as a representative—and avenger—of a parallel power, which the Charter and the Chartists have become today in Czech culture. The attitudes that he explains correspond, rather frighteningly, to those that we know so well from the representatives of the official power: their oppositional stance does not prevent the dissidents from acting towards those who do not belong to them with intolerance, with boisterous self-confidence and narrow-mindedness in regard to every criticism that is fatefully typical of all institutions.]⁶⁴

It is no doubt important to understand the complexities of Kundera’s refashioning of his identity and his cutting off ties with his homeland in an alleged chase after popularity in the West; the critical question, however, concerns the issue of just what implications such considerations may or should have on the critical evaluation of his

⁶³ Trefulka, 122.

⁶⁴ Král, 344.

artistic works. Even if Kundera has indeed catered to the West with his novels written in exile, as Jungmann declares, and has tried thus to ensure his success as a writer, should this fact influence the determination of the artistic worth of the texts? Květoslav Chvatík raises precisely this issue, when he asks rhetorically: “Pokud jde o touhu po úspěchu, byl jí například Balzac doložitelně přímo posedlý; snižuje to však hodnotu jeho díla?” [“As long as it is a matter of craving of success, Balzac, for example, was beyond doubt absolutely obsessed with it; does it decrease at all the value of his work?”].⁶⁵ Should Kundera’s works not be judged according to their merit alone? Should one not make a distinction between Kundera the man and Kundera the author? An imminent danger exists in reading his texts through the prism of his personal life, for relying too much on the biographical details may lead to a simplification and misinterpretation of his novels. Such a reading is subjective at best and is destined inevitably to become narrow-minded and reductionist.

It is against such a reading of his works and literature in general that Kundera himself rebels. He disapproves of the critical practice of interpreting fiction in terms of the author’s own life story, which refuses to let the work of art to speak for itself. By engaging in personal mythologizing in exile, Kundera may indeed have tried to distance himself from the Czech dissident community. Even though he never actually belonged to it, he was likely perceived as being part of it in the Western opinion, and it is quite plausible, that he thereby tried to break out of the limitations imposed on him as an émigré writer and to subvert the exile identity attributed to him, so that his work is judged

⁶⁵ Chvatík, “Hranice,” 340.

according to its inherent merit. In the article titled “A Big Piece of Nonsense for His Own Pleasure: The Identity of Milan Kundera,” Brian Ward suggests that this is one reason why Kundera blurs boundaries between his biographical and fictional identity, the other being that “he does not wish to elaborate on his ambiguous feelings about his former homeland.”⁶⁶ Ward, too, places the beginning of “Kundera’s biographical revisionism” in his emigration from Czechoslovakia.⁶⁷ He implies that Kundera’s manipulation of the details of his biography serves to not only avoid public scrutiny, but also “to undermine the kitsch of history and biography.”⁶⁸ Thus, instead of trying to gain an advantage from his status as an author in exile, Kundera has obfuscated his biography perhaps precisely because he wants his readers and critics to suspend judgement, shed their preconceived notions about the émigré writer’s mission, engage actively with the text, and because he wants his works to be praised and/or criticized objectively, his position in exile notwithstanding.

Accused of betraying his homeland and its freedom-fighters, Kundera, one might argue, has himself been betrayed by the dissidents. Having labeled him a betrayer, they approached his work with a prejudice against him. The allegation that Kundera is devoted to the Western audience in preference of his own Czech readership is at the center of Jungmann’s scathing review of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, with every purported flaw of the novel linked with and even attributed to Kundera’s chase after fame in the

⁶⁶ Ward, 146.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 151.

West. Jungmann's artistic evaluation of Kundera's text, thus, does not simply take the personal critique into consideration; it is, in fact, founded on it.

A prominent place in Jungmann's criticism of Kundera's novel is dedicated to the moral dimension of his fiction, namely: questions of eroticism, defecation, and their connection to the novelist's manner of philosophizing, or what another critic of Kundera, Jaroslav Čejka, calls Kundera's pseudo-philosophy⁶⁹. Jungmann strips the scenes of lovemaking in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* of any deeper meaning and reduces them to mere acts of copulation, which, in his opinion, clearly proves the author's indebtedness to the popular trends in Western fiction. Similarly, Jan Křesadlo finds it easy to attribute Kundera's success in the West to sexuality and excessive sentimentality combined with seemingly weightier concerns: "je podstata Kunderova úspěchu naopak jednoduchá a jasná. [...] Kundera udělal to, že nanápadně spojil dva nejčtenější literární žánry, totiž pornografii a slad'ák. Udělal to velice šikovně, ba snad i vkusně, a nadto to ještě zakamufloval jakousi filosofií, politikou, obecnou vzdělaností a estetickým, až po tu muzikologii" ["the essence of Kundera's success is, on the contrary, simple and clear. [...] Kundera has managed to discreetly fuse two of the most widely read literary genres, namely pornography and schmaltz. He has done that very skillfully, even perhaps tastefully, and on top of it all, he has camouflaged it in some philosophy, politics, universal erudition and aestheticism, and even musicology"].⁷⁰ Čejka⁷¹ also denies

⁶⁹ Čejka states that Kundera's philosophical digressions are merely "pseudophilosophical reflections" ["pseudofilozofické úvahy"]. Jaroslav Čejka, "Kýč třetí generace: O jednom románu, ale nejen o něm" ["Kitsch of Third Generation: About One Novel, But Not Only about It"] (1988), in *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře (1945-1989)*, ed. Michal Přibáň (Praha, 2005: 348-352), 350.

⁷⁰ Křesadlo, Jan (*Svědectví* 13. března 1987: 965-968), 966.

Kundera's depiction of sex any complexity and argues that the erotic scenes in the novel are devoid of any profound undertones and are, in fact, simply vulgar sexual encounters.⁷² Kundera is blamed for indulging in excessive eroticism for no other reason than to satisfy the Western readers' hunger for the provocatively suggestive. As Čejka decidedly proclaims, Kundera produces a kitsch novel for a less than discerning audience: "*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí je kýč*" [*The Unbearable Lightness of Being is kitsch*"].⁷³

In their oversimplified analysis, both Jungmann and Čejka fail to notice that the erotic in Kundera, however seemingly lightly it is presented, always intimates weightier truths, albeit ambiguous. Sexual scenes are never imposed on the narrative, but constitute an integral part of the text and are important not only in shedding light on the characters and the action, but also in laying bare important philosophical leitmotifs of the novel, as Král, for example, elucidates: "milostní scény tu nejsou lyrickou výplní nebo atraktivním zpestřením, ale právě naopak rámcem, kde skutečnost odhaluje svůj smysl—či svůj vztah

⁷¹ Jungmann responded to Čejka's disparaging article about Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* with his own "Drzé čelo lepší než poplužní dvůr" ["An Arrogant Mind is Better than a Compliant Mind"] (1988), in which he pointed out that the critic's arguments are, if not always incorrect, unsubstantiated: "Jenže tahle sekaná páchne myšlenkovou bemocností a navíc je v argumentaci nestoudně licoměrná, překračuje fakta, zamlčuje nepříjemné pravdy a tvrdí evidentní nesmysly" ["But such meatloaf reeks of mental impotence and is hypocritical in argumentation most of all; it goes beyond the facts, conceals unpleasant truths and proclaims obvious nonsense"]. It is noteworthy that many of Čejka's claims are consistent with Jungmann's own critique of the novel and that many of Jungmann's own assertions are not supported with sufficient evidence. Milan Jungmann, "Drzé čelo lepší než poplužní dvůr" (1988), in *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře (1945-1989)*, ed. Michal Přebáň (Praha, 2005: 353-355), 353.

⁷² Čejka writes, "[E]rotické scény zbavené vší smyslnosti v její přirozené podobě, jak ji chápal například D.H. Lawrence, a redukován na pouhou 'intelektuální' obscénnost, či pseudofilozofické úvahy hojně využívající tabuizovaných vulgarismů, které tak příjemně lechtají zejména pruderní čtenáře" ["The erotic scenes are devoid of all meaning in its natural form, the way D. H. Lawrence understood them, for example; they are reduced to mere 'intellectual' obscenities, or pseudophilosophical reflections that use tabooed vulgarisms, which titillate in such a pleasant way prudent readers, in particular"] (350).

⁷³ *ibid.*, 351.

ke smyslu—a konflikty, z kterých žije” [“the love scenes here are not lyrical filler or attractive diversification, but on the contrary, they are the framework, in which reality unveils its meaning—or its relation to meaning—and conflicts, from which it exists”].⁷⁴ Interestingly, while Kundera’s detractors argue that his popularity in the West stems from his trivial, superficial eroticism, Škvorecký points out that it is precisely the philosophical dimension of sex scenes in Kundera—a novel idea in the West—that arouses interest in a Western reader:

kdo ho četl, ví, že na tělesné otvory zredukovány nejsou. Právě naopak—a v tom je jistě část Kunderova úspěchu u západních čtenářů. [...] v současné americké literatuře je sex jako houska na krámě [...] u něho je sex vždycky v blízkosti problémů jiných a obvykle zajímavějších. To bylo v americké literatuře jakési novum—nebo spíš *neonovum*—a zaujalo to. Sex má u Kundery prostě ‘filozofickou’ dimenzi.

[those who had read him know that [the sexual scenes] are not reduced to bodily openings. Quite the contrary—and this definitely is part of Kundera’s success with the Western readers. [...] in contemporary American literature, sex is like a roll on the store counter [...] in Kundera, sex is always in close proximity to other, and usually more interesting, problems. That was something new in American literature—or more likely neo-new—and it has captivated. Sex in Kundera has a simply ‘philosophical’ dimension.]⁷⁵

Too quick to condemn Kundera for what they construe as the distastefully profane, Čejka and Jungmann offer a perfunctory reading of the novel and overlook the connection of erotic scenes to reflective passages that are—if not themselves revealing of metaphysical truths—meant to provoke a more scrupulous engagement with the text.

Just as Jungmann dismisses possible associations of eroticism with intellectual observations as “philosophy of eroticism,” moreover, of “pornography”—“kniha je

⁷⁴ Král, 346.

⁷⁵ Škvorecký, 622.

skrz naskrz proniknuta ‘filozofií’ erotiky,” “filozofií pornografie” [“the book is through and through permeated with ‘philosophy’ of eroticism,” “with philosophy of pornography”], he writes⁷⁶,—he considers Kundera’s preoccupation with bodily functions unjustified and interprets those elements as obscene digressions that masquerade as philosophy. He makes the following pronouncement:

Fekální motivy se u Kundery vyskutují už od *Žertu* a fyziologické úkony, vyměšování, záchod atd. jsou nadány jakýmsi hlubším, div ne mystickým smyslem ... Tato—řekněme—bezpředsudečnost vkusu je mi zcela nepochopitelná a vysvětluji si ji jen poplatností módnímu trendu západní literatury, jak by řekl Ivan Skála—podlehnutím teroru módnosti.

[Fecal motifs in Kundera occur already in *The Joke*, and physiological acts, excretions, toilet, etc. are given some deeper, almost mystical meaning ... That—let’s say—lack of judgment of taste is beyond my comprehension, and I attribute it only to conformity to the voguish trends of Western literature, as Ivan Skála would say—to succumbing to the terror of fashion.]⁷⁷

The critic seems to be contradicting himself here, however. While he attributes Kundera’s tastelessness to the “terror of [Western literary] fashion,” he discerns fecal motifs already in Kundera’s first novel. Unless he implies that the writer was targeting the Western audience with *The Joke*, his argument does not appear convincing.

Jungmann’s interpretation of the excremental theme in Kundera’s oeuvre constitutes another example of oversimplification and a cursory reading of his fiction. A more perspicacious reader—the kind of reader Kundera hopes to reach—is likely to gain a different insight, as Škvorecký notes: “Kunderovy úvahy o hovnu jsou jistě provokující a pro mnohého i šokující: ale zamyslíte-li se nad nimi, vedou skutečně k teologii: k

⁷⁶ Jungmann, “KP,” 327.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 317.

některým jejím nejtížeji řešitelným problémům” [“Kundera’s reflections about shit are definitely provocative and for many even shocking: but if you ponder them, they really lead to theology: to some of its problems that are the most difficult to solve”].⁷⁸

Kundera’s speculations about defecation are not straightforward philosophical explications; rather, they require the reader to ponder their implications and undertake complex textual analysis, to interpret these passages not as discrete, self-contained entities, detached from the broader narrative, but to read them in the context of the whole work, and even in the larger context of Kundera’s oeuvre as a whole. As such, they are consistent with Kundera’s manner of novelistic philosophizing in general: “Kunderov[y] filozofujíc[í] úvah[y] [...] nejsou katedrovou filozofií, ale básnivou, provokativně obraznou *hrou* s pojmy, která nenabízí čtenáři definitivní Pravdu, ale jen inspirující podněty k vlastním úvahám” [“Kundera’s philosophical reflections [...] are not traditional philosophy, but a poetic, provocatively figurative *game* with concepts that does not offer readers a definite Truth, but only provides impulses to personal reflections”].⁷⁹ Although excerpts dedicated to bodily functions do not themselves contain definitive truths, they stimulate the readers to go beyond the text and to make their own discoveries. In fact, due to their shocking nature, these scenes can be extremely effective in provoking a more rigorous engagement with the novel, as they take the readers outside of their comfort zone and startle them into the unknown.

The hidden potential of scenes of lovemaking and defecation in Kundera can be illustrated by the account of Tereza’s sexual encounter with a stranger who presents

⁷⁸ Škvorecký, 622.

⁷⁹ Král, 347, emphasis in the original.

himself as an engineer in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The depiction includes several references to sexual organs—“she felt her groin becoming moist,”⁸⁰ for example, and “the round brown blemish above its hairy triangle”⁸¹—and the erotic experience itself: “Tereza could feel orgasm advancing from afar, [...] the ecstasy lingered all the longer in her body, flowing through her veins like a shot of morphine.”⁸² Moreover, right after the intercourse, overcome with a “sudden desire to void her bowels,”⁸³ Tereza goes to the bathroom. The author does not simply state the fact that his heroine had to use the toilet, but describes it in detail: “the toilet [...] was broad, squat, and pitiful. [...] And since it lacked even a wooden seat, Tereza had to perch on the cold enamel rim. [...] She stood up from the toilet, flushed it, and went into the anteroom.”⁸⁴ It is quite easy to dismiss this scene as too candid, and unnecessarily so. Some readers may even find the description unfit for any novel and accuse Kundera of indulging in immodest details that do not serve to advance the narrative and do not reveal anything important about the characters involved. This scene, however, is not only crucial for one’s understanding of the character of Tereza, but it is also critical in bringing into focus the dichotomy of body and soul, one of the leitmotifs of the whole novel. A reader of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* should not forget that “Tereza was born of the rumbling of the stomach,”⁸⁵ and

⁸⁰ Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), 155. In all subsequent citations in this paper, this novel is denoted by the abbreviation *ULB*.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 155.

⁸² *ibid.*, 156.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 156.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 156-157.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 39.

that she is troubled by an extreme preoccupation with the body and its functions. By providing a precise account of the experience of Tereza's flesh and offering insight into her soul, Kundera continuously draws the reader's attention to the splitting that occurs within her: "She had sent her body into the world, and refused to take any responsibility for it,"⁸⁶ and later: "what made the soul so excited was that the body was acting against its will; the body was betraying it, and the soul was looking on."⁸⁷ Her defecation is also indicative of this doubling: it "was in fact a desire to go to the extreme of humiliation, to become only and utterly a body, the body her mother used to say was good for nothing but digesting and excreting. And as she voided her bowels, Tereza was overcome by a feeling of infinite grief and loneliness."⁸⁸ Far from being extraneous, the specific seemingly indecorous details in this episode bring the motifs of betrayal, sexual infidelity, loneliness, humiliation, and even rape together and reflect Tereza's internal contradictions.

While this sexual act is not an unambiguous incident of sexual assault (after all, Tereza consents to it, even believing that a copy of Sophocles' *Oedipus* in the engineer's apartment is a sign that her husband approved of her crossing the fateful "border of infidelity"⁸⁹ and even that "she was actually being sent to him [the engineer] by Tomas"⁹⁰), it can nonetheless be interpreted as rape, albeit internal. The intercourse can

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 154.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 155.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 156-157.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 152.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 152.

be read as Tereza's revenge on Tomas, but it is also her soul's revenge on her body, and her body's revenge on her soul. Tereza's soul rebels against the body, distances itself from it and subjects it to a meaningless copulation with a stranger, thus raping it. By experiencing the ecstasy of physical pleasure, however, the body,⁹¹ too, rapes the soul and disgraces it by defecation.

Tereza's encounter with the engineer is, above all, a solipsistic experience, a moment of self-discovery, when, alienated from each other, her body and soul are liberated and, paradoxically, united. Her body is allowed to be nothing more than just a body, unfettered by the spiritual and emotional concerns, and her soul is finally compelled to acknowledge and accept the physical, the flesh: "Making love with the engineer in the absence of love was what finally restored her soul's sight,"⁹² Kundera writes. This sexual adventure is extremely significant in Tereza's life—not as a source of great erotic pleasure, but rather as a stimulant for a personal revelation. That is why, after their intimate encounter, she only thinks about the engineer in terms of herself; in fact, she does not even remember him as an individual:

It was not her lover she remembered. In fact, she would have been hard put to describe him. She may not even have noticed what he looked like naked. What she did remember [...] was her own body: her pubic triangle and the circular blotch located just above it. The blotch, which until then she had regarded as the most prosaic of skin blemishes, had become an obsession. She longed to see it again and again in that implausible proximity to an alien penis. Here I must stress again: She had no desire to see another man's organs. She wished to see her own private parts in close proximity to an alien penis. She did not desire her lover's body. She *desired her own body*,

⁹¹ "In a way, having a body is the first real violence against us," Kundera explains in an interview with Jane Kramer, "For people like Tereza, this violence is at the center of life."

⁹² *ibid.*, 161.

*newly discovered, intimate and alien beyond all others, incomparably exciting.*⁹³

This scene convincingly illustrates how the sexual and fecal motifs, so intricately interwoven into the narrative, are not superfluous, but integral to the novel. Connected to its broader themes, they illuminate not only Tereza's character, but also elucidate universal philosophical concerns, such as the metaphysical divide between body and soul, in this instance.

Such kind of philosophizing that connects seemingly incongruous concepts of high and low, of the spiritual and the corporeal, guides the reader to metaphysical revelations, yet it does not represent a new development in Kundera's fiction since his emigration. He has always aspired to achieve precisely such fusion of elements in his fiction, as he himself states: "To bring together the extreme gravity of the question and the extreme lightness of form—that has always been my ambition."⁹⁴ His early works written in Czechoslovakia—*Laughable Loves* [*Směšné lásky*] (1969), *The Joke*, *Farewell Waltz*, for example—include a number of openly erotic episodes that introduce weightier themes. Moreover, Jan Trefulka gives an example of a poem written by Kundera when he was only sixteen or seventeen, which features eroticism quite prominently: "podstatné rysy budoucích představ a názorů jeho literárních hrdinů in eroticis jsou už zde vyznačené" ["the essential features of future characters and ideas of his literary heroes in eroticis are highlighted already here"].⁹⁵

⁹³ *ibid.*, 161, emphasis added.

⁹⁴ *AN*, 95.

⁹⁵ Trefulka, 123.

Czech literature is, in fact, distinguished by its predilection for the sensual. Not only sex, but also defecation plays a great role in the works of Bohumil Hrabal, for example, where both are linked to the transcendental.⁹⁶ Thus, contrary to Jungmann's belief that Kundera adopted the sexually suggestive manner to increase his popularity in the West, the novelist can and should be seen as continuing the literary tradition of his homeland, even in exile. To accuse Kundera of lack of "inner censorship," as Jungmann does—"Kundera se nepochybně do maximální míry zbavil 'vnitřní cenzury'" ["Kundera has undoubtedly, in the greatest measure, freed himself of 'inner censorship'"], he writes,⁹⁷—is to condemn not only this novelist, but also many of those who preceded him for their apparent amorality. Furthermore, doesn't a demand that an author self-censor his/her works on the grounds of morality represent essentially the same limitation⁹⁸ on his/her creative freedom as imposed by the restricting aesthetic of socialist realism?

Even if one were to agree that Kundera's treatment of these controversial topics does not espouse conventional values and beliefs, it is important to remember that the question of morality should not be a measure of the value of a work of art, as Ivo Bock

⁹⁶ The sexual encounters of the protagonist of Hrabal's novel *I Served the King of England* [*Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*] (1971), for example, mirror his spiritual journey and are important in the development of a deeply aesthetic sensibility that informs most of his life. The portrayal of lovemaking, tantalizing and often provocative in its candidness, may seem excessive at times, but just like in Kundera, the erotic scenes are crucial for the novel as a whole. The unlikely combination of beauty and excrement features prominently in Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude* [*Příliš hlučná samota*] (1976).

⁹⁷ Jungmann, "KP," 318.

⁹⁸ Those who demand that an author must comment on the issues of right and wrong insist that fiction be didactic, that it should provide moral instruction. Kundera himself considers moralizing to be a means of oppression, even more dangerous than censorship. In an interview with Olga Carlisle, he says, "Political oppression presents yet another danger, which—especially for the novel—is even worse than censorship and the police. I mean moralism. Oppression creates an all-too-clear boundary between good and evil, and the writer easily gives in to temptation of preaching. From a human point of view, this may be quite appealing, but for literature it is deadly."

reminds us: “‘Morálnost’ anebo ‘amorálnost’ postav, děje anebo vypravěčských komentářů nemůže být podle patrně jednomyslného přesvědčení literární vědy kritériem při posuzování hodnoty literárního díla” [“‘Morality’ or ‘amorality’ of the characters, action, or narrator’s commentary cannot be, according to an apparently unanimous conviction of literary scholarship, a criterion for assessing the value of a literary work”].⁹⁹ After all, the novel is precisely the space where traditional ethics can be questioned, and the greatest novelists challenge their readers with an unexpected rendition of the accepted norms, thus provoking a deeper reflection and often serving to actually reaffirm those values.

Although Kundera’s peculiar approach to philosophical concerns is not without precedent, it comes under attack in Jungmann’s critique. Contesting the novelist’s claim that he belongs to the old tradition of the European novel represented by such writers as Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Mann, among others, Jungmann expounds his argument and shows how Kundera is fundamentally different, in his opinion, from the founders of philosophical prose:

jejich texty jsou koncipovány složitě, umně a kladou čtenářům četné obtíže, sotva by se mohly stát bestsellery, ctižádost jejich autorů směřovala evidentně jinak. V Kunderových románech je naopak filozofování příjemnou hrou paradoxů, do které se může snadno zapojit i čtenářská mysl velmi prostinká. [...] [U] Kundery přicházíme jaksí k hotovému, každá myšlenka je podána v pestrém vyhotovení a příjemně nás překvapuje svou snadnou dostupností. Autorský a poznávací akt jsou prostě od sebe odděleny, na čtenáři se nevyžaduje žádná námaha spoluúčasti na cestě za poznáním; autor mu sděluje výsledek, k němuž došel, s přesvědčivým gestem myslitele.

⁹⁹ Bock, Ivo, “Nad Jungmannovou kritikou” [“Beyond Jungmann’s Critique”] (*Svědectví* 20 (1986): 630-633), 631-632.

[their texts are conceptualized in a complex, skillful way, and they pose numerous problems to readers; they could hardly become best-sellers; the ambition of their authors was directed evidently at something else. In Kundera's novels, philosophizing is, on the contrary, a pleasant game of paradoxes, into which a simple-minded reader can be easily engaged. [...] In Kundera, we somehow come to the ready-made; every thought is presented in a colorful appearance and pleasantly surprises us with its easy availability. The authorial and cognitive acts are simply separated; no effort to participate in the journey of discovery is demanded from the reader; the author shares the conclusion with him, at which he has arrived, with a persuasive gesture of a thinker.]¹⁰⁰

Read out of context, this passage may be taken to describe precisely what Kundera's novels are not, for his works, just like those of his precursors, compel a reader to engage with the text actively and ponder it thoroughly. The subtleties of the narrative will no doubt escape a casual reader, to whom what appears as a philosophical revelation is bound to appear simple and straightforward. Jungmann's criticism makes it obvious that he did not go beyond a surface reading of the novel and missed the provocative, ambiguous nature of what he considers to be the author's "ready-made" thoughts. His conclusion is surprisingly simplistic.

Furthermore, Jungmann offers only another inconsistent argument in support of his statement that Kundera counted on simplicity of his texts to earn him world renown. Claiming that mass readership is attracted to Kundera's novels because they represent an "ideal type of 'philosophical' prose that is accessible and, moreover, entertaining" ["ideální typ 'filozofické' prózy, jež mu je dostupná a ještě k tomu je zábavná"¹⁰¹], Jungmann reiterates that the author caters to Western readers who seek easy reading that provides only an illusion of intellectual fiction and thus satisfies their superficial interest

¹⁰⁰ Jungmann, "KP," 337.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 338.

in serious questions in a very light, amusing way. At the same time, he blames Kundera's narrator for his extensive commentary:

další paradox—jeho analytický intelekt ho neustále nutí vysvětlovat to, co se v příběhu událo, vyslovit verbis expresis jeho smysl, jako by byl v obraze příliš zašifrován. Výstavba jeho próz spočívá stále víc na důsledné kombinaci ironického příběhu a následné *rozumové explikace*

[a further paradox—his analytical intellect constantly forces him to explain what has happened in the narrative, to articulate its meaning verbatim, as if it was too encoded in the image. The construction of his prose works rests always more on a strict combination of ironic narrative and subsequent *rational explication*];¹⁰²

and further: “Některé situace jsou konstruovány tak umně, že autor neporozumění předpokládá a spěchá čtenáři na pomoc s výkladem jejich smyslu ... což svědčí o tom, že se uvědomuje, jak nesoběstačná je fabule sama o sobě.”

[Some situations are constructed in such a skillful way that the author expects misunderstandings and hurries to help the reader with the explanation of their meaning ... which testifies to the fact that he is aware of how insufficient the plot is in itself.]¹⁰³

If Kundera's narrative is “constructed so skillfully,” in such a complex way that it requires a straightforward explanation by the narrator, however, then its meaning must be far from clear, not accessible at all. Moreover, Jungmann misses the point of Kundera's narrator's ironic voice that—instead of clarifying and spelling out the truths—serves to divert the reader and to complicate the process of explication of the novel's import.

Neither the characters nor the narrator in Kundera's fiction carry the function of making explicit pronouncements about the intrinsic meaning of the text or plot. The very notion that a novel can be a source of any truth is inconsistent with Kundera's conception of the

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 315, emphasis in the original.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 316.

genre as an experimental space for exploring the complexities and potentialities of human existence, challenging accepted norms and values by means of intense questioning. “To be a writer does not mean to preach a truth,” Kundera declares, “it means to discover a truth.”¹⁰⁴ The narrator’s intrusions into the narrative only pose more questions to the perspicacious reader; they do not provide answers to them, as Jungmann claims. Even though they are often presented in affirmative sentences, they are still questioning in form.

It is this questioning quality of Kundera’s novels that roots him firmly in the European novelistic tradition. Just like the works of Kafka, Musil, and Broch, Kundera’s fiction requires the reader to move across space and time, to pay attention to repetitions of words, phrases, images, and the narrator’s (often ironic) interventions, to re-construct the chronologically displaced events into a single narrative, and, remembering to interpret seemingly unrelated parts in terms of each other and in terms of the whole, to find the bigger themes that serve both as the organizing principle of the novel and as the object of its “existential inquiry.” It takes a very diligent reader to hear the symphony of Kundera’s fiction in the multiplicity of its voices, for, like classical music, the novel is above all a synthetic form: “Ironic essay, novelistic narrative, autobiographical fragment, historic fact, flight of fantasy: The synthetic power of the novel is capable of combining everything into a unified whole like the voices of polyphonic music. The unity of a book need not stem from the plot, but can be provided by the theme.”¹⁰⁵ Only by bridging the

¹⁰⁴ Carlisle.

¹⁰⁵ Roth, Philip, “The Most Original Book of the Season,” Interview with Milan Kundera (*New York Times* 30 Nov. 1980. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/kundera-roth.html>>).

borders within the text can the reader discern the complexity of philosophical ideas within the intricate pattern of the narrative.

Jungmann clearly fails as a reader of Kundera. He betrays him by offering only an oversimplified and short-sighted interpretation of his fiction. His assertion that Kundera betrayed his homeland and the Czech readers by catering to the West can be discredited by another observation. There are many Western readers who, approaching Kundera's texts precisely the way Jungmann does, misread his novels: "Of course, my books were received, at first, in the most clichéd way imaginable, and in the most schematic way."¹⁰⁶ An acute mind, Kundera was well aware of the contemporary Western cultural malaise and criticized Westerners for their short-sightedness, ignorance, and lack of imagination.

It is hardly the case that a writer who sought popularity above all would offer a less than flattering depiction of the Western world in his novels. Yet, the delineation of the dangers of the West's growing infantilism, its pattern of quick forgetting, and its lightness in dealing with contemporary issues occupies a significant place in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. It is perhaps best exemplified by the scene at the office of a Swiss magazine, where Tereza brings her photographs of the 1968 invasion. She quickly learns, however, that this event has already been forgotten, replaced by other momentous events in the Western memory. The editor explains that "because a certain time had elapsed since the events, they [the photographs] hadn't the slightest chance ("not that they aren't very beautiful!") of being published," even though "all Czechs still

¹⁰⁶ Elgrably, 14.

wore the halo of their misfortune.”¹⁰⁷ His comments reveal an astonishing lack of care and ignorance about the repercussions of the invasion, but they also demonstrate how, having faded from the immediate media limelight, the event is no longer of any interest to the Western public. Having his own preconceived notions about the nature of the Czech regime, the editor defines the invasion within his own ideological mold (even if it is an ideology of freedom and democracy), and thinking that he knows the “truth,” does not even care to listen to Tereza. He does not hear her and treats her in a patronizing, arrogant manner, exhibiting a one-sidedness and bias characteristic of the West. His behavior demonstrates how the Western media participate in dissemination of kitsch, shaping the perception of events by the public. Having a very short memory and living in the current moment, the Europeans in the novel are presented as being ill-informed and having no true beliefs of their own. Blindly following the latest headlines, they overlook the essence of world problems, are fickle in their allegiances, and live in the world of kitsch¹⁰⁸.

In his novel, Kundera reminds us that the only person who can challenge kitsch is one who doubts, one who questions this world, the status quo, the dominant ideology, the accepted morality, and above all, oneself. Far from being kitsch itself, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and Kundera’s entire oeuvre, in fact, is the novelist’s answer to it. By

¹⁰⁷ *ULB*, 68.

¹⁰⁸ Kitsch is one of the key terms of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. For Kundera, kitsch is not “simply a work [of art] in poor taste,” but a certain behavior, attitude, spirit that permeates all areas of life. In *The Art of the Novel*, he defines it as “the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection” (134). It is characterized by superficiality, lack of individuality, conformity, and adherence to ideals that are promoted as true by a political regime, an ideology, or fashionable trends. Anyone who accepts those ideals without questioning, according to Kundera, not only succumbs to kitsch, but also participates in its dissemination.

creating a personal mythology out of his life and by writing novels that require the readers' active engagement with the text and intense probing of the narrative and reality, the novelist strives to undermine the kitsch of biography, of history, of facts that appear or are considered to be true, and of accepted morality.

CHAPTER III.

History: The Tyranny of Truth

The most serious betrayal that Kundera allegedly committed in exile and that earned him the harshest criticism relates to his depiction of historical and political reality. Charges of taking liberties with historical facts, providing an inaccurate account of events and a distorted description of reality are leveled against the novelist from both inside and outside of Czechoslovakia. In the West, it has been pointed out that Kundera's fiction "contains numerous historical references that are deliberately undermined and manipulated,"¹⁰⁹ and that the author "distorts the historical references that appear in his novels."¹¹⁰ Ludvík Vaculík, a Czech dissident writer who did not emigrate, claimed in 1986 that Kundera did not "express the real experience of this country [Czechoslovakia]."¹¹¹ Jungmann asserted that Kundera's "narrative reached a contradiction with *the meaning* of what we are living" ["bájení se dostalo do rozporu se *smyslem* toho, co žijeme"].¹¹² The novelist's artistic philosophy has also been described

¹⁰⁹ Ward, 144.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 148.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Diehl, Jackson, "Prague's Literary Winter" (*Washington Post* 2 Aug. 1986).

¹¹² Jungmann, Milan. "Otvírání pasti na kritika (ještě ke kritikám románů Milana Kundery)" ["The Opening of a Trap for a Critic (More to the Critics of Milan Kundera's Novels)"] (*Svědectví* 20 (1988): 721-733), 727, emphasis in the original.

in terms of mystifications and lies: “Je to podivuhodná filozofie, která dost upřímně poodhaluje ‘tajemství’ mystifikátorského akcentu Kunderovy tvorby, směřující pojem literární invence se lží, taškařicí a mystifikací” [“It is a strange philosophy that quite frankly opens up ‘the mystery’ of the mystifying accent of Kundera’s oeuvre, mixing up the ideas of literary invention and lies, farce and mystification”].¹¹³ And when commenting on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* after the Velvet Revolution, Daniel Kumermann declared that Kundera should have no right to write about his former country: “Kundera writes completely outside of reality here. Actually, Kundera is not a Czech author anymore. He’s become something like a French wit. He should write about France rather than about Czechoslovakia.”¹¹⁴

For those who criticize Kundera for being unfaithful to reality in his representation of Czech issues and historical events, it is the geographical location of the writer that seems to determine whether he should write about his homeland and how he can depict it. The underlying issue at the core of this debate, however, is far more significant. Concerning the very question of the function of fiction and the role of a novelist, it has far-reaching implications for the interpretation and critical analysis of artistic literature. The philosophical dilemma facing any writer is exacerbated in exile, particularly for those authors whose exilic identity, like Kundera’s, can be defined in terms of potential political opposition to the regime they fled—dissidence. In his case,

¹¹³ Hájek, 311-312.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Malcolm, Janet, “The Window-Washer” (*New Yorker* 19 Nov. 1990: 56-106), 56.

critics and readers both at home and abroad have imposed certain expectations about what exilic writing is and should be like.

The Czech dissidents see Kundera's position outside of the country suffocating under the oppressive regime as granting him the freedom to express his dissatisfaction with the unfair political and social situation in his homeland, to tell the truth about the undemocratic power, and to join the dissidents' struggle against it by depicting their fight for freedom in a noble and glorifying manner. Ironically, this demand comes dangerously close to the requirements of the socialist realist aesthetic, which dictated that literature should provide "the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development."¹¹⁵ While the dissidents and the proponents of the official literary doctrine had different views on what constituted the "truth," both groups charged the author with the task of portraying it accurately. Both saw literature, above all, as a weapon. The concept of "art for art's sake" was just as inconvenient for the dissidents as it was for the official regime, and ambiguity was unacceptable to both.

The crucial question in determining the value of a literary work within the borders of Kundera's native country thus became "Is the writer with us or against us?" It was posed both by the representatives of the official regime and by those who opposed it. In the former case, the writer was prohibited from publication; in the latter—accused of being disloyal to the dissident cause. In both cases, he risked being labeled a betrayer. Ironically, while fighting for freedom in their country and calling for liberating the literature from being overpowered by politics, the Czech dissidents who accused Kundera

¹¹⁵ Emerson, Caryl, *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature* (Cambridge UP, 2008), 199.

of betrayal denied him artistic freedom and imposed constraints on his art, as rigid as those applied by the regime they opposed.

The West, however, imposed its own set of shackles on Kundera. The interpretation of his works on this side of the border is conditioned just as much by certain expectations of the essence of writing in exile—a fact that did not escape the novelist’s attention: “Such people are only interested in the so-called ‘Eastern’ writers as long as their books are banned. As far as they’re concerned, there are official writers and opposition writers—and that is all.”¹¹⁶ In “Branding World Literature: Global Circulation of Authors in Translation,” Corine Tachtiris provides an excellent detailed analysis of the paradox of the seemingly free, but inherently biased, restrictive and often reductionist perception of émigré art in the democratic West. In the chapter devoted to Kundera, she depicts the Franco-Czech author’s struggle with “the unasked-for guise of a political writer”¹¹⁷ and uses it to illustrate the pitfalls that await an émigré from the former communist Eastern Europe in the West:

Firstly, if you come from an ‘oppressed’ country, then it is your duty to testify about these conditions in your writing. To ignore your country’s plight and write ‘pure’ literature is, in fact, morally reprehensible. The West then recuperates these political statements as justification for its own ideological stance. Secondly, the realm of ‘pure’ literature belongs only to the West because it alone has a free enough social and political system to allow its writers to concentrate on more aesthetic matters. By not discussing politics in their texts, Eastern bloc writers risked not being translated into Western literary systems because they failed to match these expectations.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Kundera, “Comedy is Everywhere,” 6.

¹¹⁷ Tachtiris, 104.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 119.

An author who does not fit the Western stereotype of an émigré writer and betrays the Western expectations in this respect is not always welcome:

The exile is the screen onto which we project our fantasies of exile, and as long as he lets us do this, he is welcome. He is welcome as someone who has *suffered*, as a *victim of the regime*, a *fighter for democracy*, a *lover of freedom* who couldn't stand oppression in the country he left. As soon as he steps out of his stereotype, he becomes undesirable, because he has *betrayed our expectations*.¹¹⁹

Viewing the East “as a land of restricted civil and economic liberties and rampant shortages, a land of show trials and exile to Siberia, a land where the people dreamed of defection to the West,”¹²⁰ the Western critics expect of Eastern bloc writers “some sort of political commentary, or more specifically, a political and social condemnation of communism,”¹²¹ which is, interestingly, in accord with the demands the dissidents in those countries placed on their writers in exile.

It is noteworthy that Vaculík, who criticized Kundera for his alleged indifference to the dissidents' cause, realized the difficulties of writing in the West and/or for the West:

It is almost impossible to tell the world something else than what the world is used to and is curious about. Even the better translators, who are familiar with this fact, translate in such a way that a work's purpose can be linked to their readers['] experience. ... Why did they publish my 1977 *feuilleton* 'A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator' so many times? Because it documented their own opinion about communism!¹²²

He approached Kundera's works with the conviction perhaps that a writer should take readers' expectations into consideration. Knowing that one's works will inevitably be

¹¹⁹ Ugresic, Dubravka, *Thank You for Not Reading: Essays on Literary Trivia* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 135.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 117.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 125.

¹²² Quoted in Tachtiris, 118.

forced into the existing paradigm of interpretation in the West, one has to ponder the implications of one's free novelistic exploration and aim for accuracy.

Indeed, much of Jungmann's critique is also based on the idea that a Western reader is prompted to anticipate a dissident text from a writer in exile because he himself is viewed as "a credible (because oppressed) native informant."¹²³ Kundera fits that stereotype perfectly: he was censored and banned in communist Czechoslovakia and thus "met the criteria for a writer who has suffered both artistically and personally."¹²⁴ Kundera's main fault, as Jungmann states, is precisely the fact that he gives the Western readers a wrong idea about Czechoslovakia and its freedom-fighters: "Ale ten, kdo nezná pravý stav věcí, zejména ovšem v cizině, si bude s potěšením číst o tom, jak vesele, bezstarostně a dokonce v jakési euforii si může žít v Čechách pronásledovaný intelektuál. Má potom vůbec právo si na něco stěžovat, mluvit o nějakém duchovním a existenčním útlaku?" ["But those who do not know the real condition of things, above all those abroad, will read with delight how a persecuted intellectual can live in Czechoslovakia in a jovial, carefree way, even in some euphoria. Does he then have any right at all to complain about something, to speak of some spiritual or existential pressure?"].¹²⁵ He accuses Kundera of a "false authenticity" ["falešná autenticita"]¹²⁶ that stems from his

¹²³ *ibid.*, 122.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, 123.

¹²⁵ Jungmann, "KP," 332.

¹²⁶ In "Otvírání pasti na kritika (ještě ke kritikám románů Milana Kundery)," Jungmann quotes Eva Kantůrkova's summary of his own critique: "A co je jediné zvnitřku textu rušivé, že si Kundera vypůjčuje jednotlivá dráždivá fakta od skutečnosti, a touto *úplně už falešnou autenticitou* (podtrhl M.J.) obluzuje cizího čtenáře, který zdejší skutečnosti nezná, ale lichotí mu možnost číst něco tak obludně orientálního" ["And what is disturbing only from the inside of the text is the fact that Kundera borrows particular titillating facts from the reality, and with that *completely false authenticity* (emphasized M.J.) attracts the foreign reader, who does not know the reality here, but flatters him/her with an opportunity to read something so oriental"] qtd. in Jungmann 727, emphasis in the original). The critic agrees with her

status as a writer in exile, but he fails to notice that the novelist has never tried to gain an advantage from his exilic identity. On the contrary, he has always strived—often provocatively—to distance himself from his past and his homeland, so as to give his works a voice of their own and to ensure that it is that voice that is heard.¹²⁷

Kundera has consistently rejected any attempts to read his novels as autobiographical or political.¹²⁸ When explaining what motivated him to start writing fiction, he declines any inclination to devote himself to social or political issues: “As far as being swept up by a necessity to react to society, this was not my impulse, not the impulse which made me settle on literature. Let me put it differently: there was not this question of writing *against* or writing to *protest* [...]”¹²⁹ Fully aware of the prevalent

interpretation: “Vytýkal jsem snad v tomto ohledu Kunderovi něco jiného? Ne, jinými slovy jsem napsal totéž a tím jsem si mj. vysvětloval, proč je mnoho čtenářů doma románem iritováno...” [“Did I criticize Kundera in this case for something different? No, I wrote the same thing in different words and explained with why many readers at home are irritated with the novel”] (727).

¹²⁷ Kundera was well aware of how difficult it is to escape the confines of political interpretation on both sides of the border. In “Comedy is Everywhere,” he states:

All my life in Czechoslovakia I fought against literature being reduced to a mere instrument of propaganda. Then I found myself in the West only to discover that here people write about the literature of the so-called East European countries as if it were indeed nothing more than a propaganda instrument, be it pro- or anti-Communist. I must confess I don't like the word ‘dissident,’ particularly when applied to art. It is part and parcel of that same politicising, ideological distortion that cripples a work of art. [...] *If you cannot view the art that comes to you from Prague or Budapest in any other way than by means of this idiotic political code, you murder it no less brutally than the worst of the Stalinist dogmatists.* And you are quite unable to hear its true voice. The importance of this art does not lie in the fact that, on the strength of social and human experience of a kind of people over here cannot even imagine it, it offers new testimony about the human conditions. (5-6, emphasis added)

¹²⁸ Kundera expresses his distaste for politics in an interview with Olga Carlisle. Of special interest is his remark about the essence of political life in the Eastern bloc countries and in the democratic West: “I hate to participate in political life, although politics fascinates me as a show. A tragic, deathly show in the empire to the east; an intellectually sterile but amusing one in the West.”

¹²⁹ Elgrably, 7, emphasis in the original.

tendency to politicize even those of his works that are free of politics,¹³⁰ Kundera has refused to succumb to the pressure, to conform to the limitations imposed on him both at home and in the West, and to write in a manner that was expected of him as a writer in exile.

What critics such as Vaculík and Jungmann fail to notice is that the fact that Kundera resisted the Western mold can only mean that he in no way tailored his novels to the Western audience. He fell out of favor with the Czech dissidents, but, as far as the representation of historical facts and political issues goes, the limitations imposed on him as a writer in exile both at home and abroad were essentially the same: both sides called for the “truth” about the oppressive regime to be told. By flouting the Western expectations, Kundera inadvertently violated the demands of the dissidents at home as well and thus betrayed them. It is ironic that, using the rhetoric of freedom, both sides placed Kundera in a position of un-freedom by imposing on him their own sets of shackles. Both, therefore, have betrayed him as an artist and thinker. Behind Kundera’s betrayal, however, lies a very courageous act that is an ultimate expression of the novelist’s artistic freedom.

Do the liberties Kundera takes with his depiction of human existence really constitute a betrayal? Does his position outside of his homeland mean that he is out of touch with the Czech reality? Does that fact alone deprive him of the right to write about it? And should it determine how he is to portray it? Quite the contrary, life in exile has

¹³⁰ Kundera said in an interview with Jane Kramer, “If I write a love story, and there are three lines about Stalin in the story, people will talk about the three lines and forget the rest, or read the rest for its political implications or as a metaphor for politics.” Jane Kramer, “When There Is No Word for ‘Home,’” Interview with Milan Kundera, *New York Times* 29 Apr. 1984, <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/kundera-home.html>>.

enriched Kundera's own understanding of his country and its past, expanded his vision, offering a different, outside perspective, allowing for a multi-faceted engagement with Czech issues, so difficult to achieve while being deeply embedded in the society, about which one writes. Kundera seized perhaps the greatest opportunity presented to him by life in the in-between space—an opportunity to explore oneself, one's country and the world at large: "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal."¹³¹ The novelist expresses the same sentiment in a conversation with Philip Roth: "For a writer, the experience of living in a number of countries is an enormous boon. You can only understand the world if you see it from several sides."¹³² Like Joseph Conrad, Bohuslav Martinu, Gombrowicz, Nabokov, and Stravinsky who, in Kundera's opinion, have found an artistic way to alleviate the pain caused by "the wound of [their] emigration,"¹³³ although perhaps never fully recovering from it, Kundera has been able to turn his liminal existence into artful exile and capitalize on the "plurality of vision" afforded to him by his status as émigré writer. Kundera's treatment of Czech history, unfettered by any political or ideological restraints coming from within his homeland or from the West, does not seek to explicate any truths, but rather to question them.¹³⁴ Such

¹³¹ Said, Edward, "The Mind of Winter: Reflection on Life in Exile" (*Harper's* September 1984: 49-55), 55.

¹³² Roth.

¹³³ *TB*, 94.

¹³⁴ He explains the fundamental difference between the ideological and novelistic conceptions of "truth" in "Comedy is Everywhere": "Ideology wants to convince you that its truth is absolute. A novel shows you that everything is relative. Ideology is a school of intolerance. A novel teaches you tolerance and understanding" (7).

questioning is not meant to undermine the facts, but rather to prompt a conscious contemplation of difficult contentious points of reality.

There is another reason why criticizing Kundera for his continued investigation of Czech matters from outside of his homeland and for a seemingly skewed perspective on Czech reality developed in exile is quite short-sighted and erroneous. Kundera's works should not be seen as dedicated to Czech matters exclusively. In that sense, he does not write about Czechoslovakia and the Czechs. He writes about the world,¹³⁵ and his characters are important not by virtue of being Czech, but by virtue of being human. Even in his earlier novels, Kundera grapples with questions of universal applicability: individual and society, individual and history, ideology, imageology, crisis of identity, personal and collective memory and its manipulation, illusion and reality. The Czech reality, so familiar to him, serves as a field of his exploration. His life in exile did not fundamentally change his artistic philosophy, but merely broadened his field of vision, gave him new material to work with, and thus stimulated the author to return to writing in his attempts to explore the ambiguous terrain of human existence.

Although the novels written in exile are different from his earlier works—Chvatík labels them “much more French and European” [“daleko francouzštější a

¹³⁵ In the 1985 interview with Olga Carlisle, Kundera explains the universal relevance of the situations he portrays: “Life when one can't hide from the eyes of others—that is hell. Those who have lived in totalitarian countries know it, but that system only brings out, like a magnifying glass, the tendencies of all modern society.”

He expands on the real aim of his novels—not to expose a regime, but to bring out the universal human concerns—in “Comedy is Everywhere”: “We have got into the habit of putting the blame for everything on ‘regimes.’ This enables us not to see that a regime only sets in motion mechanisms which already exist in ourselves... A novel's mission is not to pillory evident political realities but to expose anthropological scandals” (6).

evropštější”],¹³⁶—they are essentially variations on the themes that are central in Kundera’s oeuvre in general. In other words, his novels written on the other side of the border do not represent a break with his past and should not be considered a betrayal. Rather, they are a continuation, an extension of Kundera’s artistic philosophy. In his revisions of the translations of his works and in his later novels, the author remains true to his conception of a writer that influenced his early writing as well: “the novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence.”¹³⁷ The notion of “fidelity to historical reality is a secondary matter as regards the value of the novel,”¹³⁸ according to Kundera. Like Musil, whom Kundera admires, he is “interested in history as a new dimension of human existence,”¹³⁹ and his works should not be read as historical novels, for it distorts their meaning and betrays the author’s intent.

Therefore, even though the accusation of betrayal put forward against Kundera at the level of representation of reality and history has, at first glance, the most validity, it is fundamentally flawed, for it is based on a fallacious belief that a fictional narrative must be not just realistic, but true to reality, always offering a faithful depiction of history and life. If one considers Kundera’s conception of a novel as a space of creative investigation and exploration of possibilities and potentialities of human existence, “a poetic meditation on existence,”¹⁴⁰ in the writer’s own words, one realizes that his works simply do not lend themselves to a purely realistic interpretation.

¹³⁶ Chvatík, *Svět románů Milana Kundery*, 80, emphasis in the original.

¹³⁷ *AN*, 44.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, 44.

¹³⁹ *TB*, 235.

¹⁴⁰ *AN*, 35.

It has been pointed out that the mistaken reading of Kundera in his homeland may be attributed to the fact that the practice of “realistic” criticism was at the time most widespread in the Czech literary tradition: “Chci říct, že jiným než tzv. ‘realistickým postupům’ nebyla zatím v české literární teorii věnována dostatečná pozornost, a proto se i do hodnocení Kunderova díla vloudila spousta omylů” [“I want to say that in Czech literary theory, no sufficient attention was devoted at the time to methods other than the so-called ‘realistic method,’ and therefore, plenty of mistakes crept into the assessment of Kundera’s works”].¹⁴¹ Jungmann’s comments on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are helpful in illustrating just how short-sighted such an approach to Kundera is and how it distorts the meaning of his novel.

Jungmann bases his interpretation of the novel on the erroneous belief that Kundera “wanted to acquaint the foreign readers with the reality of his country, with the absurd horrors that his homeland was living through during the so-called normalization years” [“chtěl cizího čtenáře seznámit s realitou své země, s tím, jaké absurdní hrůzy prožívala jeho vlast za tzv. normalizace”].¹⁴² One of the critic’s main arguments in support of his opinion that Kundera intentionally misrepresents reality concerns the character and fate of Tomas from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a physician, who returns to Czechoslovakia from exile, and having refused to retract an article he published years earlier, before the Soviet invasion, is forced to become a window washer, a common occupation of dissidents who fell out of favor with the regime. Everything with this portrayal contradicts reality, according to Jungmann. Firstly, he points out that

¹⁴¹ Kratochvíl, Jiří, “O Kunderovi jinak” [“About Kundera in a Different Way”] (1989), in *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře (1945-1989)*, ed. Michal Příbáň (Praha, 2005: 355-360), 357.

¹⁴² Jungmann, “Otvírání pasti,” 727.

doctors simply never had to become window washers because they were much needed in the country with a ubiquitous shortage of people in the medical profession.¹⁴³ Secondly, those intellectuals who were reduced to the status of menial workers and forced to serve as window washers suffered for their outspoken opposition to the regime. They took risks and were active in their struggle against the repressive society. Tomas, on the other hand, is not presented as having suffered. According to Jungmann, he has no idea about the degree of humiliation and the tortures, with which the dissidents had to contend in the post-invasion Czechoslovakia. Interestingly, Jungmann disregards the fact that the publication of the article prevented Tomas from continuing to perform the only truly meaningful work in his life, which he considers much more beneficial than disseminating ideas that supposedly have the power to change the world. “Thanks to those ideas, I can no longer operate on my patients,”¹⁴⁴ Tomas exclaims in a conversation with his son. In his analysis, the critic significantly underestimates Tomas’ hardship and takes no notice of how much he suffered from the loss of his career. Calling him “merely an observer who stands outside of the chaos of history” [“je pouhý *divák*, stojící mimo zmatky dějin”],¹⁴⁵ Jungmann refuses to acknowledge that Tomas was no less hurt and betrayed by history than the dissidents.

¹⁴³ Jungmann writes, “V letech normalizace se čističi stali lidé nejrůznějších povolání—novináři, právníci, faráři, historici, diplomati, technici atd., ale ani jediný lékař. To nebylo náhodou: úřední zákaz nepřipouští, aby u nás lékař o své vůli opustil povolání. [...] Fakta života jsou tu tedy postavena na hlavu” [“During the years of Normalization, people of various professions became window-washers—journalists, lawyers, priests, historians, diplomats, technicians, etc., but not a single doctor. That was not by chance: the official prohibition would not allow a doctor to voluntarily give up his career. [...] The facts of life are here turned upside down”] (“KP,” 331).

¹⁴⁴ *ULB*, 217.

¹⁴⁵ Jungmann, “Otvírání pasti,” 728, emphasis in the original.

Furthermore, in Jungmann's opinion, Tomas is the antithesis of a dissident, for he refuses to sign the petition for amnesty of political prisoners, thus rebuffing the "power of the powerless,"¹⁴⁶ the belief that all acts, however insignificant they may seem, have the potential to further the dissidents' cause and to help in their struggle against the regime. Tomas does not even attempt to conceptualize the issue in philosophical and moral terms, Jungmann argues, because his only concern and purpose in life has always been limited to sexual adventurism. Again, Jungmann overlooks Tomas' complex inner struggle, as he ponders the signing of the petition, perhaps because the conclusion Tomas comes to—that signing any petition is "totally useless,"¹⁴⁷ and that "[i]t's much more important to dig a half-buried crow out of the ground [...] [—in other words, to show an act of kindness—] than to send petitions to a president"¹⁴⁸—goes contrary to what Jungmann and other dissidents believed.

Disregarding the complexity of Tomas' character, Jungmann reduces him to being nothing more than a womanizer. He contends that Kundera presents Tomas' window washing career as a free-spirited tale of sexual escapades: almost every day brings a sexual encounter with a new female client. That was simply not the case, declares Daniel Kumermann. Like Jungmann, the foreign-affairs journalist who was forced to do the menial work of washing windows after signing Charter 77, expresses his contempt for the

¹⁴⁶ In his philosophical essay "The Power of the Powerless" ["Moc bezmocných"] (1978) that became the manifesto of dissent in the countries of the former Soviet bloc, Václav Havel discusses the ideas and possible actions, however small and not always openly political, that those living under oppressive regimes can undertake to "create and support the 'independent life of society' as an articulated expression of 'living within the truth'" (67), which has the potential to bring about meaningful political change. Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in *The Power of the Powerless*, ed. John Keane (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1985: 23-96).

¹⁴⁷ *ULB*, 219.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 220.

lighthearted depiction of reality in the novel and insists that Kundera is out of line with his portrayal of window washing:

Kundera himself was never forced to work menially, [...] and what he wrote about window-washing is complete nonsense. [...] It's very upsetting to meet Americans and when you tell them what you do they give you a lecherous look. In fact, washing windows is very unpleasant work, and the women you work for do not sleep with you. The women you wash windows for usually regard you as the lowest scum. Kundera writes completely outside of reality here.¹⁴⁹

Resolved to subject the text to the litmus test of reality, both Jungmann and Kumermann fail to note the sinister undertones of Tomas' experience as a window washer. They refuse to see, for example, that his existence is rendered meaningless precisely by his confrontation with the regime, even though it is different from the dissidents' clash with the authorities.

Tomas and Tereza's life in Prague after their return from Switzerland is far from blissful and carefree, and their move to the countryside hardly offers them the peacefully bucolic setting that Jungmann assigns to it:

Původně měla *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* zřejmě ukázat tragiku lásky destruované režimem nesvobody, ale výsledkem je *idyllický příběh* dvojice, která se v malém českém světě zabydlí tak, že to musí čtenáři neznalému předobrazu připadat jako *půvabná selanka* o zemi, kde i ti pronásledovaní žijí št'astně a spokojeně a mají problémy leda ještě tak s partnerovým erotomanstvím.

[Initially, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was apparently meant to show the tragedy of love destroyed by the regime of un-freedom, but the result is an *idyllic story* of a couple that lives in the small Czech world in such a way that to a reader unacquainted with the prototype, it must appear as a *charming idyll* about a land where even the persecuted ones live happily and contently and have problems only with the partner's erotomania.]¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Malcolm, 56.

¹⁵⁰ Jungmann, "KP," 321, emphasis added.

Disregarding Kundera's aesthetic, Jungmann misses the irony and the subtleties of the narrative and completely misunderstands the novel's ending, misreading the character of Tomas and misinterpreting his life with Tereza in the village as an idyll:

Bylo by krásné, kdyby na té idyle s šampaňským a slivovicí byla aspoň špetička pravdy, ale mých deset let obcování se špínou (i lidskou) a dvacet i víc let mých kamarádů se stejným údělem se prostě nad tímhle líbivým obrázkem může jen trpce usmát.

[It would be nice if in that idyll with champagne and slivovice there was a kernel of truth, but my ten years of lying with grime (human, too) and twenty and more years of my friends with the same fate can only simply bitterly laugh at that appealing image.]¹⁵¹

Contrary to Jungmann's interpretation, the portrayal of Tomas and Tereza's final life in the countryside is tinged with great sadness. Even their final dance is far from being unambiguously happy and carefree: "She [Tereza] was experiencing the same odd happiness and odd sadness [...]. The sadness meant: We are at the last station. The happiness meant: We are together. The sadness was form, the happiness content."¹⁵² The negative connotations of what may appear to be an idyll are also revealed by the fact that the protagonists are essentially trapped in the countryside ("Now they were in a place that led nowhere"¹⁵³), having lost all ties with the larger world, unable to make a contribution to the community, wasting their talents, and by the fact that in this socialist "paradise," they perish, both emotionally and physically. Their death itself, caused by pervasive socialist inefficiency and negligence ("The police determined later that the brakes were in

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, 331-332.

¹⁵² *ULB*, 314.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, 310.

disastrous condition”¹⁵⁴), is symbolic of the general degradation of society. What may be taken as an idyll upon a superficial reading of the text reveals itself to be a terrifying nightmare, a trap, from which there is no escape, except in death, as Jan Trefulka explains:

To, co Tomáše a Terezu vyhnalo z města, nejsou jejich at’ už skutečné nebo vymyšlené problémy [...], s nimi by za normálních okolností žili šťastně až do smrti, to, co je přinutilo změnit prostředí je nesnesitelnost pomyslení, že by se jejich provizorní existence ve známém městě mohla změnit v trvalý stav, v bezsmyslné, bezcenné přetrvávání. Nevím, jak kdo, ale já si v sobě takovou vesnici nosím po všechna léta trvání normalizace a vlastně dodnes, jako poslední možnost, jako vesnici-propast, jako představení k sebevraždě—a tak si také Tomášův a Terezin konec vykládám. Kdyby se nezabili v autě (ostatně sebevražedným), museli by svůj život sami ukončit. [...] *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* je zlý sen o tom, jak by skončil člověk, svým vnitřním ustrojením podobný Milanu Kunderovi, kdyby se byl skutečně vrátil do normalizovaného Československa. A jestliže ten sen není zcela pravdivý, má k pravdě velice blízko, a čerta starého záleží na tom, jestli je Tomáš chirurgem a jak umýval nebo neumýval okna. Kundera není sám, kdo měl a má pocit, že by to tady nepřežil, že by neunesl osud, odlehčený od všech srdci blízkých existenciálních jistot.

[What drove Tomas and Tereza from the city is not their real or imagined problems [...]; with them, under normal circumstances, they would live happily until their very death; what forced them to change their surroundings is the unbearableness of thought that their provisional existence in the famous city be changed into a permanent state, into a meaningless, worthless persistence. I do not know about others, but I have carried that kind of village during all those years of surviving Normalization and actually today as a last possibility, as a village-abyss, as a step towards suicide—and that is how Tomas and Tereza’s end is depicted. Had they not died in the truck (suicidal, after all), they would have had to take their own lives themselves. [...] *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a horrible dream about how a person similar to Milan Kundera in his inner nature would end up, if he really returned to the normalized Czechoslovakia. And if that dream is not totally truthful, it is very close to truth, and who gives a damn about whether Tomas is a surgeon and how he washed or did not wash windows. Kundera himself is not the only one who had and has a feeling that he would have survived it

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 123.

here, that he would have carried his fate, removed from all hearts of close existential certainties.]¹⁵⁵

By ascribing an idyllic meaning to Tomas and Tereza's life in the countryside, Jungmann denies the text any complexity and depth and interprets the novel's ending in terms reminiscent of the socialist realist aesthetic that advocates a literal, unambiguous conclusion. By not probing the narrative and reading the novel exclusively on the level of plot, Jungmann ignores or fails to notice that Kundera exposes both the deficiencies of the realistic style of writing and the dangers inherent in the socialist enterprise to forge a new utopian future. Far from extolling the pleasures of country life in post-1968 Czechoslovakia, Kundera offers a harsh critique of the very essence of socialist society. His criticism, based not on political, but existential considerations, is arguably far more effective and subversive than a most disparaging exposé rooted in pure politics.

Considering faithfulness to reality to be of the highest value—"Krásné bájení však je únosnou prozatérskou metodou jen potud, pokud zásadně neporušuje realitu, pokud neznásilňuje životní fakta" ["Beautiful story-telling is, however, an acceptable prosaic method only so long as it does not radically distort the reality, so long as it does not violate the facts of life"],¹⁵⁶—Jungmann sees the novel as a betrayal of Kundera's homeland, a simplification of Czech history, reductive in its representation of Czech reality. However, as the analysis of the novel's ending demonstrates, the historical inaccuracies and inconsistencies, for which Kundera is blamed, enrich the text and shed new light on Czech reality, making the issues more complex and multi-dimensional, demanding the reader's active, critical engagement with the novel, raising questions and

¹⁵⁵ Trefulka, 125-126.

¹⁵⁶ Jungmann, "KP," 331.

forcing the reader to contemplate reality not as it was, but as it could have been. As Kundera emphasizes, “history *itself* must be understood and analyzed as an existential situation.”¹⁵⁷ His playful use of historical details elevates the text from the level of realistic, historical novel that is, in Kundera’s words, “*the illustration of a historical situation*, the description of a society at a given moment, a novelized historiography,”¹⁵⁸ to the level of polyhistorical, philosophical¹⁵⁹ novel in the spirit of Broch and Musil, a novel that “examines *the historical dimension of human existence*”¹⁶⁰ and thus expands the reader’s field of vision as well. Such a novel, according to Kundera, defies an interpretation conducted in terms of pure realism. This conception of the novel invalidates the method of analysis applied by Jungmann.

Like Marquez, Fuentes, and Rushdie, whom Kundera admires, he creates a complex, multi-dimensional novelistic space, where the temporal and spatial borders are merged, and where the boundaries between the real and the illusory are blurred, which brings “the story into that realm where everything is at once strangely real and unreal, possible and impossible.”¹⁶¹ Kundera emphasizes that the works of novelists like Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz who “refused any obligation to give the reader the illusion of reality” harken back to “the nearly forgotten aesthetic of the novel previous to

¹⁵⁷ *AN*, 38, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 36, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁹ Musil and Broch, according to Kundera, showed a new path in the development of the novel: “Not to transform the novel into philosophy, but to marshal around the story all the means—rational and irrational, narrative and contemplative—that [...] could make of the novel the supreme intellectual synthesis” (*AN*, 16). In their perspective, “the word ‘polyhistorical’ means: marshaling all intellectual and all poetic forms to illuminate ‘what only the novel can discover’: man’s being” (*AN*, 64).

¹⁶⁰ *AN* 36, emphasis in the original.

¹⁶¹ *TB*, 50.

the nineteenth century”¹⁶² in the spirit of Cervantes and Rabelais. Kundera’s own works should also be placed in the European novelistic tradition, for he, too, “break[s] through the plausibility barrier. Not in order to escape the real world (the way the Romantics did) but to apprehend it better”¹⁶³ because, as he observes, “imagination [...], freed from the control of reason and from concern for verisimilitude, ventures into landscapes inaccessible to rational thought.”¹⁶⁴ In his novels, Sylvie Richterová notes, Kundera transgresses borders between reality and fiction and creates an “illusion of author’s authority” (“iluze autority autora”): “autor prochází magickou hranicí racionálního světa na druhou stranu, do fikce, kde platí jiné kauzální a časové zákony nežli v prostoru zvaném skutečnost. [...] autor je románem [...] vysvobozen, protože svět fikce je otevřeným prostorem svobodné imaginace” [“the author crosses the magical border of rational world to the other side, to fiction, where hold other causal and temporal laws than in the terrain called reality. [...] the author is [...] freed by the novel because the world of fiction is an open space of free imagination”].¹⁶⁵ This “illusion of author’s authority” is not a “false authority,” as Jungmann argues, but the only legitimate authority a novelist can have—the authority of imagination freed from all constraints. And that free space, unencumbered by the limitations imposed by strict realism, constitutes the very terrain of novelistic inquiry.

¹⁶² *ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, 50-51.

¹⁶⁴ *AN*, 80-81.

¹⁶⁵ Richterová, Sylvie, *Ticho a smích [Quiet and Laughter]* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1997), 130.

Like the great novelists before him who “did not want to give the impression that their characters are real and have an official family record,”¹⁶⁶ Kundera constantly draws attention to the fact that his characters are imaginary. “It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived,” he writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, “They were not born of a mother’s womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation.”¹⁶⁷ To a critic entrenched in the realistic tradition, this feature of Kundera’s fiction appears without doubt as a shortcoming. Jungmann draws attention to the fact that Kundera’s characters are not made from “flesh and blood,” for example: “Prozaikova fantazie rodí nikoli postavy z masa a krve, jak po tom touží klasický (a socialistický) realista, nýbrž *postavy jako funkce* problému či rozvíjeného tématu, a to na pokyn nápadu, který vyvolá slovo-kategorie nebo nějaká základní situace” [“The novelist’s imagination never gives birth to characters from flesh and blood, the way a classical (and a socialist) realist yearns for it, but rather *characters as functions* of a problem or of a developed theme, and in beckoning of an idea that calls forth a word-category or some basic situation”].¹⁶⁸ Similarly, Hájek denigrates them as merely “coat-hangers for ideas” (“věšáky na ideje”¹⁶⁹). Yet, Kundera’s conception of a literary character as “an experimental self” and “not a simulation of a living being”¹⁷⁰ fits in perfectly with his definition of a novel as “a

¹⁶⁶ *TB*, 159.

¹⁶⁷ *ULB*, 39.

¹⁶⁸ Jungmann, “KP,” 314, emphasis in the original.

¹⁶⁹ Hájek, 301.

¹⁷⁰ *AN*, 34.

meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters.”¹⁷¹ He invites the reader (and critic) to suspend his/her realistic expectations and venture out on an existential quest into potentialities of human existence.

Kundera sees the novel as a perfect form to merge boundaries between genres as well. In *The Art of the Novel*, he writes that “the novel can incorporate both poetry and philosophy without losing thereby anything of its identity, which is characterized (we need only recall Rabelais and Cervantes) precisely by its tendency to embrace other genres.”¹⁷² In trying to “to rid the novel of the automatism of novelistic technique,”¹⁷³ which weighs it down, Kundera is seemingly creating a boundary between his works and those of the nineteenth-century novelistic tradition. Kundera’s break with that system of composition¹⁷⁴ represents a return to the very roots of the novel form as “almost boundless freedom,”¹⁷⁵ as a bridge to the novelistic tradition started by Cervantes and Rabelais and continued by Broch and Rushdie, for example. Thus, what appears as a betrayal is, in fact, an act of Kundera’s faithfulness to his conception of the novel and to his own artistic philosophy.

Betrayed both at home and abroad, with readers and critics on both sides of the border imposing their own shackles on the novelist and imprisoning him in their

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷² *ibid.*, 64.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, 73.

¹⁷⁴ In Kundera’s opinion, the realistic novelistic tradition imposed certain limitations on the author. He describes the nineteenth-century novelistic norms as “the conventions that do the author’s work for him: present a character, describe milieu, bring the action into a historical situation, fill time in the characters’ lives with superfluous episodes” (*ibid.*, 73).

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 84.

preconceptions about what writing in exile should be like, Kundera has remained true to himself as an artist and to his aesthetic. His history of treason against his native language, against his homeland and its history, therefore, represents a paradoxical case of a liberating, faithful betrayal.

CONCLUSION.

Betrayal as Fidelity

The homeland? Why, every eminent person was a foreigner even at home just because of that very eminence. Readers? Why, they never wrote "for" readers anyway, always "against" them. Honors, success, renown, fame: why, they became famous precisely because they valued themselves more than their success.

Witold Gombrowicz

“Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown,”¹⁷⁶ Milan Kundera writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Forever trying to remain true to no one other than herself, his heroine, Sabina, is not afraid to betray, but she fails to realize the positive potentials inherent in the act of what may be perceived as disloyalty. First, she betrays her father who makes fun of her love of Picasso. Later in life, she feels she has to betray the Communist Party that tries to impose its own socialist realist conception of art on her. In exile, she can be seen as betraying her homeland by openly distancing herself from her country and her past and by refusing to take an active role in the life of the émigré community. While there is something admirable in Sabina’s strength¹⁷⁷ and determination to serve no one but herself and her art, she takes it too far

¹⁷⁶ *ULB*, 91.

¹⁷⁷ Kundera himself sees her as an intellectual, “a woman endowed with a strong mind” (Elgrably, 23).

perhaps: “again she felt a longing to betray: betray her own betrayal.”¹⁷⁸ Soon, betraying for the sake of betraying, Sabina loses balance and gives in to forgetting. Having ultimately betrayed herself above all, she ends up in the very world of kitsch that she has been trying to escape all her life, removed from her country both physically and emotionally, having nowhere to go. Taking “less and less interest in her native land,” moving farther and “farther away from the country where she had been born” to a country where “[e]verything beneath the surface was alien to her,”¹⁷⁹ Sabina has no resting place, no true home and falls into the abyss of a meaningless existence, true homelessness. Her fate thus demonstrates how a potentially liberating betrayal can become a trap.

Like his heroine, Kundera was forced to perform a difficult balancing act in exile, “walking a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded [him] by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known since childhood.”¹⁸⁰ Like his heroine, Kundera is guilty of betrayal; he also knows what it is like to be betrayed. Unlike Sabina, however, her creator was able to escape the vicious cycle of betrayals and remain true to himself and to his art. In fact, what may be perceived as treachery constitutes his attempts to renegotiate his past and his present both as an individual and as a writer, to turn his émigré existence into artful exile, and thus to transform his betrayal into “the dialectical

¹⁷⁸ *ULB*, 92.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 273.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 75.

opposite of conformity and tyranny.”¹⁸¹ His history of betrayals represents the paradoxical case of a liberating betrayal turned into an expression of greatest faithfulness.

Kundera has remained faithful to the novelistic tradition he admires and has succeeded in bridging the “two shores” of the European novel. In “Improvisation in Homage to Stravinsky,”¹⁸² the writer uses the metaphor of “the two halves of a game” to illustrate the history of music and novel. The first period of the European novel inaugurated by Cervantes and Rabelais lasted until about late eighteenth-early nineteenth century, at which point a caesura, a “halftime break” occurred covering the time “between Laclos and Sterne on the one side and, on the other, Scott and Balzac.” He argues that “we are all of us raised in the aesthetic of the second half” that “not only eclipsed the first, [but] *repressed* it,” forgetting “the spirit of the nonserious” and demanding plausibility.¹⁸³ It is novelists like Kafka, Gombrowicz, Musil, and Broch that usher in what Kundera terms the “third period, [...] by reviving the forgotten experience of the pre-Balzac novel and by taking over domains previously reserved for philosophy.”¹⁸⁴ To this tradition Kundera himself belongs. His novels can be seen as “a response to the disruption of [the] history [the novel],”¹⁸⁵ for they restore a bridge between the contemporary novel and the great novels of the past.

¹⁸¹ Garfinkle, 63.

¹⁸² *TB*, 53-95.

¹⁸³ *ibid.*, 57-59, emphasis in the original.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 250.

¹⁸⁵ Píčov, Hana, *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 2002), 104.

In the same essay, Kundera shows that Adorno's designation of Stravinsky's music as "music made from music" should not be seen as disparaging, which is how the philosopher meant it, but instead as complimentary, for it places the composer within the musical tradition, in which he finds his true homeland.¹⁸⁶ He describes Stravinsky's artistic journey in terms of his émigré struggle to bridge the past and the present:

the start of his journey through the history of music coincides roughly with the moment when his native country ceases to exist for him; having understood that no country could replace it, he finds his only homeland in music; this not just a nice lyrical conceit of mine, I think it in an absolutely concrete way: his only homeland, his only home, was music, all of music by all musicians, the very history of music; there he decided to establish himself, to take root, to live; there he ultimately found his only compatriots, his only intimates, his only neighbors, from Pérotin to Webern; it was with them that he began a long conversation, which ended only with his death.¹⁸⁷

Like Stravinsky, Kundera was able to take opportunities presented by the liminal space of émigré existence and turn his exile into artful exile. Not only did his creative work likely help him deal with the challenges of reconciling the past with the present on the personal level, but he merged borders artistically as well, perfecting the novel form he conceived when still in his homeland, developing it into a type of the novel that transcends boundaries, thus finding his rightful place in the European novelistic tradition. Using the "plurality of vision" afforded by exile to his advantage, Kundera escaped the trap imposed by small nations on their artists. He explains the often overlooked limitation of being a small-nation author in *Testaments Betrayed*: "what handicaps their art is that everything and everyone (critics, historians, compatriots as well as foreigners) hooks the

¹⁸⁶ *TB*, 74.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 94.

art onto the great national family portrait photo and will not let it get away.”¹⁸⁸ Those who criticize Kundera for betraying his homeland by substantially changing his earlier novels in the process of revising translations, for example, or by taking liberties with the portrayal of Czech history in the novels written in exile, forget both that he had an exilic “contrapuntal awareness” that broadened his vision and the scope of issues he raises, and that his works don’t belong to the Czech novelistic tradition exclusively. It is not familiarity with the Czech reality, but “familiarity with the international modern novel (that is, with the *large context*) that will bring us to understand the originality and, hence, the value of [his] novels.”¹⁸⁹

Taking advantage of the “plurality of vision” afforded by exile, Kundera developed “a broader, more expansive aesthetic” that he used “as a fertile ground where creative imagination is able to transcend all physical and political boundaries.”¹⁹⁰ Just like Stravinsky’s music can be aptly described as “music made from music,” Kundera’s novels can be seen as literature made from literature, for they harken back and recall the whole tradition of the European novel. The very tradition of the novel that George Lukas calls a form of “transcendental homelessness,”¹⁹¹ for Kundera, becomes his true and only homeland. Betrayed by his native land, by the Czech dissidents, and by the West, and criticized for betraying his native language, his Czech readers and his country, Kundera was nonetheless able to overcome the liminal state of exile and find his true homeland—

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 191.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 192, emphasis in the original.

¹⁹⁰ Píčov, 12.

¹⁹¹ Quoted in Píčov, 114.

in the European novelistic tradition. The novelist's history of betrayals should be seen, in fact, as an act of greatest fidelity to that homeland.

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