



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810
2006 • Vol. 6, No. 1

Milan Kundera on Politics and the Novel

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Abstract

This article examines Milan Kundera's perspective on politics and the mission of the novel. For him, the novelist can examine politics from outside, from the higher position of art and the novel. She can provide lucid comments on politics while resisting the siren song of shared political emotions and political ideologies. This article presents and then assesses the merits and limitations of this position.

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Si je devais me définir, je dirais que je suis un hédoniste piégé dans un monde politisé à l'extrême. Milan Kundera¹

This article examines Milan Kundera's perspective on the contrasting logics of art and politics. It is the product of a broader research project on the essayistic works of writers and intellectuals who participated actively in the political debates of their time while claiming to have the ability to examine the realm of politics from outside, fortified with the superior cognitive and moral elixir of art.²

¹ In translation: "If I had to define myself, I would say that I am an hedonist trapped in a world that is politicized to extremes." In Milan Kundera, Foreword to *Jacques and his Master, an Homage to Diderot in Three Acts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985 [1971]), quoted in Kvetoslav Chvatik, *Le monde romanesque de Milan Kundera*, translated from the German by Bernard Lortholary (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Arcades, 1995), 65. An earlier version of this article was presented in September 2005 at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association in Washington D.C. I wish to thank Michael Keren, Michael S. Kochin, Simon Snow, Alberto Spektorowski, and *History of Intellectual Culture's* anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and suggestions. Special thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its support.

² For useful discussions on the interplay between art and politics, see the special issue of *Millennium* on "Images and Narratives in World Politics" 30, 1 (2001); Roland Bleiker, "Pablo Neruda and the Struggle for Political Memory," *Third World Quarterly* 20, 6 (December 1999): 1129-42; and "'Why, Then, Is It So Bright?' Towards an Aesthetics of Peace at a Time of War," *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003): 387-400. As well, see: Yvon Grenier, *From Art to Politics: Octavio Paz and the Pursuit of Freedom*

Kundera's reflections on art and politics do not amount to a comprehensive and systematic exposé by the standards of philosophy or the social sciences. Nevertheless, Kundera's insights help us appreciate the nature and limitations of an insider's view of politics. In addition, they provide thoughtful comments on Central European politics and culture, dissidence and exile, the responsibility of the intellectual, and the mission of art.

Kundera's ideas are elegantly formulated in essays such as "The Art of the Novel" ("L'art du roman"), "Testaments Betrayed" ("Les testaments trahis"), and recently "Le rideau" ("The Curtain"; not yet translated into English).³ Most of his thought on art and politics is the object of literary experimentation in his novels, either in the thematic structure of the novels themselves, or in self-standing reflections and digressions formulated by the characters or the narrator.⁴ This particular article focuses mainly on Kundera's essays, essentially because this is where Kundera explicitly and intentionally uses a propositional register that lends itself to the universality of the law of contradiction.⁵ I am a political scientist interested in interdisciplinary approaches. What I propose here is an analysis of Kundera's ideas on the contrast between art and politics.

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Kundera's background is well known. A Czech novelist and essayist born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1929, Kundera joined the Communist Party in 1947 and welcomed the Communist takeover in 1948, but was expelled from the party in 1950 for saying something he "would better have left unsaid." Reinstated in the thaw that followed the 1956 Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow, he became a teacher at the Prague Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies. After delays by censors, *The Joke* (1967) was published and became a "cult book" of the Prague Spring of 1968.⁶ Soon, the short-lived opening under the reformist government of Alexander Dubček came to a tragic end. Kundera was deprived of his "privilege of working" — a fate shared with many of his characters — and he sought exile in France in 1975 where he has been living and thriving as an author ever since.

An outspoken critic of the Communist regime in his native country, the famous author of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) is usually presented as a political "dissident" from the Communist bloc à la Havel, Milosz, or Solzhenitsyn.⁷ Kundera tirelessly resists this characterization, preferring the role of continental and cultural dissident whose mission is to alert his contemporaries to the presence of broader or deeper menaces than just communism or any other narrowly defined "political" phenomena. As Fred Misurella writes, Kundera "passed twenty years in a country [Communist Czechoslovakia] where any human problem, large or small, was considered only in the political

(Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); and Maarten van Delden and Yvon Grenier, *Gunshots at the Concert: Literature and Politics in Latin America* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming).

³ Milan Kundera, "The Art of the Novel," translated from the French by Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1988); *Testaments Betrayed, An Essay in Nine Parts I*, translated from the French by Linda Asher (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996); "Le Rideau" (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

⁴ As Italo Calvino puts it: "Like his eighteenth-century masters Sterne and Diderot, Kundera makes of his extemporaneous reflections almost a diary of his thoughts and moods" ("On Kundera," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9, 2 [1989]: 53).

⁵ For a useful discussion on the propositional and non-propositional registers, see Margaret Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xix.

⁶ Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993). For facts and thoughtful comments about Kundera's itinerary, see David Lodge, "Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism," *Critical Quarterly*, 26, 1-2 (Spring and Summer, 1984): 105.

⁷ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

context, and now he wanted to concentrate on other things.”⁸ Kundera’s concern for the fate of European and Western culture pre-dates his status as a “dissident.” Kundera still wants to treat most, perhaps any, human problem, large or small, in a highly ironic and intellectualized context. This means that his novels are, at the very least in their form, a repository for the kind of critical ambiance that in most intellectual circles passes for being eminently political.

In contrast with many intellectuals of his generation, Kundera eschews the idea of the political responsibility of the writer, opting instead for the aesthetic responsibility of the novelist to espouse and transmit a certain literary tradition. Kundera takes it as an affront to have his literary work labelled as “political novels.” In *Testaments Betrayed*, he claims: “I have always, deeply, violently, detested those who look for a position (political, philosophical, religious, whatever) in a work of art rather than searching it in an effort to know, to understand, to grasp this or that aspect of reality.”⁹ His essays on the mission of the novel seem written to defend the novel and what it represents (culture, civilization, wisdom, autonomy) against what he sees as the reductive world of ideology. Still, Kundera’s writings on the mission of the novel are filled with interesting and insightful comments on politics. Many of his novels can be effortlessly interpreted as political novels. The result is an oeuvre in which the tension between the intent of the author and the “intention of the text” yields a fruitful and stimulating ambiguity for both social scientists and literary critics.

For Kundera, the point is not to separate completely the novel (and conceivably art in general) from politics. Literary imagination is not, as he once commented on Kafka, “a dream-like evasion or a pure subjectivity, but rather a tool to penetrate real life, to unmask it, to surprise it.”¹⁰ By “real life,” Kundera means human experience as a whole, including politics. In fact, politics is especially deserving of being “penetrated” and “unmasked” since it is the realm where reductive ideology and propaganda flourish. In fact, the novel (the comment conceivably applies more generally to literature and even to art) should be doing the “penetrating and unmasking” of politics. It should not be penetrated and manipulated by it as is the case with much of “political art” in its most didactic form. The novelist speaks about politics, but from a higher position than politics, one that never fails to surround politics with its broader and more meaningful cultural context.

The Mission of the Novel

Kundera’s comments on the superior nature and mission of culture and art generally focus on the novel as his art form. He defines the novel as “the great prose form in which an author thoroughly explores, by means of experimental selves [characters], some great themes of existence.”¹¹ By “the novel” he means “the European novel” pioneered by Boccaccio, Rabelais, and Cervantes, celebrated by English and French writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively, and more recently, in the twentieth century, by Russian and Centro European writers such as Tolstoy, Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz.

Kundera is anything but modest when commenting on the mission of the novel. Europe and, in its wake, western civilization, have failed to recognize the novel as the art form of modernity. Commenting on the “Rushdie Affair,” Kundera concluded that “the condemnation of Rushdie can be

⁸ See Kundera’s speech made at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union, 27-29 June 1967, in Dušan Hamšík, *Writers against Rulers*, translated by D. Orpington, with an introduction by W.L. Webb (London: Hutchison, 1971), 167-77; Fred Misurella, “Not Silent, But in Exile and With Cunning,” *Partisan Review*, 52, 2 (1985): 88.

⁹ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 91.

¹⁰ My translation of: “une evasion rêveuse ou une pure subjectivité, mais un moyen de pénétrer la vie réelle, de la démasquer, de la surprendre.” Milan Kundera, “Prague poème qui disparaît,” *Le Débat*, 2 (June 1980): 51.

¹¹ Kundera, “The Art of the Novel,” 142 (my translation).

seen not as a chance event, an aberration, but as the most profound conflict between two eras: theocracy goes to war against the Modern Era and targets its most representative creation: the novel."¹² In fact, if half of what he claims about the heuristic richness and intellectual properties of the novel proved to be accurate, one could wonder why most social scientists remain indifferent to literature and literary criticism. Kundera gives the novel credit for the invention of such key western commodities as the individual, freedom, humour, intelligence, ambiguity, and criticism. "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."¹³ Contemporary predicaments of modern societies such as the hyper-bureaucratization, the "société du spectacle," the erosion of individual autonomy, were all anticipated by great novelists.

Elsewhere in his writings, the same type of clairvoyance is credited to great art in general, with a preference for his other preferred art form: music. Kundera talks about his native Bohemia/Czech Republic whose culture he defends as part of Central European culture. A particularly vibrant and rich (if underestimated because of its peripheral status in the realm of power) part of European culture, that is to say of the very cradle of Western culture, Kundera claims that "the three greatest artistic monuments erected by my country in this century represent the picture of the hell of the future and its three constituents: Kafka's bureaucratic labyrinth, Hašek's military stupidity, and the world of the concentration camp with Janáček. Yes, between *The Trial* (1917) and *From the House of the Dead* ([by Leoš Janáček], 1928), everything had been said in Prague, and history had nothing left to do but to show up and mimic what the novel had already imagined."¹⁴

The superiority of the novel, an expression of the supremacy of art in general, underwrites what he sees as the pre-eminence and supremacy of culture over politics; hence, the essentially reductionist quality of any comment on Central Europe and its place in the European continent that would restrict itself to political events and development. From that pre-eminence derives his preference for cultural (or even psychological) rather than strictly political explanations for political problems. According to Kundera, we, his contemporaries, tend to exaggerate the importance of the political system, a bad habit that constitutes "the heritage of vulgarized Marxism, adopted, very curiously, by both the right and the left."¹⁵

The novel is particularly apt at celebrating the leading actor of modernity: the free, audacious, willful individual. It is *par excellence* individualistic and pluralistic. The plurality and openness of the world of novels is one where individuals can breath, imagine, create, and recreate themselves. In *The Discourse of Jerusalem: The Novel and Europe* (1985), upon receiving the Jerusalem Award, Kundera said,

¹² Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 26.

¹³ Kundera, "The Art of the Novel," 32. In the same essay, he continues: "[A]ll the great existential themes Heidegger analyzes in Being and Time — considering them to have been neglected by all earlier European philosophy — had been unveiled, displayed, illuminated by four centuries of the novel (four centuries of European reincarnation of the novel). In its own way, through its own logic, the novel discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one: with Cervantes and his contemporaries, it inquires into the nature of adventure; with Richardson, it begins to examine 'what happens inside,' to unmask the secret life of the feelings; with Balzac, it discovers man's rootedness in history; with Flaubert, it explores the terra previously incognita of the everyday; with Tolstoy, it focuses on the intrusion of the irrational in human behavior and decisions. It probes time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examines the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present actions. Et cetera, et cetera" (5).

¹⁴ My translation of: "les trois plus grands monuments d'art que mon pays a érigés en ce siècle représentent les trois volets du tableau de l'enfer futur: le labyrinthe bureaucratique de Kafka, la stupidité militaire de Hasek, le désespoir concentrationnaire de Janáček. Oui, entre *Le Procès* (1917) et *La maison des morts* (1928), on avait tout dit à Prague, et l'Histoire n'avait qu'à faire son entrée pour mimer ce que la fiction avait déjà imaginé." Milan Kundera, "Prague poème qui disparaît" (63). See also Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (London: Hesperus, 2005); Leoš Janáček, *From the House of the dead* (New York, N.Y.: London, 1991).

¹⁵ Quoted in Misurella, "Not Silent," 88. One could argue that Marxism tends to exaggerate the importance of socio-economic "infrastructures" rather than the political.

“The novel is the imaginary paradise of individuals. It is the territory where no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin, but where everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin.”¹⁶ The novel was there when the individual was born. For Kundera, we forget that before the individual could have “rights,” it had to be invented as such, a task for which art in general and the novel in particular played a central role.

Experimental Thinking

For Kundera, the novelist is an “explorer of existence,” not a prophet or a historian.¹⁷ Such “explorers” prefer questions to answers. Kundera often seems to think that only novelists are endowed with this peculiar inclination: “Outside the novel, we’re in the realm of affirmation: everyone is sure of his statements: the politician, the philosopher, the concierge. Within the universe of the novel, however, no one affirms: it is the realm of play and of hypotheses. In the novel, then, reflection is essentially inquiring, hypothetical.”¹⁸

This interrogation is performed through what he calls “experimental thinking” by which he means, essentially, a non-systematic, open-ended, agnostic, relativistic, secular, hypothetical, and ironic mode of thinking. This contrasts with the reductive and rigid logic of the political or the ideological among other “hard” discourses (religion and science also come to mind). Kundera deserves to be quoted as length on this point:

a person who thinks is automatically prompted to systematize; it is his eternal temptation (mine too, even in writing this book): a temptation to describe all the implications of his ideas; to pre-empt any objections and refute them in advance; thus to barricade his ideas. Now, a person who thinks should not try to persuade others of his belief; that is what puts him on the road to a system; on the lamentable road of the “man of conviction”; politicians like to call themselves that; but what is a conviction? It is a thought that has come to a stop, that has congealed, and the “man of conviction” is a man restricted; experimental thought seeks not to persuade but to inspire; to inspire another thought, to set thought moving; that is why a novelist must systematically desystematize his thought, kick at the barricade that he himself has erected around his ideas.¹⁹

This celebration of asystematism does not imply that Kundera is systematically opposed to systematic thinking, if I may use this expression. Kundera’s essays are propositional, coherent, and reasonably argued. As an educated music-lover, Kundera clearly has an appreciation for systems in music.²⁰ He attaches great importance to many system-like aspects of his trade, from the number of chapters in a novel to all the practical intelligence and professional skills that are part of the art of the novel.

To be sure, Kundera could be more clear on how and why an intellectual propensity to systematize can wreck experimental thinking. But it is fairly evident that for him, asystematism means rejection of what the Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz calls “jails of concepts,” that is to say

¹⁶ Kundera, “The Art of the Novel,” 159.

¹⁷ Kundera, “The Art of the Novel,” 44.

¹⁸ Kundera, “The Art of the Novel,” 78. This is a constant theme in his latest essay “Le Rideau.”

¹⁹ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 174-5.

²⁰ Kundera is a great admirer of the (tonal) work of Leoš Janáček. His parents were musicians and he was himself a jazz-musician who studied musicology at the Prague Charles University. I shall thank one of the anonymous reviewers for insisting on Kundera’s appreciation for “systems inherent in music.”

comprehensive and fairly rigid “grand narratives” or ideational systems from which interpretations can be deduced. It is a warning against modes of thinking that value dogmas: it is not a celebration of randomness, incoherence, or automatism. This position is somewhat akin to the romantic mistrust of “reason” epitomized in the twentieth century by the Surrealists, although Kundera is not rejecting reason: he just wants to put it at the service of a quest to know rather than an urge to dominate.²¹ Furthermore, Kundera’s commitment to asystematism is not directed to the “form” but rather to the “content” of his writing. His debts go not to the likes of Mallarmé or Artaud, but to essayists-writers-philosophers such as Cioran and especially Nietzsche, both epigrammatic writers known for their rejection of systematic thinking. Kundera’s writing style ties him to writers of the sixteenth century (Rabelais, Cervantes), the late eighteenth century (Sterne, Diderot), the early nineteenth century (Stendhal, Balzac and Flaubert), and the twentieth century (especially Central European: Broch, Gombrowicz, Musil, and Kafka) rather than to the so-called vanguards of the twentieth century. Kundera enjoys *avant-garde* art, but not “l’esprit d’avant-garde.”²²

For Kundera, Nietzsche’s rejection of the grand theory project bears fruit in the form of “an immense broadening of theme,” meaning that it opens access to uncharted territories and brings down the barriers between modes and types of analysis and creativity.²³ Experimental thinking connects to a specific type of wisdom common to great novelists and, conceivably, great artists as well: the “wisdom of uncertainty.” Experimental thinking conjugates with uncertainty, polyphony, and perpetual quest, the way ideologies connect to truth, dogma, and final judgment. In a comment on Cervantes, Kundera contends:

Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire. They can cope with the novel only by translating its language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse. They require that someone be right: either Anna Karenina is the victim of a narrow-minded tyrant, or Karenin is the victim of an immoral woman; either K. is an innocent man crushed by an unjust Court, or the Court represents divine justice and K. is guilty. This “either-or” encapsulates an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human, an inability to look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge.²⁴

Understandably, Kundera conceives the novel as intrinsically incompatible with authoritarianism, especially in its most radical form: totalitarianism. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the narrator proclaims: “In the realm of totalitarian kitsch, all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. It follows, then, that the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions.”²⁵ And the “person who asks questions” is, *par excellence*, the novelist, the writer, the artist, and this because they are not longing for final solutions.

²¹ The artistic and intellectual movement called Surrealism is obviously vast and diverse. Here, I am simply referring to André Breton’s well-known celebration of “pure automatism” as a way to explore the “real functioning of the mind . . . in the absence of any control exerted by reason.” In *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 36. See also *Le Surréalisme en Tchécoslovaquie: Choix de textes, 1934-1968*, traduit du tchèque et présenté par Petr Král (Paris: Gallimard, c1983).

²² Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 158.

²³ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 175.

²⁴ Kundera, “The Art of the Novel,” 7.

²⁵ Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 254.

Interestingly, the “incompatibility” between the novel and totalitarianism is not political in the narrow Manichean sense, where one is politically right and the other one is wrong. The contradiction is, as he puts it in “The Art of the Novel,” ontological, rather than ideological: “[the] incompatibility [between the novel and totalitarian universe] is deeper than the one that separates a dissident from an apparatchik, or a human-rights campaigner from a torturer, because it is not only political or moral but ontological. By which I mean: the world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call the spirit of the novel.”²⁶ The novel does not merely “speak the truth” to power, although it conceivably can and perhaps should, from time to time. It denies power (or anybody else) a monopoly over “truth.” Great novels (and great art) help us resist the siren song of final solutions to human problems, either in its hard utopian form (totalitarianism) or, as Isaiah Berlin masterfully argued in the common rendition “for each problem a solution” and “all solutions can be construed as potentially compatible,” nested in the tradition of Western political thought.²⁷

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Obviously Kundera’s perspective on the mission of art runs counter to perspectives that conceive the novel or art in general as a springboard for “messages.”²⁸ Nevertheless, the thematic core of his generous views on the mission of the novel is not entirely original. We recognize its profile in the essayistic work of writers such as Carlos Fuentes, Salman Rushdie, Mario Vargas Llosa, and A.B. Yehoshua, among many others.²⁹ The work of scholars such as Mikhail Bakhtin or even Lionel Trilling have done much to nurture this vision of the novel as the receptacle of either pluralistic, democratic and open-ended, or “poliphonic” cognitive exploration. In Canada, Marc Angenot and Régine Robin’s works clearly favor this orientation as well.³⁰ Nevertheless, Kundera is arguably the writer who presents this thesis most forcefully, eloquently and, with the recent publication of “Le rideau,” one could say, obstinately.³¹

²⁶ Kundera, “The Art of the Novel,” 14.

²⁷ See Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), 15.

²⁸ For a celebration of art as government propaganda, for example see David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

²⁹ In a particularly eloquent passage, Yehoshua contends that “among the many art forms, such as poetry, drama, and short stories, one finds the novel the most accommodating to a democratic perspective and reflecting in its flexibility and open structure some basic democratic principles. Perhaps, one can add, somewhat boastfully, the novel, more than any other artistic form, has encouraged and supported the democratic revolution of modern times . . . The democratic inclination of the novel also is manifested in its ability to accommodate a wide range of non-fiction materials, from philosophical extracts, to newspaper articles, to judiciary protocols, and so on.” A.B. Yehoshua, “Modern Democracy and the Novel,” in Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman, eds., *Democracy and the Arts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 447-8.

³⁰ See Marc Angenot, avec la collaboration de Edmond Cros, *Théorie littéraire: problèmes et perspectives* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989); Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004); Régine Robin, *La mémoire saturée* (Paris: Stock, 2003); and Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, [1979] c1950).

³¹ See Valerie Z. Nollan and Gary Saul Morson, eds., *Bakhtin: Ethics and Mechanics* (Northwestern University Press, 2004); Régine Robin and Marc Angenot, *La sociologie de la littérature: un historique, nouvelle édition revue et corrigée* (Montréal: Ciadest, 1993); and a special issue of the *Yale Journal of Criticism* on Marc Angenot’s work, Volume 17, 2 (Fall 2004).

Politics and the Novel

Kundera's disenchantment with politics is multifaceted. For him, politics is binary and Manichean. It seems to lead naturally to intolerance, inquisition, and dogma. Politics belongs to the world of "reductive forces" in sharp contrast with the imaginative creativity and openness of art. Thus, "if a novel (or poetry, a film) is a content in a form, it is no more than a disguised ideological message: its aesthetic character falls apart. The ideological reading of a novel (and the one that we are constantly offered) is as simplifying, stupefying and flattening as the ideological reduction of reality itself."³² The "superstructure" of politics (I use this term, not Kundera), with its dogmatic and Manichean proclivities, is ultimately a manifestation of deeper and not particularly political "infrastructure" — culture in general, and individual dispositions in particular (need for certainties, quest for community, desire to be part of something bigger, longing for adventure, love, wealth, recognition, and so on). Very much the hallmark of Kundera's approach is to examine politics by focusing on what can be called the meta-political (the foundation — the underpinnings — as opposed to current events, political thought or institutions), and to find roots of the meta-political in psychological dispositions in general.

The novel examines "not reality but existence"; that is to say "the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable of."³³ Politics is evidently part of that world of possibilities. Politics, ideology, dogma, delusion, and self-delusion belong to the very "possibilities" of life, and indeed they are, as such, excellent material for the novelist. Art is not to be nested in an ivory tower, separate from "reality." Rather, "if one insists on art's specificity, it is not to seek evasion from reality; to the contrary, it expresses the will to see a tree in a tree, a picture in a picture; it represents a resistance against all the reductive forces that mutilate both the human being and art."³⁴ The language of art is not merely different than the language of politics: it is more intimately and comprehensively "human."³⁵ When Kundera discusses ideology, either directly as an essayist or using (literally) one of his characters, he refutes the definition of ideology as a foundational, coherent, and rational set of positions. Ideologies have dramatic, even tragic consequences, but as intellectual constructions, they remain light and flimsy, genuine smokescreens for the crude quest for power, security, and emotional fulfillment.³⁶

Ideas in general, and political ideas in particular, are shared constructions that seem unbearably light when examined from the perspective of an individual's life experience. In a discussion of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, Kundera explains that what is wrong with the former is the fact that the identity of his characters is both fixed and determines their ideological preferences. Real human

³² My translation of: "Si un roman (une poésie, un film) est un contenu dans une forme, il n'est qu'un message idéologique déguisé: son caractère esthétique s'écroule. La lecture idéologique d'un roman (et c'est elle qui nous est proposée sans cesse partout) est aussi simplificatrice, abêtissante et aplatissante que la réduction idéologique de la réalité même." Kundera, "Prague poème qui disparaît," 59. As Kundera summarizes in "The Art of the Novel": "Well, I'll never tire of repeating: The novel's sole *raison d'être* is to say what only the novel can say" (36).

³³ Kundera, "The Art of the Novel," 42.

³⁴ My translation of: "Si l'on insiste sur la spécificité de l'art, ce n'est donc pas pour s'évader du réel; au contraire, c'est la volonté de voir un arbre dans un arbre, un tableau dans un tableau; c'est la résistance contre les forces réductrices qui mutilent et l'homme et l'art." Kundera, "Prague poème qui disparaît," 59.

³⁵ On this point, see interesting comments by Chvatik, *Le monde romanesque de Milan Kundera*, 199.

³⁶ In *Immortality*, the following passage illustrates this conception: "I think, therefore I am is the statement of an intellectual who underrates toothaches. I feel, therefore I am is a truth much more universally valid, and it applies to everything that's alive. My self does not differ substantially from yours in terms of its thought. Many people, few ideas: we all think more or less the same, and we exchange, borrow, steal thoughts from one another. However, when someone steps on my foot, only I feel the pain. The basis of the self is not thought but suffering, which is the most fundamental of all feelings." Milan Kundera, *Immortality* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 200.

experience is not like that, according to Kundera, unless one is a true ideologue (in other words, unless one chooses not to live one's life in the fullest, sacrificing it to a shared emotion like a "cause"). Thus, Kirilov is completely absorbed by his philosophy of suicide, which he considers to be a supreme manifestation of freedom. Kirilov: an idea become man. But in real life, is a man really such a direct projection of his personal ideology? Tolstoy's characters in *War and Peace* (particularly Pierre Bezukhov and Andrei Bolkonsky) also have a very rich, very developed intellectuality, but their's is changeable, protean, so that it is impossible to describe them in terms of their ideas, which are different in each phase of their lives. Tolstoy thus offers us another conception of man: he is an itinerary; a winding road; a journey whose successive phases not only vary but often represent a total negation of the preceding phases.³⁷ Here, Kundera is not commending the absence of ideas or cultural poverty, even though his anti-political stand teases out this kind of interpretation. A more attentive interpretation suggests that for him, politics and political ideas occupy at best a secondary and derivative role in life, at least from a novelist's perspective (which is not just any perspective). A rich intellectuality allows one to see politics from outside and for what it is: a reductive and ultimately impoverishing perspective on the human experience.

Political ideas are discoloured by use and abuse, and for Kundera, surprisingly few of them are in circulation. In the marketplace of received ideas, people pick and choose the ideas that suit them, usually in a fairly syncretic and fickle way. They delude themselves into thinking that their choice is truly their own when in fact they are merely following well-established trends. Furthermore, political ideas in circulation are no more than a pale reflection of themselves. This is due to the superficial and mindless ways in which political ideas are used in today's politics. For Kundera, "political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that political kitsch."³⁸ In *Immortality*, his narrator (echoing Kundera himself) typically explains that "the remnants of Marx no longer form any logical system of ideas, but only a series of suggestive images and slogans (a smiling worker with a hammer, black, white, and yellow men fraternally holding hands, the dove of peace rising to the sky, and so on), we can rightfully talk of a gradual, general, planetary transformation of ideology into imagology."³⁹

The lightness and the fickle way ideas and ideologies are used, abused, and disposed of points to another problem quite central to Kundera's perspective: the problem of forgetfulness. "The struggle of man against power," for him, "is the struggle of memory against forgetting."⁴⁰ Kitsch breeds forgetfulness. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (*Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*, 1978), Kundera talks about la grande marche of history (in fact, of politics), and the political palimpsest underwriting many political mobilisations. Consequently, "the assassination of Allende soon buried the memory of the Russian invasion of Bohemia, the bloody massacre in Bangladesh soon made us forget Allende, the deafening noise of the war in the Sinai desert covered Bangladesh's complaints, the massacres in Cambodia made us forget the Sinai, and so on, and so forth, until the total forgetfulness of everything by everybody."⁴¹ One can deduce from his reasoning that the transformation of ideology into

³⁷ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 213; Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (New York: Viking, 2006).

³⁸ Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 257.

³⁹ Kundera, *Immortality*, 114.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, in association with Penguin Books, 1991), 14.

⁴¹ My translation of: "L'assassinat d'Allende a bien vite recouvert le souvenir de l'invasion de la Bohême par les Russes, le massacre sanglant du Bangladesh a fait oublier Allende, la guerre dans le désert du Sinaï a couvert de son vacarme les peintes du Bangladesh, les massacres du Cambodge ont fait oublier le Sinaï, et ainsi de suite, et ainsi de suite, jusqu'à l'oubli complet de tout par tous." Quoted in Eugène Ionesco, "Dissidence, littérature et vérité," *Commentaire*, 31, 11 (1980): 469. To mention another quote from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: "Yes, said Franz to himself, the Grand March goes on, the world's indifference notwithstanding, but it is growing nervous and hectic: yesterday against the American occupation of Vietnam, today against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia; yesterday for Israel, today for the Palestinians; yesterday for Cuba, tomorrow against

“images” and the general forgetfulness with which humanity throws itself forward in its quest for happiness have to do with the triumph of superficiality in our culture. This affects the intelligentsia as much (if not more) than anybody else. Kundera is not alone among the Central and East European “exile” community to be irritated by the vulgarity and chaos of Western media, perhaps because it is seen as a substitute for a higher culture.

One could be misled to conclude that for Kundera, political agents of all stripes manipulate an ignorant and sentimental crowd. Things are not that simple. It takes a great deal of energy and intelligence — that is, not merely emotional reflexes — to concoct and reproduce political ideologies.⁴² The disposition that leads one to yield to ideology is intimately related to what sixteenth century thinker Etienne de la Boétie called “Voluntary Servitude.” The contrast between high culture and stultifying ideology is nowhere clearer than in the work of scholars whose formidable intellectual capacity is second only to their ideological commitments.⁴³ Furthermore, Kundera does not associate totalitarianism with cruelty alone. The Manichaeism of politics prevents us from seeing the connection between “innocence” and “oppression.”⁴⁴ From the guillotine on (with the masked and sensitive executioner), oppression has been perpetrated for justice, freedom, revolution, history, nationhood, and the like. The angelic nature of the militant and the tormentor are identical. In sum, reason and unreason, virtue and malice, are not sharp alternatives in the world of modern politics. Emotional and irrational motives can coexist with apparently rational and cerebral dispositions (although in politics the former usually prevail over the latter), and as we all know, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The Politics of Anti-Politics

Milan Kundera’s views on art and politics should be analysed for what they are: informed and insightful views by a politically conscious writer whose life experience includes living on both sides of the “iron curtain.” For all his uniqueness and creative imagination, Kundera’s vision has been very much shaped by his unique itinerary, by the experience of communism, the hope and disillusionment of 1968’s Prague Spring, the persecution, and then his Parisian exile where he found an intellectual scene dominated by the left, by a very different “1968” experience, and by suspicion toward Eastern bloc “dissidents.” His escape from politics and his seeking refuge in grand culture and eroticism are plausibly the contingent strategies of an “hédoniste piégé dans un monde politisé à l’extrême.”⁴⁵

Cuba — and always against America; at times against massacres and at times in support of other massacres; Europe marches on, and to keep up with events, to leave none of them out, its pace grows faster and faster, until finally the Grand March is a procession of rushing, galloping people and the platform is shrinking and shrinking until one day it will be reduced to a mere dimension-less dot” (266-7).

⁴² A character named Grizzly has this very Kunderian thought in *Immortality*: “You remind me of the young men who supported the Nazis or communists not out of cowardice or out of opportunism but out of an excess of intelligence. For nothing requires a greater effort of thought than arguments to justify the rule of nonthought. I experienced it with my own eyes and ears after the war, when intellectuals and artists rushed like a herd of cattle into the Communist Party, which soon proceeded to liquidate them systematically and with great pleasure” (122).

⁴³ For example, Kundera says: “What irritates me in Adorno is his short-circuit method that, with a fearsome facility, links works of art to political (sociological) causes, consequences, or meanings; extremely nuanced ideas (Adorno’s musicological knowledge is admirable) thereby lead to extremely impoverished conclusions”; in fact, given that an era’s political tendencies are always reducible to just two opposing tendencies, a work of art necessarily ends up being classified as either progressive or reactionary; and since reaction is evil, the inquisition can start the trial proceedings” (*Testaments Betrayed*, 91).

⁴⁴ François Ricard, *Le dernier après-midi d’Agnès, Essai sur l’oeuvre de Milan Kundera* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Arcades, 2003), 72.

⁴⁵ In Milan Kundera, Foreword to *Jacques and his Master, an Homage to Diderot in Three Acts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985 [1971]), quoted in Kvetoslav Chvatik, *Le monde romanesque de Milan Kundera*, translated from the German by Bernard Lortholary (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Arcades, 1995), 65.

Kundera's views are mostly expressed in essays, freely and creatively, in the best tradition of Montaigne.⁴⁶ What is valuable in Kundera's work, from my perspective as a political scientist, is the ensemble of insights on politics and their origin in what can be called an artist's perspective. His views amount to more than mere "questions," to be sure, but without reaching the level of development of proper "answers" in the sense of either a political or a social-scientific position. Kundera's views shed light on a number of important issues in areas such as political theory, sociology of ideas, cultural studies, and even comparative politics (comparative regimes, democratization, public opinion, and so on). His conjugation of politics and culture is also refreshing in an era that is characterized by the balkanization of knowledge.

* * *

In this second part of my article, I want to discuss Kundera's positions on two issues in particular, both fundamental to his perspective: first, his idealistic vision of art (and the novel in particular) in contrast with his negative and reductionist view of politics; and second, his position on the political responsibility of the artist.

Taken as a variation of an idealistic conception of art, Kundera's position on the novel is, in its core, as old as our civilization. In our time, most artists and commentators on arts and letters take for granted that high culture makes us better citizens: more virtuous yesterday, more cosmopolitan, and pluralistic, tolerant, and "critical" today. The idea of art as a universal repository of virtue seems to be weathering the storm (in an academic tea pot) of post-modernity.⁴⁷ Every year, in rich and secular Western nations, more people visit museums than attend sport events. As Régis Debray wrote, art has become the "ultimate belief of the unbelievers."⁴⁸

While superficially agreeable, closer scrutiny suggests a much more nuanced view on the innate merit of art. To begin with, if art and the novel in particular, are the repository of wisdom and a genuine school of freedom, artists and writers do not stand out of the crowd for their moral or political wisdom. Their political views can be "self-indulgently useless, sometimes portentously banal," as Brooke Horvath said of a recent collection of writers' political writings.⁴⁹ The political record of literary intellectuals (novelists are no exception) especially during the twentieth century is punctured with evidence of political naiveté, unfastened contact with "reality," and moral

⁴⁶ According to Octavio Paz felicitous definition, the "essay" is "adjacent, in one of its extremes, to the treaty; in the other, to aphorism, sentence and maxim. What is more, it requires contrasting qualities: it must be brief but not laconic, light but not superficial, deep without being heavy, passionate without being pathetic, complete without being exhaustive, at once buoyant and penetrative, smiling without moving any of the face's muscle, melancholic without tears and, finally, it must convince without being argumentative and, without saying it all, say what has to be said" (Octavio Paz, *Obras Completas*. Volume 9: *Ideas y costumbres I, La letra y el cetro* [Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995], 447).

⁴⁷ Robert Hughes offers this gem on the liaisons between art and morality during the Renaissance: "Nobody has ever denied that Sigismondo da Malatesta, the Lord of Rimini, had excellent taste. He hired the most refined of quattrocento architects, Leon Battista Alberti, to design a memorial temple to his wife, and then got the sculptor Agostino di Duccio to decorate it, and retained Piero della Francesca to paint it. Yet Sigismondo was a man of such callousness and rapacity that he was known in life as "Il Lupo," The Wolf, and so execrated after his death that the Catholic Church made him (for a time) the only man apart from Judas Iscariot officially listed as being in Hell — a distinction he earned by trussing up a Papal emissary, the fifteen-year-old Bishop of Fano, in his own rochet and publicly sodomizing him before his applauding army in the main square of Rimini" (Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint, The Fraying of America* [New York: Warner Books, 1993], 178).

⁴⁸ Régis Debray, "Universal Art: The Desperate Religion," *New Perspective Quarterly* 9, 2 (Spring 1992): 40.

⁴⁹ See Christian Salmon, ed., *International Parliament of Writers, Autodafé, no.1* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001). Also see the excellent review of the Salmon, ed., issue of Brooke Horvath in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 21, 2 (Summer 2001): 178.

irresponsibility. As a whole, nineteenth-century literary intellectuals seem to fare better arguably because they were less addicted to “total” ideologies.⁵⁰

A brief survey of the political positions of twentieth-century literary intellectuals reveals that as a group, they have been at least as attracted to utopias and dictatorships as they have been to the muse freedom. The list of great writers who embraced totalitarianism in the twentieth century gives one pause. George Bernard Shaw, for one, managed to praise Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini. Benjamin Péret had a point when he concluded that the twentieth century was shamed with the “dishonour of poets.”⁵¹ Writers and artists routinely condemn the violation of human rights in this or that case (perhaps more so if one of them is being victimized⁵²), though not as easily in all cases.

What is more, if literature and the novel are such a dissolvent of tyrannical rule, a bottomless well of irreverence to authority, why has it been so much appreciated, since time immemorial, by absolute rulers? In our time, as Roland Bleiker puts it, it seems that “the more authoritarian the ruler, the more passionate their love for literature. Radovan Karadzic, Saddam Hussein, Muammar al-Gaddafi, Saparamurat Niyazov, or Kim Jong-il, to name just a few recent examples, all claim to have written poetic works.”⁵³ Tyrants are often failed (frustrated?) artists. Both have in common a longing for the triumph of the will against all odds. In *Immortality*, a character affirms: “When Lenin proclaimed that he loved Beethoven’s *Appassionata* above all else, what was it that he really loved? What did he hear? Music? Or a majestic noise that reminded him of the solemn stirrings in his soul, a longing for blood, brotherhood, executions, justice, and the absolute? Did he derive joy from the tones, or from the musings stimulated by those tones, which had nothing to do with art or with beauty?”⁵⁴

Then again, Kundera also concedes that men of power can appreciate art: “It does not surprise me that the Sorbonne theologians, the sixteenth-century ideological police who kindled so many stakes, should have made life so hard for Rabelais, forcing him often to flee and hide. What seems to me far more amazing and admirable is the protection provided him by the powerful men of his time, cardinal du Bellay, for instance, and Cardinal Odet, and above all François I, the king of France. Were they seeking to defend principles? Freedom of expression? Human rights? They had better motive: they loved literature and arts.”⁵⁵ What is to be understood from these two statements? That for Kundera, a politician can appreciate art but only if s/he can leave the lowest call of politics unanswered, not unlike the artist who, while examining a political subject, knows how to resist the siren song of ideology. Dictators, especially totalitarian ones, are unwilling or unable to do that, and thus their incapacity to appreciate true art, according to Kundera.

⁵⁰ See Michel Winock, *Les voix de la liberté, Les écrivains engagés au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Le seuil, 2001). Also see Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals and Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001).

⁵¹ One remembers that in July 1943, the Editions de Minuit (France) clandestinely published a collection of poems under the title “L’Honneur des poètes.”

⁵² Talking about the Rushdie Affair and the support the author of the *Satanic Verses* received from his fellow writers, Daniel Pipes writes: “Solid as it was, the writers’ support for Rushdie left a bad taste. In both Europe and the United States, those who had for so many years pooh-pooed the very notion of terrorism suddenly discovered it when one of their own was the target. Twenty years of IRA and PLO atrocities made almost no impression on them so long as the targets were policemen and airline passengers; when terrorists directed their fire elsewhere, writers pleaded for an understanding of their revolutionary rage. Only when the victim was a friend and a fellow-writer did they wake up, momentarily anyway, and begin talking about an assault on civilized life” (*The Rushdie Affair, The Novel, The Ayatollah, and the West*, second edition [New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003], 160).

⁵³ Roland Bleiker, “Learning from Art: A Reply to Holden’s ‘World Literature and World Politics,’” *Global Society* 17, 4 (October 2003): 423. Do dictators prefer poetry to novels, for the same reason they seem to prefer classical music to Jazz: because the latter celebrate individualism, pluralism, and heterogeneity?

⁵⁴ Kundera, *Immortality*, 79.

⁵⁵ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 27-8.

To explain the apparent incongruity in literature's elective affinity with both freedom and unfreedom, what is needed, arguably, is an appreciation of the respective importance and mutual influence of the writer herself versus what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "le champ littéraire" (the literary field) by which he means the more or less institutionalized micro-society made of practices and habitus, and in which the writer writes, socializes, publishes, debates, and so on. Equally important are the interactions between that particular champ and other areas, including the field of politics.⁵⁶ If a correlation exists between literature and freedom, the novel and non-authoritarian politics, it involves not so much the writer's political dispositions but the conditions of literary production themselves, at the center of which one finds some of the fundamental conditions for freedom itself: imagination, conversation, and criticism. If, as George Steiner contends, "all serious art, music and literature is a critical act," a "counter statement to the world," it is because of the "concentrated, selective interactions between the constraints of the observed and the boundless possibilities of the imagined," almost regardless of the political beliefs of the artist/writer.⁵⁷ If freedom is understood as the possibility that results primarily from a type of interactions, rather than as an attribute or propensity that a given actor possesses or not, then the proposition that literature and art are schools of liberty, as Octavio Paz once said, can still be maintained in the face of countless examples of liberticidal writers and artists.

The literary champ is evidently not the only one that is amenable to the pursuit of freedom in society. It is one that is particularly prone to fostering pluralism, competition, creativity, imagination, and the conjugation of differences, all important ingredients to literature and to a culture of freedom. Other milieus feature a comparable propensity: the intelligentsia (when and where it exists), the academic world, the educational system in general, and arguably the market. Art is freer, more imaginative and interrogative; the academic world and the intelligentsia are more dependent on available systems of beliefs, more propositional, and more systematic. The market is more instrumental, more mechanical and impersonal (the "invisible hand"): it is morally lenient but also merciless. No single milieu is the guarantor of freedom, and of course milieus are made of people. One should resist the temptation to reify any "system" into something separate from its actors (Kafka helps us realise this).⁵⁸ On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a free society where nobody is committed to freedom. Once most people in a system are minimally committed to preserving the freedom that makes the system's existence possible, freedom enhancement is no longer the "mission" of a particular agency. It becomes the result of certain types of interaction, with the acceptance (or non-opposition) by individuals that certain types of interaction are better for their benefits (defined broadly) and the benefits of all. Kundera's exclusive emphasis on the novelist arguably prevents him from appreciating the importance of the whole dynamic involving the literary champ and society at large.

The chief political contribution of art may be found in the questions it raises rather than in its specific answers, as Kundera (among many others) argues. The poet Charles Tomlinson once said: "The artist lies for the improvement of the truth. Believe him." A reformulation of this proposition can be: use the artist and her work as an emotional, intellectual, and sometimes moral stimulant, as an awakener, as a provider of good questions; believing her particular prescriptions or programmatic ideas is no more urgent than believing anybody else's. Again, freedom exudes primarily from the

⁵⁶ This particular approach allows Bourdieu to elaborate a sociology of literature that emphasizes the importance of the relevant group, as opposed to the individual or society: "C'est dire que ce qui advient dans le champ est de plus en plus lié à l'histoire spécifique du champ, donc de plus en plus difficile à déduire directement de l'état du monde social au moment considéré" (Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art, Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* [Paris: Seuil, 1992], 338).

⁵⁷ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11.

⁵⁸ On Kafka and politics, see the insightful Chapter 2 in Michael Keren, *The Citizen's Voice: Twentieth-Century Politics and Literature* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003).

conditions that are met to allow art to flourish, not from the artist's particular political (or apolitical) inclinations. One is tempted to say that the artist or novelist is in a position similar to a character in a novel as typically defined by Kundera: unique, yet not prevailing; simply adding to the group dynamic. This is, it seems to me, an important distinction to be made to appreciate how literature and freedom have fed each other since the dawn of time.

Kundera's point on the individualistic and pluralistic quintessence of the novel is well taken. The novel is at its best representing the ambivalence and even contradictory nature of human situations, illuminating the many possibilities of life, and freely combining various literary genres. Conversely, politics tends to generate certainties and sharp alternatives. The novel typically features a plurality of characters and an orchestration that is open and free to borrow from any other discursive genres. That being said, one can easily think of a number of great novels that promote a certain point of view, some of them written by Kundera himself. His novels feature "themes" that are remarkably similar to the ones found in "The Art of the Novel" or *Testaments Betrayed*.⁵⁹ They are *mis en scène* in a novelistic way but for all the orchestrated ambivalence and polyphony, the reader is not driven away from the main point articulated by the author. The best examples of the plurality of meaning advocated by Kundera are to be found in works where it happens unwittingly, by artistic accident, as it were, but less so in the works of artists whose positions against political didacticism end up as a form of political didacticism itself. Furthermore, the distance between the writer and his political dispositions on one hand, and the novel on the other, is far from being automatic, just because the author happens to adopt a neutral or ironic posture before his own imaginary world. As Robert Boyers wrote, irony can also be understood as "the expression of the distance between a character's sense of what he is doing or feeling and our instructed sense of what is actually involved. Irony is also, and more elusively, the novel's expression of how easy it is to promote a routine cynicism that can become almost as programmatic as the naive enthusiasms it means to ridicule."⁶⁰

Kundera's position on politics is interesting and stimulating in spite of being somewhat simplistic and reductionist. His position parallels George Orwell's oft-quoted view that political language of any stripe "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."⁶¹ Both arguably deal with their problem of political cognitive dissonance with their intellectual milieus by adopting an ecumenical dismissal of all political ideologies.

I happen to share Kundera's basic view that politics tends to be binary and Manichean, prone to intolerance, inquisition, and dogmas. A binary logic is probably inherent to politics; it is not, as one could argue, an upshot of the Cold War. It stems from politics' moralizing and action-oriented impulses, and it is doubtlessly related to its religious roots as well.⁶² Political debates and even discussions tend to frame problems in dualistic, mutually exclusive moral options: left versus right, North versus South, West versus East. Within some of these categories, more either/or-types of funnels operate: social democracy versus revolutionary socialism, secular versus religious, military versus civilian. When comprehending a particular issue, political discussions easily turn into an ideological plebiscite: for or against globalization, affirmative action, free trade, gay marriage.

Allusion to this built-in disposition can be found in the political science literature. In his classic on political parties, Maurice Duverger contends that "a duality of parties does not always exist, but there is almost always a duality of tendencies."⁶³ A few decades earlier, the political and legal scholar (and National-Socialist) Karl Schmitt famously argued that "the specific political distinction to which

⁵⁹ See François Ricard, *Le dernier après-midi d'Agnès*, 141-9.

⁶⁰ Robert Boyers, *Atrocity and Amnesia: the Political Novel since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 220-1.

⁶¹ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 28.

⁶² See Raymond Boudon, *L'art de se persuader des idées douteuses, fragiles ou fausses* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

⁶³ Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (London: Methuen, 1954), 205.

political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy." In other words, "Tell me who your enemy is and I'll tell you who you are."⁶⁴ Being fiercely anti-liberal, Schmitt underestimated the importance of friendship and cooperation, two important ingredients in politics and essential ones in democratic politics. Politics in a liberal democracy tends to be less strictly "ideological" and more concerned with process and personalities. The overarching dynamic is one of cooperation rather than one of fundamental conflict. Conflicts do take place, as they should in a plural society, but within the context of the rule of law, supported by customs of tolerance and trust. Here, politics generally concerns small politics, not epochal or regime-defining issues. Politicized characters in Kundera's novels tend to adopt ideological postures, even when for them, the relative importance of politics is negligible. The more ideological, the more politics resembles the portrait Kundera draws of it. But to give a fuller and more convincing account of political life, one needs to appreciate that as a practice, politics can be more than pure kitsch, superficial images and dogmatic dispositions. As a dimension of the human experience to be reflected upon, it can be the object of sophisticated and nuanced comments and investigation.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that no facile categorization can be made between reason and unreason when assessing great monstrosities of the twentieth century. Kundera generally understands the intimate link between reason and totalitarianism, reason and utopia. But he is not consistent in this respect, arguing for instance that "in the month of August 1968, the Czechs, naïve rationalists, experienced the shock of the irrational."⁶⁵ As Joseph Brodsky reminded him in a convincing critique of his position, "The political system that put Mr. Kundera out of commission is as much a product of Western rationalism as it is of Eastern emotional radicalism."⁶⁶ A perspective on politics that emphasizes reduction to kitsch, emotions, and images can easily miss an important dimension of modern politics: its roots in philosophical and intellectual movements of the past centuries, its built-in rationality, not to mention the very modern and "rational" intellectual foundation of totalitarianism.⁶⁷

Kundera's critique of politics can conceivably be seen as a cover for something more fundamental: his radical individualism, rooted in a deep mistrust of any representation of collective lendemains qui chantent. Terry Eagleton, whose critical arrows point exactly in the opposite direction, contends that "Kundera seems genuinely unable to imagine any universally shared emotion which would not, by definition, be intolerably banal."⁶⁸ This is not entirely true. Kundera celebrates the European culture (and by extension, for him, the Western culture), and especially the grand contexte of European literature. But Eagleton is aiming in the right direction, for Kundera is clearly suspicious of any shared and emotional hope in a brighter future. Politics, not culture, is shared that way. Crowds are made of individuals but redemption is possible at the individual level, never *a priori* at the collective level. Again, how much of this perspective derived directly from the experience of communism and/or of a failed state is hard to measure. In any case, it is not out of tune with the fatigue of "grand narratives" widely associated with the period and/or idea of "post-modernity."

⁶⁴ Quoted in Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind*, 56.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Fred Misurella, "Not Silent," 98.

⁶⁶ Joseph Brodsky, "Why Milan Kundera is Wrong about Dostoyevsky," *The New York Times Review of Books* (17 February 1985): 31.

⁶⁷ See Jacob Leib Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Mercury, 1961).

⁶⁸ Terry Eagleton, "Estrangement and Irony," *Salmagundi* 73 (Winter 1987): 32. In his first published novel, *The Joke* (1967), the main character, Ludvik, is expelled from the Communist Party for writing this joke on a postcard destined to his girlfriend: "Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik" (147). Forget Trotsky: the rest encapsulates Kundera's perspective.

* * *

Kundera's views are liable to a double accusation of political irresponsibility: because he refuses to engage directly in the political debates of his time, at least with any of the competing political discourses that are *déjà là*; and secondly, because when he does formulate political opinions, if obliquely and from what can be seen as superior artistic distance, he likes to take the dissimilarities between the "two worlds" (in other words, Communist East and capitalistic and democratic West) as an overrated issue. Milan Kundera's position is controversial for those who would like him to be clearer and more forceful in denouncing the evils of communism and in praising (or at least recognizing clearly the undisputable advantages of) liberal democracy — in other words, for those who would like him, once and for all, to choose his camp in politics.⁶⁹

Kundera rejects the notion that "the democratic and communist worlds are in absolute opposition. From a political or an economic standpoint, perhaps. But for a novelist, the starting point is the concrete life of the individual; and from this standpoint, one is not less struck by the resemblance between these two worlds."⁷⁰ He also tends to conflate "totalitarian kitsch" with the kitsch that is the "ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movement."⁷¹

For a writer, it is fairly uncontroversial to maintain that the human experience should not be flattened to its political and economic dimensions. Topics such as love, sex, anxiety before death, friendship, jealousy, greed, anger, sadness, and a host of other building blocs of writers and artists since time immemorial can all be presented as deeper and more fundamentally "human" than politics. But another interpretation is implicit here: some dimensions of the human experience that do not originate directly or primarily from the political or economic realms have such a cultural resonance that they ultimately make the "two worlds" (Communist and democratic) look essentially similar to such an extent that at the end, real historical similarities trump the differences. Here, societies, not merely individual experiences, look alike. Hence, the unmistakably political quality of his position.

Kundera takes the reader to a journey that conjures up memories of the "theory of convergence" of the 1970s (bureaucratization makes regimes look increasingly alike) and the Germano-French (in that order) "critique of modernity" pioneered by Heidegger (the alienating triumph of instrumental reason). Kundera still juggles with these fragments of sociological theory and philosophy of history in "Le rideau" (2005), portraying western societies as an analgesic mixture of commercial vulgarity, democratic illusions, and conquering bureaucratization.⁷² Similar positions can be found in the writings of "dissidents" such as Alexander Sozhenitsyn or Alexander Zinoviev. Perhaps Kundera is simply reverberating the anti-liberal or even anti-modern dispositions of the French intelligentsia.⁷³ But there is more to it: these predicaments are not narrowly political in their essence; they point to a more fundamental problem of "alienation," for the examination of which art and especially the novel offers abundant and explicit insights. It is not the "two worlds" that are similar from the starting point of "the concrete life of the individual": it is life in society in general, that is to say the encounter between the individual and the other. Making simple connections between this invariable condition

⁶⁹ A typical example can be found in Norman N. Podhoretz, "An Open Letter to Milan Kundera," *Commentary* (October 1984): 34-9. See also Roger Kimball, "The Ambiguities of Milan Kundera," *The New Criterion* (January 1986): 5-13.

⁷⁰ My translation of: "les mondes communiste et démocratique sont en opposition quasi absolue. Du point de vue politique ou économique, soit. Mais pour un romancier, le point de départ est la vie concrète d'un individu; et de ce point de vue, on n'est pas moins frappé par les ressemblances de ces deux mondes" (Quoted in Kvetoslav Chvatik, *Le monde romanesque de Milan Kundera*, 245).

⁷¹ Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 312.

⁷² *Le rideau*, 158, 125.

⁷³ See Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes: De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); Raymond Boudon, *Pourquoi les intellectuels n'aiment pas le libéralisme* (Paris: Jacob, 2004).

and incompatible political arrangements, *a priori* bound to be inconsequential and insignificant, is politically reckless. Clearly, anti-communism and anti-totalitarianism, even when conjugated with a broad defence of individualism and freedom, do not automatically stem from or require a sophisticated comprehension of liberal democratic societies.

Interestingly, apparently Kundera does not completely discard the possibility of legitimate political action even in the kind of activist, sloganeering forms he despises. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he risks a concession:

I can't help thinking about the editor in Prague who organized the petition for the amnesty of political prisoners. He knew perfectly well that his petition would not help the prisoners. His true goal was not to free the prisoners; it was to show that people without fear still exist. That, too, was playacting. But he had no other possibility. His choice was not between playacting and action. His choice was between playacting and no action at all. There are situations in which people are condemned to playact. Their struggle with mute power (the mute power across the river, a police transmogrified into mute microphones in the wall) is the struggle of a theatre company that has attacked an army.⁷⁴

Here, the action is infrapolitical: it succeeds only in affirming the basic value of human dignity in the midst of a political defeat. To be legitimate and valuable, the action must bypass the political and reach for something deeper. And perhaps, in good romantic fashion, defeat is a necessary condition for redemption. This is not without conjuring up the modern sensibility in favour of "human rights" understood as a contemporary exhibit of natural law flourishing in the infra-political "public sphere." A recent essay by Charles Taylor provides an interesting parallel. Taylor conceives the contemporary public sphere as "a space of discussion that is self-consciously seen as being outside of power" and "extrapolitical in status." Its precursor was no other than the *République des lettres*.⁷⁵ Such a space is useful in its own terms, but it rests for a good part on an illusion.

Kundera is not merely adopting an "art for art's sake" position. He is attempting to find a position from whence he can elaborate his position on politics while remaining staunchly anti-political (in other words, not merely a-political). From a political science perspective, this suggests an interesting question: can politics be examined and judged from outside? Is there such a thing as a "political logic" that one is bound to adopt, consciously or not, when thinking about politics, pushing us in one of politics' many alternatives and away from vantage points from which politics could be criticized as a whole? Kundera demonstrates that it is feasible to criticize politics from a novelist perspective if one is satisfied with what novelists do best: scrutinize and even pass judgment while keeping propositional or programmatic dimensions of criticism open. To put it differently, what is possible and even useful as a complement to result-oriented political action is a good dose of irresponsible criticism. This does not typically yield a fully coherent or practical position, however. William Phillips aptly points out that sooner or later, not yielding to the demands of political responsibility "is bound to clash with the rational and pragmatic concerns of politics."⁷⁶ To be meaningful and interesting, sooner or later a political position has to confront the rational and pragmatic concerns of politics because politics is also (Kundera chooses to elide that) about choice and decision.

⁷⁴ *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 267-8.

⁷⁵ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, Public Planet Books, 2004), 89-92.

⁷⁶ William Phillips, "The Art of Kundera," *Partisan Review*, 57 (Summer 1990): 470.

A number of useful lessons can be learned from Kundera's position. We should pay more attention to the nature and the importance of the non-primarily political content of political forms; that is to say, the cultural (aesthetic, emotional, religious, psychological) dimension of politics. Political action is the result of a cluster of motivations, not all of which are political, and among the political ones, not all of which are profound and rational. We should also be more critical of the self-aggrandizing, exclusive, and constraining logic of the political. Reading good novels help us rediscover the ambivalent and unruly impetus of the human experience including its political manifestations. To say that Kundera underestimates the importance of choice and decision in politics takes nothing away from his merit to emphasize the similarity between criticism and freedom: that is, their common propensity to value the irreverent quest for autonomy and self-development.