

# De ondraaglijke lichtheid van het bestaan

## Milan Kundera



Tereza en Tomas, Tomas en Sabina, Sabina en Franz, Franz en Marie-Claude... Vier in elkaar vervlochten relaties waarvan in Milan Kunderas meesterwerk *De ondraaglijke lichtheid van het bestaan* (1984) het relaas gebracht wordt, met de focus voornamelijk op Tomas, een man die verscheurd wordt tussen zijn liefde voor Tereza, zijn vrouw, en zijn onverbeterlijke "erotische avonturen," in het bijzonder zijn langdurige reëtie met de kunstschilderes Sabina. De wereld van Kunderas roman is er een waarin de levens vorm krijgen door onherroepelijke keuzes en onvoorziene gebeurtenissen. Het is een wereld waarin alles maar één keer gebeurt en dan verdwijnt in het verleden. Op die manier lijkt het bestaan zijn substantie en gewicht te verliezen. Kunderas personages, in een

poging om een levensverhaal te schrijven dat blijvende betekenis en individuele waarde heeft, krijgen af te rekenen met de gevolgen van hun eigen daden en de eisen die de staat en de samenleving hen oplegt.

*De ondraaglijke lichtheid* is een ideeënroman die een provocerende kijk geeft op de manier waarop de geschiedenis botst met individuele levens en een meditatie over persoonlijke identiteit. Het boek onderzoekt de onvolmaakte mogelijkheden van volwassen liefde en de manieren waarop vrije keuze en noodzaak mee gestalte geven aan onze levens. "Wat moeten we dan kiezen? Zwaarte of lichtheid?" vraagt de auteur zich af bij het begin van de roman. De internationale bestseller is zijn poging om die vraag te beantwoorden. En het antwoord is misschien nog het beste terug te vinden in de slotscène waarin Tomas en Tereza zich in een klein hotelletje op het platteland bevinden, na een zeldzaam (dans)avondje uit. Wanneer Tomas het licht aandoet in de kamer gaat een grote nachtvlinder, geschrokken van het plotse licht door de kamer fladderen waar zij voorts helemaal alleen zijn met hun geluk en verdriet...

## Vragen - discussiepunten

### Lichtheid

- Wat heet licht en zwaar in het boek? Ga je akkoord met die voorbeelden?
- Wat met het oxymoron "ondraaglijke lichtheid", zware lichtheid, dus?
- Door een (gelukkig) toeval kan "lichtheid" in het Nederlands ook opgevat worden in de optische betekenis: wat licht, helder is. Is in het boek enige houvast voor die stelling te vinden? Denk bijvoorbeeld aan het al dan niet open houden van de ogen, tijdens het vrijen... Is er een verband met het thema van de schaamte ('recht op schaamte')

- Twee keer hebben opeenvolgende hoofdstukken de titels 'Lichtheid en zwaarte' (1 en 5) en 'Ziel en lichaam' (2 en 4). Is er een verband? Wat vertelt ons die structuur. (De resterende hoofdstukken zijn 3 Onbegrepen woorden, 6 De grote mars en 7 Karenins glimlach).

### Filosofie

- Hoe gebruikt de auteur Nietzsche (zware?) idee van "de eeuwige terugkeer van hetzelfde"? Wat heeft het voor consequenties als dingen van fundamenteel voorbijgaande aard zijn dan wel dat alles toch altijd terugkeert? Wat met 'Einmal ist keinmal'. Wat zou er veranderen als we meer levens hadden of op zijn minst een kladder versie konden leven?
- Wat met medelijden versus medeleven en de hele etymologische argumentatie erom?
- Ziel en lichaam
- Wat nodig is, verwacht kan worden, zich elke dag herhaalt, spreekt niet aan. Alleen het toeval spreekt tot ons (p. 42 2-9)
- Trouw als principe dat eenheid geeft aan een mensenleven... Is verraad het tegenovergestelde van trouw. En kan verraad hetzelfde doen?
- Het echte leven? Leven in waarheid? Privé, openbaar? 'Hij heeft trouwens altijd al de voorkeur gegeven aan het onwerkelijke boven het werkelijke' (p. 100 3,9)
- Echt serieus zijn alleen vragen die ook een kind kan stellen...
- Hoeveel weten kan een mens dragen? In hoeverre pleit onwetendheid vrij van schuld?
- Het bestaan en de werking van het poëtisch geheugen

### Literaire en andere verwijzingen

- De hond Karenin en het boek Anna Karenina functioneren hier als een metafoor. Wat is het verband tussen beide?
- Een hoofdstuk is getiteld 'De grote mars'. Wat doe je daarmee? Is er een verband met de Chinese Lange Mars?
- Het beeld van Teresa die hem 'overkomt': als Mozes in een mandje, een vondeling als Oedipos... Is Teresa een mythologische vrouw? Bijvoorbeeld de manier waarop haar moeder een man kiest...

### Thema's, beelden, metaforen

- *Het thema van de dromen*. Dromen spelen een belangrijke rol in het boek: poezen, het zwembad, de begrafenisauto, maar ook de droom (geïnspireerd door de stiekem gelezen brief) met het podium in het atelier van Sabina.
- *Het thema van de fotografie*: elkaar fotograferen (de geziene en de voyeur en dan de rollen omkeren), de context van het atelier/podium, de oude hoed van de burgemeester
- *Het thema van de liefde*: flirten (de lichte liefde), cultus (liefde als godsdienst), liefde als het verlangen naar het vrijen versus naar een gedeelde slaap... Liefde in tijden van paranoia (Teresa en de ingenieur, Tomas' activiteiten als ramenlapper). 'Met liefdes is het net als met imperia: wanneer de gedachte waarop ze zijn gesticht vergaat, vergaan ook zij.' (p. 139 4,28). De lyrische rokkenjager (verlangen naar, najagen van een ideaalbeeld) versus de epische (de 'Collector' die zoveel mogelijk verschil zoekt).
- *Het thema van de schilderkunst*. Is wat Sabina over haar dubbele

schilderijen zegt ook geen beeld: een laag van begrijpelijke leugens met daaronder de onverklaarbare waarheid...?

De verteller

- De personages van mijn roman zijn mijn eigen niet gerealiseerde mogelijkheden (p. 180)

# Het gewicht van 'De lichtheid'

Door Pieter Steinz

**Milan Kundera's cocktail van Kafka en Tolstoj is met recht de bekendste Oostblokroman, stelt Pieter Steinz in deel 20 van zijn stoomcursus literatuur.**

Tussen de onverbiddelijke bestsellers van de jaren tachtig (De aanslag, Montaignou, De naam van de roos) neemt Milan Kundera's De ondraaglijke lichtheid van het bestaan een bijzondere plaats in. Niet alleen de lange, veel geparodieerde titel stak boven het maaiveld uit – 'De ondraaglijke dichtheid van het raam' kopte deze krant ooit bij een artikel over airconditioning – ook de inhoud en opzet van de roman. Welke boekverkoper zou op voorhand iets hebben gezien in een kronkelig verteld liefdesdrama uit het kafaeske Oostblok, waarin de filosofische passages elkaar verdringen en waarin van tijd tot tijd een postmoderne verteller de lezer duidelijk maakt dat hij bezig is met een verzonnen verhaal?

Toegegeven, de in Frankrijk gepubliceerde maar in het Tsjechisch geschreven roman bevatte ook nogal wat seks. Vanaf zijn debuut uit 1967, De grap, heeft Milan Kundera (Brno 1929) geëxcelleerd in erotische passages, en De ondraaglijke lichtheid, waarin een seksverslaafde chirurg de hoofdrol speelt, was daarvoor een mooi podium. Maar zelfs dat neemt de verbazing niet weg over meer dan dertig Nederlandse drukken sinds 1984 – al zal een deel daarvan op het conto kunnen worden geschreven van de aanstekelijke verfilming die Philip Kaufman in 1988 maakte onder de Engelse titel The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Daniel Day-Lewis speelde daarin de rol van Tomas, de Praagse arts die na de Russische inval in Tsjechoslowakije in ballingschap gaat, om na zijn terugkeer wegens nonconformisme gedegradeerd te worden tot glazenwasser. Juliette Binoche was de serveerster Tereza, Tomas' grote liefde; en Lena Olin speelde de belangrijkste van Tomas' veroveringen, de melancholieke kunstenares Sabina die 'niet gebukt [gaat] onder een last, maar onder de ondraaglijke lichtheid van het bestaan'.

'Het zou dwaas zijn van de auteur om de lezers te willen aanpraten dat zijn personages werkelijk hebben bestaan' schrijft Kundera al in het eerste deel van De lichtheid. De roman is een conte philosophique in de traditie van Kundera's grote voorbeeld Denis Diderot, wiens Jacques le fataliste hij voor het toneel bewerkte. Via zijn personages (waarvan de ikfiguur er één is) filosofeert de schrijver over kitsch, over communisme, over ballingschap (waarover hij kan meepraten, aangezien hij sinds 1975 in Frankrijk woont en sinds 1995 zelfs in het Frans publiceert), over het doel

van het leven, over toeval, en over het wezen van de roman: 'Een roman is geen bekentenis van de auteur, maar een onderzoek naar het menselijk leven in de val die de wereld is geworden.'

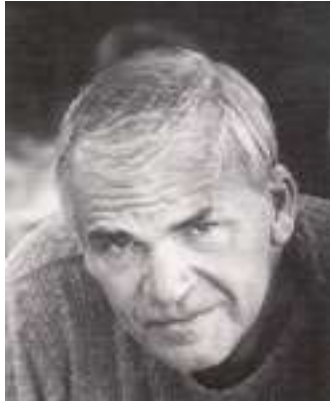
En tóch leef je mee met Tomas en Tereza, de ploeterende geliefden in communistisch Praag die uiteindelijk een Liebestod sterven. Kundera biedt een sprankelende cocktail van Kafka, Diderot en Tolstoj (wiens Anna Karenina het leidmotief van de roman is), en verenigt bovendien de belangrijkste thema's uit zijn overige werk. De lichtheid is daarmee met recht de bekendste moderne roman over het al dan niet gehandschoende totalitarisme in het communistische Oostblok. En hoewel Kundera met ieder nieuw boek Nobelprijswaardiger wordt – onlangs verscheen zijn negende roman Onwetendheid – heeft hij het succes van De lichtheid nooit overtroffen.

## Milan Kundera

1 april, 1929)

(Jan aulík

University of Glasgow)



Milan Kundera is one of the most important contemporary Czech writers. He is one of the few Czech writers who have achieved wide international recognition. In his native Czechoslovakia, Kundera was regarded as an important author and intellectual from his early twenties. Each of his creative works and each of his contributions to the public political and cultural discourse always provoked a lively debate in the context of its time. In the first part of his creative career, Kundera was a communist, although from the inception, his fellow-believers considered him to be an unorthodox thinker. The story of his writing is a story of many Czech intellectuals of his generation: it is the story of freeing themselves of the Marxist dogma and of gaining and communicating important insights, based on the traumatic experience of life under totalitarianism in Central Europe.

Milan Kundera was born in Brno in the highly cultured middle class family of Ludvík Kundera (1891-1971), a pupil of the composer Leoš Janáček and an important Czech musicologist and pianist, the head of the Brno Musical Academy between 1948 and 1961. From early years on, Kundera learnt to play the piano with his father. Later, he also studied musicology. Musicological influences can be found throughout Milan Kundera's work.

The author completed his secondary school studies in Brno in 1948. He then started studying literature and aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, but after two terms he transferred to the Film Academy, where he first attended lectures in film direction and then in script writing. In 1950, he was temporarily forced to interrupt his studies for political reasons. After graduation in 1952 he was appointed as lecturer in world literature at the Film Academy.

Kundera belonged to the generation of young Czechs who had not properly experienced the pre-war democratic Czechoslovak Republic. Their growing up was greatly influenced by the experiences of the Second World War and the German occupation. Paradoxically, the experience of German totalitarianism instilled in these young people a somewhat black-and-white vision of reality. It propelled them towards Marxism and membership of the communist party. Milan Kundera joined the ruling Czechoslovak communist party in 1948, still in his teens. In 1950 he and another Czech writer, Jan Trefulka, were expelled from the party for "anti-party activities". Trefulka described the incident in his novella *Práelo jim štěstí* (Happiness rained on them, 1962), Kundera used the incident as an inspiration for the main theme of his novel *Žert* (The Joke, 1967). Milan Kundera was re-admitted into the Communist Party in 1956. In 1970, he was expelled from the Party for the second time.

Milan Kundera is an extremely private person and he guards the details of his personal life as a secret, which is, as he says "nobody's business". In doing this, he has been undoubtedly influenced by the teaching of Czech structuralism, which argues that literary texts should be perceived on their own merits, as self-contained structures of signs, without the interference of extra-literary reality.

In an interview with the British writer Ian McEwan, Kundera said: "We constantly re-write our own biographies and continually give matters new meanings. To re-write history in this sense - indeed, in an Orwellian sense - is not at all inhuman. On the contrary, it is very human." Kundera feels that it is impossible to produce an objective history of politics, just as it is impossible to produce an objective autobiography or a biography.

He strictly controls the public information about his life. In the latest French editions of Kundera's works, his "official biography" consists only of two sentences: "Milan Kundera was born in Czechoslovakia in 1929 and since 1975 has been living in France."

Kundera now rejects and suppresses most of his literary output produced in the 1950s and the 1960s. He asserts the right of the author to exclude from his work "immature" and "unsuccessful" pieces of writing, the way composers do this.

In his mature works of fiction, Kundera creates an independent, self-contained world, which is constantly analysed and questioned from a philosophical point of view. However, it would be wrong to regard Kundera as a philosopher. He is a proponent of no concrete school of thinking. He greatly enjoys playing with his storylines and while analysing them rationally, he opens up an infinite way of interpreting the presented facts. As Květoslav Chvatík has pointed out, Kundera's mature fiction highlights the semiotic relativity of the modern novel, seen as an ambiguous structure of signs. Playing with these signs enables Kundera to show human existence as infinitely open to countless possibilities, thus freeing Man from the limitedness of one, unrepeatable human life. In concentrating on the sexual experiences of his characters, Kundera analyses the symbolic social meaning of these erotic encounters, thus being able to deal with the most essential themes concerning Man.

Kundera's mature work is the result of his unique Central European experience of disillusionment with the left-wing mythology of communism and also the product of his fascination with the West European literary tradition, manifested in the works of Rabelais, Diderot, Cervantes and Sterne, as well as with the Central European authors Kafka, Musil, Broch and Heidegger.

Kundera's journey to literary maturity was relatively long. In 1945, Kundera first published translations of poetry by the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in the journal *Gong* in Brno-Královo pole; in 1946, a surrealist poem by Milan Kundera, written undoubtedly under the influence of cousin Ludvík Kundera (born in 1920), a well-known Czech writer and poet in his own right, was printed in the journal *Mladé archy* (The Young Notebooks).

Milan Kundera's first book came out in 1953, five years after the communist takeover of power in Czechoslovakia and during the period of rampant Stalinism. It was a collection of lyrical poems, *âlovûk zahrada %oirá* (Man, a Wide Garden, 1953). The young author and many of his contemporaries saw this as unorthodox departure from the poetics of literature which had been by this time fully enslaved by the orthodox communist dogma. The period after the communist takeover of power in February 1948 produced attempts at "socialist realism" in Czech literature. Poems and novels were written about the "mass proletarian movement", the "class struggle" and the "successful progression of society towards communism". It was propaganda, made up of cardboard cut-outs and empty political clichés.

In his first collection of poems, Kundera attempted to assume a critical attitude towards this type of "literature", but he still did so from a strictly Marxist point of view. Nevertheless, he boldly transgressed against most of the tenets of the then only permissible literary method of socialist realism, as disseminated by the official state and party literary propagandist Ladislav Štolc.

*âlovûk, zahrada %oirá* is a collection of inferior verse in which the author systematically

attempts to illustrate and enliven the official Marxist dogma by personal experience. Thus the poet feels encouraged when he hears a young boy, playing in Brno near a railway track, singing the hymn of the left-wing movement, the Internationale. Kundera uses the atmosphere of the familiar Czech surroundings as a symbol of comfort and peace. In all his work written before leaving Czechoslovakia, Kundera is firmly rooted in his home environment. In *Žalostná zahrada*, the communist regime in Czechoslovakia is for Kundera a guarantor of all the values associated with his home: of everything that is cosy and reassuring.

In one poem, an old woman is confused by the new regime. She does not understand the political jargon of the new era. But at the end of the poem she is happy because her grandson, a communist Young Pioneer with his red scarf on his neck, embraces her and takes her by the hand. Kundera seems to argue here that the communist dogma is more palatable to people if it is communicated to them by individual experience and by the power of human relationships.

An example of early misogynic attitude by Kundera is a poem in which the hero, a party activist who comes home after a hard day's work, complains that his wife is not interested in listening to his account of his daily political "struggle" at work. She only prepares supper for him. The relationship of the individual to his community and the Party is examined in several of these early poems: the hero criticises himself for being too detached from his party companions. He realises that it is treason to be alone. He promises to his Comrades that he will never again act on his own. This particular poem clearly foreshadows one of the main themes of what is perhaps Kundera's most profound novel *Ľt*.

In 1955, Kundera published a blatant piece of communist political propaganda, a long poem *Poslední máj* (The Last May), a homage to Julius Fuřík, the hero of communist resistance against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia during the Second World War. Full of bathos, the work conforms to the tenets of socialist realism and the strictly official communist version of history. The communist journalist Fuřík is transformed into mythical heroic figure in the poem. Some commentators have speculated that Kundera had been commissioned to write this propagandistic piece and did not really believe in what he was writing.

In a parallel to Christ's temptation by the Devil, Commissar Boehm, Fuřík's interrogator in a Nazi prison in Prague, takes the communist activist for an evening out in a restaurant in the park on a hill overlooking the city of Prague. The Nazi policeman hopes that the magic of Prague on a June evening, symbolising the beauty of life, will make Fuřík try to save himself from death by giving up his communist dream and that Fuřík will start collaborating with his investigator. Some of the typical Kundera-esque themes, to be used later in a quite different context, appear even here. Moravian ethnicity is used as a reaffirmation of the authenticity and the great value of national life. Three young men in the restaurant sing Moravian folk songs boisterously. This gives Fuřík strength to resist Commissar Boehm's insistence. Fuřík becomes the epitome of full-blooded, loving and energetic existence while Boehm is crushed by the energy of Fuřík's emotions because he is an empty, sceptical, lifeless shell.

*Monology* (Monologues, first edition 1957) is a collection of poems in which Kundera highlights the tension between lovers. Here he rejects political propaganda and again stresses the importance of natural, ordinary, authentic human experience. *Monology* is a book of love poetry of a rational, intellectual inspiration. Many poems are based on paradoxes. ("I cannot live with you, you are too beautiful.") Some of them highlight the tension between emotion and the intellect and the irrationality of love which often conquers even those who would be guided by the intellect alone. These are also typical Kundera-esque themes, developed later in his work. In some of the poems, the poet is physically repulsed by women, while being attracted to them. Erotic passion can be a burden. The sexual impulse is disconcerting. Lovemaking can sometimes assume the form of escapism which hides unpleasant reality. The

theme of the pettiness of everyday female concerns, which makes women unaware of what is really going on in life, re-appears in this collection, as does the theme of one's beloved native country. Women are obedient, while men are warriors who are trying to understand the meaning of existence. When attempting to do so, they invariably break their heads against impenetrable walls. Some of the poems deal with the quandaries of infidelity, others are preoccupied with the fear of ageing and death. The theme of treason is present here in a slightly different form. The latest version of *Monology*, published in 1965, includes a poem in which the man's principal traumatic experience is being unjustly accused and condemned by his party colleagues at a political meeting - the theme of Kundera's early expulsion from the communist party, the main theme of *Ľert*, re-appears again. A woman's love is offered as a healing instrument for all the ills that the man has experienced in the world.

In this first stage of his creative career, Milan Kundera also wrote plays. In *Majitelé klíã* (The Owners of the Keys, 1962), which was very successfully staged in 1962 at the National Theatre in Prague by the experimental director Otomar Krejã, Kundera again attempted gently to humanise totalitarian communism from within the framework of its own, official referential system.

The setting of the play is orthodox, but Kundera has given the story and the characters his own, mildly reformist content. He has again filled the play with many typical Kundera-esque motifs which are developed later in his mature work.

In *Majitelé klíã*, a young couple is sharing cramped accommodation with their in-laws in a small Moravian town during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Young man Jifí Neãas and his twenty-year-old wife Alena live in one room in the small flat, while Alena's narrow-minded and pedantic parents, the Krãtas, live in another room in the same flat. The cramped conditions, the narrow-mindedness of the parents and the uncontrollably destructive emotionalism of particularly the female characters (a typical Kundera theme) are the source of conflict. On a Sunday morning, Jifí is contacted on the telephone by Vãra, a woman whom he knew when he temporarily became involved with the communist resistance movement. Vãra is on the run from the Gestapo and needs Jifí's help. While trying to do so, Jifí clashes with the limitedness of his in-laws and the childlike innocence of his wife. Vãra turns up in the flat and raises the suspicion of a Nazi concierge. Jifí is forced to kill him. He hides his dead body in the flat. Now it is necessary for everyone in the flat to run away, before the Gestapo arrives. But Jifí cannot tell his wife and her parents what has happened. Their reaction would be unpredictable. They would create a tantrum, attract the attention of the Nazi secret police and everyone would be killed. The parents keep harping on about irrelevant matters, accusing Jifí of having temporarily appropriated both sets of keys to the house, locking them inadvertently inside the flat for twenty minutes on the Sunday morning. In despair, Jifí is trying to lure away Alena from the flat, but she decides on a whim that she will not go out this morning. Eventually, Jifí and Vãra leave on their own, abandoning Alena and her parents to certain death.

*Majitelé klíã* is a protest against destructive primitivism. It is a play written from a communist point of view and members of the communist resistance are given the expected high place in the official political pantheon. The characters are still sufficiently black and white in order for them to conform to the tenets of "socialist realism", prevailing at the time. The play contains lyrical interludes, "visions", in which the main character, Jifí, emotionally probes his own situation, the experience of his life and his relations to people close to him. This is lyricism which the author later came to reject. Kundera's afterword to the printed version of *Majitelé klíã* of 1964 shows that his propensity to explain and interpret his own work to the reader dates back to this early stage of his literary career.

All the above discussed works by Milan Kundera were written by a communist and are all unawoedly Marxist. Nevertheless they were always slightly in advance of the times,

although not so much as to make it dangerous for the author. Thus on the official Czech literary scene of the 1950s and the early 1960s they were regarded as major literary landmarks. They provoked much debate and made an important contribution to the gradual process during which Czech literature freed itself from the yoke of Stalinism.

In *Majitelé klíů* Kundera for the first time openly voiced his revulsion over "the desire for order, which equals the desire for death". Mr Krůta's view that it is necessary to "line-up, to adapt one's life to the momentarily prevailing conditions and not to waste time by futile philosophising" was an open reference to the beginnings of a conflict between the relatively free-thinking Czech intellectuals, striving to do away with the excesses of Stalinism, and the authoritarian Communist Party leadership.

From the middle of the 1950s, Kundera was a celebrity in communist Czechoslovakia. He wrote for a number of literary magazines and his articles were followed with considerable interest. In 1955, his article "O sporech dũdickřch" ("Arguing about our inheritance") stood up for the heritage of the Czech and European avant-garde poetry, which until then had been condemned as decadent by official communist literary scholars. Kundera defended avant-garde poetry from a strictly communist point of view. He argued that even his politically orthodox poem about Julius Fuřík (*Poslední māj*) could not have been written without the legacy of Czech and international avant-garde poets. The art of the "decadent", "receding" capitalist era may be pernicious, but a truly socialist poet will avoid the unacceptable content and will use the formal creative innovations of even "idealist", avant-garde poetry to produce truly authentic, socialist art. The same applies to music and painting. Creative imagination can be used for "ideologically correct aims". If you do so, you actually apply Marxist dialectic properly. Those Czech socialist poets who willingly cut themselves off from the glorious tradition of the Czech interwar poetic avant-garde in the 1950s produced worthless doggerel instead of poetry. In order to give credence to his arguments, Kundera quoted Lenin who said that only vulgar materialists rejected philosophical idealism. The article "O sporech dũdickřch" even includes a statement which speaks rather boldly of those poets who have been "buried alive in the cells of incomprehensible abstraction". Might this be an implicit reference to the many poets who were languishing in communist prisons at the time?

Equally well received was Kundera's literary study *Umůní romānu: Cesta Vladislava Vanůury za velkou epikou* (The Art of the Novel: Vladislav Vanůura's journey to the great epic, 1960). This work which analyses the writings of an outstanding Czech interwar avant-garde prose writer (and member of the communist party) Vladislav Vanůura is a strictly Marxist defence of experimentation in the field of narrative fiction. The work was significantly influenced by the Hungarian Marxist theoretician Gyōrgy Lukács and his concept of the development of the epic - but writers were not allowed to quote Lukács in Czechoslovakia at that time.

*Umůní romānu* is a part of Kundera's search for his own style of writing. While analysing Vanůura's fiction, Kundera realised the importance of an ever-present, subjective narrator, a philosopher, who evaluates and comments upon the story as it develops. He rid himself of lyricism, descriptiveness and psychological analysis and became aware that good fiction must be based on dramatic conflict. He became very close to the poetics of the 18th century novel of enlightenment.

This first *Umůní romānu* is an important stage in the development of Kundera's style. He wrote his analysis of Vanůura's prose in short, clear and easily understandable chapters, using the method of question and answer. For the first time, Kundera here enters a systematic dialogue with his reader, guiding him gradually through a number of experimental stages through which Vanůura's fiction has gone. Frequent examples are used to illustrate Kundera's argumentation.

Vanůura, was tackling what Kundera saw as a serious problem: how to create convincing and yet topical fiction, with active and independent characters, acting out major conflicts, although he was living in the era of "stagnant, alienated, dehumanising and decomposing capitalism, a time when dramatic conflict between proud, independently acting individuals was no longer possible". In this era, individuals were passive and were being crushed by impersonal forces. In the study, Kundera attempts to show by what stylistic and thematic devices Vanůura tried to overcome this conflict and how he learnt from the history of the European novel as he was doing so.

Kundera disowns the work now. In a way, he has tried to negate its existence by publishing a new volume of literary essays under the title *The Art of the Novel* (1986) where some of the ideas first presented in the Vanůura study are developed to a much higher degree.

The original *Umůní romůnu* nevertheless remains a highly competent and erudite work, even though it sets out from what many might now see as false premises. The work was regarded as an important landmark in the sphere of official Czechoslovak marxist literary scholarship and was given a special award "to mark the 15th anniversary of the birth of Popular Democratic Czechoslovakia" as well as the 1961 annual prize of the *œskoslovenskř spisovatel* (Czechoslovak Writer) Publishing House.

In the controversy that arose among Czech independent intellectuals about Kundera's novels, written in the 1980s (see the debate in the Prague samizdat monthly *Obsah* and the Czech emigré quarterly *Svůdectvř* in 1985-1988), some Czech writers criticised Kundera, once he had left for the West, for stylising himself into a role of a dissident writer, as though he had never been a communist. Thus, in an interview with Philip Roth, Milan Kundera says:

"Then they expelled me from University. I lived among workmen. At that time, I played the trumpet in a jazzband in small-town cabarets. I played the piano and the trumpet. Then I wrote poetry. I painted. It was all nonsense. My first work which is worth while mentioning is a short story, written when I was thirty, the first story in the book *Laughable loves*. This is when my life of a writer began. I had spent half of my life as a relatively unknown Czech intellectual."

Leading Czech literary critic Milan Jungman reacted to this as follows:

"Those who used to know Milan Kundera in the 1950s and the 1960s, can hardly recognise him in this account. The self-portrait has been retouched in such a way that Kundera's real appearance has vanished. Everything essential that formed Kundera's image as a leading intellectual of the past few decades of Czech history has been suppressed."

In Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and the 1960s, Kundera was a major liberalising force in Czech official, communist literature. Even after the publication of *Smůné lůsky* (*Laughable Loves*) and *řert*, which are seen by many as heralding an openly anti-totalitarian stage of Kundera's writing, in December 1968, four months after the Soviet invasion, in an article published in *Listy*, Kundera sees himself as a "person belonging to the world of socialism (i.e. communism)" and criticises Vůclav Havel for using the arguments of a person who has never accepted communist ideals.

In the second half of the 1960s, liberal members of the communist party, primarily writers and intellectuals pushed for freedom in Czechoslovakia against the will of the defensive authoritarian and bureaucratic communist party apparatus. At the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak writers, which took place in June 1967, Czech writers clashed openly with the Communist leadership for the first time. Milan Kundera became a leading figure in the movement for freedom. He gave a major speech at the 1967 Congress of Czechoslovak

Writers, setting the scene for the debate that followed. The speech became a landmark in the history of independent, self-critical Czech thought.

Kundera looked back at the legacy of the 19th century Czech National Revival, at whose inception a handful of Czech intellectuals resurrected the Czech language as an instrument of educated discourse and brought the Czech nation from the threshold of extinction. He referred to journalist Hubert Gordon Schauer, who in 1886 asked the re-established Czech national community whether all the effort recreating modern Czech national culture had been worth while. Would it not have been simpler and wiser had the Czechs merged with the larger and more sophisticated German community, rather than having to start from scratch in all the fields of human activity, in their own language?

Small nations always face the possibility of extinction, said Milan Kundera. There is no point in preserving a separate, Czech identity in the quickly integrating world if this community is incapable of making its own, innovative and unique contribution to mankind, in particular in the field of the arts. In order to be able to do so, Czech literature and culture must develop in conditions of total freedom. Truth can only be reached in a dialogue conducted by individuals who are equal and free. Having experienced democracy, Nazi subjugation, Stalinism and "socialism", the Czechs are favourably placed to produce a unique testimony about man and his/her predicament, thus giving Czech culture meaning, maturity and greatness. (Here Kundera may have been influenced by the views of Jean Paul Sartre, who visited Prague in 1963 and predicted that the great novel of the second half of the twentieth century would be produced by the search for truth about the experiment of communism.) The question remains, concluded Kundera, whether the Czech national community is aware of this opportunity and whether it will use it. The speech showed again how firmly Kundera was grounded in his own, national environment and with what feelings of responsibility he was looking at the Czech national heritage and asking questions about the future of his nation.

In the author's own words, Kundera's first mature period started in 1958 (or in 1959, he has given both years) when he "found himself as a writer" while working on his first short story, "Já, truchlivý Bůh" ("I, the mournful God", 1958), which was later included in the first of the three slim volumes of *Smělné lásky* (Laughable Loves, 1963, 1965, 1968), but was eventually left out from the definitive Czech edition of this book in 1981 because it was superfluous to the seven-part structure of the collection which Kundera imposed upon it. "Já, truchlivý Bůh" was written as relaxation during the hard work on the play *Majitelé klíče*.

Like most of the texts in *Smělné lásky*, "Já, truchlivý Bůh", is a brilliant miniature drama of intimate human relationships. Most of these short stories are based on bittersweet anecdotes which deal with sexual relations of two or three characters. Kundera believes that looking at people through the prism of erotic relationships reveals much about human nature. Thus he re-works the ancient Don Juan theme. The modern Don Juan, however, no longer conquers women. He just boringly collects them because the convention of the day demands this.

The odd stories in *Smělné lásky* are based on strong dramatic conflicts. The even numbers in the collection tend to be light and playful variations on the themes of sexual pursuit. Most of them take the form of witty dialogue, based on paradoxes. The even short stories form a background framework for the strongly narrative odd stories. These evolve from what always seems to the hero at the inception as an innocent joke. These jokes however have catastrophic consequences both for their perpetrators and the victims. Thus the arrogance of the perpetrator of the joke who believes that he can control history and manipulate people is exposed as a fallacy.

Thus, in "Já, truchlivý Bůh", the hero of the story, a young man, fails to win a beautiful girl, a somewhat limited student at the Brno conservatory. As an act of revenge, he decides to make fun of her snobbery and introduces her to his friend, an illiterate Greek immigrant,

whom he disguises, stage-manages and introduces him to the girl as the director of the Athens Opera who is visiting Prague only for a short time. The Greek man and the Czech girl make love and a beautiful boy is born of the union. His mother proudly shows the son off, but where there was one unhappy young man, spurned by the girl at the beginning of the story, there are now two. The Greek labourer has hopelessly fallen in love with the Czech girl, but she does not recognise him in his workman's clothes.

In a highly dramatic short story "Falešný autostop" (The Hitchhiking Game), a girl and a boy in a car at the beginning of their summer holiday start playing a manipulative game. They pretend that they do not know each other and that they have just met for the first time. The boy at the wheel pretends he is a womaniser. The girl plays being a hitchhiker who looks for a sexual encounter. The game destroys their relationship. In "Eduard a Bůh" (Eduard and God), a young teacher living in a Stalinist society, where religion is frowned upon, tries to win the favours of a religiously-minded girl by pretending that he himself is extremely devout. This gets him into trouble with the school authorities who set about re-educating him in the spirit of Marxist atheism. The young man is unable to persuade them he was only pretending to be religious in order to get a girl into bed. Such behaviour would not be regarded as serious. It would be an affront to those officials who are genuinely trying to reeducate the young man. When you try to explain what you mean to idiots, does not this mean that you are also becoming an idiot, asks Kundera through one of his characters. Another character in *Směné lásky* argues:

"When you believe in something literally, you will turn it into an absurdity through your faith. Genuine adherents of a political philosophy never take its arguments seriously, but only its practical aims, which are concealed beneath these arguments. Political arguments do not exist, after all, for people to believe in them, rather they serve as a common, agreed-upon excuse. Foolish people who take them in earnest sooner or later discover inconsistencies in them, begin to protest and finish finally and infamously as heretics."

Paradoxically, truth is often left by the wayside in these stories of mutual sexual manipulation. Once Kundera's characters start perpetrating a joke, they are invariably forced by circumstances to stick to it as though they had always meant it seriously. As Kvetoslav Chvatík has pointed out, this highlights the crisis of language. A linguistic message, a sign, emancipates itself from reality, imposes its meaning on it and violates it. People succumb to stereotyped conventions which negate reality. The same theme reappears in *Ďert* and all the other, mature novels by Milan Kundera.

*Směné lásky* are playful, yet sophisticated, almost mathematical constructs which create in the reader the feeling of vertiginousness due to their complexity. The same impact is made by Kundera's novel *Ďert*. Both *Směné lásky* and *Ďert* attack primitivism, pomposity and kitsch and are filled with scepticism and melancholy.

The concepts of truth and untruth, authenticity and pretence, cynicism and sincerity are shown as ambiguous. In *Směné lásky* Kundera for the first time uses a large number of witticisms, based on paradoxes. He is particularly interested in seeing how facts imperceptibly change into their opposites. By concentrating on human sexual games, Kundera produces a modern version of the Don Juan myth, which he debunks at the same time. He analyses the themes of human identity and authenticity and the phenomenon of mystification. Several of the stories are very firmly set in the Czech society of late Stalinism and provide authentic testimony about the atmosphere of that era.

Kundera regards *Směné lásky* as his first, truly mature work. He likes it best of all his work because the collection "reflects the happiest time of my life" (the liberal 1960s). He completed the last story of the collection three days before the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, which took place on 21st August 1968.

The play *Jakub a jeho pán* (Jacques and his Master, first published in a French translation in 1981, first published in the Czech original in Brno in 1992) was written in Prague in 1971, subsequent to the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968, after Kundera had become a non-person in his native country, along with more than 300 other writers. The Russian-led invasion ended the 1960s period of liberalisation in Czechoslovakia, which culminated in several months of total media freedom in the spring and summer of 1968 and threw the country into a harsh, neostalinist freeze. This rigid regime of post-1968 "normalisation" lasted practically unchanged until the disintegration of communism in Czechoslovakia in November 1989.

As the author explains in the 1981 French preface to the piece, the work was the product of yearning for Western rationality, the spirit of doubt and playfulness and the awareness of the relativity of human matters. It was a reaction to the imposition of Russian emotionality on Czechoslovakia, "emotionality, regarded as a value, as a criterion on truth". In 1975, it was staged in Ústí nad Labem without giving Kundera's name as the author. Between 1975 and the fall of communism in 1989, the play had a successful run of 226 performances there.

*Jakub a jeho pán* is a homage to the writer of the French enlightenment, Denis Diderot. It is a set of variations on his novel *Jacques the fatalist*. Inspired by Diderot and the English writer Laurence Sterne, whose *Tristram Shandy* is a masterpiece, made of playful digressions, Kundera set out to write a play whose backbone are three amorous stories. The stories are intertwined in a continuous dialogue of the play's protagonists, whose speech is constantly interrupted by the other characters. Kundera gave up the unity of action and built up the play using the techniques of polyphony and variation. The three amorous stories are variations on the same theme. They resemble one another.

In the preface of the play, Kundera attacks the notion of "seriousness". In one of his typical, challenging, but apodictic sayings, which should not be accepted at face value, he states that "to take the world seriously means to believe what the world wants us to believe".

Kundera's mature work is littered with statements like the one quoted above. Such statements are paradoxes. They are both true and untrue at the same time. By making them, Kundera encourages the reader to think independently and make his own conclusions.

At first *Jakub a jeho pán* certainly seems to be a playful, unserious, amusing piece, dealing with the matters of love. As we go along, it transpires that the play can be construed as a protest against the bleakness of the world and the human predicament. The playful conversation about love-making and the art of spinning a yarn becomes a shield which is supposed to protect us from inhospitable reality, from our journey through life whose aim is unknown. As *Jakub* says: "Don't be afraid, sir. I don't like unnecessary truths. An unnecessary truth is the stupidest thing I know. For instance that we will die. Or that this world is rotten. As though we did not know all this. Do you know them, those men who heroically enter the stage to exclaim: This world is rotten! The public applauds but *Jakub* is not interested. *Jakub* knew this two hundred, four hundred, eight hundred years before them, so while they are exclaiming that the world is rotten he is trying invent for his master a few women with very large bottoms, the way his master likes it..." Life is repetition. Everything has been here before. "The one above (i.e. God) who has written all this repeated himself an awful lot, and since he has done so, he has probably been making fun of us..."

Life being a giant joke, perpetrated on members of the human race, is the main theme of Kundera's perhaps most profound novel *Îert* (1967).

In *Îert*, Kundera for the first time developed in a great depth the major theme of his writing, namely the warning that it is impossible to understand and control reality. This sceptical attitude is evidently linked with the history of Kundera's own personal disillusionment with

communism. *Îert* is a challenge to the optimistic proposition, advanced by the communists in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, who believed that reality can be mastered and controlled by Man's intellect and that Man can be the creator of his own destiny. With typically Kunderesque irony, the author points out that the communists' optimistic belief in an all-powerful human intellect, the culmination of rationalist optimism of the Enlightenment, produced overall destruction, a negation of the world.

*Îert* masterfully conveys the bleak atmosphere of triumphant Stalinism in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, whose propaganda and attitude to life was based on officially manipulated lyricism. Kundera again warns against the destructiveness of emotions, elevated to the status of truth.

Most Western critics originally understood *Îert* as a political novel, a protest against Stalinist totalitarianism. Protest against Stalinism is however only one of many themes in the novel. Kundera rightly objected to such a simplified interpretation. He pointed out that the 1950s in Czechoslovakia attracted him as a scene for the novel only "because this was a time when History made as yet unheard of experiments with Man. Thus it deepened my doubts and enriched my understanding of man and his predicament". Czech critics of the 1960s correctly understood *Îert* as a work probing the deepest essence of human existence.

Like in *Smûné lásky*, the story of *Îert* is based on an anecdote. In order to win a girl, a young communist student makes an innocent joke. The girl is attending a political training course at a summer camp. The hero of the novel, Ludvík Jahn, frustrated by her absence, sends her a provocative postcard. The postcard gives rise to a witchhunt. Ludvík is expelled from the party, forced to leave university and ends up as a member of a penal army unit, working in the mines. Many years later, in the 1960s, Ludvík thinks an opportunity has arisen to revenge himself on a fellow student, Pavel Zemánek, the main perpetrator of his downfall. He seduces his wife, thus hoping to destroy their marriage. But Zemánek no longer lives with his wife and by seducing her, Ludvík Jahn actually helps him. Moreover, as a chameleon-like creature, Zemánek is now a liberal reformer, fighting against communist authoritarianism in his country, and is therefore extremely popular with students at the University where he teaches. Thus Ludvík realises that Man is never in control. There is no point in trying to revenge oneself. "Everything will be forgotten. There will never be any redress for anything."

The most traumatic experience of Ludvík Jahn is the realisation that his closest friends did not hesitate to vote for his expulsion from the Party because the Party had commanded them to do so. In a similar incident, the soldiers in the penal unit Ludvík served in ruthlessly subject an innocent individual to undeserved torment. Whenever Ludvík finds himself in a group of people, he always wonders how many of them would be willing to send their fellow mortals to death, only because the collective has demanded this.

The structure of *Îert* is derived from the principles of musical composition. It is pluralist, polyphonic, and strictly mathematical. Four main characters tell their stories, often recounting the same events from their own points of view. By confronting their accounts, the reader comes to the conclusion that each of the characters is the victim of his or her own fallacious interpretation of reality.

The main character, Ludvík Jahn, is proud of his intellectual, analytical abilities. But he fools himself when believing that he is in full, rational control of his life. Even his actions are based on emotional impulse, just as the actions of the thoroughly "lyrical", fully emotional characters (Zemánek's wife Helena) who behave in a blatantly limited, embarrassing and destructive way.

The characters in *Îert* make numerous brief philosophical statements and paradoxical wisecracks about life around them. As is always the case with Kundera, these are only

partially true. When analysing them, the reader is supposed to exercise his own judgment.

The main themes of the novel are the Joke that History (or God?) perpetrates on Man, revenge, forgetting, identity and the crisis of language. The motive of one's native land, extremely dear to Kundera, reappears at the end of the novel, when everything is collapsing around the main character. Ludvík turns, somewhat unconvincingly, to his native heritage but even that can give him only a partial consolation, since even his home has been despoiled by the arrogance of rampant official rationalism-turned into lyricism.

The motif of sexual revenge in *Ľert* has been questioned by some critics. They have wondered whether it is actually possible to make love to someone as an expression of hatred.

The theme of love-making as an instrument of subjugation also re-appears in Kundera's play *Dvů u%oi, dvů svatby* (Two ears, two weddings, 1968, printed in 1969 in the *Divadlo* journal under the original title *Ptákovina* (Nonsense). *Ptákovina* is one of the works that Kundera now excludes from the canon of his writing as an immature piece.

*Ptákovina* is first and foremost a work of political satire, in the tradition of East European absurd drama. In this respect, it is quite closely related to the early absurd plays by Václav Havel.

The play takes place in a school, a useful symbol of society under totalitarian subjugation. The piece is a variation on the themes of power, sex, violation and manipulation of truth. Under totalitarian pressure, truth becomes meaningless. People dissimulate and put on a multiplicity of masks. The play is a condemnation of brutal, primitive totalitarian oppression which borders on sadomasochism with sexual undertones.

The Headmaster of a school, who terrorises personally and physically the members of his teaching staff, draws the shape of female sexual organs on the blackboard in one of the classrooms. Later on, he adds, in a child's handwriting, "= headmaster". A commission is set up to investigate this. An innocent pupil is accused and he confesses because he hopes that thus his punishment will be lenient. As a punishment, his ears are cut off. It has been agreed by the local Party Chairman that the culprit's teacher, young Eva, in her twenties, should also be punished, by whipping. The punishment is carried out by the Party Chairman as a special sexual treat.

But Eva is the Headmaster's lover and he is livid with jealousy. The Headmaster has a reputation of a great womaniser - he has slept with 400 women - and thus he is invited by Party Chairman to test the fidelity of his fiancée, RůĽena. RůĽena succumbs to the Headmaster while he reports to the Chairman that she has remained faithful. Spurred on by his own fiancée Eva, Headmaster sleeps with RůĽena to revenge himself on the Chairman for whipping Eva. But RůĽena records Headmaster's abusive comments about the Chairman and turns him into her sexual slave. She particularly relishes that although the Headmaster hates her, must repeatedly make love to her. A typical Kundera-esque theme of women who are at the same time both attractive and repulsive makes an appearance in this play, as does the theme of love-making as a punishment or an instrument of enslavement.

*Ľivot je jinde* (Life is Elsewhere first published in the Czech original in Toronto, 1979, definitive French translation published in Paris in 1975) is a novel of exorcism. Milan Kundera started writing it during the liberal Prague Spring of 1968 and completed it in 1970, during the first wave of the post-1968 clampdown in Czechoslovakia.

In this novel, Kundera confronts his communist past and frees himself from it. He viciously strips away all remnants of his youthful lyrical personality and of communist ideology. The novel is a scathing, rational analysis of an immature, narcissistic lyrical attitude, which is

destructive in its impotence.

In *Jakub a pán*, Kundera's and Diderot's characters created amusing stories because they wanted to shield themselves from an inhospitable human predicament. *Ľivot je jinde* is a new variation on this theme. In Kundera's view, as expressed in this novel, lyrical characters cannot cope with reality and therefore create an independent reality, poetry, in which they then take shelter. An artificial sign takes over the role of reality. In lyrical poems, words turn into things. You do not need to reason in lyrical poetry: any lyrical statement becomes the truth. The lyrical poet might say, "Life is as futile as crying", or he might say "Life is as cheerful as laughter" and in both instances he will be right. The statements become true because of their beauty.

Lyricism is often associated with a desire for a radical revolution. Lyrical poets always try to find a better world in their poetry than is the one in which they are actually living. The name of Kundera's novel, *Life is elsewhere*, is a quotation from the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, used by André Breton as the last sentence of his first surrealist manifesto in 1924. The same slogan was used by the French students during their demonstrations in Paris in May 1968. Lyricists yearn for a different world. They are convinced that a radical revolution can bring it about, argues Kundera.

*Ľivot je jinde* is a scathingly analytical account of the life of a fictitious young poet, Jaromil. The fictitious poet is of Kundera's generation. His adventures are compared and contrasted with key episodes from the lives of major European lyrical poets: Shelley, Lermontov, Keats, Rimbaud, Mayakovsky and Wolker. Thus the author makes a general statement about the perniciousness of lyricism. In effect, he condemns the immaturity and destructiveness of the European lyrical avantgarde, as well as their political views, based on emotions.

In Kundera's view, lyrical poets are completely controlled by women. Jaromil is subjugated by his neurotic, limited, middle class mother who systematically falls victim to bad faith, reinterpreting facts and events so that they fit into an emotional account of reality, favourable to her.

Jaromil also cannot cope with reality. He escapes into the world of poetry. Yearning to become a part of community of active individuals, he is easily used by the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia after 1948. As a narcissist, he strives for fame and adopts his poetry to the official demands of the day. Self-centredness turns Jaromil into a monster. He reports his girlfriend to the police and she is unjustly condemned to prison for several years. Soon thereafter, after an altercation at a party, acting like a spoilt child, Jaromil stays out on a balcony in a freezing weather, deliberately contracts pneumonia and dies a banal death. By killing Jaromil grotesquely, Kundera does away with the fallacies of his own youth.

In his second version of *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera admits that the number seven is an important principle of the mathematical structures of his novels. Number seven appears in many of his works. *Ľivot je jinde* is composed as a seven-part musical composition, observing the laws of the sonata. The individual parts of the novel are composed in varying tempos. Jaromil's story is told dispassionately by a critical, third person observer. Towards the end of the novel, the angle of vision suddenly changes. Jaromil disappears from the centre of our attention and becomes an insignificant, irrelevant character.

This is the first novel that Kundera completed as a banned writer. In this and in his subsequent novels, he radically simplified his language, knowing that he was writing for translators into foreign languages because his work could now no longer be published in his native country.

*Valáik na rozlouãenou* (*The Farewell Party*, first published in Czech in 1979, definitive

French version *La valse aux adieux*, Paris, 1986) uses the form of the French vaudeville. Completed in Prague in 1972, this was supposed to be Kundera's last novel, a testament. Its original name was *Epilog* (The Epilogue).

Kundera had been dismissed from his teaching post at the Prague Film Academy. His books had been withdrawn from bookshops and libraries. Along with hundreds of other writers, he was to be erased from Czech cultural history. Paradoxically, after he had become a non-person, he experienced the feeling of total freedom: for the first time in his life, he could write freely. He knew that his works would "never be published in Bohemia and that no censor would be reading them".

*Valáik na rozlouäenou* is formally a farce. Kundera has filled a comic French form with a serious, ironic content. The result is an overwhelming feeling of the grotesque. The novel deals with misunderstanding within the relationships of five different couples. The main character, trumpet player Klíma, who is deeply in love with his beautiful wife Kamila, realises his love for her by sleeping with other women and by always "returning to Kamila". He has had a brief sexual encounter with a local nurse in a West Bohemia spa. The nurse has become pregnant, possibly by another man, but in an instance of "typically feminine", emotional bad faith, she ascribes the pregnancy to the famous musician Klíma, thus hoping to wield control over him. Much of the novel is devoted to Klíma's efforts to persuade the nurse to have an abortion. There is complicated interaction with the other characters. *Valáik na rozlouäenou* is a set of variations on the theme human misunderstanding. Events, as they occur, are being interpreted by characters incorrectly. Characters often ascribe to events interpretations which are exactly the opposite of their real meaning. The many misunderstandings culminate in an almost accidental killing of the pregnant nurse. The perpetrator of the killing is never discovered. He leaves the country. The novel shows all human "dramas" as futile, insubstantial and irrelevant.

The atmosphere of the novel is influenced by the barren climate in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet-led invasion of 1968. Politics is excluded from the scene: the novel preoccupies itself with personal relationships, as they develop in the characters' private sphere of existence. The protagonists are calculating and selfish: they aim to gain advantage at the expense of other people. Their own pleasure is the primary motivation of their behaviour.

The oppressive atmosphere of the outside world intrudes on the scene of the novel only occasionally: in the grotesque scene of intolerant old age pensioners, chasing and catching freely wandering dogs in the town, in the proceedings of the abortion commission and in the tendency of characters to create hidden little cells of nepotism, of creating secret brotherhoods of friends who exchange special favours, ignoring ordinary people and shielding themselves from the inhospitable reality on the outside.

From the contemporary Western point of view, the attitude of men towards women is decidedly politically incorrect. Women exist primarily to be manipulated so that men can get them into bed. Again, male characters are often both attracted and repulsed by women. Men are "chased" into marriage. They are almost pathologically afraid of the "trap of pregnancy" and are horrified by the notion that their sexual adventures could produce "brats". Older women are depicted with hardly concealed disgust. They are personifications of the "mindless lyricism" which aggressively allies itself with official ideology.

Another Kundera-esque theme that re-appears in *Valáik na rozlouäenou* is the theme of violence, perpetrated on innocent individuals by society, with the active approval of its members. Like Ludvík Jahn in *Āert, Jakub*, a sceptical dissident intellectual about to leave his native country for ever, bitterly re-examines the phenomenon and comes to the conclusion that anyone in his native country would send innocent people to death without hesitation. Paradoxically, it is Jakub who is guilty of the arbitrary killing of the nurse, thus confirming,

that in spite of his lifelong support for human rights, he belongs amongst his countrymen.

In 1975, Milan Kundera and his wife left Czechoslovakia for France. Kundera was invited to teach at the University of Rennes. In subsequent interviews, the author confessed that the departure from the oppressive atmosphere of occupied Czechoslovakia brought him profound relief. Yet, he continued to look at his native country from the new, French, vantage point with a mixture of affectionate melancholy.

The departure from Czechoslovakia was a watershed for Kundera. He had studied French literature and culture during his Prague years, yet when he settled permanently in France and gained first-hand experience of life in the West, he became able to compare and contrast in his work life in the West with life in the East. His critical analysis of both societies was scathing. It took him six years to complete his first "Western" book. During his first years in the West, Kundera maintained that he had said all that he had to say and that he would write no more works of fiction.

*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (Book of laughter and forgetting, completed in 1978, published in a French translation in 1979, in the Czech original in 1981) heralded a new stage of Kundera's career. At the same time, it is a continuation of Kundera's onslaught on the left wing myths of his youth. From this point of view, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* highlights again some of the themes dealt with in *Ľert* and *Ľivot je jinde*, now from a Western vantage point.

After Kundera had found out that the early Western translations of *Ľert* were inaccurate, he resorted to an extremely rational, intellectual style of expression. Yet he did not give up the notion of writing as a game. While his language is precise, the meaning of his statements remains ambiguous. An ironic detachment is again a pervading characteristic of the novel.

The structure of *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* is looser than that of his earlier works. The work has again seven chapters, which consist of a number of disparate stories, memories, anecdotes and philosophical essays. As a homage to Beethoven, the chapters are bound together by the musical principles of polyphony and variation. Thus different aspects of the same facts are being highlighted, one at a time. The novel is not supposed to impose any particular truth on the reader, it examines things and asks questions.

The starting point for Kundera's novels is a handful of key concepts. In *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* these are forgetting, laughter, angels, pity, frontier. There are several story lines, whose characters never meet. The narratives are related to one another only by being variations of the same set of concepts.

Maybe typically for someone who was forced to leave his native country, the main theme of the work is a struggle against forgetting. This theme present in all chapters of the novel and is examined from many personal as well as social angles.

At the beginning of the novel Mirek is looking for the letters he wrote to one of his lovers when he was a young man, so that he could destroy them and change the past. He, like a novelist, feels he is entitled to rewrite his own life. The Czech emigré Tamina, stranded in France, is on the other hand trying desperately and in vain to reclaim the letters she had written to her now dead husband in Prague while they were still living in there. She wants to be able to recreate the memories of her life with him, which are fading fast. She is trying to reinforce her disappearing past. Forgetting is a characteristic of childlike people without history. In the East, forgetting is forced upon people by the authorities, in the West, people embrace forgetting of their own initiative.

The other main theme of the novel is laughter. Angelic, optimistic, collective laughter,

expressing a simple joy being alive, is a sign of mindless destruction of individuality. Devilish, subversive laughter blasphemes against the ideal of divine perfection. It pricks pomposity, whether it be the seriousness of group sex or of attempts to create an ideal, communist society.

Tamina's story is also a story of misunderstanding. As in other prose works by Kundera, there is never any meeting of minds. Everybody interprets what is going on in his or her own way. All action changes its meaning depending on circumstances and on the angle of vision.

Eventually, Tamina is taken from her isolation in France to an island inhabited by a community of young children who play all the time and are at the same time subjected to rigid discipline. This is an obvious parallel to life in a communist state, but maybe also to the mindless consumerist society of the West? In trying to escape from the island, Tamina drowns.

In a soul-searching manner, Kundera again re-examines the communist past of his young years. He sees it the communist revolution as a "deed which has got out of hand, it has escaped from under the control of its creators". He contrasts the enthusiasm of the early youthful Czech communist revolutionaries with the arid regime of post-1968 Czechoslovakia. For the rest of their lives, he concludes, the young revolutionaries were unsuccessfully trying to re-capture their original deed which had emancipated itself from them. The work draws deeply on Kundera's personal experiences and on historical facts, but it is not an autobiography, nor is it a documentary. The author's personal experience and the historical events are elevated to the realm of fiction to make a personal statement.

Mirek, the intellectual from the first chapter, who wishes to reclaim and re-write his past, is followed by the secret police and eventually is sentenced to a long prison term. A chapter deals with two limited American students in Paris and their similarly simple-minded teacher who think that they have understood Ionesco's absurd humour. The chapter entitled "Lítost" (Pity) is a study of an emotion which Kundera defines as "a state of torment which arises when we look at our own wretchedness". The final chapter, "Frontier", gives examples of how easy it is to overstep the borderline beyond which things lose their meaning.

In 1978 Milan Kundera and his wife moved to Paris where he taught at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. It was in Paris in 1982 that Kundera completed the novel *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (The Unbearable Lightness of Being, first published in Czech in Toronto, 1985, definitive French edition 1987), his most popular work with Western readers and critics alike. It was particularly this novel which made Milan Kundera an internationally well-known author, especially after it was turned into a film by director Philip Kaufman in 1988. However, Kundera was unhappy with the film. Neither this movie nor Jaromil Jireš's film version of *Ľert*, made in Czechoslovakia in 1968, do not in any way do justice to the complex, polyphonic structure of Kundera's novels. Kundera, however, likes Jireš's version of *Ľert*. Some Czech critics think that the best film ever made of a work by Milan Kundera is *Nikdo se nebude smát* (Nobody will laugh) the 1969 Czech film of a short story from *Smůné lásky*, directed by Antonín Kachlík.

*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* returns to a more traditional narrative storyline, although even here the narrator continually interrupts it, explaining to the reader what he means and examining highlighted problems from different angles.

While many of Kundera's frequent witticisms are full of insight, some of them do not always ring true. This may be deliberate provocation. Alfred Thomas has pointed out that the narrator's voice in Kundera's novels must be regarded as one of many voices in the polyphony of views, competing for the readers attention. The events of the novel often transcend the narrow interpretations offered by the narrator.

Even in this novel, Kundera uses the principle of playfulness and variation as an instrument to examine matters from all sides. He tells the stories of two couples, Tomáš and Tereza and Sabina and Franz. The author again compares and contrasts a number of major themes of his work. *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* examines Nietzsche's myth of Man's eternal return. Kundera concentrates on the fact that Man lives only once. *Einmal ist keinmal*. Man has consciousness and reason, but his life is unrepeatable. Hence one cannot correct one's mistakes. This realisation is obviously still connected in the author's mind with his attempts to live down the experience of his communist youth. Since life is unrepeatable, we experience vertiginous lightness, a total lack of responsibility.

The idea of lightness, which Kundera takes from the Greek philosopher Parmenides, and which originally meant playfulness, turns into lack of seriousness, into meaningless emptiness.

Kundera also deals with the concept of kitsch, which he has taken over from the German writer Hermann Broch. Kitsch is a beautiful lie, which hides all the negative aspects of life and deliberately ignores the existence of death.

A number of typical Kundera-esque themes recur in the novel. The main hero, Tomáš, is again a passionate womanizer, yet he loves his wife. He is at the same time attracted and repelled by women. The mother of his wife, Tereza, a typical "lyrical" character, is an aggressive proponent of the notions of collectivism, optimism and lack of privacy. Tereza however is shy and yearns for privacy. Destructive lyricism is again associated with left wing political ideology, both in Eastern Europe in the 1950s and in Western Europe in the 1980s. It is comical that people often interpret the same phenomena and events each in their own way, due to their differing experience, mentality and background. Thus, understanding between people is impossible.

*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* is a story of a Czech neurosurgeon Tomáš and his photographer wife Tereza who defect to Switzerland after the Soviet invasion of 1968. But Tereza cannot stand Tomáš's infidelities and returns to Czechoslovakia on an impulse. Tomáš follows her, giving up his good job. On his return to Czechoslovakia he becomes a window cleaner. (Czech critics complained that this does not ring true. Of all the professionals who were forced to abandon their work and support themselves in menial jobs after the post 1968 clampdown, medical doctors were an exception - they were not persecuted in this way.) Eventually, to escape the attention of the secret police, the couple move to the Czech countryside, where they live in happiness and humility and after a few years die in a traffic accident.

The parallel relationship of the Czech emigré painter Sabina with a Swiss lecturer Franz is based on misunderstanding, which follows from their different backgrounds. The novel even includes a "Vocabulary of misunderstood expressions", used quite differently by Franz and Sabina. Franz is a victim to a number of naive myths. He dies a nonsensical death in Thailand, during a protest march against the genocide in Cambodia.

While being hailed as a masterpiece in the West, this work became the subject of fierce controversy among independent critics within Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. Perhaps misunderstanding that the narrator's emphatic pronouncements are to be taken by the reader as only one of the many polyphonic voices, as an invitation to critical thinking, Czech commentators felt that the author's vision of reality was too black and white to be convincing.

Milan Kundera always expressed a strong affection for his native country. His Czechness, the familiar surroundings of his native land and its culture was for a long time one of the highest values for him. Later, he broadened the concept of the culture to which he belonged to the

concept of Central Europeanness. In many of his writings and interviews he has argued that Central Europe gave the birth to a unique civilisation, with great figures such as Freud, Einstein, Mahler, Janáček, Broch, Kafka and Musil. In Kundera's view, this culture was destroyed by Russian subjugation. In December 1968, four months after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, in an essay entitled "Český úděl" ("The Czech Destiny", *Listy*, 19th December 1968) Kundera professed that he believed "in the great mission of the small nations which in today's world have been delivered to the tender mercies of the Great Powers. (...) By their incessant search for their own identity and by their fight for survival, the small nations resist the terrifying push towards uniformity on this earth, making it glitter with a wealth of traditions and customs, so that human individualism, marvel and originality can find a home in this world." In the 1980s, Kundera started an international controversy (see his interview with Philip Roth, *The New York Review of Books*, 30th November, 1980, which is now included as an "Afterword" in the American edition of *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, or his essay "The Central European Tragedy", published in *The New York Review of Books* on 27th April, 1984) by directly accusing the "unEuropean, alien" Russians of destroying Central European culture and, in effect, threatening Europe's culture as a whole. The Russians weren't "one of us" : "Nothing could be more foreign to Central Europe and its passion for variety than Russia: uniform, standardizing, centralising (...) determined to transform every nation of its empire into a single Russian people..." Kundera has no time for Russian culture and even Dostoyevsky himself becomes for him a symbol of Russian intolerance and brutality. In his preface to the American edition of *Jakub a jeho pán* (New York, 1985) Kundera says: "What irritated me about Dostoyevsky was the climate of his novels: a universe where feelings are promoted to the rank of value and truth. For Kundera, Dostoyevsky is a non-European who lacks the Western balance between rationality and sentiment. Kundera's assertions provoked an international debate; some people agreed with him, others especially the Russians (including the poet Joseph Brodsky) disputed his views. Czech dissident writer Milan Kundera pointed to the fact that Central European culture was not destroyed by Stalin, but by Hitler's Germany.

With hindsight of almost twenty years, it is now obvious that it is questionable to ascribe guilt to whole "nations" and to judge people and "their cultures" by their alleged national characteristics. Surely world culture has always rested on the achievements of individuals who produced their work as a result of their talents, often regardless of their nationality and they invariably had to defy their natural environment. Since the fall of communism, the political culture of the Central European countries often displays characteristics which seem to be closer to the Russian or the old Austrian imperial model than to the West European model. This is maybe one of the reasons why since the fall of communism, Milan Kundera has cut almost all his ties with his native land, visiting it rarely. He says that it is difficult for him simultaneously to follow events in two different countries and since he lives in France, he has adopted France as the place of his home. Three major novels by Kundera (*Život je jinde*, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* and *Nesmrtelná lehkost bytí*), not speaking of his latest work (*La Lenteur* and *L'Identité*) have so far not been published in the Czech Republic.

The Novel *Nesmrtelnost* (Immortality, first published in French in 1990, in Czech in 1993) still reflects Kundera's Central European experience, but rather indirectly. *Nesmrtelnost* is the most French of Kundera's novels. The author has produced a most accomplished version of his own, specific genre of the novel based on models from Classicism: a "novel as a debate" whose characters are personifications of ideas and whose narrator freely interrupts the story and reflects on it for the benefit of the reader. Discursive passages are more frequent in *Nesmrtelnost* than they were in Kundera's earlier work, yet the book retains the character of a polyphonic fictional narrative. It is not a collection of literary essays.

There are no Czech protagonists in *Nesmrtelnost*. The characters are French. The work is a criticism of our civilisation towards the end of the twentieth century, based on concrete experience of life in France. This concrete experience is elucidated by comparisons with

relevant events from European cultural history. Thus *Nesmrtelnost* is primarily a European novel with French overtones.

One of the major grievances that Kundera holds against our contemporary world is its tendency to reduce everything to a superficial, easily digestible simplification. This is why he now deliberately writes his novels in such a way that they could not be easily summed up. Indeed, in his view, it is the most typical feature of a viable contemporary novel that its "story" cannot be re-told in a few sentences. Kundera deliberately produces a complicated structure, a mosaic of events where themes and motives from various parts of the novel are interrelated in an intricate, precarious balance. As in his previous novels, narratives and characters are developed in order to analyse certain selected themes from many different angles. The selection of these themes is still primarily determined by Kundera's traumatic experience from Eastern Europe and by the period of his adjustment to life in the West, which made him compare the cultural differences and similarities in both parts of the European continent.

*Nesmrtelnost* is first and foremost a story of a French woman Agnes, born in the mind of the writer of an attractive, flirtatious feminine gesture, made at the beginning of the novel in the presence of the fictitious author by an old lady to a young teacher of swimming at public baths. The author interprets it as a gesture of desire to enter history, to become famous and thus gain "immortality". Kundera explores this theme further in the story of Bettine von Arnim and her relationship to the great classical German poet Johann von Goethe. Bettine was attracted to famous men and wanted to enter history with them. In 1835 she published the love letters she had allegedly exchanged with Goethe. It did not transpire until the twentieth century that she had considerably rewritten the original letters, to create an image, highly flattering to herself.

The creation of fake images is another major theme in *Nesmrtelnost*. Ideologies like communism or Nazism no longer present a threat. The real threat now comes of "imagology", i.e. from the media and advertising. The "imagologists" create systems of ideals and anti-ideals that people are supposed unthinkingly to follow, thus reality is destroyed. Agnes unsuccessfully fights the deadening pressures. Another character, defying the "Diabolo" i.e. the monster of the modern world, is the fictitious narrator's grotesque friend, Professor Avenarius, who punctures the tyres of parked cars during his forays into the night streets of Paris as a gesture of hatred aimed against the destructiveness of the modern civilisation.

The theme of accidental, unintentional outcomes of events, familiar primarily from *Ľert*, recurs here. Avenarius happens to puncture the tyres of the car, owned by Agnes's husband Paul, so that he is delayed when travelling to a country hospital, where Agnes had been taken after a car accident, caused by another unpremeditated event. Paul arrives at the hospital fifteen minutes after Agnes's death.

Another topic to which Kundera returns in *Nesmrtelnost* is the conflict between the maturity of classicism and juvenile immaturity of romanticism. One whole section of the novel is an extended critique of sentimental lyrical poets and their attitudes. Romantic love is always an unconsummated, pre-coital emotion.

Ecological themes are very important in *Nesmrtelnost*, contributing forcefully to the overall impression of superficial, mechanised, dehumanised and alienated modern world. *Nesmrtelnost* poses the question whether contemporary Man could escape from the crisis of emptiness and absurdity of existence in a world without God. Kundera's heroes live in an enclosed world of closed systems, which reproduce themselves and have nothing in common with reality.

*Slowness* (*La Lenteur*, 1995) is the first work of fiction that Milan Kundera wrote in French.

An accomplished short novel, a mature example of Kundera's art, it is a playful postscript to the whole prosaic work by Milan Kundera and an amusing counterbalance to the seriousness of *Nesmrtelnost*.

The novel displays all the well tried and tested characteristics, methods and approaches of mature writing by Milan Kundera. Slowness is again a bravura performance, a mathematical, music-like structure, built up from a number of abstract basic themes, from which the author creates his characters, to explain his point. The work is again a mixture of essayistic contemplation, which interrupts several narrative lines, most of them from the present and one from the past. In the spirit of playfulness, Kundera includes a fictional version of himself and his wife in the novel.

The starting point is a debate about the meaning of hedonism. Pleasure is defined, in the words of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, as absence of suffering. In the past, the notion of sensuality was associated with slowness. The slower one acts, the greater is the intensity of memory. The present-day obsession with speed is for Kundera an epitome of superficiality and emptiness. Kundera intensifies his criticism of contemporary Western civilisation which is manipulative, empty, without knowledge and without wisdom. The protagonists whom he analyses are spoilt, vainglorious and pretentious. Kundera contrasts their attitudes and their perceptions of reality and creates a grotesque image of the contemporary world.

The novel is set in a French chateau, where Kundera and his wife Vûra spend a midsummer night. The castle becomes a microcosm, a stage where Kundera can closely observe the preposterous behaviour of his characters and compare it to an amorous encounter which took place in the same castle two hundred years before, and was recorded in a novella published in 1777. The manipulation carried out by the members of the nobility in the 18th century was more sophisticated than the behaviour of people today, which is clumsy, illiterate and grotesque. All human encounters in the novel are based on misunderstandings which are so absurd that they become comic.

A congress of entomologists takes place in the castle. One of them is a Czech scientist, a former dissident, now in the Czech government, who was forced to support himself as a manual worker for twenty years in Czechoslovakia. This fills him with self-centered pride. One of the grotesque scenes in the novel concentrates on him. When he is called upon to give his paper, he is so moved by the occasion that he makes an extempore emotional speech about his past persecution and then leaves the platform without actually giving his lecture, totally forgetting about it. He becomes a laughing stock among the present French scientists who misspell and mispronounce his name, do not know where his country is, confuse it with other countries and are basically disinterested in anything but themselves.

Two men and two women are paired up by Kundera in the castle, but their relationships are unsuccessful, due to misunderstanding. These misunderstandings culminate in a night scene of simulated copulation at the side of the hotel swimming pool and a histrionic jump into the pool by one woman in an evening dress. All this is witnessed by the Czech visitor, who strips into his swimming trunks in order to display his muscles in total incomprehension.

Kundera again comments on contemporary civilisation on the basis of his experience in France and concludes that the contemporary world is crazy in many of its aspects. The author makes fun of the self-obsessed French pseudo-intellectuals, politicians and other figures in the public eye. He unmaskes their pretentiousness and shows the sordid motivation of their behaviour.

*Identity* (*L'Identité*, 1998) is another short novel that Kundera has written in French and it is yet another example of Kundera's accomplished art. The work is a love story; in a way it can perhaps be seen as a sophisticated variation on Kundera's short stories in *Smûné lásky*, in

particular "Falešný autostop". Here, too, a relationship between two lovers (this time a middle-aged pair) is put to the test by what at the beginning seems like an innocent, although manipulative game. The heroine of the story, Chantal, complains that "men do not look at her any more" and so her lover, Jean-Marc, begins sending her anonymous love letters. The game, which is interpreted differently by the man and the woman, leads to a misunderstanding which almost breaks their relationship. A catastrophe would ensue, had Kundera not avoided such a clear ending: towards the end of the playful, though serious work, which is again structured like a musical composition, the author insists that at some imperceptible point, the story had become a dream - and its dream-like nature certainly encourages this ambiguous interpretation. Thus instead of a tragedy, the work remains on the level of a warning: Identity is a homage to the value of an authentic love bond in a hostile and primitive contemporary world. Love is the only value that protects us from the outside world - even though its fundament may be uncertain because our perception of the world is unreliable. Typical Kundera-esque themes reappear: love, death, the imperfection of human bodies, the volatility of human identity, yearning for privacy in the stereotyped, aggressively collectivised world, culture and thoughtfulness as against commerce, advertising, loud music in public places and boredom.

When Milan Kundera was young, like many of his young compatriots, he fell into the trap of destructive ideology. It took him almost twenty years to free himself from its constraints. The deep trauma taught him to assume a sceptically critical attitude towards reality. It taught him how important pluralism is. It made him realise that man is infinitely fallible and that he/she does not understand his environment.

Once Kundera left Czechoslovakia for the West, he was able to use the critical faculties he gained as a result of his traumatic encounter with communism, in order to compare and contrast the West European and the Central European experience in such a way as to uniquely elucidate important aspects of man's contemporary existence.

First of all Kundera has highlighted the contemporary crisis of language, a crisis of meaning and a crisis of communication. His novels are novels about various forms of delusion. In many of his works, a text, a sign, or an image becomes alive and begins to act in the real world with an unstoppable, destructive force.