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# Baring the Brain as well as the Soul: Milan Kundera's *The Joke*

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YVONNE HOWELL

BARING THE BRAIN AS WELL AS THE SOUL:  
MILAN KUNDERA'S *THE JOKE*

I

MILAN KUNDERA'S FIRST MAJOR novel, *The Joke*, was written in 1961–1965, before he made the decision to leave Czechoslovakia and take up residency as a political exile in France.<sup>1</sup> With a few noteworthy exceptions, critics of the work focused on its political message in a Cold War context. This was easy to do: its plot revolves around an avid young Czech communist (Ludvik), who writes an ironic postcard to his overly earnest girlfriend while she is away at a political training camp. The year is 1950, and among intellectuals, enthusiasm for a new era of Soviet-mediated socialism is a genuine response to the chaotic disintegration of old certainties after the Nazi occupation of the country. Ludvik is dedicated to the cause of communism, but he also wants to get laid. In response to his girlfriend's ingenuous letters about the "healthy optimism" of camp life, he quips on a postcard, "*Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik*" (p. 34).

The repercussions are swift and serious. Ludvik loses his Party membership and is expelled from the university. As a non-student with a political strike on his record, he cannot defer military duty, and is assigned to a unit of blacklisted conscripts to two years of hard labor in the mines outside of Ostrava (a provincial town in Moravia). Ludvik's trauma is the trauma of countless participants in the cannibalistic logic of Stalinism: at first he believes in the Party and is genuinely dismayed to find his identity as a member of the vanguard group forcibly exchanged for a new identity as social outcast and "enemy of the people." He quickly

looses his former communist convictions, but this does not mitigate the sheer physical trauma of brutal army conditions and the irretrievable loss of youth.

In this bleak breaking point of his life, Ludvik finds salvation in his sudden and all-consuming love for an ordinary local girl he coincidentally encounters during one of his rare Sunday afternoon leaves. In Kundera's handling, the moment of falling in love is described as an instance of our implacable urge to ascribe meaning and intention to random events: "A great deal has been said about love at first sight; I am perfectly aware of love's retrospective tendency to make a legend of itself, turn its beginnings into a myth; so I don't want to assert that it was *love*; but I have no doubt there was some kind of clairvoyance at work" (p. 66). Instead of a psychologically nuanced rendering of budding romance (as perhaps Tolstoy would have given us), we get a dissection of the cognitive mechanism that irrationally attributes clairvoyance (the universe "knows" something) to the encounter with the object of infatuation. For her part, the girl Lucie seems happy for the friendship of this embittered conscript, but as soon as he tries to move their relationship past the kissing stage to actual coitus, she resists desperately. He assumes she is a virgin and that her resistance is a pointless combination of fear and modesty. In a moment of overwhelming frustration, he breaks off with her and she disappears from his life until a chance encounter fifteen years later.

The three other characters that share Ludvik's generational trauma are neither mute, nor mysterious in their attributions of meaning to the botched course of their lives. All of them initially supported the communist take-over of Czechoslovakia in 1948. All of them willingly participated in the construction of an ideological regime that soon revealed its intolerance of any doubt, ambiguity, alternative thinking, or creative opposition. In the name of creating an utopian state "for the workers by the workers," the Czechoslovak Communists arrested or expelled from their jobs hundreds of so-called "bourgeois sympathizers" (intellectuals and entrepreneurs of various stripes); it staged spectacular show trials and executed its critics; and gradually, it leveled public discourse to a steady cant of conformist rhetoric and practice. When the lives of all four narrators intersect in 1965, each of them must look into a chasm that separates former illusions and crimes of conscience from the present-day exigencies of getting on with life in a new, less ideological era. The basic problematic is at once utterly simple and ubiquitous, yet perennially unsolvable: after any trauma (personal or generational),

what can be forgotten, and what can be revenged or redressed? *The Joke* poses an ethical challenge to find and depict a space *between* the poles of historical amnesia (silence and forgetting) and collective vengeance (former victims reenact the violence of their oppressors, in reverse).

In his non-fictional essays, Kundera has already suggested what kind of art is best equipped to show us the way towards a space that neither forgets trauma, nor reenacts it. In 1983, Kundera contributed an essay on the Czech composer Janacek to an émigré publication, *Cross Currents: A Journal of Central European Culture*.<sup>2</sup> In the article, he is particularly interested in Janacek's last opera, an adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel about life in a Siberian prison camp. Kundera finds that "when invested with the modern hyper-sensitivity of his music, it [*House of the Dead*] becomes the image of today's concentration camp" (CC, p. 377). The essay asks "How is it possible that Janacek's final work, his musical last testament—he died the same year—was a vision of the hell of today? Why was he interested in a situation that had no perceptible link with his personal experiences? Was it from the night of the future that it had come to him?" (CC, p. 377). In other words, Kundera applauds Janacek's proleptic vision—his music shows us the future that will inevitably be reenacted if we willfully forget the past.

Janacek's ability to "predict the future" is explained as a function of his disturbingly polyrhythmic and polyphonic style. Kundera's analysis of Janacek's difficult aesthetic structures vindicates the staging of multiple voices and perspectives in art (no matter how jarring to the reader's/listener's sensibilities). When the voices of Janacek's songs "intermingle, interlace and mesh in a fascinating polyrhythm," the listener gets the "impression of hearing wild cries from the crowd, each person shouting his truth without listening to the other. This is neither homophony nor counterpoint. It is the inimitable *polyphony of expressions*" (CC, p. 376). We can assume, in consonance with the above analysis of Janacek's music, that Kundera also intended to write a novel of *polyphonic expressions* in order to invoke the proleptic dimension of art—to show that the past already looms in the future, which then reaches its tentacles back into the present.

Earlier critics of the novel were understandably more attuned to the "tumultuous present of myth-destruction" (Dolezel, p. 125) represented in *The Joke* than adumbrations of the moral conundrums that persist in an era of globalization.<sup>3</sup> However, if some texts are capable of warning us against a (bad) future before it happens, it is valuable to have modes of interpretation that illuminate this function. The great contribution

of the Russian Formalists and the Prague Structuralists was to insist on the internal, autonomous coherence of artistic works, rather than derive their meaning from external social, political, or psychological contexts. Paradoxically, the anti-Marxist thrust of the Structuralist argument automatically politicized the whole business of literature and literary criticism in Soviet bloc countries. As an astute insider writing from the outside, émigré critic Peter Steiner was able to mine this paradox and reconnect aesthetic and social context in interesting ways.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Steiner discovers in Havel's absurdist plays of the 1960s a "communicating about a communicative disorder" (Steiner, p. 11) and then shows how Havel's ostensibly far-from-political scripts allowed a generation of Czechoslovak viewers to apprehend (and possibly rebel against) their own participation in a system of pervasive double-speak (Steiner, pp. 218–40).

Steiner's approach inspires me to see the critic of Soviet-era literary dynamics in a triple-bind: a) he is only interested in texts that purposely foreground aesthetic considerations over ideological ones; and in the same vein b) he flouts official "Marxist" injunctions to treat the text as a reflection of social relations, and insists on analyzing the internal, autonomous organization of a given text; leading to c) an ostensibly apolitical approach reveals to him the "secret" of a given text's explosive political impact in this particular society. Following Steiner's lead, I want to incorporate cognitive and evolutionary data into re-readings of East European novels, because for all its contested "trendiness," this data actually reaffirms the productive and insightful approach to literary systems and culture pioneered by the Prague Structuralists. Furthermore, a mode of interpretation that helps illuminate the *underlying cognitive structures of myth-making* strikes me as particularly useful in the post-Cold War context. It is not enough to explain to my students that behind the Iron Curtain, people succumbed to this-and-that ideological myth and later regretted it. This ends up being a way of out-sourcing guilt to the past, without taking into account our role in the future.

Kundera attributes to his favorite composer an intention to strip away "metrical clichés" and "romantic flourishes" in order to lay bare "the hidden dimension of people, of words, of situations" (CC, p. 377). In 1965, Kundera was already writing against the metrical clichés and romantic flourishes that embodied the emotional appeal of Communism. I will cite just one passage out of dozens to show how the Party's invocations of harmony, homeland, and heroism are systematically re-contextualized and dismantled under Kundera's scrutiny. For instance, here the lyrical

appeal of children licking strawberry soft-serve cones is re-inscribed as a parody of the uplifting symbol (torch) of Revolutionary fervor:

Again I passed people carrying little red-capped cones, and again I thought that the cones looked like torches, and that there might be some meaning in their shape, because those torches were not torches, but *parodies of torches*, and the pink trace of pleasure they so solemnly displayed was not pleasure but a *parody of pleasure*, which would seem to capture the inescapably parodic nature of all torches and pleasures in this dusty little town. (p. 166)

But it was not enough to demolish socialist realist facades; Kundera needed to find a way to lay bare the “hidden dimension of people, words, situations.” This aesthetic task required an *existential* analysis, i.e., an examination of what makes people tick that is broad enough to implicate all of humanity, but deep enough to reflect the peculiar influence of a given historical moment. In what follows, I will argue that two current theories about how our minds ascribe intentional psychological states to other people (so-called Theory of Mind) as well as to non-personal events that happen to us (a proposed Existential Theory of Mind) provide a rich interpretive framework for understanding the social and historical context of Kundera’s innovative aesthetics.

## II

First of all, in *The Joke* and other early works (e.g., the short story collection *Laughable Loves*), readers are confronted with an unfamiliar blend of erotic subject matter and cerebral analyses of how the would-be lovers assess each other’s unspoken intentions. We do not get to watch Ludvik’s expert seduction of the married Helena in order to make our *own* inferences about how he reads her and she reads him (as we might “watch and infer” the thoughts of Turgenev’s characters). Instead, Ludvik’s theory of how to predict and manipulate Helena’s desires is made clinically explicit: “The management of a woman’s mind has its own inexorable rules . . . it is much wiser to grasp her basic self image (her basic principles, ideals, convictions) and contrive to establish (with the aid of sophistry, illogical demagoguery, and the like) a harmonious relationship between that self-image and the desired conduct on her part” (*Joke*, p. 181). One of the most striking things about Ludvik’s narration is the way he relentlessly exposes the cognitive steps by which one character infers the motivations of another.<sup>5</sup>

Cognitive psychologists have a model of human inferential capacities in regard to the behavior of other people, known as the Theory of Mind (ToM).<sup>6</sup> In a nutshell, our “theory” of how other people’s minds work is a constant, automatic, everyday facet of our mental functioning. We regularly attribute unobservable intentions to other people’s observed behaviors. Therefore, if I observe you as you cross your legs and roll your eyes while reading this, I attribute a state of mind to your behavior. I might ascribe to your behavior a mental state such as boredom, or creeping incredulity that this topic is being pursued in this journal, and so forth. It is easy to see how the ability to read intentionality (some kind of mental stance) in the observed behavior of those around us would be a highly adaptive trait, one that was vigorously selected for in the course of human evolution. Our ancestors thrived when they were able to discern in a glance or a movement the likelihood of a neighbor’s cooperation, courage, or intent to deceive.

When we read novels, we habitually transfer our almost nonstop penchant for mindreading to the task of figuring out social relationships in a fictional world. To answer the question of *why we read fiction*, Lisa Zunshine argued that at least two highly adaptive features of our mental architecture—our “Theory of Mind” and our meta-representational abilities—are given a good workout when they enter a fictional playground full of social intrigue (e.g., the nineteenth-century comedy of manners), complex characters (e.g., revealing themselves in stream-of-consciousness), or multi-layered attributions of guilt (e.g., detective fiction).<sup>7</sup> To put it very succinctly, the mind on fiction busies itself with deciphering the plausible emotions and intentions signaled by a character’s behavior, and when necessary, it eagerly delves into the meta-representational task of deciphering nested layers of intentionality: Anna lowers her black lashes and narrows her eyes [behavior] *because* Vronsky’s inappropriate adoration makes her feel both guilty and triumphant [inferred mental state 1], *but* she wants to deny that she feels either guilt or triumph [inferred mental state 2], *and* she knows [first layer of representation] that Kitty knows [second layer of representation] that her denial is false. I insert this example to show that invoking the relevance of ToM to our reading of fictional texts highlights both the complexity and the surprising naturalness of our ability to translate a simple “Anna’s lowered gaze” into an ominous knot of passionate and duplicitous feelings.

Now we can see that Kundera intends to “make strange” the very naturalness of our ToM, by diverting our expectations for a mindread-

ing romp through the complicated, erotically charged social milieu he depicts. We are diverted towards an awareness that powerful social and political ideologies intersect with “normal” ToM functioning in ways that are probably historically and culturally specific. As many interpreters of the Soviet period have pointed out, the actual implementation of socialism as cultural practice involved a multi-layered system of coded signs and behaviors on the part of both rulers and the ruled. Yurchak characterizes the transition from Stalinist to post-Stalinist culture as a process of disconnecting (and realigning) what was actually *said* (the “constative” function of authoritative discourse) from what was actually *meant* (the increasingly negotiable “performative” function of this discourse).<sup>8</sup> In this ambiguously controlled but potentially repressive environment, the relationship between “observed actions” (she raised her hand at a Party meeting to vote ‘yes’) and “unobservable intentions” (this was not a signal that she believes in communism, but a signal that she knows that we know that she doesn’t, but we will pretend that she knows that we know she is willing to play the game as the system requires, etc.) was a matter of great political and personal import, so that a kind of “folk expertise” on the dynamics of mind reading was implicit in the local culture. In *The Joke*, Kundera’s sharp portrayal of how characters read (or misread) each other’s behavior should be read as a sustained comment on the social pathology engendered by the Czech response to Soviet occupation.

Put another way, Kundera is not always interested in affording us the pleasure of “mindreading” his characters. Instead of sketching the contours of their behaviors and allowing us to infer their probable states of mind, he makes a parody of the whole connection between observed actions and unobserved states of mind. For instance, when his narrator Ludvig stumbles into a secular Christening ceremony at the local town hall, he details the muscular efforts that produce a woman’s smile, so that one new mother “stared up at the ceiling, then her eyes fell and met the glance of someone in the audience; the glance so ruffled her that she tore her eyes away and smiled, but the smile (the *effort* of the smile) quickly vanished, leaving only a rigid configuration of the lips” (*Joke*, p. 169). This mode of description, complete with an italicized parenthetical analysis of the non-smile’s unwilling origins, completely co-opts the reader’s own ability to infer mental states from the micro shifts in a character’s expression. In fact, Kundera’s narrator has offered us the kind of description a well-programmed robot might produce. It scans and records a sequence of small gestures and attributes some



correct mental states to what it sees (ruffled, rigid). It completes the activity of "mindreading" for us, in a way that is both discomfiting and unexpected in a novel that skirts with more familiar conventions (adultery, revenge, small-town social life). The impression made by these parodic passages is that the author has chosen to depict mainstream small town life in his society as somehow autistic.

The theory of autism forwarded by Baron-Cohen and most of his peers indicates that the problem of autism is fundamentally a "social deficit" resulting from the mind's inability to cope with fluid, complex, unpredictable, or ambiguous systems (including almost all social behavior, conversation, fiction, emotional expression, etc.). The autistic mind craves sameness, and finds comfort in systems that are lawful and predictable.<sup>9</sup> What can it mean to say Kundera invokes an "autistic" society? By this I do mean that he depicts autistic characters, but that as soon as an author chooses (for whatever artistic reason) to sever the connection between observed behavior and inferred state of mind ("normal" mind-reading at work), the resulting representation of human interactions mimics the problem of autism. Czech society under Communist rule is thus construed as a system that abhors ambiguity and unpredictability. Vaclav Havel diagnosed the same symptoms in his famous 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless."<sup>10</sup> In his telling, the predictable complicity of Czech citizens in the regime's bankrupt public rituals can be attributed to the following calculations: "I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace" (Havel, p. 7). Obviously, this risk-avoiding attitude has nothing to do with clinical autism (nor is it specific to socialist societies!). On the contrary, Steiner characterizes it as "schizophrenic" because the greengrocer pretends to be obedient in public, whereas we all know that in private he can be scathing about the hypocritical shortcomings of the regime.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing on Gregory Bateson's theory of the "double-bind," Steiner diagnoses a problem people encounter when forced to respond to utterances whose objective-linguistic meaning is the opposite of their meta-linguistic meaning (Steiner, p. 10). Example: Let's say children are told to sing every day "Lenin's Party is the people's strength / leading us to the triumph of Communism" (lyrics of the Soviet national anthem, revised and adopted in 1977) by a Party whose members enjoy enormous material benefits not available to 90% of the "people." The singers will eventually adopt a behavior that does and says and pretends to believe

one thing in public, while venting other beliefs at home. My reading of Kundera suggests that at least some Russian and East European writers have portrayed the “double-bind” behavior as something more nuanced (if you will) than schizophrenia. The public pretending-to-pretend-to-believe behavior mimics the mental stance of Baron-Cohen’s autists, in so far as the public self participates in official discourse *as if* that discourse were indeed a rigidly predictable and unambiguous system of signs. The private self reverses its mental stance and interprets (or over-interprets) every gesture as potentially fraught with complex intentionality. Thus, Baron-Cohen’s recent description of autism as an extreme point on the range of cognitive preference for systematizing versus improvising may also turn out to be a useful intellectual and discursive framework for thinking about how modern societies effect individual behavior. People are perfectly capable of pretending to be socially tone-deaf systematizers in public, while operating as fully sensitive mindreaders in private.

*The Joke’s* depiction of Czech society in the aftermath of Stalinism reveals that nobody can trust anybody; personal behavior has become unmoored from internal belief systems, outward appearances have been systematically co-opted from and alienated from natural expressions of a subjective inner world. This interpretation is most dramatically confirmed in the moment of Ludvik’s conviction by the court of his peers, which he re-plays over and over again in his mind. Pre-trial, he thought he could intuit a myriad of thoughts, emotions, and reactions behind the outward behavior of his various friends and colleagues. The moment of his conviction marks a turning point, after which he expects ideological considerations to trump the “normal” inferences generated by our instinctive mindreading. The fact that he censors the more generous promptings of his astute ToM is figured as the cause of his pointed alienation and bitterness long after he successfully returns to civilian society. Fifteen years after his arrest, he still finds that “whenever I make new acquaintances, men or women with the potential of becoming friends or lovers, I project them back into that time, that hall, and ask myself whether they would have raised their hands; no one has ever passed the test: every one of them has raised his hand in the same way my former friends and colleagues (willingly or not, out of conviction or fear) raised theirs” (*Joke*, p. 76).

Here’s the odd thing about Ludvik: our embittered, cynical ladies’ man has learned to censor or “correct” his ToM impressions of other people, but he can’t seem to get rid of an irrepressible urge to ascribe intentional psychological states to impersonal *events*, against all rational

logic. This skeptical and disillusioned Czech intellectual suspects that even those of us with existentialist leanings cannot help but discern codes of meaning conveyed in the gestures of the universe:

For all my skepticism, some trace of irrational superstition did survive in me, the strange conviction, for example, that everything in life that happens to me also has a sense, that it *means* something, that life speaks to us about itself through its story, that it gradually reveals a secret, that it takes the form of a rebus whose message must be deciphered, that the stories we live comprise the mythology of our lives and in that mythology lies the key to truth and mystery. Is it an illusion? Possibly, even probably, but I can't rid myself of the need continually to *decipher* my own life. (p. 164)

The fact that Kundera's characters can discern the fine print of fate ("whose message must be deciphered . . .") even in the spiritually devastated landscape of their lives is so remarkable that the psychological mechanism of *attributing meaning and intentionality to the random events of our lives* becomes one of the novel's primary thematic and structural motifs.

### III

As a group, readers of journals like this one tend to define themselves as secular, critical thinkers. We claim to interpret the events that make up our biographical experience without resorting to "hidden patterns" revealed by folk beliefs, religious platitudes, or superstitious assumptions about reality that cannot be plausibly investigated by scientific method. We are smart skeptics who do not normally ascribe any intentionality to the small coincidences of daily life; e.g., if a parking space opens up just when I need it, I rationally believe that this occurrence (which saves me a lot of time) is a random fluke of probability, not a coded message from some disembodied Parking Spirit that I was meant to show up for my meeting early. Note, however: if my prompt arrival coincides with a sudden opportunity to take someone else's spot in a life-transforming project, I will find it hard not to ascribe benevolence or clairvoyance to the force that gave me that parking space. In this sense, I am as superstitious as Ludvik. As we have seen in the discussion of ToM, this mode of thinking is not contested when we are dealing with agentical subjects who might plausibly desire or intend a certain outcome. What Daniel Dennett has described as "adopting the Intentional Stance" (as opposed to seeking physical or design causality) allows us to explain

the behavior of a system in terms of its likely intentional states (belief, desires, hopes, fears, etc.), so it is obviously well suited to dealing with most people and animals.<sup>12</sup> But what are we to make of the urge to ascribe intentionality to the universe?

One direction of current research postulates that somewhere along the path to our modern selves, the inferential capacities implicated so usefully in our mind reading capacity (ToM) extended to other spheres of cognitive functioning.<sup>13</sup> Is it possible that once we became expert readers of other people's behavior, we also become expert and unstoppable readers of the behavior of the universe? In his article on "The Existential Theory of Mind," cognitive evolutionist Jesse Bering reiterates that even when we believe that meaning is only generated within the mind itself, it is hard to find a person who in practice does not project some meaning-making agency onto an external, specified (e.g., God) or vaguely disembodied psychological agent of some sort (Bering, p. 5). The EToM hypothesized by cognitive psychologists may or may not constitute a dedicated domain of the brain (not important for our purposes), and it may or may not be particularly adaptive, if it evolved as a spandrel of another, profoundly adaptive piece of mental architecture. Nevertheless, so much of *The Joke* experiments with our perception of EToM's ubiquitous yet puzzling resilience. At both the structural and stylistic levels, this novel plays with the tension between our rational denial of fateful design and our almost irrepressible urge to project intentionality onto the events that befall us.

Kundera's representation of trauma, and the anxious space that hovers between forgetfulness and vengeance, is grounded in the careful, hyper-alert dissection of the mind's irrational insistence on establishing a story of existential purposefulness. Both Kundera and Bering emphasize the ineluctability of our drive to discern and decipher existential meaning (even when we suspect rationally that there is none). But Bering's EToM model is value-free: in his account, the human brain has an adaptive, evolved mind reading capacity (ToM) that has expanded from a system of inferring meaning from behavior into a system of inferring meaning in autobiographical events. The EToM model does not predict anything further about the variety of disembodied psychological agents held responsible for events (gods, superstitions, ideological premises), nor can it assess the impact of EToM attributions on the regulation of human affairs.

Kundera's novel transcends the explanatory capacity of the universal, evolutionary paradigm precisely where it engages the problem of moral

value and individual responsibility: is it really all the same to whom or to what imagined force we attribute the patterns of meaning we discern in our lives? Does the fabric of society come apart—or mend itself—differently if people believe that God, rather than the Dialectical Laws of History, is responsible for scripting the events that befall them? *The Joke* insists on asking these questions in a way that denies us a happy ending. Just at the moment when Ludvik finally lets go of his bitterness to reconnect with the native Moravian folk music of his youth (warning: constructions of “native” are always a myth!), his friend Jaroslav is felled by a heart attack. Kundera ends his novel with a blaze of ambulance lights that forebodes the continuing spiritual (and perhaps physical) paralysis of the main characters.

The parts of *The Joke* narrated in Jaroslav’s voice show that he has clung to a myth that is rapidly corroding in the oxygenated atmosphere of skepticism and rebellion of 1960s Czechoslovakia. Jaroslav has constructed his acquiescence with socialism and his personal existential narrative on the basis of ancient folk beliefs. Soviet ideology officially celebrated all manner of local folk customs as a way of bolstering the supposed affinity between Communism and the prelapsarian, communal rites of common people everywhere. Peter Steiner has explicated the structure of Jaroslav’s utopian conservatism, which seeks to justify everything in the present as an extension of the past. Jaroslav derives the meaning of his existence not from God (or Historical Materialism), but from a bond with the spirit of his people—as it is expressed specifically in the traditions of Moravian music and folklore (Steiner, p. 200). Jaroslav justifies his continuing support for the patently artificial, corrupted socialist folk kitsch his younger son despises in the following terms: “I believe things have a meaning, Vladimir. I believe the fates of men are bonded one to the other by the cement of wisdom. I see a sign in the fact that it was you they chose to be king [of an annual reenactment procession] this year” (*Joke*, p. 133).

Helena’s narrative voice reveals a different story. Helena fell in love with the Party in the same moment that she first fell in love with a man—for her, the attachment to socialism is purely emotional, connected to her sexual liberation as an 18-year old (in 1949) and subsequent marriage to the dashing Party activist she danced with that day. Yet even when her husband betrays her and the rest of society has long ceased to believe in the Party’s hollow (but repressive and authoritative) rhetoric, Helena clings to the grand narrative of Communism because it prevents her life from breaking in half. “I don’t want to split my life

down the middle, I want it to be one from beginning to end" (*Joke*, p. 15). When she meets Ludvik in the mid-nineteen sixties, she readily attributes his feigned interest in her as a sign that they were destined to be together, because Ludvik represents in her mind an unbroken thread to the values of her past.

Ludvik's old friend Kostka is a Christian. For him, the workings of universe are decipherable as coded signs from God, and if one attends to the meaning of His messages, life makes sense. In the first part of his life, it was easy enough for Kostka to elide the contradictions between his Christian faith and his support for the socialist movement. Communist doctrine spoke of radical equality and the end of injustice in ways that echoed strongly with the message of the Gospels, even if the identity of the external guiding agent was not longer God, but Historical Materialism. By the time Kostka meets Ludvik again fifteen years later, cracks have appeared in his faith, but he still holds onto it with the tenacity of an articulate interpreter of our EToM: "If we hear the voice of Christ's appeal, we must follow it unconditionally. This is clear from the Gospel, but in modern times it sounds like a fairy tale. What does an appeal mean in our prosaic lives? And yet the voice of the appeal can reach us even in today's world if our hearing is keen" (p. 212). Thus, when Kostka is persecuted for his religious beliefs and pushed out of his prestigious university lectureship by the new socialist ideologists in the 1950s, he accepts his demotion to advisor on an out-of-the-way state farm as "a coded appeal." In this way, he hypocritically translates the reality of defeat and avoidance into a message from the external agent who invests his life with meaning.

*The Joke's* fifth protagonist, Lucie, remains mute throughout the novel, and critics have remained mute about Lucie.<sup>14</sup> It turns out that the "ordinary girl" who so fiercely resisted Ludvik's advances was not a nineteen year old virgin. Rather, she had been the victim of frequent gang rape by a pack of boys from the age of sixteen until she was sent off to a reformatory at the age of seventeen. What Ludvik had loved about Lucie when he was a conscript was the fact that she seemed so far from the political ideologies that had twisted his fate: "she knew nothing of history, she lived *beneath* it; it held no attraction for her, it was alien to her; she knew nothing of *great and contemporary* concerns; she lived for *small and eternal* concerns" (p. 72). That Lucie's young life had already been broken by a different kind of trauma is of course outside of Ludvik's imagination. The difference between Lucie's trauma and that of the others is not that hers is "personal" and theirs is "political,"

rather, it has to do with Lucie's inability to represent or articulate any kind of possible intentionality in her fate.

As we have seen, the novelty of Bering's theory is that it inverts the notion that *Man is made in the image of God*. On the contrary, if we have an evolved EToM, then God (and other divinities, whatever one may call them) is simply the name we give to the way our brain functions when we employ our EToM. In this sense, which lacks any anthropocentric hubris, what we call God is more nearly an image of what evolved as an innate human function. Bering doubts our ability to willfully overcome the cognitive drive to read intentionality into the universe. "Individuals may well be ideological atheists, and I do not doubt their sincerity on the matter, however, much as solipsists cannot switch off theory of mind mechanisms, neither can EToM be totally disengaged" (Bering, p. 19). In other words, the skeptics and existentialists may be right, but our adaptive brain architecture will not easily allow their philosophy to inhabit its cognitive system. We might describe this as a gap between the way the brain works and the way the mind works. This particular gap is particularly evident when we have to do with instances of historical and personal trauma. Our EToM kicks into gear, supplying a religious (God wills it), or nondescript agent (historical necessity, fate, secret pattern of the universe) as the author responsible for this arrangement of events. But what happens in response to severe trauma, defined as an event which defies representation, which cannot be put into words, or even re-imagined? Annie Rogers has defined the essence of trauma as a complete failure of representation—it can't be named.<sup>15</sup> In this case, our EToM comes up against a countervailing cognitive arsenal of responses to trauma: shutting down, denial, deflection, refusal of memory, inability to fathom the intentionality of the world so construed. This is what has happened to Lucie: she is the one character in the novel whose normal, cognitive capacity has shut down; her existential theory of mind has been shattered. She exists only as a mute foil to the other narrators' orgies of meaning-making throughout the novel. In particular, her helplessness as a rape victim contrasts with Ludvik's determination to get revenge on his former political enemies.

We will indulge in another evolutionary theory to shed light on the meaning of Ludvik's utterly unsuccessful revenge. In an essay for the *New Yorker*, Jared Diamond suggests that basic human instinct urges us towards personal vengeance.<sup>16</sup> While Diamond is quick to endorse modern judicial procedures instead, he uses the story of his New Guinean informant to show us that the thirst for vengeance is a basic human



emotion, whose satisfaction we deny and circumvent to the detriment of our individual psyches. Diamond's essay belongs to the wider genre of popular evolutionary psychology. Its purpose is to show us how our evolved brains really work, in order to better understand how we might soothe our souls. He believes that if we acknowledge the thirst for vengeance as a biological given, we will perhaps find ways to make amends for the personal suffering entailed when one's loss is not avenged.

Ludvik's story of personal vengeance complicates the evolutionary view of human nature presented by Diamond, because it engages our EToM as a competing, perhaps equally powerful evolutionary drive. When the opportunity arises, Ludvik sadistically seduces Helena, in order to get back at her husband Zemanek, the man who orchestrated the kangaroo court that arrested him many years ago. In a scene that seems to function as the antipode to Jared Diamond's story in the *New Yorker*, Ludvik discovers all the reasons that personal vengeance turns out to be deeply unsatisfying. Far from hurting Helena's philandering husband, he actually does him a favor. Moreover, after treating the naïve Helena badly, he feels depressed and sullied by his own participation in the violence he meant to avenge. Worst of all, since time has moved forward, his old nemesis is no longer the same person. "I recognized the Zemanek I had known; but [his] *content* staggered me; it was evident that he had completely abandoned his former views, and if he and I were now to frequent the same circles, in any conflict I would, like it or not, find myself taking his side" (p. 271).

Faced with the futility of vengeance, Kundera's protagonist finally concludes that the past can only be forgotten;

Yes, suddenly I saw it clearly: most people deceive themselves with a pair of faiths: they believe in *eternal memory* (of people, things, deeds, nations) and in *redressibility* (of deeds, mistakes, sins, wrongs). Both are false faiths. In reality the opposite is true: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be redressed. The task of obtaining redress (by vengeance or by forgiveness) will be taken over by forgetting. No one will redress the wrongs that have been done, but all wrongs will be forgotten. (p. 294)

This is a strong statement, coming from a narrator whose meta-literary commentary about his own meaning-making processes has struck us as unusually astute for most of the novel. Suddenly he determines that any act of vengeance is always already too late (the processes of forgetting and re-interpreting have already taken hold), and that all we can do is resign ourselves to anesthesia of time.



This is amoral. If he abandons himself to the “vertigo” of forgetfulness, he is not just letting go of old grudges, he is also letting go of his barely acknowledged guilt and complicity in the Communist Party’s robust initial spree in the halls of academia (where Ludvik was an activist-student). Thus, the novel’s ethical compass does not come to rest on Ludvik, or on any of the other characters. Rather, it rests on *The Joke’s* unusual and in some ways prescient aesthetic *discovery*: a curious, clinical appraisal (whether scientific or aesthetic) of our uniquely human drive to infer existential meaning is the one thing that can best contribute to our understanding of trauma and the possibility of adequate reparation.

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1. Milan Kundera, *The Joke*, definitive version fully revised by the author (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); hereafter *Joke*. In Czechoslovakia, censors rejected the novel in 1965, but allowed it into print, unabridged, as a reformist movement peaked in 1967–1968. It was formally banned in the author’s native country after 1969, until the retraction of all censorship during the Velvet Revolution (1989).
2. Milan Kundera, “Janacek,” *Cross Currents: A Journal of Central European Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), pp. 371–80; hereafter abbreviated as CC.
3. The preeminent Czech literary theorist Lubomir Dolezel devoted a chapter to the use of multiple perspectives in *The Joke* in his book *Narrative Modes in Czech Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 112–25. Contemporary (since 2000) scholars in the Czech Republic mostly analyze Kundera’s works through the prism of French theory, which still has the caché of having been banned in mainstream academia for many decades.
4. Peter Steiner, *The Deserts of Bohemia: Czech Fiction and Its Social Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
5. For a good discussion of the often misogynist content of Kundera’s “cerebral” dissections of psycho-sexual motivation, see Frances L. Restuccia, “*Homo Homini Lupus*: Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*,” *Contemporary Literature* 31 (1990): 281–99.
6. The scientific literature on ToM is vast. For an introduction, see Alison Gopnik, “Theory of Mind,” *MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. Robert A. Wilson and Frank C. Keil (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 838–41. Citations in this paper refer to Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) and Baron-Cohen, 2007 (see note 9).
7. Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

8. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
9. Leo Kanner was the first to describe autism in "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," *Nervous Children* 2 (1943): 217–50. Since then, the study of autism has evolved from early attributions to nurture ("cold family environment"), to an acknowledgement of genetic components (e.g., Hughes and Plomin, 2000), to a hypothesis of evolutionary origins in Simon Baron-Cohen, "The Assortive Mating Theory of Autism," in *Evolutionary Cognitive Science*, ed. Michael S. Gazzaniga (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 499–515.
10. Vaclav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," *Cross Currents* 1983 (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Materials, No. 23, University of Michigan Press, 1983), pp. 3–22.
11. Yurchak (pp. 1–25) and other recent investigations into the late Soviet period make a point of replacing "binary" ("schizophrenic") models of "going behind the regime's back" with models that better explain the fertile and creative interaction between "official" and "non-official" cultural forms.
12. Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).
13. Jesse Bering, "The Existential Theory of Mind," *Review of General Psychology* 6 (2002): 3–24.
14. Likewise, in the Czech New Wave film version of *The Joke* (directed by Jaromil Jires, 1968, and billed by the New York Film Festival as an "ironic, sexy, and sour comedy"), Lucie disappears altogether.
15. This discussion of the mute quality of trauma is indebted to Annie Rogers, *The Unsayable: The Hidden Language of Trauma* (New York: Random House, 2006).
16. Jared Diamond, "Vengeance Is Ours," *The New Yorker* (April 21, 2008), pp. 74–87.