Conversation with Milan Kundera on the Art of the Novel

(Translated from the French original by Linda Asher)

Christian Salmon: I’d like to devote this conversation to the esthetic of your novels. But where shall we begin?

Milan Kundera: With this assertion: My novels are not psychological. More precisely, they lie outside the esthetic of the novel normally termed psychological.

C.S.: But aren’t all novels necessarily psychological? That is, concerned with the enigma of the psyche?

M.K.: Let us be more precise: All novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self. As soon as you create an imaginary being, a character, you are automatically confronted by the question: What is the self? How can the self be grasped? It is one of those fundamental questions on which the novel, as novel, is based. By the various responses to that question, if you wanted, you could distinguish different tendencies, and perhaps different periods, in the history of the novel. The psychological approach wasn’t even known to the first European storytellers. Boccaccio simply tells us about actions and adventures. Still, behind all those amusing tales, we can make out a certain conviction: it is through action that man steps forth from the repetitive universe of the everyday where each person resembles every other person; it is through action that he distinguishes himself from others and becomes an individual. Dante said as much: “In any act, the primary intention of him who acts is to reveal his own image.” At the outset, action is thus seen as the self-portrait of him who acts. Four centuries after Boccaccio, Diderot is more skeptical: his Jacques le Fataliste...
seduces his friend's girl, he gets happily drunk, his father wallops him, a regiment passes by, out of spite he signs up, in his first battle he gets a bullet in the knee, and he limps till the day of his death. He thought he was starting an amorous adventure, and instead he was setting forth toward his infirmity. He could never recognize himself in his action. Between the act and himself, a fissure opens. Man hopes to reveal his own image through his act, but that image bears no resemblance to him. The paradoxical nature of action is one of the novel's great discoveries. But if the self is not to be grasped through action, then where and how are we to grasp it? So, then, the time came when the novel, in its quest for the self, was forced to turn away from the visible world of action and examine instead the invisible interior life. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Richardson discovers the form of the epistolary novel in which the characters confess their thoughts and their feelings.

C.S.: The birth of the psychological novel?

M.K.: The term is, of course, inexact and approximate. Let's avoid it and use a paraphrase: Richardson set the novel on its way to the exploration of man's interior life. We know his great successors: the Goethe of Werther, Constant, then Stendhal and the other writers of his century. The apogee of that evolution is to be found, it seems to me, in Proust and in Joyce. Joyce analyzes something still more ungrasppable than Proust's "lost time": the present moment. There would seem to be nothing more obvious, more tangible and palpable, than the present moment. And yet it escapes us completely. All the sadness of life lies in that fact. In the course of a single second, our senses of sight, hearing, smell register (knowingly or not) a horde of events, and through our heads there passes a parade of sensations and ideas. Each instant represents a little universe, irrevocably forgotten in the next instant. Now, Joyce's great microscope manages to stop, to seize that fleeting instant and make us see it. But the quest for the self ends, yet again, in a paradox: the more powerful the lens of the microscope observing the self, the more the self and its uniqueness escape us; beneath the great Joycean lens that breaks the soul down into atoms, we are all alike. But if the self and its uniqueness cannot be grasped in man's interior life, then where and how can we grasp it?
Photograph of Milan Kundera

by Aaron Manheimer
C.S.: Can it be grasped?

M.K.: Certainly not. The quest for the self has always ended, and always will end, in a paradoxical dissatisfaction. I don’t say defeat. For the novel cannot breach the limits of its own possibilities, and bringing those limits to light is already an immense discovery, an immense triumph of cognition. Nonetheless, after having reached the depths involved in the detailed exploration of the self’s interior life, the great novelists began—consciously or unconsciously—to seek a new orientation. We often hear of the holy trinity of the modern novel: Proust, Joyce, Kafka. Yet in my own personal history of the novel, it is Kafka who provided this new orientation: a post-Proustian orientation. His way of conceiving the self is totally unexpected. What is it that defines K. as a unique being? By neither his physical appearance (we know nothing about that), nor his biography (we don’t know it), nor his name (he has none), nor his memories, his predilections, his complexes. By his behavior? His field of action is lamentably limited. By his thoughts? Yes, Kafka unceasingly traces K.’s reflections, but these are bent exclusively on the current situation: What should be done then and there, in the immediate circumstances? Go to the interrogation or dodge it? Obey the summons of the priest or not? All of K.’s interior life is absorbed by the situation he finds himself trapped in, and nothing that might refer beyond that situation (K.’s memories, his metaphysical reflections, his notions about other people) is revealed to us. For Proust, a man’s interior universe comprises a miracle, an infinity that never ceases to amaze us. But that is not Kafka’s amazement. He does not ask himself what the internal motivations are that determine man’s behavior. He asks a question that is radically different: What possibilities remain for man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that internal impulses no longer carry weight? Indeed, how could it have changed K.’s destiny and attitude if he had had, say, homosexual inclinations or an unhappy love affair behind him? In no way.

C.S.: That’s what you say in The Unbearable Lightness of Being: “The novel is not the author’s confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.” But what does that mean, trap?
M.K.: That life is a trap—well, that we’ve always known. We are born without having asked to be, locked in a body we never chose, and destined to die. On the other hand, the wideness of the world used to provide a constant possibility of escape. A soldier could desert from the army and start another life in a neighboring country. Suddenly, in our century, the world is closing around us. The decisive event in that transformation of the world into a trap was surely the 1914 war, called (and for the first time in history) a world war. Wrongly “world.” It involved only Europe, and not all of Europe at that. But the adjective “world” expresses all the more eloquently the sense of horror before the fact that, henceforward, nothing that occurs on the planet will be a merely local matter, that all catastrophes concern the entire world, and that consequently we are more and more determined by external conditions, by situations no one can escape, and which, more and more, make us resemble one another.

But understand me: If I locate my own work outside the so-called psychological novel, that does not mean that I wish to deprive my characters of an interior life. It means only that there are other enigmas, other questions that my novels pursue primarily. Nor does it mean that I oppose those novels fascinated by psychology. The change in the situation since Proust, in fact, makes me nostalgic. Along with Proust, an enormous beauty is moving slowly out of our reach—forever and irretrievably. Gombrowicz had an idea, as comical as it is ingenious: The weight of our self, he said, has to do with the size of the population on the planet. Thus Democritus represented a four hundred millionth of humanity; Brahms a billionth; Gombrowicz himself, a two billionth. According to that calculation, the weight of the Proustian infinitude—the weight of a self, of a self’s interior life—becomes lighter and lighter. And in that race toward lightness, we have crossed a fateful boundary.

C.S.: “The unbearable lightness” of the self is your obsession, beginning with your earliest writings. I’m thinking of Laughable Loves—for example, the story “Edward and God.” After his first night of love with the young Alice, Edward is seized by a bizarre discomfort, one that is decisive for him: he looks at his girl and thinks “that her convictions were in fact only something extraneous to her fate, and her fate only something extraneous to her body. He saw her as an accidental conjunction of a body, thoughts, and a life’s course; an inorganic
conjunction, arbitrary and unstable.” And again in another story, “The Hitchhiking Game,” in the final paragraphs of the tale, the girl is so upset by her uncertain hold on her identity that she sobs, “I am me, I am me, I am me . . .”

M.K.: In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Tereza is looking at herself in the mirror. She wonders what would happen if her nose were to grow a millimeter longer per day. How long would it take for her face to become unrecognizable? And if her face no longer looked like Tereza, would Tereza still be Tereza? Where does the self begin and end? You see: No wonderment at the immeasurable infinity of the soul; rather, wonderment at the uncertain nature of the self and of its identity.

C.S.: There is a complete absence of interior monologue in your novels.

M.K.: Joyce set a microphone within Bloom’s head. Thanks to the fantastic espionage of interior monologue, we have learned an enormous amount about what we are. But, myself, I cannot use that microphone.

C.S.: In Ulysses, interior monologue pervades the entire novel; it is the ground of its construction, the dominant process. Could we say that, in your work, philosophical meditation plays that role?

M.K.: I find the word “philosophical” inappropriate. Philosophy develops its thought in an abstract realm, without characters, without situations.

C.S.: You begin The Unbearable Lightness of Being by reflecting on Nietzsche’s eternal return. What’s that but a philosophical idea developed abstractly, without characters, without situations?

M.K.: Not at all! That reflection introduces directly, from the very first line of the novel, the fundamental situation of a character—Tomas; it sets out his problem: the lightness of existence in a world where there is no eternal return. You see, we’ve finally come back to our question: What lies beyond the so-called psychological novel? Or put another
way: What is the non-psychological means to apprehend the self? To apprehend the self in my novels means to grasp the essence of its existential problem. To grasp its existential code. As I was writing The Unbearable Lightness of Being, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words. For Tereza: body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas: lightness, weight. In the part called "Words Misunderstood," I examine the existential codes of Franz and of Sabina by analyzing a number of words: woman, fidelity, betrayal, music, darkness, light, parades, beauty, country, cemetery, strength. Each of these words has a different meaning in the other person's existential code. Certainly, the existential code is not examined in abstracto; it reveals itself progressively in the action, in the situations. Take Life Is Elsewhere, the third part: the hero, the bashful Jaromil, is still a virgin. One day, he is out walking with a girl who suddenly lays her head on his shoulder. He is overcome with happiness and even physically excited. I pause over that mini-event and note: "The pinnacle of happiness Jaromil had experienced up to this point in his life was having a girl's head on his shoulder." And from that I try to grasp Jaromil's erotic nature: "A girl's head meant more to him than a girl's body." Which does not mean, I make clear, that he was indifferent to the body, but "he didn't long for the nudity of a girlish body; he longed for a girlish face illumined by the nudity of her body. He didn't long to possess a girl's body; he longed to possess the face of a girl who would yield her body to him as proof of her love." I try to give a name to that attitude. I choose the word "tenderness." And I examine the word: just what is tenderness? I arrive at successive answers: "Tenderness comes into being at the moment when life propels a man to the threshold of adulthood. He anxiously realizes all the advantages of childhood which he had not appreciated as a child." And then: "Tenderness is the fear instilled by adulthood." And then a further definition: Tenderness is the creation of "a tiny artificial space in which it is mutually agreed that we would treat others as children." You see, I don't show you what happens inside Jaromil's head; rather, I show what happens inside my own. I observe my Jaromil for a long while, and I try, step by step, to get to the heart of his attitude, in order to understand it, name it, grasp it.

In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Tereza lives with Tomas, but her love requires a mobilization of all her strength, and suddenly she can't go on, she wants to retreat "down below," to where she came
from. And I ask myself: What goes on with her? And this is the answer I find: She is overcome by vertigo. But what is vertigo? I look for a definition and I say: “A heady, insuperable longing to fall.” But immediately I correct myself, I sharpen the definition: “Vertigo is the intoxication of the weak. Aware of his weakness, a man decides to give in rather than stand up to it. He is drunk with weakness, wishes to grow even weaker, wishes to fall down in the middle of the main square in front of everybody, wishes to be down, lower than down.” Vertigo is one of the keys to understanding Tereza. It’s not the key to understanding you or me. And yet both of us know that sort of vertigo at least as a possibility for us, one of the possibilities of existence. I had to invent Tereza, an “experimental ego,” to understand that possibility, to understand vertigo.

But it isn’t merely particular situations that are thus investigated; the whole novel is nothing but one long investigation. Meditative investigation (investigative meditation) is the basis on which all my novels are constructed. Look at Life Is Elsewhere. The original title of that novel was The Lyrical Age. I changed it at the last minute under pressure from friends who found it insipid and forbidding. I was foolish to give in to them. Actually, I think it’s a very good thing to name a novel for its main category. The Joke. The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Even Laughable Loves. That title should not be taken in the sense of “amusing love stories.” The idea of love is always associated with seriousness. But the category laughable love is that of love stripped of seriousness. A critical notion for modern man. But to return to Life Is Elsewhere: That novel rests on certain questions: What is the lyrical attitude? How is youth a lyrical age? What is the meaning of the triad lyricism—revolution—youth? And what is it to be a poet? I remember having begun that novel with, as my working hypothesis, the definition I set down in my notebook: “The poet is a young man whose mother leads him to display himself to a world he cannot enter.” You see, that definition is neither sociological, nor esthetic, nor psychological.

C.S.: It’s phenomenological.

M.K.: The adjective isn’t bad, but I forbid myself to use it. I’m too fearful of the professors for whom art is only a derivative of philosophical and theoretical trends. The novel dealt with the unconscious before
Freud, the class struggle before Marx, it practiced phenomenology (the investigation of the essence of human situations) before the phenomenologists. What superb “phenomenological descriptions” in Proust, who never knew a phenomenologist!

C.S.: Let’s summarize so far: There are several means for grasping the self. First, through action. Next, through interior life. As for yourself, you declare: the self is determined by the essence of its existential problem. This view has a number of consequences for your work. For example, your insistence on understanding the essence of situations seems to render useless to your mind all descriptive techniques. You say almost nothing about the physical appearance of your characters. And since the investigation of psychological motives interests you less than the analysis of situations, you are also very parsimonious about your characters’ past. Doesn’t the overly abstract nature of your narration risk making your characters less lifelike?

M.K.: Try asking that same question of Kafka or Musil. In fact, it was asked of Musil. Even some highly cultivated minds complained that he was not a true novelist. Walter Benjamin admired his intelligence but not his art. Edouard Roditi found his characters lifeless and suggested he take Proust as his model: how alive and real Madame Verdurin is, he says, compared with Diotima! Indeed, two centuries of psychological realism have created some nearly inviolable standards: (1) A writer must give the maximum amount of information about a character: about his physical appearance, his way of speaking and behaving; (2) he must let the reader know a character’s past, because that is where all the motives for his present behavior are located; and (3) the character must have complete independence; that is to say, the author with his own considerations must disappear so as not to disturb the reader, who wants to give himself over to illusion and take fiction for reality. Now, Musil broke that old contract between the novel and the reader. And so did other writers along with him. What do we know about the physical appearance of Esch, Broch’s greatest character? Nothing. Except that he has big teeth. What do we know about K.’s childhood, or Schweik’s? And neither Musil, nor Broch, nor Gombrowicz were at all uncomfortable about being present as minds in their novels. A character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental ego. In that way the novel reconnects with
its beginnings. Don Quixote is practically unthinkable as a living being. And yet, in our memory, what character is more alive? Understand me, I don't mean to scorn the reader and his desire, as naive as it is legitimate, to be carried away by the novel's imaginary world and to confuse it occasionally with reality. But I don't see that the technique of psychological realism is indispensable for that. I first read The Castle when I was fourteen years old. At that same period I admired an ice hockey player who lived near us. I imagined K. as looking like him. I still see him that way today. What I mean is that the reader's imagination automatically completes the writer's. Is Tomas dark or fair? Was his father rich or poor? Choose for yourself!

C.S.: But you don't always follow that rule: in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Tomas has virtually no past, but Tereza is presented not merely with her own childhood but her mother's as well!

M.K.: In the novel, you will find this sentence: "Her entire life was merely a continuation of her mother's, much as the course of a ball on the billiard table is merely the continuation of the player's arm movement." If I talk about the mother, then, it's not in order to set down data on Tereza, but because the mother is her main theme, because Tereza is the "continuation of her mother" and suffers from it. We also know that she has small breasts with areolae that are "very large, very dark circles around her nipples," as if they were "painted by a primitivist of pornography for the poor"; that information is absolutely necessary because her body is another of Tereza's main themes. By contrast, where Tomas, her husband, is concerned, I tell nothing about his childhood, nothing about his father, his mother, his family. And his body, as well as his face, remain completely unknown to us because the essence of his existential problem is rooted in other themes. That lack of information does not make him the less "living." Because making a character "alive" means getting to the bottom of his existential problem. Which, in turn, means: getting to the bottom of the situations, the motifs, even the words that shape him. Nothing more.

C.S.: Your conception of the novel, then, could be defined as a poetic meditation on existence. Yet your novels have not always been understood in that way. They contain many political events that have provoked sociological, historical, or ideological interpretations.
do you reconcile your interest in social history with your conviction that a novel examines primarily the enigma of existence?

**M.K.:** Heidegger characterizes existence by an extremely well-known formulation: *in-der-Welt-sein*, being-in-the-world. Man does not relate to the world as subject to object, as eye to painting; not even as actor to stage set. Man and the world are bound like the snail to its shell: the world is part of man, it is his dimension, and, as the world changes, existence (*in-der-Welt-sein*) changes as well. Since Balzac, the world of our being has a historical nature and characters' lives unfold in a realm of time marked by dates. The novel can never rid itself of that legacy from Balzac. Even Gombrowicz, who invents fantastical, improbable stories, who violates all the rules of verisimilitude, cannot escape it. His novels take place in a time that has a date and is thoroughly historical. But two things should not be confused: there is on the one hand the novel that examines the historical dimension of human existence, and on the other the novel that is the illustration of a historical situation, the description of a society at a given moment, a novelized historiography. You're familiar with all those novels about the French Revolution, about Marie Antoinette, or about the year 1914, about collectivization in the USSR (for or against it), or about the year 1984; all those are popularizations that translate non-novelistic knowledge into the language of the novel. Well, I'll never tire of repeating with Broch: the novel's single *raison d'être* is to say what only the novel can say.

**C.S.:** But what specifically can the novel say about history? Or, what is your way of treating history?

**M.K.:** Here are some of my own principles. First: All historical circumstances I treat with the greatest economy. I behave toward history like the set designer who constructs an abstract set out of the few items indispensable to the action.

Second principle: Of the historical circumstances, I keep only those that create a revelatory existential situation for my characters. Example: In *The Joke*, Ludvik sees all his friends and colleagues raise their hands to vote, with complete ease, his exclusion from the university and thus to topple his life. He is certain that they would, if necessary, have voted with the same ease to hang him. Whence his definition
of man: a being capable in any situation of consigning his neighbor to
death. Ludvik’s fundamental anthropological experience thus has his-
torical roots, but the description of the history itself (the role of the
Party, the political bases of terror, the organization of social institu-
tions, etc.) does not interest me and you will not find it in the novel.

Third principle: Historiography writes the history of society, not of
man. That is why the historical events my novels talk about are often
ignored by historiography. Example: In the years that followed the 1968
Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the reign of terror against the pub-
lic was preceded by officially organized massacres of dogs. An episode
totally forgotten and without importance for a historian, for a political
scientist, but of the utmost anthropological significance! By this one
episode alone I suggested the historical climate of The Farewell Par-
y. Another example: At the crucial point of Life Is Elsewhere, history
intervenes, in the form of an inelegant and shabby pair of undershorts;
there were no others to be had at the time; faced with the loveliest
erotic occasion of his life, Jaromil, for fear of looking ridiculous in his
shorts, dares not undress and takes flight instead. Inelegance! Another
historical circumstance forgotten and yet how important for the person
obliged to live under a Communist regime.

But it is the fourth principle that goes furthest: Not only must
historical circumstance create a new existential situation for a character
in a novel, but history itself must be understood and analyzed as an
existential situation. Example: In The Unbearable Lightness of Being,
Alexander Dubcek—after being arrested by the Russian Army, kid-
napped, jailed, threatened, forced to negotiate with Brezhnev—returns
to Prague. He speaks over the radio, but he cannot speak, he loses his
breath, in mid-sentence he makes long, awful pauses. What this histo-
cal episode reveals for me (an episode, by the way, completely forgot-
ten because, two hours later, the radio technicians were made to cut the
painful pauses out of his speech) is weakness. Weakness as a very
general category of existence: “Any man confronted with superior
strength is weak, even if he has an athletic body like Dubcek’s.” Tereza
cannot bear the spectacle of that weakness, which repells and humili-
ates her, and she prefers to emigrate. But faced with Tomas’s infidel-
ities, she is like Dubcek faced with Brezhnev: disabled and weak. And
you know already what vertigo is: intoxication with one’s own weak-
ness, the insuperable desire to fall. Tereza abruptly understands that
“she belonged among the weak, in the camp of the weak, in the coun-
try of the weak, and that she had to be faithful to them precisely because they were weak and gasped for breath in the middle of sentences.” And, intoxicated with weakness, she leaves Tomas and returns to Prague, back to the “city of the weak.” Here the historical situation is not a background, a stage set before which human situations unfold; it is itself a human situation, a growing existential situation.

Similarly, the Prague Spring in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is not described in its politico-historico-social aspect but as a fundamental existential situation: man (a generation of men) acts (makes a revolution), but his action slips out of his control, ceases to obey him (the revolution rages, kills, destroys); he thereupon does his utmost to recapture and subdue that disobedient act (a new generation starts an opposition, reformist movement), but in vain. Once out of our hands, the act can never be recaptured.

C.S.: Which recalls the situation of Jacques le Fataliste that you discussed at the beginning.

M.K.: But this time, it’s a matter of a collective, historical situation.

C.S.: To understand your novels, is it important to know the history of Czechoslovakia?

M.K.: No. Whatever needs to be known of it the novel itself tells.

C.S.: Reading novels doesn’t presume an historical knowledge?

M.K.: We have the history of Europe. From the year 1000 up to our time, that has been a single common experience. We are part of that and our every action, individual or national, only reveals its crucial significance when set in that context. I can understand Don Quixote without knowing the history of Spain. I cannot understand it without some idea, however general, of Europe’s historical experience—of its age of chivalry, for instance, of courtly love, of the shift from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era.

C.S.: In Life Is Elsewhere, each phase of Jaromil’s life is seen against fragments from the biographies of Rimbaud, Keats, Lermontov,
and so on. The May First Parade in Prague is confounded with the May 1968 student demonstrations in Paris. Thus you create for your hero a huge scene that encompasses the whole of Europe. Still, your novel takes place in Prague. It ends with the Communist putsch in 1948.

M.K.: For me, it is the novel of the European revolution as such, in condensed form.

C.S.: European revolution—that putsch? And imported, what’s more, from Moscow?

M.K.: However inauthentic it was, that putsch was experienced as a revolution. With all its rhetoric, its illusions, reflexes, actions, crimes, I see it today as a parody condensation of the European revolutionary tradition. As the continuation and grotesque fulfillment of the era of European revolutions. Just as the hero of that book, Jaromil—the “continuation” of Victor Hugo and Rimbaud—is the grotesque fulfillment of European poetry. Jaroslav, in The Joke, continues the age-old history of popular art at a time when that art is vanishing. Doctor Havel, in Laughable Loves, is a Don Juan at a time when Don Juanism is no longer possible. Franz, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, is the last melancholy echo of the Grand March of the European left. And Tereza in her obscure village in Bohemia is withdrawing not only from all the public life of her country but also “from the road along which mankind, ‘the master and proprietor of nature,’ marches onward.” All these characters fulfill not only their personal histories but also the suprapersonal history of the European experience.

C.S.: Which means that your novels take place in the last act of the Modern Era, which you call the “period of terminal paradoxes.”

M.K.: If you like. But let’s avoid any misunderstanding. When I wrote Havel’s story in Laughable Loves, I had no intention of describing a Don Juan in a time when the adventure of Don Juanism was ending. I was writing a story I found comical. That’s all. All these reflections on terminal paradoxes, etcetera, did not precede my novels, but proceeded from them. It was while I was writing The Unbearable Lightness of Being that—inspired by my characters, all of whom are in some fashion withdrawing from the world—I thought of the fate of
Descartes' famous formulation: man as "master and proprietor of nature." Having brought off miracles in science and technology, this "master and proprietor" is suddenly realizing that he owns nothing and is master neither of nature (it is vanishing, little by little, from the planet), nor of history (it has escaped his grip), nor of himself (he is led by the irrational forces of his soul). But if God is gone and if man is no longer master, then who is master? The planet is moving through the void, without any master. There it is, the unbearable lightness of being.

C.S.: Still, isn't it an egocentric mirage to see the present time as the special moment, the most important moment of all—that is, the moment of the end? How many times already has Europe believed it was living through its end, its apocalypse!

M.K.: Among all those terminal paradoxes, there is also the one of the end itself. When a phenomenon proclaims, far in advance, its imminent disappearance, many of us know and perhaps even regret it. But when the agony draws to a close, we are already looking elsewhere. The death becomes invisible. It's some time now since the river, the nightingale, the paths through the fields have disappeared from man's mind. When nature disappears from the planet tomorrow, who will notice? Where are the successors of Octavio Paz, of René Char? Where are the great poets now? Have they vanished, or is it only that their voices have grown inaudible? In any case, our Europe, formerly unthinkable without its poets, is immensely changed. But if man has lost the need for poetry, will he notice when it disappears? The end is not an apocalyptic explosion. There may be nothing so quiet as the end.

C.S.: Granted. But if one thing is ending, we might suppose that something else is beginning.

M.K.: Certainly.

C.S.: But what is it that's beginning? That doesn't show in your novels. Whence the doubt: are you seeing only half of our historical situation?

M.K.: It's possible, but that isn't so very grave. Indeed, it's important to understand what a novel is. An historian tells you about events
that have taken place. By contrast, Raskolnikov’s crime never saw the light of day. A novel examines not life but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he’s capable of. Novelists draw up the map of existence by discovering this or that human possibility. But again, to exist means: “being-in-the-world.” Both the character and his world must be understood as possibilities. In Kafka, all that is clear: the Kafkan world is like no known reality, it is an extreme and unrealized possibility of the human world. It’s true that this possibility shows faintly from behind our own real world and seems to prefigure our future. That’s why they speak of Kafka’s prophetic dimension. But even if his novels had nothing prophetic about them, they would not lose their value, because they grasp one possibility of existence (a possibility for man and for his world) and thereby make us see what we are, of what we are capable.

C.S.: But your own novels are located in a world that is thoroughly real!

M.K.: Remember Broch’s The Sleepwalkers, a trilogy that encompasses thirty years of European history. For Broch, that history is clearly defined as a perpetual disintegration of values. The characters are locked into this process as in a cage and must find a way of living that suits the progressive disappearance of common values. Broch was, of course, convinced of the correctness of his historical judgment—that is, convinced that the possibility of the world he was describing was a possibility come true. But let’s try to imagine that he was mistaken and that parallel to this process of disintegration another process was at work, a positive development that Broch was unable to see. Would that make any difference to the value of The Sleepwalkers? No. Because the process of disintegration of values is an indisputable possibility of the human world. To understand man flung into the vortex of that process, to understand his gestures, his attitudes—that’s all that matters. Broch discovered an unknown new territory of existence. Territory of existence means possibility of existence. Whether or not that possibility becomes a reality is secondary.

C.S.: The period of terminal paradoxes where your novels are located must be considered, then, not as reality but as possibility?
**M.K.**: A possibility for Europe. A possible vision of Europe. A possible situation for man.

**C.S.**: But if you are trying to grasp a possibility rather than a reality, why take seriously the image you offer of Prague, for example, and of the events that occurred there?

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