9. Milan Kundera

Milan Kundera dislikes talking about himself, so much so that journalists inevitably must go to each other rather than to him for the facts of his life. He was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1929. A student when the Communists came into power in 1948, he later worked as a laborer and a jazz musician before deciding to devote himself to literature and film. In the 1960s, he taught at the film school in Prague, where many of his students were the filmmakers of the Czech New Wave.

His first novel was *The Joke,* the publication of which was one of the central literary events of the so-called Prague Spring in 1968; it won the award of the Czech Writers Union. Later in the year came the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, after which Kundera lost his teaching job, and was unable to find other work of any kind. His books were removed from the libraries. He wrote *Life Is Elsewhere* in 1974, and *The Farewell Party* (published in English in 1974 and 1976, respectively), before choosing to leave his country in 1975 to live in France, where he had been offered a post as professor of literature at the University of Rennes. With the publication, in a French translation, of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in 1978, his Czech citizenship was revoked and his books banned. His latest novel is *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). He has received the Prix Medecis, the Prix Mondello, and the Jerusalem Prix. Milan Kundera lives with his wife near Montparnasse in Paris.

A jestli rekl pred chvili, ze detstvi je budoucnost lidstva, detstvi prave vekem bez minulosti a neni sila detstvi prave v te lehkosti, s niz nezatizeny leti do budoucnosti vpred?

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"Ta budoucnost, o ktere mluvim ;

"V tom krasnem budoucnosti, o ktere mluvim, ja sam uz, deti, nebudu."

A vidi pred sebou andělsky krásnou tvář Gabrielovu a cíti jak mu po tváři teče slza dojetí. Opakuje: "Ne, tam ja už nebudu."

A chce tim rici, ze jestlize cely smysl jeho státnickeho dila tkvěl v tom ukázat závratnou s... naplneni, nebyl to z jeho strany akt egoisty, ktery vyvyšuje vlastni památku nad památku jiných, ale velkorysé odhodlání toho, kde sám je ochoten jít dát první příkladem a vejít do velke (sladke, modré) náruče nepameti, v níž se sejde ve velikem smireni a sbratreni se vsemi i s Hublem, i Clementisem, ktereho vymazali z fotografii, i s Kafkou, ktereho vyskrtl y učebnic literatury, i se stesedmdesati českymi historiky, jimz zakazal badat v historii.

Ve zvlastnim slzavem nadseni se usmiva a mluvi koketně o své smrti a vidi proti sobe vesele usmevy detskeho publika, ty deti se usmivaji a Husak se usmivá též a po tváři mu tečou slzy dojeti a cim vic mu tečou slzy, tim vic se usmívá a deti se začínaji smát nahlas, je to šťastný smich a Husak se smaje a nahlas a nahlas pláče a do svych slz opakuje už uplne nesrozumitelnym hlasem: "To já už na svete nebudu," a slzy mu tecou jeho vraskami ve tvari a tech vrasek je cim dal vic, cim více se smeje

A page from an unpublished manuscript by Milan Kundera.

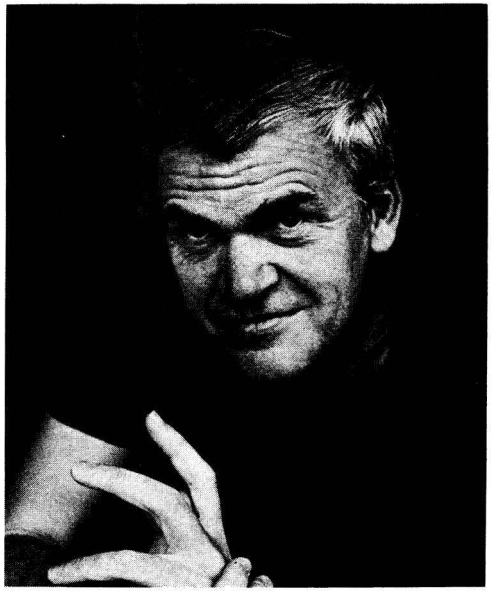

Photo: Aaron Manheimer

Milan Kundera

This interview is a product of several encounters with Milan Kundera in Paris in the fall of 1983. Our meetings took place in his attic apartment near Montparnasse. We worked in the small room that Kundera uses as his office. With its shelves full of books on philosophy and musicology, an old-fashioned typewriter and a table, it looks more like a student's room than like the study of a world-famous author. On one of the walls, two photographs hang side by side: one of his father, a pianist, the other of Leoš Janáček, a Czech composer whom he greatly admires.

We held several free and lengthy discussions in French; instead of a tape recorder, we used a typewriter, scissors, and glue. Gradually, amid discarded scraps of paper and after several revisions, this text emerged.

This interview was conducted soon after Kundera's most re-

cent book, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, *had become an immediate best-seller. Sudden fame makes him uncomfortable; Kundera would surely agree with Malcolm Lowry that "success is like a horrible disaster, worse than a fire in one's home. Fame consumes the home of the soul." Once, when I asked him about some of the comments on his novel that were appearing in the press, he replied, "I've had an overdose of myself!"*

Kundera's wish not to talk about himself seems to be an instinctive reaction against the tendency of most critics to study the writer, and the writer's personality, politics, and private life, instead of the writer's works. "Disgust at having to talk about oneself is what distinguishes novelistic talent from lyric talent," Kundera told Le Nouvel Observateur.

Refusing to talk about oneself is therefore a way of placing literary works and forms squarely at the center of attention, and of focusing on the novel itself. That is the purpose of this discussion on the art of composition.

INTERVIEWER: You have said that you feel closer to the Viennese novelists Robert Musil and Hermann Broch than to any other authors in modern literature. Broch thought—as you do—that the age of the psychological novel had come to an end. He believed, instead, in what he called the "polyhistorical" novel.

KUNDERA: Musil and Broch saddled the novel with enormous responsibilities. They saw it as the supreme intellectual synthesis, the last place where man could still question the world as a whole. They were convinced that the novel had tremendous synthetic power, that it could be poetry, fantasy, philosophy, aphorism, and essay all rolled into one. In his letters, Broch makes some profound observations on this issue. However, it seems to me that he obscures his own intentions by using the ill-chosen term "polyhistorical novel." It was in fact Broch's compatriot, Adalbert Stifter, a classic of Austrian prose, who created a truly polyhistorical novel in his *Der Nachsommer*

(Indian Summer), published in 1857. The novel is famous: Nietzsche considered it to be one of the four greatest works of German literature. Today, it is unreadable. It's packed with information about geology, botany, zoology, the crafts, painting, and architecture; but this gigantic, uplifting encyclopedia virtually leaves out man himself, and his situation. Precisely because it *is* polyhistorical, *Der Nachsommer* totally lacks what makes the novel special. This is not the case with Broch. On the contrary! He strove to discover "that which the novel alone can discover." The specific object of what Broch liked to call "novelistic knowledge" is existence. In my view, the word "polyhistorical" must be defined as "that which brings together every device and every form of knowledge in order to *shed light on existence.*" Yes, I do feel close to such an approach.

INTERVIEWER: A long essay you published in the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* caused the French to rediscover Broch. You speak highly of him, and yet you are also critical. At the end of the essay, you write: "All great works (just because they *are* great) are partly incomplete."

KUNDERA: Broch is an inspiration to us not only because of what he accomplished, but also because of all that he aimed at and could not attain. The very incompleteness of his work can help us understand the need for new art forms, including: (1) a radical stripping away of unessentials (in order to capture the complexity of existence in the modern world without a loss of architectonic clarity); (2) "novelistic counterpoint" (to unite philosophy, narrative, and dream into a single music); (3) the specifically novelistic essay (in other words, instead of claiming to convey some apodictic message, remaining hypothetical, playful, or ironic).

INTERVIEWER: These three points seem to capture your entire artistic program.

KUNDERA: In order to make the novel into a polyhistorical illumination of existence, you need to master the technique of

ellipsis, the art of condensation. Otherwise, you fall into the trap of endless length. Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* is one of the two or three novels that I love most. But don't ask me to admire its gigantic unfinished expanse! Imagine a castle so huge that the eye cannot take it all in at a glance. Imagine a string quartet that lasts nine hours. There are anthropological limits—human proportions—that should not be breached, such as the limits of memory. When you have finished reading, you should still be able to remember the beginning. If not, the novel loses its shape, its "architectonic clarity" becomes murky.

INTERVIEWER: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is made up of seven parts. If you had dealt with them in a less elliptical fashion, you could have written seven different full-length novels.

KUNDERA: But if I had written seven independent novels, I would have lost the most important thing: I wouldn't have been able to capture the "complexity of human existence in the modern world" in a single book. The art of ellipsis is absolutely essential. It requires that one always go directly to the heart of things. In this connection, I always think of a Czech composer I have passionately admired since childhood: Leoš Janáček. He is one of the greatest masters of modern music. His determination to strip music to its essentials was revolutionary. Of course, every musical composition involves a great deal of technique: exposition of the themes, their development, variations, polyphonic work (often very automatic), filling in the orchestration, the transitions, etc. Today one can compose music with a computer, but the computer always existed in composers' heads—if they had to, composers could write sonatas without a single original idea, just by "cybernetically" expanding on the rules of composition. Janáček's purpose was to destroy this computer! Brutal juxtaposition instead of transitions; repetition instead of variation—and always straight to the heart of things: only the note with something essential to say is entitled to exist. It is nearly the same with the novel; it too is encum-

bered by "technique," by rules that do the author's work for him: present a character, describe a milieu, bring the action into its historical setting, fill up the lifetime of the characters with useless episodes. Every change of scene requires new expositions, descriptions, explanations. My purpose is like Janáček's: to rid the novel of the automatism of novelistic technique, of novelistic word-spinning.

INTERVIEWER: The second art form you mentioned was "novelistic counterpoint."

KUNDERA: The idea of the novel as a great intellectual synthesis almost automatically raises the problem of "polyphony." This problem still has to be resolved. Take the third part of Broch's novel *The Sleepwalkers*; it is made up of five heterogeneous elements: (1) "novelistic" narrative based on the three main characters: Pasenow, Esch, Huguenau; (2) the personal story of Hanna Wendling; (3) factual description of life in a military hospital; (4) a narrative (partly in verse) of a Salvation Army girl; (5) a philosophical essay (written in scientific language) on the debasement of values. Each part is magnificent. Yet despite the fact that they are all dealt with simultaneously, in constant alternation (in other words, in a polyphonic manner), the five elements remain disunited—in other words, they do not constitute a *true* polyphony.

INTERVIEWER: By using the metaphor of polyphony and applying it to literature, do you not in fact make demands on the novel that it cannot possibly live up to?

KUNDERA: The novel can incorporate outside elements in two ways. In the course of his travels, Don Quixote meets various characters who tell him their tales. In this way, independent stories are inserted into the whole, fitted into the frame of the novel. This type of composition is often found in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novels. Broch, however, instead of fitting the story of Hanna Wendling into the main story of Esch and Huguenau, lets both unfold *simultaneously*. Sartre (in *The Reprieve*), and Dos Passos before him, also used

this technique of simultaneity. Their aim, however, was to bring together different novelistic stories, in other words, homogeneous rather than heterogeneous elements as in the case of Broch. Moreover, their use of this technique strikes me as too mechanical and devoid of poetry. I cannot think of better terms than "polyphony" or "counterpoint" to describe this form of composition and, furthermore, the musical analogy is a useful one. For instance, the first thing that bothers me about the third part of *The Sleepwalkers* is that the five elements are not all equal. Whereas the equality of all the voices in musical counterpoint is the basic ground rule, the *sine qua non.* In Broch's work, the first element (the novelistic narrative of Esch and Huguenau) takes up much more physical space than the other elements, and, even more important, it is privileged insofar as it is linked to the two preceding parts of the novel and therefore assumes the task of unifying it. It therefore attracts more attention and threatens to turn the other elements into mere accompaniment. The second thing that bothers me is that though a fugue by Bach cannot do without any one of its voices, the story of Hanna Wendling or the essay on the decline of values could very well stand alone as an independent work. Taken separately, they would lose nothing of their meaning or of their quality.

In my view, the basic requirements of novelistic counterpoint are: (1) the equality of the various elements; (2) the indivisibility of the whole. I remember that the day I finished "The Angels," part three of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* I was terribly proud of myself. I was sure that I had discovered the key to a new way of putting together a narrative. The text was made up of the following elements: (1) an anecdote about two female students and their levitation; (2) an autobiographical narrative; (3) a critical essay on a feminist book; (4) a fable about an angel and the devil; (5) a dream-narrative of Paul Éluard flying over Prague. None of these elements could exist without the others, each one illuminates

and explains the others as they all explore a single theme and ask a single question: "What is an angel?"

Part six, also entitled "The Angels," is made up of: (1) a dream-narrative of Tamina's death; (2) an autobiographical narrative of my father's death; (3) musicological reflections; (4) reflections on the epidemic of forgetting that is devastating Prague. What is the link between my father and the torturing of Tamina by children? It is "the meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella" on the table of one theme, to borrow Lautréamont's famous image. Novelistic polyphony is poetry much more than technique. I can find no example of such polyphonic poetry elsewhere in literature, but I have been very astonished by Alain Resnais's latest films. His use of the art of counterpoint is admirable.

INTERVIEWER: Counterpoint is less apparent in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.*

KUNDERA: That was my aim. There, I wanted dream, narrative, and reflection to flow together in an indivisible and totally natural stream. But the polyphonic character of the novel is very striking in part six: the story of Stalin's son, theological reflections, a political event in Asia, Franz's death in Bangkok, and Tomas's funeral in Bohemia are all linked by the same everlasting question: "What is kitsch?" This polyphonic passage is the pillar that supports the entire structure of the novel. It is the key to the secret of its architecture.

INTERVIEWER: By calling for "a specifically novelistic essay," you expressed several reservations about the essay on the debasement of values which appeared in *The Sleepwalkers.*

KUNDERA: It is a terrific essay!

INTERVIEWER: You have doubts about the way it is incorporated into the novel. Broch relinquishes none of his scientific language, he expresses his views in a straightforward way without hiding behind one of his characters—the way Mann or Musil would do. Isn't that Broch's real contribution, his new challenge?

KUNDERA: That is true, and he was well aware of his own courage. But there is also a risk: his essay can be read and understood as the ideological key to the novel, as its "Truth," and that could transform the rest of the novel into a mere illustration of a thought. Then the novel's equilibrium is upset; the truth of the essay becomes too heavy and the novel's subtle architecture is in danger of collapsing. A novel that had no intention of expounding a philosophical thesis (Broch loathed that type of novel!) may wind up being read in exactly that way. How does one incorporate an essay into the novel? It is important to have one basic fact in mind: the very essence of reflection changes the minute it is included in the body of a novel. Outside of the novel, one is in the realm of assertions: everyone —philosopher, politician, concierge—is sure of what he says. The novel, however, is a territory where one does not make assertions; it is a territory of play and of hypotheses. Reflection within the novel is hypothetical by its very essence.

INTERVIEWER: But why would a novelist want to deprive himself of the right to express his philosophy overtly and assertively in his novel?

KUNDERA: Because he has none! People often talk about Chekhov's philosophy, or Kafka's, or Musil's. But just try to find a coherent philosophy in their writings! Even when they express their ideas in their notebooks, the ideas amount to intellectual exercises, playing with paradoxes, or improvisations rather than to assertions of a philosophy. And philosophers who write novels are nothing but pseudonovelists who use the form of the novel in order to illustrate their ideas. Neither Voltaire nor Camus ever discovered "that which the novel alone can discover." I know of only one exception, and that is the Diderot of *Jacques le fataliste.* What a miracle! Having crossed over the boundary of the novel, the serious philosopher becomes a playful thinker. There is not one serious sentence in the novel—everything in it is play. That's why this novel is outrageously underrated in France. Indeed, *Jacques le fataliste*

contains everything that France has lost and refuses to recover. In France, ideas are preferred to works. *Jacques le fataliste* cannot be translated into the language of ideas, and therefore it cannot be understood in the homeland of ideas.

INTERVIEWER: In *The Joke,* it is Jaroslav who develops a musicological theory. The hypothetical character of his thinking is thus apparent. But the musicological meditations in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* are the author's, your own. How am I then to understand whether they are hypothetical or assertive?

KUNDERA: It all depends on the tone. From the very first words, my intention is to give these reflections a playful, ironic, provocative, experimental, or questioning tone. All of part six of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* ("The Grand March") is an essay on kitsch which expounds one main thesis: kitsch is the absolute denial of the existence of shit. This meditation on kitsch is of vital importance to me. It is based on a great deal of thought, experience, study, and even passion. Yet the tone is never serious; it is provocative. This essay is unthinkable outside of the novel, it is a purely novelistic meditation.

INTERVIEWER: The polyphony of your novels also includes another element, dream-narrative. It takes up the entire second part of *Life Is Elsewhere,* it is the basis of the sixth part of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* and it runs through *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by way of Tereza's dreams.

KUNDERA: These passages are also the easiest ones to misunderstand, because people want to find some symbolic message in them. There is nothing to decipher in Tereza's dreams. They are poems about death. Their meaning lies in their beauty, which hypnotizes Tereza. By the way, do you realize that people don't know how to read Kafka simply because they want to decipher him? Instead of letting themselves be carried away by his unequaled imagination, they look for allegories—and come up with nothing but clichés: life is absurd (or it is not absurd), God is beyond reach (or within reach), etc. You

can understand nothing about art, particularly modern art, if you do not understand that imagination is a value in itself. Novalis knew that when he praised dreams. They "protect us against life's monotony," he said, they "liberate us from seriousness by the delight of their games." He was the first to understand the role that dreams and a dreamlike imagination could play in the novel. He planned to write the second volume of his *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* as a narrative in which dream and reality would be so intertwined that one would no longer be able to tell them apart. Unfortunately, all that remains of that second volume are the notes in which Novalis described his aesthetic intention. One hundred years later, his ambition was fulfilled by Kafka. Kafka's novels are a fusion of dream and reality; that is, they are neither dream nor reality. More than anything, Kafka brought about an aesthetic revolution. An aesthetic miracle. Of course, no one can repeat what he did. But I share with him, and with Novalis, the desire to bring dreams, and the imagination of dreams, into the novel. My way of doing so is by polyphonic confrontation rather than by a fusion of dream and reality. Dream-narrative is one of the elements of counterpoint.

INTERVIEWER: There is nothing polyphonic about the last part of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* and yet that is probably the most interesting part of the book. It is made up of fourteen chapters that recount erotic situations in the life of one man—Jan.

KUNDERA: Another musical term: this narrative is a "theme with variations." The theme is the border beyond which things lose their meaning. Our life unfolds in the immediate vicinity of that border, and we risk crossing it at any moment. The fourteen chapters are fourteen variations of the same situation —eroticism at the border between meaning and meaninglessness.

INTERVIEWER: You have described *The Book of Laughter*

and Forgetting as a "novel in the form of variations." But is it still a novel?

KUNDERA: There is no unity of action, which is why it does not look like a novel. People can't *imagine* a novel without that unity. Even the experiments of the *nouveau roman* were based on unity of action (or of nonaction). Sterne and Diderot had amused themselves by making the unity extremely fragile. The journey of Jacques and his master takes up the lesser part of *Jacques le fataliste;* it's nothing more than a comic pretext in which to fit anecdotes, stories, thoughts. Nevertheless, this pretext, this "frame," is necessary to make the novel feel like a novel. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* there is no longer any such pretext. It's the unity of the themes and their variations that gives coherence to the whole. Is it a novel? Yes. A novel is a meditation on existence, seen through imaginary characters. The form is unlimited freedom. Throughout its history, the novel has never known how to take advantage of its endless possibilities. It missed its chance.

INTERVIEWER: But except for *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* your novels are also based on unity of action, although it is indeed of a much looser variety in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.*

KUNDERA: Yes, but other more important sorts of unity complete them: the unity of the same metaphysical questions, of the same motifs and then variations (the motif of paternity in *The Farewell Party,* for instance). But I would like to stress above all that the novel is primarily built on a number of fundamental words, like Schoenberg's series of notes. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* the series is the following: forgetting, laughter, angels, "litost," the border. In the course of the novel these five key words are analyzed, studied, defined, redefined, and thus transformed into categories of existence. It is built on these few categories in the same way as a house is built on its beams. The beams of *The Unbearable Lightness of*

Being are: weight, lightness, the soul, the body, the Grand March, shit, kitsch, compassion, vertigo, strength, and weakness. Because of their categorical character, these words cannot be replaced by synonyms. This always has to be explained over and over again to translators, who—in their concern for "good style"—seek to avoid repetition.

INTERVIEWER: Regarding the architectural clarity, I was struck by the fact that all of your novels, except for one, are divided into seven parts.

KUNDERA: When I had finished my first novel, *The Joke,* there was no reason to be surprised that it had seven parts. Then I wrote *Life Is Elsewhere.* The novel was almost finished and it had six parts. I didn't feel satisfied. Suddenly I had the idea of including a story that takes place three years after the hero's death—in other words, outside the time frame of the novel. This now became the sixth part of seven, entitled "The Middle-Aged Man." Immediately, the novel's architecture had become perfect. Later on, I realized that this sixth part was oddly analogous to the sixth part of *The Joke* ("Kostka"), which also introduces an outside character, and also opens a secret window in the novel's wall. *Laughable Loves* started out as ten short stories. Putting together the final version, I eliminated three of them. The collection had become very coherent, foreshadowing the composition of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.* One character, Doctor Havel, ties the fourth and sixth stories together. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* the fourth and sixth parts are also linked by the same person: Tamina. When I wrote *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* I was determined to break the spell of the number of seven. I had long since decided on a six-part outline. But the first part always struck me as shapeless. Finally, I understood that it was really made up of two parts. Like Siamese twins, they had to be separated by delicate surgery. The only reason I mention all this is to show that I am not indulging in some superstitious affectation about magic numbers, nor making a rational calcu-

lation. Rather, I am driven by a deep, unconscious, incomprehensible need, a formal archetype from which I cannot escape. All of my novels are variants of an architecture based on the number seven.

INTERVIEWER: The use of seven neatly divided parts is certainly linked to your goal of synthesizing the most heterogeneous elements into a unified whole. Each part of your novel is always a world of its own, and is distinct from the others because of its special form. But if the novel is divided into numbered parts, why must the parts themselves also be divided into numbered chapters?

KUNDERA: The chapters themselves must also create a little world of their own; they must be relatively independent. That is why I keep pestering my publishers to make sure that the numbers are clearly visible and that the chapters are well separated. The chapters are like the measures of a musical score! There are parts where the measures (chapters) are long, others where they are short, still others where they are of irregular length. Each part could have a musical tempo indication: *moderato, presto, andante,* etc. Part six of *Life Is Elsewhere* is *andante*: in a calm, melancholy manner, it tells of the brief encounter between a middle-aged man and a young girl who has just been released from prison. The last part is *prestissimo;* it is written in very short chapters, and jumps from the dying Jaromil to Rimbaud, Lermontov, and Pushkin. I first thought of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in a musical way. I knew that the last part had to be *pianissimo* and *lento:* it focuses on a rather short, uneventful period, in a single location, and the tone is quiet. I also knew that this part had to be preceded by a *prestissimo*: that is the part entitled "The Grand March."

INTERVIEWER: There is an exception to the rule of the number seven. There are only five parts to *The Farewell Party.*

KUNDERA: *The Farewell Party* is based on another formal archetype: it is absolutely homogeneous, deals with one subject, is told in one tempo; it is very theatrical, stylized, and derives

its form from the farce. In *Laughable Loves,* the story entitled "The Symposium" is built exactly the same way—a farce in five acts.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by farce?

KUNDERA: I mean the emphasis on plot and on all its trappings of unexpected and incredible coincidences. Nothing has become as suspect, ridiculous, old-fashioned, trite, and tasteless in a novel as plot and its farcical exaggerations. From Flaubert on, novelists have tried to do away with the artifices of plot. And so the novel has become duller than the dullest of lives. Yet there is another way to get around the suspect and worn-out aspect of the plot, and that is to free it from the requirement of likelihood. You tell an unlikely story that *chooses* to be unlikely! That's exactly how Kafka conceived *Amerika.* The way Karl meets his uncle in the first chapter is through a series of the most unlikely coincidences. Kafka entered into his first "sur-real" universe, into his first "fusion of dream and reality," with a parody of the plot—through the door of farce.

INTERVIEWER: But why did you choose the farce form for a novel that is not at all meant to be an entertainment?

KUNDERA: But it *is* an entertainment! I don't understand the contempt that the French have for entertainment, why they are so ashamed of the word *"divertissement."* They run less risk of being entertaining than of being boring. And they also run the risk of falling for kitsch, that sweetish, lying embellishment of things, the rose-colored light that bathes even such modernist works as Éluard's poetry or Ettore Scola's recent film *Le Bal,* whose subtitle could be: "French history as kitsch." Yes, kitsch, not entertainment, is the *real* aesthetic disease! The great European novel started out as entertainment, and every true novelist is nostalgic for it. In fact, the themes of those great entertainments are terribly serious—think of Cervantes! In *The Farewell Party,* the question is, does man deserve to live on this earth? Shouldn't one "free the planet from man's clutches"? My lifetime ambition has been to unite the utmost

seriousness of question with the utmost lightness of form. Nor is this purely an artistic ambition. The combination of a frivolous form and a serious subject immediately unmasks the truth about our dramas (those that occur in our beds as well as those that we play out on the great stage of History) and their awful insignificance. We experience the unbearable lightness of being.

INTERVIEWER: So you could just as well have used the title of your latest novel for *The Farewell Party*?

KUNDERA: Every one of my novels could be entitled *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or *The Joke* or *Laughable Loves*; the titles are interchangeable, they reflect the small number of themes that obsess me, define me, and, unfortunately, restrict me. Beyond these themes, I have nothing else to say or to write.

INTERVIEWER: There are, then, two formal archetypes of composition in your novels: (1) polyphony, which unites heterogeneous elements into an architecture based on the number seven; (2) farce, which is homogeneous, theatrical, and skirts the unlikely. Could there be a Kundera outside of these two archetypes?

KUNDERA: I always dream of some great unexpected infidelity. But I have not yet been able to escape my bigamous state.

CHRISTIAN SALMON
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Writers at Work

The Paris Review Interviews

SEVENTH SERIES

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