On Milan Kundera
by CALVIN BEDIENT

On two photographs

Back jacket of The Unbearable Lightness of Being: his body muffled in a padded black raincoat, he is self-consciously and uncomfortably cocked, leg and arm, against a scuffed urban wall: an image of the novelist as mock scheming Samson, all shoulders and pushing limbs. On his face, beneath the enormous, waspish eyebrows, a smirk-smile says: Like everything else regarding that absurd creature, social man, this rite of posing is ridiculous.

Above the title of the interview “The Art of Fiction LXXXI” in the Paris Review 92 (Summer 1984): his arm extending before him on a table or a desk, one hand clutches the massive root of the other, the fingers of which extend up and splay out like the rooster’s comb of the bird-of-paradise flower-flora the novelist’s body creates out of itself as it remembers “life in Paradise,” a vegetal monotony that “bred happiness, not boredom” (The Unbearable Lightness of Being). Above this adjunctival tableau a face that, under its warm, caterpillar-on-leaf brows, beams back a lot of reflected light, plus an inner glow of agreeableness, of cooperation with the “media.” A likeable mug. Broad nosed. Full lips widening to where they seem to catch in the deep grooves winging out from each side of the nose, the crowned head of an Egyptian king in the shape thus inscribed, or a plump nun in a habit, a nun who smiles over the hands, recollecting the myth of a peaceable kingdom.

The Kundera of the first photograph is identical with the old-fashioned, incessantly “obtrusive” narrator of his fiction—a born instructor with lemon juice in his veins, perpetuator of the famous Czech sternness. He it is who has also authored a series of passionately serious, stunningly lucid and summatory essays and interviews that,
appearing in translation in American journals in recent years, and in
conjunction with his novels, have brought back into our consciousness
a sense of the historical momentousness of the novel.

This Kundera trusts nobody. Nothing escapes the withering glance
of his irony except art, memory, and animals—the first two for their
spiritual depth (such as it is), the third for a restful unconsciousness of
depth.

And as for art, perhaps he trusts only the novel, with its inveterate
skepticism, its “wisdom of uncertainty.” Particularly the central
European novel (Kafka, Broch, Musil, Hasek). Here he finds the great
enemy of “totalitarian Truth,” of the regimented abstraction that
“excludes relativity, doubt, questioning.” Here he finds “concrete
existence,” for instance “hated irony” and dialogue and jokes and “the
centuried roots of jazz” and benign patches of irrelevance, such as the
tongue of the bulldog in The Farewell Party “waving like a gay little
flag.”

The Kundera of the second photograph is the tender creator, in
particular, of two heroines, Tamina in The Book of Laughter and
Forgetting and Tereza in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. He would
sooner pick his hand than pick a flower. Being is as safe with him as
with anyone. His brilliant discursive flights are entertainment for her
vacant mind. His irony is a boyish show of muscle; he would like to
make even bitterness blossom into lyricism, to delight her ears.
(Indeed, he can hardly think except to sing.) His sentences are tersely
masculine just for her, teasingly rough caresses of the sandpaper tips of
his long, peculiarly long, fingers.

On not being serious

A novelist whose work has been banned for political reasons—as
Kundera’s has in Czechoslovakia—is naturally defensive about being
read politically. He wants to believe that his work “transcends”
politics; he wants to keep the children of his imagination out of danger.

Kundera’s other reason for categorizing his fiction as “hypothesis”
or “play” is his refusal of what Czeslaw Milosz, in The Captive Mind,
calls “enslavement through consciousness.” Logic may be limitingly
self-born, out of phase with “concrete existence.” A joke can set you
free.

Yet Kundera also believes that thinking can free the mind, and the
more he emerges as a formal authorial presence in his work, the more
he appears as one who incessantly thinks. What is the purpose of all this thought? Ludvik, in Kundera’s first novel, *The Joke*, thinks “that life in its day-to-day events speaks to us about itself, that it gradually reveals a secret, that it takes the form of a rebus whose message must be deciphered, that the stories we live in life comprise the mythology of our lives and in that mythology lies the key to truth and mystery.” He adds: “Is it all an illusion? Possibly, even probably, but I can’t seem to rid myself of the need to decipher my life continually.”* Kundera displays the same need, satisfying it through his characters, those “playful” elaborations of himself. His books are, then, serious play. They press “concrete existence” for its secrets; they are intent (as Kundera says great novels are) on making discoveries. On the other hand, the author defends them as being only playfully serious, because seriousness, in his experience, strong-arms concrete being. Marketa, in *The Joke*, with her “fatal inability to grasp any joke whatsoever,” is “the type of woman who takes everything seriously,” and this “made her totally at one with the spirit of the age.” Her “major gift from the fates was an aptitude for credulity.” Seriousness, then, is a form of stupidity. That being so, who would want to claim that his or her work is serious?

Can Kundera have it both ways? He cannot decipher without being serious; he cannot be serious without being stupid. At times, as will be noted more fully, I think he is stupid, and precisely because he appears overeager to be serious (this usually means a cynical thinker, with cynicism acting as a reverse form of credulity). But that, for the moment, is not the issue. The issue is the contradiction between the intention to use thought to gain freedom and the insistence, at the same time, that the medium of that thought, the novel, is not “a territory where one . . . make[s] assertions; it is a territory of play and of hypothesis.”

We can respect Kundera’s fine scruples, his flight from either suffering or inflicting enslavement of consciousness, while concluding that, where an author obtrudes as a thinker so frequently and piquantly as Kundera does, the distinction between play and assertion disappears. In a novel, an authorial assertion is precisely that; it may be relative to

*Not that Kundera—a guarded, non-committal man—turns the hermeneutic approach to existence into a passion, into poetry, as Melville does in *Moby-Dick*, or Michel Tournier in *The Ogre*. 

This content downloaded from 82.12.176.78 on Sun, 29 Jun 2014 11:18:29 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions
a concrete situation, but it is not automatically relativized by the novel “form,” which bears it along as the barge bore the preening Cleopatra. Only a character’s reflection may be lusciously changed by the medium of fiction, like an ice-cream bar when it is dipped into chocolate.

In any case, to assert is not to compel, whereas not to assert may be to abet the age’s stupidities. Thought that isn’t serious isn’t worth thinking—indeed, cannot be thought. Kundera is worth reading, quite largely, because he thinks, and because his thought would befriend “concrete existence.” (In fact, just as he is not gifted at laughter—his laughter is all pain—so he is no great friend to the flesh. In this, he is the opposite of Joyce. His special love is for the trembling or embittered “I.” But more on this later.) Kundera’s thinking is a continual agitation against received ideas, as exciting and alarming to break into as a hornet’s nest, and as multiple, as incessantly active. This author may make himself audible in his work as an earnest that it is only fiction, but the result is the opposite: the fiction becomes serious because he, Milan Kundera, being in the midst of it, is savagely caring.

**Reverse kitsch**

For Kundera, the novel is an aggressive complexity, a kitsch-destroyer. (Kitsch: a sentimental group lie.) It is, precisely, rebelliously intelligent. A Boston Tea Party of a genre, a defiance against the taxation of ideological absolutisms, a serious mischief of both conceptual and formal complication, it is ethical to the degree that it remains an axiological gadfly, to the degree that its aesthetics disorient and buzz.

If this puts it precariously on the offensive, if it makes an affirmation of “being” hard to get to (but Kundera has never promised an *affirmation*), it also creates the hazard of reverse kitsch.

Reverse kitsch is the meaning of the smirk of the Kundera in the first photograph. If kitsch excludes shit, the kitsch-denier must shovel some into his work, as a lesson.

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* begins, as if wanting to be unbearably, heavily frank, with an example. The first brief section concludes:

> Not long ago, I caught myself experiencing a most incredible sensation. Leafing through a book on Hitler, I was
touched by some of his portraits; they reminded me of my childhood. I grew up during the war; several members of my family perished in Hitler's concentration camps; but what were their deaths compared with the memories of a lost period in my life, a period that would never return?

This reconciliation with Hitler reveals the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return, for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted.

This analysis coarsely equates "my childhood" and the deaths of relatives ("my family"). Childhood and Hitler. To long for the first, it is implied, is to long for the second ("I was touched by some of his portraits"). But the meaning of the first is life (the puer eternus, once below a time, the unspilt seed); and the meaning of the second, death. The first relates to what is essential to the speaker, the "I" climbing up to exult in its first tree-crotch, whereas the second was, to the child, a temporal rustle of contingency.

What explains this leveling of legitimate, of just, distinctions? Does Kundera want to be antilyrical at any cost, brutal toward the "heart" for its failure to be entirely virtuous? The phrase "this reconciliation with Hitler" is dishonest. To begin with, an exaggeration. Second, a reification: a once-and-for-all status conferred on a passing emotion. There is a further confusion between pardon and cynicism. The first combines bewilderment and charity. The second is all weary condemnation.

Yes, it seems that Kundera wants us to look with him into his heart and see the monster there, the one produced by "the nonexistence of return." Diametrically opposed to the stupidity of Marxist or republican progressiveness, he keeps up an open fire on the unbearable lightness of existing only once (i.e., not only is there no recurrence or progression, but, bewilderingly experimental and fugitive, life never gains enough certainty and solidity to be heavy, to be real, to be just).

"We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come"—this thought is characteristically arresting, but listen to its undermessage: "this one life is not worth living." It makes short shrift of the imaginative extensions of experience in literature, of the lessons of history, of the pragmatic guidelines of organic societies, and of learning from one's own past mistakes.
Life: a tabula rasa. A grief of uncertainty. Perversely attached to its own imperfect past, so as to thicken itself with duration. And so everything is pardoned in advance, or at least in retrospect. Everything is cynically permitted. The thinking in all this is darkly, anti-sentimentally slick, not really thinking, but topsy-turvy kitsch.

Mystifications

Kundera feels “an irresistible desire to demystify myths” (“Conversation with Milan Kundera,” The Threepenny Review, Winter 1986). That is, he has the aggressive and melancholy soul of a novelist. He has also a penchant for dramatic philosophy, a contradiction in terms whose folly he does not escape.

The opening pages of The Unbearable Lightness of Being form a mare’s nest of “brilliant”—of stage-conscious—ideas. There is space to take up a few of them:

1. “In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make.” This idea assumes that we ourselves determine what will eternally recur (as opposed to being determined). And Nietzsche did indeed suggest that “your most solid center of gravity” should be the thought that, whatever you will, will its eternal return. But a solid center of gravity is a sustaining weight, not an unbearable one.

The ethical gravity of the ideal of eternal return is not “why Nietzsche called the idea the heaviest of burdens.” Rather, Nietzsche understood that recurrence could only fake Being (Being as what stands). The relentless sewing machine of becoming could whir and whir as long as it liked, but would lack thread for its needle.

In the world of the eternal recurrence of the same, every move we made would be emptied, lightened, by the demon of duplication, with his taunt: “To repeat is not the same as Being in and for itself; it is to die a hundred thousand times.”

Suppose that Gilles Deleuze is right when, in Nietzsche and Philosophy, he says that Nietzschean eternal return is the strict opposite of a circle that makes the same return, that what returns is active becoming itself, so active that it is being. Then the idea is indistinguishable from the great theme of the novel, namely the burden of “living only one life,” a theme that only the Dionysian artist can make soar.
2. “If eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness.” How fortunate that eternal return is only a “myth,” how splendid to live only one life. The pictorial appeal of contrast (“can stand out against”) lures Kundera into this patent insincerity.

3. “Parmenides . . . saw the world divided into pairs of opposites: light/darkness, fineness/coarseness, warmth/cold, being/nonbeing.” Again: Parmenides judged “lightness . . . positive, weight negative.” But in point of fact miracle-minded Parmenides corrected those taken in by “the deceptive order of my words,” those who “divided form contrariwise and established characters apart from one another.” Name two opposites: “There is nothing that does not belong to either. Being is indivisible” (“ungenerated, imperishable, whole, unique, immovable, and complete”).

No philosopher of Being more divinely antidivisional than Parmenides. What a pity to see his pure white egg of a theory (too good, of course, for this world) broken on the edge of Kundera’s sizzling habit of logical dualism.

4. “What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?” If eternal return exists, we cannot choose lightness; if we live only once, we cannot, so Kundera insists, choose weight. What, then, is there to choose?

But the impulse behind Kundera’s question is not merely to make us tense with the drama of a choice; the obscure impulse is to recognize that, if we trust the tale and not the teller, weight (or the unavoidable “myth” of weight) is crucial. For I suggest that Kundera’s novel discovers not the unbearable lightness, but the scarcely bearable burden, of living (living once only).

Consider Tomas: this donkey of a character bears several rocks in his panier: his passion for surgery, his passion for women (for the “‘I’ [that] hides itself,” for “what is unimaginable about a person”), and his passion for truth, which underlies the other two passions and which leads to his seditious, ruinous article on Oedipus’ willful blindness to the truth.

Or consider Tereza: this sweet little donkey is terribly burdened by the need for a master (master of her soul and master of her body). Her “‘I’” is sunk like a trapped diver, and only Tomas (such is her destiny) could possibly free her, releasing her lungs to the unbearable lightness of metaphysical air (her unique being awaits his detection of her unique
flesh). In short, she is rather horribly referenced to one man, a man whose passion for discovery exceeds her, leaving her deserted, inert.

Sabina, Tomas's mistress, is burdened by the need to betray others. Franz, whose mistress she becomes, bears every leftist's burden, the myth of the march of history, the need to keep faith with everyone.

The unbearable lightness of being is a myth—a metaphysical fancy. Implicit in the oxymoron "unbearable lightness" is the paradox of a lightness too heavy to be borne. This is a negative inversion of Parmenidean indivisibility: opposites meet, because neither offers any support to being.

**Kunderean thought**

All told, Kundera's thinking is, as intimated, an ambivalent mixture of motives, plus a proposition. Cynical antilyricism accounts for its glumness; a dramatic sense of important fresh discovery for its flair; a sensual love of shaping a sharp-edged idea for its piercing concision; hope in its potentially freeing results, for its quite remarkable salience and watchfulness; the need to escape from traps (e.g., central Europe) for an occasional blithe myth.

At its worst, it might be labeled Contra-Sweet ("Physical love is unthinkable without violence"; "if we have one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all"). At its best, as in his essays, it is an elegance of forceful, plain persuasion. In between it belongs to that bastard category, the provocative ("The individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress"; "If a love is to be unforgettable, fortuities must immediately start fluttering down to it like birds to Francis of Assisi's shoulder")—thoughts that flutter down to us, impose their delicate, alien lightness of weight, and then fly off.

Hypothetical? For the most part, his style of thinking eschews conditionality and qualifiers—phrases like "for the most part" and writerly, pressed-flower words like "eschews." It means to bite, to have instant, hard effect.

**Attack and dodge**

Cognitive totalization? Leave that to the enemy, who loves it as a path back to a lost paradise.

Kundera's two masterpieces, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, are like territories that defy
mapping, that refuse to be small cohesive nations that can be wiped out by the squat tanks of a lineal, ideological paradisaicismp.

In the sense developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *On the Line*, the novels are continually self-decentering rhizomes—iris-stands with a stemmed flow-head here, another there, and so on, all springing from the same promiscuous self-multiplying root (a root with a passion for the lateral). The contrast between Kundera’s habit of reductive binary differentiations (body and soul, east and west, and so on) and the open circles, the broken chains, the deterritorializations and reterritorializations of his masterpieces (in terms echoed from *On the Line*) is peculiar.

In fact, however, the first serves as the means to the second. Kundera’s way of creating a fictional map (and not a tracing: “a map is opposed to the trace . . . because its whole orientation is toward establishing contact with the real experimentally”) [Deleuze and Guattari] is to externalize his subject matter (lives, events) by placing it under the burning glass (under several in turn) of “universal ideas.” Two twice-occurring chapter headings in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*—“Lightness and Weight,” “Soul and Body”—read like entries indexed in a philosophical dictionary. Other titles, in both books, announce not fictional “concreteness” but themes, ideas (“Words Misunderstood,” “The Grand March,” “Karenin’s Smile,” “The Angels,” “Litost,” “The Border”). Afraid of creating a climate like Dostoevsky’s “a universe where everything turns into feeling . . ., where feelings are promoted to the rank of value and of truth” (in words from the Introduction to *Jacques and his Master*); determined to be a Cartesian nut that no one, that nothing, can crack, Kundera invents fictions whose multiplicities are defined and united by means of “outside” lines, the flight of his own authorially elaborated ideas, themselves multiple. His texts are thus opposed in every way to the classical or romantic book, which, as Deleuze and Guattari observe, is “constituted by the interiority of a substance or a subject.” If Kundera himself is present, it is not as a universe of feeling, but as an activity of thought.

In what Schoenberg called “developing variation,” as Theodore W. Adorno observed, “intellectualization becomes a technical principle.” The result is that “all develops more concentratedly and more rapidly than is deemed acceptable by the sluggish habits of culinary [consumption]; polyphony functions with real parts.” Like
Schoenberg’s art, Kundera’s is one of “identity in nonidentity,” in which, “amid radical change, melodic economy prevails.”

Unlike Schoenberg’s art, however, Kundera’s is not, in Frederic Jameson’s terms, “symptomatic of an objective tendency in the socio-economic structure,” of “an inhuman systematization of the world itself.” It is not organized down to the least phrase, straitjacketing. What the various ideas compose, at any rate, is less a system than a grid, through which the characters are viewed (our nose pressed to the screen) but not captured.

Like Beethoven melody, a typical Kundera paragraph forms a short-lived synthesis of the functional (the development of an idea) and the expressive (the “poetry” of unique experience). But that it is disposed with a view to the whole structure of a chapter, as well as to social structure, does not keep it from seeming, tough luck, alone, indeed bereft.

Kundera’s serial compositions (avoiding what he calls the “key signature” of unity of action, that “king’s court in miniature”) are the likely fictional home of those displaced from power, those who no longer belong, those experiencing cultural and personal vertigo.

The gain reciprocal with this forlornness is a certain deceptive dodging of the external reign of necessity. Kundera’s ideational orientations relieve him of the burden of singleness of action, with its passive, unbroken, and “unbearable” submissions (when the action is novel length) to inexorable orders, not least temporality. A rhizomic structure does not, and cannot, end: its proliferation through segmentation or reterritorialization (that enchantment, that serial eternity) simply leaves off . . . Kundera’s architectonics are important to him—as contrapuntal “music,” as a victory over the political marketing and miring of ideas, over death—and they are subtle enough; but, and this is their secret aim, they never create the expectation of a certain formal satisfaction that they subsequently disappoint, as disappoint they inevitably would.

Are the two novels in question aesthetic triumphs, at least where “architectonic clarity” (in Kundera’s phrase) is concerned? I think not. They are radiant only because certain of their characters come to mean more than the ideas that illuminate them, and not because of any architectonic light. (Their architectonics break up the path of the light they contain.)

In particular, they end poorly. The Book of Laughter and Forgetting leaves off with Jan, a dully repulsive character, not least so
because he is conceived of as primarily sexual, hence biologically subject to repetition, bored. (Oh, Tamina, where are you, now that we have come to love you?) As for The Unbearable Lightness of Being, it drags to a nominal close with poor Karenin’s mute, doggy death, generating a nostalgia for the animal paradise of unreflective circular repetition—a fictional luxury, surely, in the shadow of the Hegelian harrow that advances on everything in the book, requiring from those in its path a sleepless cunning. (Besides, isn’t repetition boring? Isn’t Karenin Jan in canine form?)

From their scattered bushes, Kundera’s novels cry: “Life is not paradisal, and least of all when someone means to make it so. In the presence of a utopian idea, mock and jump clear.” Smelling the paradise of socialist brotherhood turns Kundera into a hornet with a rage to relativize space, to decenter it and break it up, to create a “vertiginous complexity,” to send the official picnickers packing. A negative role, perhaps, limited by its oppositional stance, its antiabsolutism that imposes a commitment to not making a commitment, its fondness for the idea that “in this world of iron laws there should remain a little human disorder” (“Symposium,” Laughable Loves).

So Kundera’s novels, piece by piece, sting and depart. Fleeing “revolutionary eschatology,” they leave themselves no future, even as they twist this way and then that to avoid their own, or the very thought of, death. (News of the deaths of Tomas and Tereza, who are crushed by the truck they were riding in after it goes off the road, reaches us in one chapter; in the next, they are back among the living, ignorant of the accident still ahead of them, revived by the mercy of the narrative’s own rhizomic flights from time.)

Novels so Czech after all, so discouragingly familiar with the forces that flatten and scatter, yet persisting, persisting.

Kundera’s art: (1) essentialization

What makes Kundera’s two masterpieces superior to his earlier work, in my view, is their essentializing (piercing, condensing) use of the “essayistic.” Analysis, here, is strength (such is its posture, its air of aggressive alertness). It incessantly and searchingly sifts the narrative material, both lightening it and, as if finding nuggets, locating its weight. It is selective, summatory, generalizing, and caring. (This last is a word that, though experiencing danger as it enters the
force field of Kundera’s irony, is necessary, and in the full
Heideggerian sense of a shepherding of Being. After the initial
shock—for Heideggerian Being is at once more an extasis and more
formal than anything suggested by Kundera—one sees the logic of the
latter’s homage, in his essay “The Novel and Europe” [The New York
Review of Books, July 19, 1984], to Heidegger’s “beautiful and almost
magical phrase ‘the forgetting of being,’ ” where the shared sense is
that this nihilistic lobotomization must be stopped.)

In Kundera’s mature art, nothing waits for its caring interpretation
(or the pained statement “I don’t know”). Everything is instantly
interrogated for its proximity to the “border” between being and
emptiness.

In a novelist of less burning care, of less elegance of intellect, of
less essentializing power, of more limited cultural experience, the
method might be a famine. With Kundera, it is meat and drink for
grown-up, human hunger, a breathtaking elimination of what he calls
“novelistic word-spinning,” “the automatism of novelistic technique.”

This development, so long overdue, so unforeseen, is part of his
complex achievement.

Kundera’s art: (2) co-feeling

The philosophical symposium would be Kundera’s ideal literary
form, were it not for his penchant—more, his creative passion—for
co-feeling. If he aspires to write, like Broch, a “gnoseological” novel,
the novel as above all “an act of cognition (of ‘gnosis’),” he wants at
the same time to create works of imaginative sympathy. For
“understanding means merging, identifying. That is the secret of
poetry. We burn in the . . . thought we espouse, we burn in the
landscape that moves us” (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting).

What is the good of co-feeling with others? How value it?

*In his preface to the American translation of The Joke, Kundera says: “Ever since
Madame Bovary, the art of the novel has been considered equal to the art of poetry, and
the novelist (any novelist worthy of the name) endows every word of his prose with the
uniqueness of the word in a poem.” But although The Joke is translated by the same
highly talented individual who translated The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The
Unbearable Lightness of Being (Michael Heim), it is prosy, whereas they are not. The
Farewell Party (translated by Peter Kussi) is prosy too, if relieved by numerous arresting
passages. Only the two recent novels have a piercingly fine touch throughout, The
Unbearable Lightness of Being especially, in the form of a moving condensation.
In *Jacques and His Master*, the master wonders “whether or not we’re good inventions,” and Jacques observes: “We should love the master who made us what we are. We’d be much happier if we loved him.” But how love him? Jacques and his master, because imperfect inventions, love and depend on one another.

Kundera loves his native country because it is an imperfect invention (too many masters). He loves it because it is weak. Tereza realizes “that she belonged among the weak, in the camp of the weak, in the country 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. She felt attracted by their weakness as by vertigo.” (Vertigo: “the intoxication of the weak,” “the desire to fall.”)

Tereza is weak, Tamina is weak: they must be loved, these allegorical figures of the soul as a small nation trying to avoid being overwhelmed—by the body, by alien erasures of culture, by time’s identity-smearing thumb.

Kundera’s genius for co-feeling is greatest in these two heroines of fragility. Yes, they must be loved, not for their weakness exactly, but for their vertigo. The characters for whom and to whom their respective novels were written (to expand on Kundera’s statement that *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is “a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina is absent, it is a novel for Tamina”), they are also the only characters who know too well the terror of being in a position to fall.

“‘It takes so little’—this the closing idea of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*—‘so infinitely little, for a person to cross the border beyond which everything loses meaning: love, convictions, faith, history.’ When Tamina enters the island of the children, the children torment her, not because they are bad, so the narrator says, but because she does not belong to their world. “If anyone is full of bitterness and hate, it is Tamina, not the children. Their desire to cause pain is positive, exuberant.” This Nietzschean valorization of the bad—as what is not “positive, exuberant”—is perverse. It makes a fetish of strength. For a moment, Kundera crosses the border beyond which weakness appears defensible, lovable. He loves the children, the idea of their organic potency. He abandons Tamina.

Tamina escapes the island, if only to drown in the attempt. The risk of being an “I” (the attempted, solo master of death) is the liability of growing weak, indeed the constant desire to go under, to give up.
The Cartesian fortress is a tower built on air, an effort to create strength on a foundation of weakness (of nothing).

Co-feeling can be from strength to strength, or from weakness to weakness. Kundera’s runs to the weakness of those who, remembering time and fighting death, have tried to found Being in the vigilance and loving powers of the “I.”

**Contra the “reign of mucus”**

Temperamentally, Kundera is a metaphysical (Cartesian) puritan whose works betray a loathing of sex and the body—the reduction of the former to comedy and nausea (has any male writer made male genitalia seem more alien to the women in his fiction?), of the latter to heavy or killable flesh. (If he is also a hedonist, as he has said, it is only secondarily, and sorrrily, and cynically.)

Tamina escapes the children’s island because her “I” wants to revive, to pull away from the children’s hot medium of flesh.

Kundera’s antipathy to youth-and-body culture, both east and west, glances at the stupidity of flesh from the privacy of a memory-quieted room. He predates—and, equally, postdates—the “process” philosophers (from the German romantics on) and their profound task of reconciling God and earth, soul and body. In his existential world, there is only the embattled, increasingly embittered “I am” (i.e., “I remember, I am attached to this and that: this is my spirituality, the unsleeping knowledge of death”). Kundera takes his place in the Socratic, rationalist tradition of irony, with its relentless suspicion of spontaneous life.

Hence, though he may aim for “phenomenological poetry” such as he honors in Broch (by citing a coldly ironical portrait of a woman in the throes of sex!), his fiction lacks descriptive appetite and trust, descriptive density and love.

But with Tereza and Tamina his skepticism toward the body at least softens into the poetry of compassion. He understands Tamina’s body through its loss of her husband’s love, and through the children’s impersonal curiosity. He understands Tereza’s body (as she comes to do) through the metaphor of the death camps, where it disappears toward anonymity and excrement.

His books mourn the flesh and its lost ticket to paradise. But, for all that, they are not elegiac; they are alive with what remains, the jealously independent “I.”
Kundera is not one of those, like Nietzsche, who beats the minutes to flush the “unhistorical.” He is a cultural, that is, a vulnerable man, difficultly checking (“everything cynically permitted”) a desire to fall.

**An unspoken utopia**

The value in defense of which Kundera writes is the self as “the sum of everything we remember”—as what resists death more savagely than can the blindly acquiescing flesh. And the particular potency of his position (as it unfolds in his novels) is his understanding that death is therefore as much a political as a biological or an ontological issue. Certain cultures are cultures of death. (Kitsch involves “organized forgetting.”) Kundera loves Europe, loves what Husserl called its “passion of knowing,” because it attempts to house, and always to quicken, the “I remember” (“forgetting is a form of death ever present in life”).

What does Kundera want above all? If he were to let himself go, to blurt out in a few unstoppable phrases what the country after his heart would consist of (besides fond familiar things, such as Janáček’s music, Broch’s and Kafka’s novels, etc.), it might be something like “a nation of supple and athletic minds, well trained, intuitive, used to depend on themselves.” The words in fact come from Whitman, who uttered them as what America might, with great cost, become—like Kundera, only more openly, with new ground to stand on, Whitman was a spokesman for Europe’s latest and most advanced and most probably improbable dream.

**Whither?**

“The process of the novel’s development has not yet come to an end. It is currently entering a new phase. For our era is characterized by an extraordinary complexity and a deepening in our perception of the world; there is an unusual growth in demands on human discernment, on mature objectivity and the critical faculty. These are features that will shape the further development of the novel as well.” (Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination*)

So it has done in Kundera, as in Broch. But what has become of the inspiriting affinity of the novel (the only genre to appear, as Bakhtin notes, after “writing and the book” and in the full historical light of day) with “development as a process”? The Kunderean “I,” which is
or wants to be more of the past than of the future, cannot encourage this folly (it finds historical "progress" too hateful). Hence what Bakhtin calls the "surplus of un-fleshed-out humanness" that even the novel, that fluid and swallowing form, always leaves disincarnate, as unrealized human possibility, cannot look, in him, to the future for its appeasement and place.

The burden of the unrealized is thrust on the author in his courageous assumption within his work of "the author's point of view," however he may dismiss this courage elsewhere as "play" or "entertainment." But human possibility is not happy, not hopeful there, and the experience of reading Kundera can indeed seem not only necessary for furthering "human discernment, . . . mature objectivity and the critical faculty" but also, in his own shameless hyperbole (one that tells all), "unbearable."