The ambiguities of Milan Kundera

by Roger Kimball

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera was in his late thirties when he published his first novel, The Joke, in Prague in 1967. The book traces the fortunes and amours of a young student, Ludvik, after his exasperatingly patriotic girlfriend decides to show the authorities a postcard he had written her as a joke: “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik.” As a result of this whimsy, Ludvik finds himself expelled from the Communist Party and the university, and is eventually conscripted to work in the mines for several years.

The appearance of Kundera’s acerbically political novel coincided with—indeed, it was only possible in—the short-lived liberalization of Czech society that has come to be known as the Prague Spring. The Joke went through three large printings in quick succession and instantly won Kundera a wide and enthusiastic readership in his homeland. It also won him the somewhat less
enthusiastic attention of the Communist Party. At the end of August, 1968, Russian troops abruptly occupied Czechoslovakia, putting an end to the Prague Spring and the reformist government of Alexander Dubcek. In a bitterly ironic variation on the fate of his character Ludvik, Kundera was relieved of his teaching position at the Prague Film School and deprived of the right to work. *The Joke* was banned and removed from public libraries—“erased,” as Kundera put it, “from the history of Czech literature.” Finally, in 1975, Kundera emigrated to France, where he has since resided.

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Kundera first came to the notice of American readers in the mid-Seventies with a collection of short stories, *Laughable Loves* (1974), and *The Farewell Party* (1976), a novel. Together they earned him a small but devoted following among aficionados of contemporary fiction. But it was not until the publication of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in 1980 that Kundera really established himself among the American literary intelligentsia—though, in fact, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* did not so much establish Kundera’s reputation here as enshrine it; it elevated him to that pantheon of writers whose productions exist more as untouchable objects of admiration than as works susceptible to critical commentary. And Kundera’s latest novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), only confirmed his apotheosis. Most reviewers dispensed with criticism altogether and instead vied with one another to concoct suitably handsome words of praise. Not merely “brilliant,” “daring,” or “provocative,” *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was widely held to constitute Kundera’s patent of literary immortality, establishing him, in the words of one reviewer, “as the world’s greatest living writer.”

Now, Kundera is indisputably a writer of enormous talent. Especially at a time when fiction in this country seems caught somewhere between the dreary banalities of Ann Beattie, the quasi-pornographic imaginings of John Hawkes, and the narcissistic obscurities of Donald Barthelme, he appears as a novelist of almost preternatural force and inventiveness. But precisely because Kundera has assumed such eminence, his work deserves more than indiscriminate celebration. Though he has developed a voice that is unmistakably his own, his best work exercises an appeal that can be said to epitomize the *ethos* of contemporary “dissident” fiction: fiercely intellectual, it is charged with a cool, at times almost brutal eroticism and ironic humor, and it is everywhere at pains to declare its fictionality, to call attention to its novelistic status. Thus in coming to appreciate the distinctive appeal of Kundera’s fiction—its substance, its vitality, its challenging idiosyncrasies—we may also come to understand one of the most important (if also perhaps one of the most problematic) aspects of contemporary fiction generally.

At the same time, we may discover something about the sensibility of the *audience* for this species of contemporary fiction. For despite its obvious literary sophistication, Kundera’s work is also deeply political, drawing heavily on his experience of totalitarianism in an effort to explore the
difficult spiritual landscape that his characters populate. Kundera has by no means always affirmed his status as a dissident writer; on the contrary, especially in recent years, he has striven to qualify, even deny, that status at every turn. But it is, I believe, in the political dimension of his work—or, more accurately, in the ambiguous attitude Kundera adopts toward the political dimension of his work—that we will find an important source of his tremendous appeal both in this country and in Western Europe.

“The identity of a people or civilization,” Kundera wrote in an essay that appeared in the English quarterly Granta, “is always reflected and concentrated in what has been created by the mind—in what is known as ‘culture.’” Many, perhaps most, of us tend to equate the culture of Czechoslovakia and its Austro-Hungarian neighbors with the culture of Eastern Europe. That we should so blithely cede the cultural as well as the political heritage of these countries no doubt tells us much about the nature and success of the Soviet Union’s custodianship there. According to Kundera, though, the defining cultural impulse of that area has its source not in the patrimony of the East but in the spiritual legacy of the West. “What does Europe mean to a Hungarian, a Czech, a Pole?” he asks. “Their nations have always belonged to the part of Europe rooted in Roman Christianity. They have participated in every period of its history. For them, the word ‘Europe’ does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word ‘West.’”

In proclaiming this cultural affiliation with Western Europe, Kundera underscores his allegiance to the fundamental Enlightenment values of skeptical rationality and individualism—traditional liberal values that he summarized in another essay as “respect for the individual, for his original thought, and for his inviolable private life.” It is no secret that these values have come increasingly under siege in modern society, most brutally and systematically in totalitarian regimes, but also, Kundera would insist, in democratic regimes, where the imperatives of mass culture compromise private life and discount genuine individuality. It is of course this latter insistence—that freedom and man’s privacy are threatened as much in Western democracies as under Communism—that has won Kundera so many friends on the Left, for whom the defiant, anti-Communist stance of the dissident writer is perfectly acceptable provided that his defiance extends to all expressions of authority, notably to those that provide a haven for his dissidence. But taken in conjunction with his attempt to downplay the frankly political message of his work, Kundera’s criticisms of the West highlight ambiguities at the heart of his position—ambiguities that force us to question the good faith and ideological motives of this troubling writer.
Time and again, Kundera has praised the “wisdom of the novel” as a counter to the leveling influence of modern society. In the midst of an environment hostile to private life and the integrity of the individual, the novel appears as a sanctuary where the “precious essence of European individualism is held safe as in a treasure chest.” It is thus not surprising that the major thematic concern of Kundera’s fiction, from The Joke through The Unbearable Lightness of Being, is with the fate of the individual in modern society, especially in modern Communist society.

Of course “the fate of the individual in modern society” is hardly uncharted territory for novelists. But this venerable theme breathes with new life in Kundera’s work, in large part because of the adroit way in which he manages to interweave fact and fiction. His characters occupy a stage that is defined half by Kundera’s imagination, half by the historical reality of recent Czech history. He tends to work with extremely short chapters and a shifting, episodic narrative that together create a montage of images, story lines, and characterizations. To this end, he has developed a terse, sinewy style, sharply ironical yet urgently engaged. The narrative is constantly interrupted as Kundera steps back to impart a bit of philosophy, autobiography, or psychological conjecture. The Unbearable Lightness of Being, for example, begins with a reflection on Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal return—a reflection that itself returns to become one of the book’s leitmotifs—and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is studded with straightforward factual accounts of historical incidents.

In many ways, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is Kundera’s most accomplished work to date. With it he perfected his digressive narrative technique, in which themes are stated, developed, transformed, and interwoven more or less on the model of a musical variation—an analogy that Kundera has been fond of invoking when describing his writing. Yet in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Kundera’s “variations”—his excursions into philosophy, say, or intellectual history—never strike one as being mere intellectual decorations, inessential to its life as a novel, as they do, at times, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. The book follows the melancholy, often overlapping careers and erotic entanglements of several sets of characters as they struggle to salvage some sense of joy and vitality, some sense of themselves as individuals, against the bleak backdrop of present-day Czechoslovakia. Kundera pauses throughout to descant on subjects as diverse as mass psychology, the nature of the novel, and the fate of various heroes of the Czech resistance. In one of two key chapters entitled “The Angels,” for example, Kundera suddenly interrupts his story, recalling that
soon after the Russians occupied my country in 1968, I (like thousands and thousands of other Czechs) lost the privilege of working. No one was allowed to hire me. At about that time some young friends started paying me regular visits. They were so young that the Russians did not have them on their lists yet and they could remain in editorial offices, schools, and film studios. These fine young friends, whom I will never betray, suggested I use their names as a cover for writing radio and television scripts, plays, articles, columns, film treatments—anything to earn a living. I accepted a few of their offers, but most I turned down. I couldn’t have gotten to them all, for one thing, and then too it was dangerous. Not for me, for them. The secret police wanted to starve us out, cut off all means of support, force us to capitulate and make public confessions. They kept their eyes out for all the pitiful little escape routes we used to avoid encirclement, and they meted out severe punishments to the friends who gave me their names.

Characteristically, this sober report is sandwiched between two very different and seemingly unrelated narratives, the first installment of a tale about two naive American schoolgirls at summer school abroad preparing a presentation on Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*, and Kundera’s essayistic elaboration of a metaphysics of laughter. His commitment to irony naturally leads him to extol laughter, but he is careful to distinguish two kinds of laughter: “demonic” laughter, which is fundamentally dissenting, lonely, even nihilistic, and “angelic” laughter, which sentimentally rationalizes a world whose contradictions and sufferings it deliberately blinds itself to. It follows that, in Kundera’s bestiary, “Devils,” though essentially a negative, admonitory force, manifest an heroic skepticism that immunizes them to the hypocrisy of sentimentality; “Angels,” on the other hand, acquiesce in illusion and refuse to acknowledge the lie at the heart of the Utopia they crave.

What Kundera calls demonic laughter plays an enormously important role in his work.

What Kundera calls demonic laughter plays an enormously important role in his work. Though his fiction can be as freighted with existential pathos as anything by Sartre or Camus or Kafka, it is nevertheless possessed of a levity and insouciance that make it as entertaining as it is thoughtful. His depiction of the American schoolgirls’ report on *Rhinoceros*, for example, crystallizes the book’s central themes in a moment of surreal, “demonic” hilarity.

Given the self-consciously playful character of Kundera’s novels, it is hardly surprising that he cites Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste* as crucial inspirations. And while the tone and “feel” of Kundera’s fiction is distinctly more modulated—more “linear,” one might say—than those rambunctious early novels, their influence can be felt throughout his work, both in its self-consciously digressive narratives and in the ironic humor that Kundera insinuates into even his most stringent philosophical meditations.

Closer to hand, Kundera’s humor reminds one even more of the great Austrian novelist Robert Musil, whose sprawling, unfinished masterpiece, *The Man Without Qualities*, is perhaps the most profound and certainly the funniest portrait of decaying *fin-de-siècle* Austrian culture we possess.
Kundera has not created any character as memorable as Musil’s Ulrich—the protagonist of *The Man Without Qualities*—nor has he rivaled Musil’s scope or incisive social satire; but his fiction bristles with a kindred ironic, highly intellectualized wit.

Kundera also specializes in that brand of emotionally distanced, often farcical, eroticism that has become a hallmark of so much modernist and “postmodernist” fiction. Here again, we can see the influence of the ribald tradition of Sterne and Diderot. Diderot’s novel especially is celebrated by Kundera for its “explosion of impertinent freedom without self-censorship, of eroticism without sentimental alibis.”

In fact, though, Kundera’s depictions of sex are edged with a loneliness and even desperation quite absent from the more playful work of his acknowledged precursors. His fiction abounds in explorations of what we might call intimacy in distress. The erotic lives of his characters become a theater in which a wounded individuality, half capitulating to forces inimical to it, struggles to preserve itself. As Kundera put it in the interview with Philip Roth that appears as the afterword to *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, “with me everything ends in great erotic scenes. I have the feeling that a scene of physical love generates an extremely sharp light which suddenly reveals the essence of characters and sums up their life situation.”

There are dramatic and usually unhappy sexual liaisons throughout Kundera’s work, generally centering on his characters’ inability to combine love with sexual passion. “Physical love only rarely merges with spiritual love,” he concludes sadly in *The Joke.* Particularly revealing, I think, are Tomas’s reflections on “erotic friendship” in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* They exhibit a thoroughgoing aestheticism that not only typifies Kundera’s treatment of erotic matters but also says a good deal about the underlying sensibility of his work *tout court.*

Like Kierkegaard’s aesthete in *Either/Or,* who attempts to defeat boredom by cultivating a systematically arbitrary approach to life, Tomas attempts to establish “a compromise between fear and desire” by steadfastly avoiding any genuine emotional involvement in his relationships with women. He has become a connoisseur of what Kierkegaard called “the rotation method.” “To insure that erotic friendship never grew into the aggression of love,” Kundera explains, Tomas

would meet each of his long-term mistresses only at intervals. He considered this method flawless and propagated it among his friends: “The important thing is to abide by the rule of threes. Either you see a woman three times in quick succession and then never again, or you maintain relations over the years but make sure that the rendezvous are at least three weeks apart.”

The rule of threes enabled Tomas to keep intact his liaisons with some women while continuing to engage in short-term affairs with many others. He was not always understood.

The problem for Tomas, as again for Kierkegaard’s aesthete, is the intractable reality of his lovers; once they are gone they assume a pleasing poetic existence that can be enjoyed at will without the endless accommodations that any real relationship involves. “His love for Tereza was beautiful,
but it was also tiring: he constantly had to hide things from her, sham, dissemble, make amends, buck her up, calm her down .... Now [that she had left him] what was tiring had disappeared and only the beauty remained.”

There is of course a large element of satire in Kundera’s depiction of Tomas, as there is in most of his depictions of intimate feelings. But satire has authority only to the extent that one can discern a credible alternative to the reality being satirized; otherwise it becomes indistinguishable from what it satirizes. And the truth is that Kundera’s own aestheticism, his own rebellion against the reality of what he describes, robs his work of any such alternative.

Kundera suggests that erotic intimacy promises a real, if already threatened, refuge for individuality in the modern world; hence he often insists that his books are essentially “love stories.” Yet it must be said that in Kundera’s novels sex is generally a rather chilly, dehumanizing event, an exercise that offers precious little refuge. Not to put too fine a point on it, there is something distinctly creepy about his portrayals of intimate relationships. One thinks, for example, of Ludvik’s aborted seductions in The Joke, of the amusing but strikingly passionless orgies in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, or of the dismal erotic adventures featured in Laughable Loves; in every case what we see is sex in the service of power, betrayal, diversion, or despair, only very rarely in the service of affection or genuine intimacy. Not surprisingly, this aspect of Kundera’s work has added greatly to its appeal, especially in the academy, where there is an abiding appetite for this sort of lugubrious depiction of sex.

The cumulative—and carefully calculated—effect of Kundera’s style is fiction endowed with a sense of great immediacy and directness, with a nimbus, so to speak, of reality. Though we are everywhere reminded that we are reading fiction, in the end such reminders tend to increase rather than diminish our confidence in the authority and truthfulness of the narrator. “It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived,” Kundera writes of his main characters 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. Tomas was born of the saying ‘Einmal ist keinmal’ [‘Once is never’]. Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach.” It is all merely fiction, yes, but we somehow feel that in admitting this the author is taking us into a deeper confidence, preparing us for some important truth.

By self-consciously warping the border between fact and fiction, Kundera’s work manifests a characteristically modernist preoccupation with the relation between art and truth, between art and reality. The essence of this preoccupation was summed up by Thomas Mann’s Serenus Zeitblom, the narrator of Doctor Faustus, in his reflections on the situation of modern music:

In a work there is much seeming and sham, one could go further and say that as “a work” it is seeming in and for itself. Its ambition is to make one believe that it is not made, but born, like Pallas Athene in full fig and embossed armour from Jupiter’s head .... [N]ow the question is whether at the present stage of our consciousness, our knowledge, our sense of truth, this little game is still permissible, still intellectually possible, still to be taken seriously; whether the work as such, the construction, self-sufficing, harmonically complete in itself, still stands in any legitimate relation to the complete insecurity, problematic conditions, and lack of harmony of our social situation;
Kundera, too, would seem to ask whether the beautiful illusions that art produces are to be taken seriously; certainly, his fiction adopts a posture of questioning their apparent self-sufficiency. He continually intrudes images of all that is problematic, insecure, unharmonious about daily life into the untroubled kingdom within which art reigns supreme. But unlike Mann, Kundera does not use the conventions of art to question our faith in art’s illusions; rather, he skillfully imports gestures of reality in order to give his fiction an aura of truth and critical weightiness.

Probably the central critical element in Kundera’s work is his attack on sentimentality. This takes various forms, and is evident throughout his writing, in his essays as well as his novels. Everywhere there is a deep suspicion of sentimentality, of feeling un-scrutinized by doubt. Thus he pokes fun at “the obscure depths,” the “noisy and empty sentimentality of the ‘slavic Soul.’” And in his introduction to Jacques and His Master, he criticizes Dostoevsky’s novels for creating a “climate. . . where feelings are promoted to the rank of value and of truth.”

For Kundera, the battle against sentimentality is at the same time a battle against forgetting. “The struggle of man against power,” we read at the beginning of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, “is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” In Kundera’s terms, the struggle of memory against forgetting is man’s struggle against whatever social or psychological forces would deny the continuity and individuality of his personal history. Hence the attack on sentimentality is only the other side of his defense of individualism. For it is just this—the lonely and irreducible privateness of experience—that sentimentality promises to dissolve. The essential appeal of the sentimental is precisely that it relieves one of the burden of individuality and the responsibilities of adult experience. As the literary critic Northrop Frye observed, sentimentality “resists, as a child would do, the inexorable advance of all experience in time, which it tries to arrest by nostalgia .... Sentimentality is the subjective equivalent of the mob’s stock response to mood.”

It is a version of sentimentality that Kundera explores in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting under the name of circle dancing. “Circle dancing” is his metaphor for the intoxicating lure of the group, the mob, what Frye calls the stock response. Kundera pictures his characters joining together to make a circle. They “take two steps in place, one step forward, lift first one leg and then the other .... I think I understand them. They feel that the circle they describe on the ground is a magic circle binding them into a ring. Their hearts are overflowing with an intense feeling of innocence .... Circle dancing is magic.” This magic is the spell cast by the dream of a paradise where distinctions vanish and all men are brothers. In this sense “paradise” tokens not the fulfillment but the denial of the human condition. “The longing for Paradise,” as Kundera put it, “is man’s longing not to be man.”

Underscoring the political dimension of circle dancing, Kundera confesses that in 1948, after the Communists had taken power in Czechoslovakia, he also “danced in a ring,” until he was expelled from the Party and “had to leave the circle.” It was then, he tells us, that he became aware of the
“magic” qualities of the circle, a magic that gives weight to his claim that “totalitarianism is not only hell, but also the dream of paradise.” “The whole period of Stalinist terror,” he writes in the afterword to The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,

was a period of collective lyrical delirium .... People like to say: Revolution is beautiful, it is only the terror arising from it which is evil. But this is not true. The evil is already present in the beautiful, hell is already contained in the dream of paradise and if we wish to understand the essence of hell we must examine the essence of the paradise from which it originated. It is extremely easy to condemn gulags, but to reject the totalitarian poesy which leads to the gulag by way of paradise is as difficult as ever.

What Kundera dramatizes as circle dancing in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting he analyzes as “kitsch” in The Unbearable Lightness of Being and in several occasional essays. While he points out that the term has its origin in Munich art circles in the nineteenth century, for Kundera “kitsch” refers not simply to a species of bad art but to the deliberate sentimentalization of reality. As Kundera notes, his discussion of kitsch is deeply indebted to the writings of the German novelist and essayist Hermann Broch. Following Broch, he views kitsch not so much as an aesthetic as an ethical or metaphysical category. What we generally think of as kitsch art is for Kundera merely one, rather minor, product of kitsch. Like circle dancing, kitsch is an instrument of forgetting. It offers man an escape from the burden of individuality. “Kitsch,” he wrote in one essay, “is the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling.” In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, he remarks that kitsch has its source in the “categorical agreement with being,” meaning that kitsch involves what he would call an “angelic” blindness to everything problematic and unaccommodating about experience. Ultimately, the ambition of kitsch is to set up “a folding screen to curtain off death.”
For Kundera, as for Broch before him, kitsch appears as a universal human temptation. “No matter how we scorn it,” he writes, “kitsch is an integral part of the human condition.” In this sense, kitsch bears witness to man’s desire to secure himself against the incursions of a reality that can never be adequately mastered. The problem with Kundera’s analysis, however, is that by so expanding the meaning of kitsch, he threatens to empty it of critical content. It may be that kitsch cannot be understood as a purely aesthetic category; the aura of moral disapproval that it carries with it suggests that this is the case. But what does it mean, for example, when Kundera asserts that “we can regard the gulag as a septic tank used by totalitarian kitsch to dispose of its refuse”? There is no doubt that totalitarianism can make effective use of kitsch; but to speak of “totalitarian kitsch” is to trivialize totalitarianism by assimilating it to a category that has its home in aesthetics; it is in effect to poeticize totalitarianism. To say, with Kundera, that “kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements” is to elide just those differences among political parties and movements that really matter. Similarly, when he has a character in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* compare the sentimental response of an American senator watching children playing on the grass to “the smile Communist statesmen beamed from the height of their reviewing stand to the identically smiling citizens in the parade below,” he ignores the fact that what matters here is not so much the kitschy sentiment as the uses to which it is put.

The great appeal—and great danger—of concepts like kitsch is that they invite one to discount the real differences among things in the name of a putatively deeper, more essential unity—a unity, however, that enjoys merely a conceptual existence. They thus allow one to maintain a pose of critical distance without the inconvenience of having to make the hard choices that genuine criticism involves. And while there is no doubt that Kundera brings considerable insight—not to mention cleverness—to his explorations of sentimentality, circle dancing, and kitsch, he also indulges in a lamentable tendency to aestheticize these concepts, to use them to disarm the very distinctions they were meant to illuminate.

Kundera’s response to this objection would be simply that, as a novelist, he is not in the business of taking positions. “Now, not only is the novelist nobody’s spokesman,” as he put it in one essay, “but I would go so far as to say he is not even the spokesman for his own ideas.” He goes so far, in fact, as to insist that we view his work as little more than an ironic game, as writing “on the level of hypothesis.” This is evident, for example, in his objection to being regarded as a political writer. Admitting that he detests Communist regimes, he hastens to add that “I detest them as a citizen: as a writer I don’t say what I say in order to denounce a regime.” A political reading of his work, he suggested in one interview, is “a bad reading.” Even the label “dissident writer” annoys him because it imports a political terminology that he claims to be “allergic” to. Again, in the 1982 preface that he contributed to *The Joke*, Kundera recalled that “When in 1980, during a television panel discussion devoted to my works, someone called *The Joke* ‘a major indictment of Stalinism,’ I was quick to interject, ‘Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story’”—this in a book whose entire psychology is unintelligible without the assumption of such an indictment.
Of course, there is an important sense in which Kundera is right: fiction does exist “on the level of hypothesis,” not on the level of fact; novels are not position papers. But there is something deeply disingenuous about appeals to the hypothetical or gamelike character of fiction when those appeals are meant to mask or deny the very real political content of one’s work. And this, unfortunately, is the effect of Kundera’s rhetoric. For like so many dissident writers, Kundera, though he embraces Western culture and Western freedom, maintains a fundamentally equivocal attitude toward the West. True, as he would be the first to point out, there is much to bemoan about the aggressive superficiality of Western mass culture and the tasteless intrusions of the media into our private lives. But it is one thing to criticize these cultural failings, quite another to pretend that they are in any relevant sense cognate with the evil of totalitarianism—to pretend, that is, that they are somehow merely different versions of the same spiritual malaise.

In fact, though, in statement after statement this is precisely the posture that Kundera has adopted. In an interview with Philip Roth that appeared in *The Village Voice*, for example, Kundera was asked if he thought private or intimate life were less threatened in the West than under Communism. “The evolution of the modern world is hostile to intimate life everywhere,” he replied. Indeed,

> In countries with Communist regimes there’s an advantage: we can see clearly what’s bad and what’s good—if the police tape your private talks, everybody knows that’s bad. But in Italy when a photographer lurks around to photograph the face of the mother of a murdered child or the agony of a drowning man, we don’t call this a violation of intimacy but freedom of the press.

The implication is clearly that one’s privacy and intimate life are just as much in jeopardy in a Western democracy as they are under Communism—perhaps more insidiously in jeopardy in a democracy, for in a Communist society one at least knows where one stands and there is no attempt to glorify shallow curiosity in the name of freedom of the press. No matter that one’s writing, one’s livelihood, one’s very life are at stake in one society where in another one is coddled and showered with acclaim—“essentially” the societies must be made to seem two sides of the same coin. Such a pretense is possible only if one substitutes a thoroughly intellectualized—perhaps one should say “kitschified”—view of the world for the sharper, if less Romantic, discriminations of lived experience. The habits of the media in the West often border on obscenity; but to suggest that the intrusiveness of an Italian news photographer is somehow comparable with the brutality of totalitarianism is absurd. The former may consign one to the front page of a noxious tabloid; the latter abandons one to the cellars of the secret police.

In effect, Kundera wants to have it both ways: he wants both the freedom of fiction and the authority of historical fact; he wants, that is, the cachet of being a dissident writer without the uncomfortably definite political commitments that that status brings with it. Instead, he strives to maintain a completely ironical view of the world, a view that would exempt him from any definite commitment—a view that Friedrich Schlegel, the great theorist of Romantic irony, aptly dubbed
transcendental buffoonery.” Thus Kundera describes the “basic event” of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting as “the story of totalitarianism, which deprives people of memory and thus retools them into a nation of children,” and yet still insists that “no novel worthy of the name takes the world seriously.” But how can a novel recount “the story of totalitarianism” and not take the world seriously? No one would suggest that Kundera’s writing should be reduced to its political content; but to dismiss that content as part of a “game,” as incidental embellishment or atmosphere to what is really a “love story,” “merely a novel,” is to ignore the element that, more than any other, grants it its authority and weight.

Near the end of his essay “Writing,” W. H. Auden remarked that “In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate.” In a way, Kundera would seem to agree with Auden’s deeply anti-Romantic sentiment. Thus he extols the novel as an ally of individuality—this is its point, its “ulterior purpose”: to salvage some remnant of individuality in an age when it is threatened by the equalizing pressures of mass media, sentimentality, and totalitarianism. Like Auden, Kundera champions art as a refuge of the critical, ironic, questioning spirit, as a bulwark against the illusions and intoxicating certainties of kitsch, the forgetfulness of “circle dancing.”

Yet in the end the ambiguities of Kundera’s position tend to cut the other way. For by insisting on the purely novelistic status of his work—by denying that a large measure of its authority comes precisely from its “seriousness” and accurate reflection of social and psychological realities—Kundera brews an intoxicating potion of his own. Indeed, it is all the more powerful for the whiff, the suggestion of truth and reality that it purveys. In this context, we should remind ourselves that criticisms of kitsch, too, can have their kitschy appeal. And it is here, perhaps, that we can witness most clearly the essential ambiguities of Milan Kundera—ambiguities that are not, alas, the inexhaustible ambiguities of human nature but the meaner, more predictable ambiguities of a writer struggling to maintain a predefined image of himself as ideologically correct.

1. Kundera’s literary work is translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim. Laughable Loves, The Farewell Party, and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, first published by Knopf, are now available in the Viking-Penguin series “Writers from the Other Europe,” which is under the general editorship of Philip Roth. The Joke (English translation 1982) and The Unbearable Lightness of Being are published by Harper & Row.


3. Kundera was so taken with the famous Diderot novel that he undertook what he describes as a “variation” of it in the form of a play, Jacques and His Master. The play opened last year at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the direction of Susan Sontag. For a review of that production, see Mimi Kramer’s “Kundera and His Master,” in the March, 1985, issue of The New Criterion.
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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 4 Number 5, on page 5
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