

Sexual Politics in *The Joke*

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When racist jokes were outlawed in Britain by the race relations act, Idi Amin, that British-trained officer who had turned on his colonial master, became the focus of their survival. The ugly tradition persisted with an explicit political target; it was tacitly deemed legitimate, patriotic, to concoct obscenities about the big black man who defied British imperialism. Now that sexism is notionally taboo its reservoirs have likewise found their outlets in a political guise. Attitudes, values, concepts that are inexpressible amongst the literary political intelligentsia within the western alliance find displaced location in works that can be hailed for their opposition to the communist world. Whatever the role of the sexual in Milan Kundera's work in its original Czechoslovakian context, translated into English it offers illiberal satisfactions for those who can protest that they appreciate it for its politics: much as people allegedly protested that they bought *Playboy* for the fiction. The central incident of *The Joke*, the celebration of sex for hatred, sex for revenge on the unwitting, unknowing victim, who is a woman, is the celebration of a variety of rape, of degradation, of a horrific contempt for woman.

There are a number of 'jokes' in *The Joke*. Each leads to another, with the ultimate joke being the way the jokes backfire on the jokester. The initial joke is the postcard Ludvik Jahn sends to his girlfriend Marketa:

Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik,

The consequences are unfunny. Ludvik is expelled from the communist party and from the university. 'Having lost the right to continue my studies, I lost the right to defer military service.' (39) He does his military service, alongside others not considered trustworthy enough to bear arms, in the mines. These episodes are recorded in retrospect. The present time of the novel records Ludvik's attempted revenge on Zemanek, the party chairman who expelled him, by 'making love' to Zemanek's wife Helena. The revenge likewise backfires, Zemanek by now having a new young girlfriend and being glad to dispose of Helena. Helena falls in love with Ludvik immediately upon their single sexual encounter but Ludvik, realising how his plan has gone wrong, tells Helena his true feelings of distaste for her, upon which she attempts suicide. The final 'joke' is that she takes not analgesics but laxatives, and survives.

1 *The Joke*, Penguin edn. (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 26. All quotations are from this edition.

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The reaction to Ludvik's postcard in its immediate political aspects confirms all those western stereotypes of humorless communist party officials. The carefully studded handful of references to Stalin are the cues for reading this as a metafiction of the purges, of the callousness, cruelty and opportunism of socialist bureaucracies. Zemanek in the present time of the novel presents himself as a fashionable progressive who teaches 'Philosophy' at the university. Ludvik remarks:

I found the nomenclature highly indicative; a few years ago he would have called it *Marxism*, but in recent years it had so declined in popularity, especially among the young, that Zemanek, for whom popularity had always been the main criterion, discretely concealed his Marxism behind the more general term. (227)

Zemanek says to Ludvik:

You won't believe this, but on entrance exams when we ask them about the purges, they don't know what we're talking about. Stalin is just a name to them. And most of them have no idea there were political trials in Prague! (231)

And in the episode of Ludvik's time with the labour brigade in the mines there is the less comic fate of Alexej:

He'd begun his service at an infantry officers candidate school, but was suddenly transferred to us. As it turns out, the notorious show trials were about to begin, and every day, in Party headquarters, courtrooms, and police stations all over the country, hands were being raised to strip the accused of all confidence, honor, and freedom. Alexej was the son of a highly placed Communist official who had been recently arrested. (77)

The allusions to the purges are there throughout *The Joke* to establish a contextual reading of Ludvik's appearance before the party functionaries. It can be read as a type of the purges, while at the same time it is made clear that the episode pre-dates the purges. If we object that the triggering episode of the joke postcard is not an adequate or representative example of the issues of the purges, the novelist can always reply that it is not about the purges, they were a later event; or he can reply that a novel about the purges in their full reality embodying what seems to be Kundera's less than enthusiastic vision of communism would not readily have found publication in Czechoslovakia in 1967, or since.

There were no doubt tactical reasons for the fictional evasions Kundera employed. But other aspects of the strategies are perhaps more readily confrontable. Ludvik is provoked into sending the postcard by Marketa's personality:

The events leading to my first major disaster (and, as a direct result of its uncharitable intervention, to my acquaintance with Lucie) might well be recounted in a detached, even lighthearted tone: it all goes back to my fatal predilection for silly jokes and Marketa's fatal inability to grasp any joke whatsoever. Marketa was the type of woman who takes everything seriously (which made her totally at one with the spirit of the age); her major gift from the fates was an aptitude for credulity. Now, I am not using credulity as a euphemism for stupidity; not in the least: she was moderately bright and in any case young enough (nineteen, a first-year student) so that her trustful naivete seemed more charm than defect, accompanied as it was by undeniable charms of a physical nature. Everyone at the university liked her, and we all made more or less serious passes at her, which didn't stop us (at least some of us) from poking gentle, perfectly innocent fun at her. (22-23)

The age-old story: it was all the woman's fault. The sexism is unavoidable. 'Everyone at the university liked her', we are told of Marketa, but the sentence continues with a definition, implicitly but unambiguously, of 'everyone' as men: 'we all made more or less serious passes at her.' There are no lesbians in *The Joke*: there is no warrant for taking these as other than masculine passes. In the context of this unproblematical male point of view, the remark that 'Marketa was the type of women who takes everything seriously' proclaims itself as part of that long tradition of anti-feminism, the woman who cannot seek the joke. We might recall Chauntecleer, the backyard cock in Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, declaring to his hen companion Pertelote

In principion,

Mulier est hominis confusio –

Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,

'Womman is Mannes joye and al his blis.'

The joke being that Pertelote cannot see the joke because she doesn't understand the Latin tag: in the beginning woman is the destruction of man. It is a tag that takes its anti-feminism firmly back to the beginning of time in the Garden of Eden.

Ludvik's telegram is in this great tradition: the sophisticated intellectual cynicism, the scholarly allusions, the joke that the woman doesn't see as a joke. The intellectual sexism may seem at this early point of the novel, when Ludvik first describes the joke that leads to his downfall, to be only a minor part of what for him becomes a major tragedy in which the political overinterpretation of the postcard is foregrounded. But the note is resumed and resituated as a major part of his revenge attempt on Zemanek with the degradation of Helena: here the political is relegated to the periphery and the sexism foregrounded in the lengthy descriptions of the sexual encounter.

Once again, whatever the grotesque male behaviour, it is presented as the woman's fault. Ludvik, now rehabilitated to white-collar status with a position at a research institute, is interviewed by a radio journalist, Helena, who Ludvik soon discovers is Zemanek's wife. 'I can't quite say it occurred to me then and there to get to know her as well as I eventually did. Far from it. The revulsion I felt the moment she entered the room was only intensified by the discovery' (152-53). However, a possibility begins to take shape.

I kept thinking that her mouth, her breasts, her eyes, her hair, all belonged to Zemanek, and I mentally fingered them, held them, weighed them – testing whether they could be crushed in my fist or shattered against the wall – and then carefully reexamined them, first with Zemanek's eyes, then with my own.

Perhaps I did have a fleeting and utterly impractical Platonic fantasy of chasing her from the no-man's-land of our persiflage to the combat zone of the bedchamber. But it was only one of those fantasies that flash through the mind and leave no trace. (153-54)

The possibilities considered and rejected are brought into realization only because of the woman. 'Nothing would have come of the meeting had not Helena herself phoned a few days later and asked whether she might see me.' (154) Although in the novel's second paragraph Ludvik has defined the morality of his scheme – 'the whole idea was so cynical and base' (26) – responsibility is now deflected from him. The blame, the initiating motivation is tactically moved from Ludvik to Helena. We are presented with yet another version of the 'women who are raped have asked for it' syndrome, that convenient moral evasion: the inviting victim, the willing complicit sacrifice.

What ensues is a blow by blow account of manipulation and humiliation.

We met at a cafe, and by way of provocation I skirted the issue of the interview entirely and ran down her professional interests at every opportunity; I watched her lose her composure, just what I needed to gain the upper hand. (154)

Ludvik describes the sexual politics of his behaviour with what is often called a 'disarming' candor: the literary strategy is that of privileging 'honesty' over 'decency'; by describing 'honestly' some hideous act, a moral superiority of truthfulness can be claimed. Ludvik's confession of his 'baseness' is tactical within this larger literary strategy.

Yes. I was struck by an acute awareness of my own *baseness*; it had taken me by surprise; but what surprised me even more was that it didn't horrify me, that I accepted it with a certain feeling of pleasure, no – joy, relief. (155)

The sexism is presented with this same would-be disarming candour:

The conquest of a woman's mind follows its own inexorable laws and all attempts at bringing her round with rational arguments are doomed to failure. The wise thing to do is to determine her basic self-image (her basic principles, ideals, convictions) and contrive (with the aid of sophistry, illogical rhetoric, and the like) to establish a harmonious relation between that self-image and the desired conduct on her part. (158)

Again the attitudes are 'classic'. Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' adopts the same strategies: presenting an argument often praised as 'logical', but in fact one of illogical rhetoric. If we had time we could delay love making; but we don't have time; therefore (and the therefore is purely sleight of hand rhetoric, not logic) let us make love at once. The praise of the woman is entirely hypothetical – if there were time I would spend it on you; which leaves the woman with the idea she has been praised. The illogic will be clear to the sophisticated, educated males, but supposedly not to women who were rarely given any philosophical training in the seventeenth century, just as in Chaucer's time they were rarely taught Latin so Pertelote could not understand Chauntecleer's 'joke'. Part of long-standing, monkish, intellectual anti-feminism, this sexism that depends on a shallow, educated superiority has been endemic to western literary culture. Ludvik spells out its surviving principles in the continuation of the passage just quoted:

For example, Helena dreamed of "simplicity", "candor", "openness" – ideals that clearly had their roots in the evolutionary puritanism of an earlier time and came together in her mind with the idea of a "pure", "unsullied", highly principled, and highly moral man. But because the world of Helena's principles was based not on careful considerations but (as with most people) on a logical suggestion, nothing was simpler than to apply a crude little bit of demagoguery and merge the idea of the "straightforward man" with behaviour altogether unpuritanical, immoral, and adulterous, thereby preventing the desired behaviour (that is, adultery) from entering into traumatic conflict with her inner ideals. A man may ask anything of a woman, but unless he wishes to appear a brute, he must make it possible for her to act in harmony with her deepest self-deceptions. (158)

But the degradation does not stop at this simply elitist 'intellectual' contempt. It takes us beyond the campy mental superiority of Marvell's poem into a revulsion from the female body:

I put my hands on her knees and inched up her skirt until her stocking tops and garters came into sight, and a sad, pitiful sight they were on those already fleshy thighs. (162)

And the expressed physical contempt allows the sexism to take over unrestrained, with the flip expression of a superiority of the male mind, the limitations of the female intellect:

For topics of conversation are not infinite, and husbands are the most gratifying topics for wives, the only topics in which they feel sure of themselves, the only topics in which they are *experts*, and people are always happy to have a chance to show off their expertise. (163)

With the sexist degradations well underway, the covert political is intruded. In the passages cited it will have been noticed how there is a leakage from Ludvik's contempt for womankind to 'people' generally: 'most people' do not base their principles on 'careful considerations' (158), 'people are always happy to have a chance to show off their expertise' (163). The elitist contempt that finds its ready expression in sexism opens up into a projection of its own empty nihilism, into a large scale political scepticism. The carefully insinuated reference to Stalin indicates the explosive significance of the politics carried in the sexism. The passage continues:

So as soon as I assured Helena it wouldn't upset me, she completely opened up on the subject of Pavel Zemanek and got so carried away she didn't bother to paint in the dark areas and went on at great length and in great detail about how she'd fallen in love with him (the straight-backed fair-haired youth), how she'd looked up to him when he became the ensemble's political officer, how she and all the girls she knew admired him (he had a marvelous way with words!), and how their love story had merged harmoniously with the spirit of the time, in defense of which she also had several things to say (how in the world were we to know that Stalin had ordered loyal Communists to be shot?), oh, not because she wished to *veer off* into politics, but because she felt herself personally involved. The way she defended the period of her youth and the way she identified herself with it (as if it had been her *home*, a home she'd since lost) seemed almost like a challenge; it was as if she were saying, Take me, but with one proviso: that you let me remain as I am and accept my *convictions* as part of me. Making so much of convictions in a situation where body, not mind, was the real issue is abnormal enough to demonstrate that the woman in question was to some extent traumatized by her convictions: either she feared being suspected or having no convictions whatsoever, or (as is more likely in Helena's case) she harbored secret doubts about them and hoped to regain her certainty by staking something of indisputable value in her eyes: the act of love (perhaps in the cowardly unconscious confidence that her lover would be more concerned with making love than discussing convictions). (163-64)

This reduction of Helena's intellectual and political integrity is not based on any sustained creation of character. It remains an abstract assertion, never tested in dialogue, never demonstrated. The passage is inserted amidst the episode of Helena's physical degradation at the hands of the novelist, between the 'pitiful sight' of her gartered stocking tops and the next classic tableau of male fantasy, the *dejeuner su l'herbe* icon. "'Take off your clothes, Helena", I said quietly.' (169) Not only does she take off her clothes while Ludvik remains dressed except for his jacket, but we are regaled with yet another male archetypal fantasy, the strip described item by item – skirt, sweater, slip stockings, bra, panties. The unnecessariness of this itemized description, the realization that it is drawn out prurience rather than clarificatory realism, is unavoidable when we consider Ludvik's account of how 'she unfastened the stockings and slid them down off her legs one after the other' (169) Try to take off stockings any other way than one after the other. And while Renoir's famous painting in all its grotesquerie at least paid some sort of ennobling tribute to the female body, here we are offered 'a blue vein bulged' (171), a 'face flushed and disfigured by a grimace' (172), and a comparably distasteful reaction to Helena's sexual and emotional satisfaction: 'It was awful' (173). While all the horrors of sadistic pornography are invoked in literary image – there but not there, the subtext that yet avoids the actualities of sadism while introducing the mental set: 'To rob Pavel Zemanek's sacred chamber; to ransack it, make a shambles of it!' (171).

Amidst the degradations of the female, the glories of machismo are naively reasserted. 'Then she told me she'd never known anything like this before' (174). The male superiority over the fooled woman is triumphantly proclaimed by the woman victim herself. Helena asserts 'the body has a foolproof instinct' (174), which once again affirms the grounds of male scorn and male contempt; her belief in that 'foolproof instinct' is but further evidence of her mental incapacity. It is certainly a further twist on the 'joke' that the intended degradation is interpreted by the degraded as a 'miracle' (174); but it is a twist that only endorses the empty machismo: not here the jokes of masculine impotence.

Insofar as Zemanek and Helena no longer have any sexual relationship, Ludvik's revenge has failed:

there it was, a body I'd stolen from no one, in which I'd revenged no one, destroyed no one, a body abandoned, deserted by its partner, a body I'd intended to use but which had used me instead and was now rejoicing brazenly in its triumph, rollicking, reveling. (177)

The scheme may have misfired, nonetheless the male potency, the masculine vigor, is triumphantly if ambiguously victor. It is through the machismo of Ludvik's performance that the joke returns on him; the irony, the paradox of 'a body I'd intended to use but had used me' in no way cancels the preceding pages of degradation of the female. 'I stared with horror at her breasts flying from side to side'

(177). The fully established revulsion from the female body is not paralleled by a revulsion from male flesh; this is not a Swiftian recoil from the body in general, but a contempt for the specifically feminine. The motive of degradation involved in Ludvik's intended 'use' of Helena cannot be identified with Helena's alleged 'use' of Ludvik for sexual fulfilment. The verbal paralleling is a sleight of hand attempt further to debase female sexuality. Everything is orchestrated for degradation. The ironic point of the revenge misfiring, had it been required only for its paradoxical effect, could have been there conceptually, off stage, in precis. But Kundera privileges the physical encounter as a major scene of the novel, and no amount of attempted resituating it with irony or paradox can erase or redefine the degrading, distasteful dehumanizing episode described with such visual particularity.

It might be objected that to dwell on Ludvik's personality and actions as anything more than an artistic study of morbid psychology, is to overinterpret. But Kundera himself has remarked to Ian McEwan how 'the same things that happen at the level of high politics happen in private life':

People always see the political and the personal as different worlds, as if each had its own logic, its own rules. But the very horrors that take place on the big stage of politics, resemble, strangely but insistently, the small horrors of our private life.²

While it is not proposed to offer an allegoric reading of Ludvik's behaviour in political terms, or any other such schematic approach, it is worthwhile remarking how Kundera deftly establishes sufficient of a political context in which to read this seemingly private episode.

For all Ludvik's proclaimed dislike of journalists – and Helena is a journalist – the establishing account of the provincial town and the 'welcoming of new citizens to life' ceremony (148) has all the note of the metropolitan journalist's glib superiority to the provinces, that contemptuous portrayal of 'the flat space' of the main square whose history 'had engraved a set of irrevocably hideous features on its face' (1):

I gave the unsightly square a final sardonic glance, and, turning my back on it, set off for the hotel where I had booked a room for the night. The porter handed me a key hanging from a wooden pear and said, "Second floor". The room was not exactly attractive: a bed along one wall, a small table and chair in the middle, an ostentatious mahogany chest of

2 Ian McEwan, 'An Interview with Milan Kundera', *Granta*, 11 (1984), pp. 32-33. Cf. Don Anderson, *Hot Copy: Reading and Writing Now*, Penguin (Ringwood, 1986), p. 161: 'Kundera said of his now famous novel *The Joke*: "spare me your politics. *The Joke* is a love story" . . . But in Kundera, politics, lust, and love are never separate.' An argument for a political reading of *The Joke* is made in Robert Boyers, *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel Since 1945*, Oxford University Press, (New York, 1985), pp 212-33.

drawers cum mirror next to the bed, and a miniscule cracked washbasin by the door. I put my briefcase down on the table and opened the window: it looked out onto a courtyard and the bare grubby backs of neighboring buildings. I closed the window, drew the curtains, and went over the the washbasin, which had two taps – one blue, the other red; I turned them on; cold water trickled out of both. (2)

It is familiar territory to the western reader, that note developed by Orwell and Greene, reaching back into T.S. Eliot's 'vacant lots' of North American urban desolation, no doubt based on observation once, but observation now conforming to a mood of deracinated *angst*. The objective correlatives of alienation are deftly established.

Soon after leaving the hospital grounds, we came to a group of buildings jutting up fitfully one after the next from an unlevelled, dust-laden plot of land (without lawns, paths or roads) and forming a pitiful screen between the town and the flat, open fields in the distance. We went in one of the doors and climbed a narrow staircase (the elevator was out of order) to the third floor . . . (4)

After the two, brief opening sections, the novel moves back in time some twenty years to the immediate post world war II society. The ramshackle seediness foregrounded in the opening allows a ready seepage into the war ravaged seediness of the reconstructing new society. The technique is a variation of the Orwellian; just as *Nineteen Eighty Four* projected forty years ahead the shortages and physical collapses of the war ravaged 1947 London of the writer's present time, suggesting a continuity of ruin and dilapidation under English socialism (Ingsoc, as Orwell termed his party), so Kundera by his chronological disruptions is able to imply that the harsh physical conditions of 1947 have been perpetuated into the briefly evoked 1967. Whatever points of social criticism such a technique could make for the Czechoslovakian reader of 1967, who had the external reality of the society against which to read the novel, the western reader can all too readily and indeed unwittingly give an Orwellian reading; and assume, moreover, with the reissue of *The Joke* in 1980's that such is the permanent condition of life in the socialist world. Such are the politics of translation.

To resituate the novel in the moment of its composition is to see these images as part of a familiar cinematic world: the provincial town and industrial wasteland of slag, mud, pylons and desolation so strikingly photographed in the English new wave cinema of the 1960's. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is the best remembered of that great period of achievement.

I walked along the bank of a narrow path flanked on one side by a thick row of poplars. To the right of the path a mixture of grass and weeds

sloped down to the level of the water, and across the river, on the opposite bank, stood the warehouses, workshops, and courtyards of several small factories; to the left of the path beyond the trees there was a sprawling rubbish heap and, farther on, open fields punctuated by more metal pylons and high-tension wires. Making my way along the path, I felt I was crossing a footbridge over a broad expanse of water. And if I compare that landscape to an expanse of water, it is because, first, it gave me the shivers, and second, I was constantly on the verge of crashing down off the path. I was well aware that the nightmarish phantasmagoria of the landscape was merely a metaphor for everything I had tried not to recall after my encounter with Lucie; I seemed to be projecting suppressed memories onto everything I saw around me: the desolation of the fields and courtyards and warehouses, the murk of the river, and the pervasive chill that gave the landscape its unity. But I understood there was no escaping those memories; they were all around me. (22)

The other context in which to view Ludvik is that classic European tradition of the outsider figure. Indeed, though his expulsion from the communist party is the episode that decisively marks his separation from society, it is difficult to see in what way he ever was a communist. Of course, his accounts of his pre-expulsion past are mediated through his expelled and disillusioned present. Everything has been coloured by the ensuing experiences. But such account as he does give of his party membership consistently privileges his alienation even then.

It was the first year after February 1948. A new life had begun, a genuinely new and different life, and its features – they are imprinted upon my memory – were rigid and grave. The odd thing was that the gravity of those features took the form of a smile, not a frown. That's right, those years told the world they were the most radiant of years, and anyone who failed to rejoice was immediately suspected of lamenting the victory of the working class or (what was equally criminal) giving way *individualistically* to inner sorrows.

Not only was I unencumbered with inner sorrows; I was blessed with a considerable sense of fun. And even so I can't say I wore the joyous physiognomy of the times: my sense of fun was too frivolous. No, the joy in vogue was devoid of irony and practical jokes; it was, as I have said, of a highly serious variety, the self-proclaimed *historical optimism of the victorious class*, a solemn and ascetic joy – in short, Joy with a capital J. (23)

What provokes Ludvik's alienation? It is presented in terms of his having a different sense of humour, as the novel's title indicates. But the postcard that conveys the ultimate unrecognized humour is not without its political aspect. The adapted quotation from *The Communist Manifesto*, the salute to Trotsky, invite a political decoding. The taunt is there, even if the basis of the taunt is absent, even if it is only a

'joke'. The absence, the specifics of political questioning, it can no doubt promptly be replied, were inevitably absent because inexpressible. The opposition Kundera now spells out to communism presumably could only be an absence in 1965 when the manuscript was completed for submission to a publisher.

Moreover, an implicit critique cannot be spelled out, otherwise the joke of the postcard will be read as having a developed ideological position. And the consequence of that would be that Ludvik's expulsion will be seen as having a rationale and even a justification, rather than being an overreaching absurdity. There is an important ambiguity here. The joke of the postcard is presented as free of political opposition; merely a joke, for all its political terms. The overreaction to the postcard is then read as a humorless political response, in itself the provocation and justification of political opposition. The political is then necessarily absent before the overreaction to the postcard; though the political terms of the postcard inevitably direct attention to this absence. And that very absence brings into question Ludvik's original stance; it is hard to see how he ever was a party member; there are no signs of communism in his thinking. But this absence, too, can be turned to serve its anti-communist purposes. It structurally reinforces the implicit case that party membership is motivated by empty careerism, authoritarianism, and such like non-communist attitudes. It is an approach, running through the novel, which serves to depoliticize the party. Is this because the party has become so naturalized in Czechoslovakian life that what it represents in a distinction to what capitalism represents cannot even be conceptualized? Even in 1948? Or is it a depoliticizing strategy such as Orwell used in *Nineteen Eighty Four*: excluding political and social aims and replacing them with a preoccupation with 'power' – a depoliticization ultimately extremely political in its reactionary bent.

The political, then, is officially absent from *The Joke*. It cannot be the central issue. It is displaced to the margins and survives in hints and in the reader's interpretations, decodings and meditations on the peripheral. This, of course, did not fool anybody. Kundera writes in his preface to the new, authorized translation of the novel in 1982:

The fate of the book called *The Joke* coincided with a time when the combined inanity of ideological dictatorship (in the Communist countries) and journalistic oversimplification (in the West) was able to prevent a work of art from telling its own truth in its own words. The ideologues in Prague took *The Joke* for a pamphlet against socialism and banned it; the foreign publisher took it for a political fantasy that became reality for a few weeks and rewrote it accordingly. (x)

What the novelist presents is not necessarily what the novelist endorses. Distasteful and discreditable modes of behaviour may be represented in order that their

components may be examined and analysed and understood, so that in future life situations hopefully they will not be repeated. Though this, too, is not without its ambiguity: what the author presents as a distasteful subject for moral examination may well be read as a model for imitation: Milton's Satan, embodiment of political tyranny, becomes the hero for many in the Romantic age. The problems of critical response are made even greater in the mode that a novel like *The Joke* employs. As David Lodge describes the mode:

both the three-day action in the provincial town, and all the analepses, are mediated to the reader not by a reliable, impersonal authorial narrator, . . . but through the interwoven monologues of four of the characters: Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav and Kostka.

These monologues do not pretend like those of Stephen, Bloom and Molly in Joyce's *Ulysses*, to record thoughts and sensations as they occur, but are rather what Dorrit Cohn calls 'memory monologues,' like those of the characters in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. They are cast in the past tense, and are linguistically too well-formed to imitate the 'stream of consciousness' in Joycean fashion; on the other hand, they are not naturalised as journal or diary entries, or as oral anecdote or deposition. They are *interior* monologues, though they do have something of the quality of confession. The characters seem to be telling their stories, the story of the last few hours, and the story of their entire lives, to some absent Other, or to themselves, to their own consciences, in an effort to understand, justify or judge their own actions.³

Initially, then, any critical rejection of the novel for its sexism, can be countered by the response: this sexism is Ludvik's world view, presented through his own consciousness. It is not necessarily endorsed: it is there for the reader critically to resituate. To identify Kundera's authorial stance with what we are given in the literary presentation of the character Ludvik's stance can be rejected as a naive reading. The mode seems to offer a pluralism – letting the characters speak for themselves. But not all the characters are given monologues. Lucie, with whom Ludvik has an ongoing sexual relationship when working in the mines is never allowed her say. Indeed, of the four who speak, only one is a woman.

It is not insignificant that Lucie is given no voice. Of course there are literary reasons for this. She is the ever exploited, the dumb victim, the voiceless underdog: woman and lower class. But is this literary tradition any more than a mode of bourgeois ruling class fantasy? Is it the case that the Lucies have no voice?

It is not only that Lucie is presented merely as the sex object with no voice in a novel that pretends to a pluralistic narrative mode. More than this, Ludvik and Kosta

3 David Lodge, 'Milan Kundera, and the idea of the author in Modern Criticism,' *Critical Quarterly*, 26 (1984) p. 114

are given narratives that consist of quite considerable *interpretations* of Lucie. Lucie is created through their male narratives. Her silence and absence are not a true silence but a manipulated, literary silence. There is no 'true' silence: the very concept is as much a literary fabrication as the manipulated silence we are offered. Ludvik tells us

I simply could not get here to write to me. Perhaps I intimidated her with my own letters; perhaps she felt she had nothing to write about or would make spelling mistakes; perhaps she was ashamed of the awkward penmanship I knew only from the signature on her identity card. It was not within my power to make her see that I actually admired her awkwardness, her ignorance. I did not value her simplicity in an abstract way; I saw it as a sign of her purity, of a tabula rasa enabling me to make my imprint on her all the more profound and indelible. (67)

Kundera's mode allows the possibility that this is in part Ludvik's projection, a vision of Lucie that may be delusional. His fantasy that 'she was a country girl, and I was the first man to see her naked' (92) is undercut by Kosta's account later of Lucie's earlier sexual 'initiation' by the gang of boys – an account that might also have been a fantasy, or so Ludvik speculates. But though Ludvik's speculations about Lucie's not writing may be projected illusion, they are reinforced by the parallel account of the language of flowers.

There were flowers waiting for me every time we met, and in the end I gave in, disarmed by the spontaneity of the giving and its meaning for the giver. Perhaps her tongue-tied state, her lack of verbal eloquence, made her think of flowers as a form of speech – not the heavy-handed imagery of the conventional flower symbolism, but an older, vaguer, more instinctive *precursor of language*; perhaps, having always been sparing of words, she instinctively longed for a mute, preverbal stage of evolution when people communicated with a minimum of gestures, pointing at trees, laughing, touching one another . . . (68)

The elitist fantasies of Ludvik's, this conviction of class superiority and gender superiority, is not something that can be disregarded. It is not confined to Ludvik but is endemic to the novel. The denial of Lucie's own narrative reveals the novelist's manipulations. Kundera privileges the old bourgeois archetype and presents Lucie as the silent inexpressive. Yet the very literary mode Kundera uses – as Lodge's reference to William Faulkner reminds us – is one whose earlier revolutionary achievement had been to give voice to those denied voice, to allow the mute inglorious Miltons to move from their class-suppressed role and achieve a verbal, a literary expression.⁴ That was Faulkner's humane genius. But as with all literary revolutions, the technical breakthroughs are rapidly appropriated for reactionary purposes. Kundera's voices are elite, educated, literate, male.

Of the four narrative voices, the one woman (Helena) has a mere sixteen of the 267 pages. Now this comparative refusal of the female voice might in some circumstances be seen as a mark of a male novelist's integrity: to simulate the female voice would be false, would be claiming an unjustifiable insight into woman, would be once again male supremacist. In this novel of seemingly multiple narration, however, this hardly seems to be the case. There is a token female voice, but the dominant mode is of male voices expressing male fantasies. And the male fantasies are no less male fantasies for being disarmingly presented as male fantasies.

Why does she always wear those black high heels?

I told them I'd bought them for her to wear when she was naked; she was shy about it, but did everything I asked of her; I kept my clothes on till the last possible moment, and she would walk up and down in front of me in those heels (how I loved seeing her naked when I was dressed!) and then go over to the cupboard, where she kept the wine, and, still naked, fill my glass

So when Lucie came up to the fence, I wasn't the only one looking at her; I was joined by ten or so of my fellow soldiers, who knew precisely what she was like when she made love (what she said, how she moaned) and who would make all kinds of innuendos about the black heels she had on again, and picture her parading naked in them around her tiny room. (92)

Ludvik goes on to refer to 'the feeling of friendly solidarity that had led me to paint so detailed a picture of Lucie's nakedness and erotic behavior.' (92) But this is not a true solidarity. It is a voyeuristic provocation, a fantasy titillation with any actuality of solidarity excluded. 'I was not the least bit upset by the obscenities they used each time she appeared at the gate; they could never act them out (the barbed wire and dogs protected her from all of us, myself included)'. (92) The represented episodes of 'solidarity', of sexual sharing, are presented with revulsion. The episode with the blonde, not dignified with any named identity, could have been a type of sexual sharing; indeed it is for Ludvik's two fellow miners. Ludvik, however, recoils in horror:

the blonde soon became voluble and said to Honza, "Hey, I bet you wouldn't lend me a hundred crowns," whereupon Honza slipped her a hundred-crown note and she opened her coat, hitched up her skirt, and pulled down her panties. She took my hand and pulled me towards her, but I was scared and broke away from her, pushing Stana into the breach; Stana showed no qualms whatsoever and moved right up between her legs. They lasted less than twenty seconds together. I planned to let Honza

4 'It is an obvious point, yet one worth making that the device of "interior monologue" militates against social absolutes and works strongly in favour of egalitarianism, indeed almost compels it.' P.N. Furbank, *Unholy Pleasure or the Idea of Social Class*. Oxford, 1985, p137

have his turn next (partly because I was trying to play the host, partly because I was still scared), but this time the girl was more determined and pulled me against her hard, and when, aroused by her caresses, I was finally ready to oblige her, she whispered tenderly in my ear, "I only came along because of you, silly," and began to sigh, and all at once I genuinely felt she was a nice girl in love with me and worthy of my love, and she went on sighing, and I went at it with abandon, but suddenly Honza came out with some obscenity, and again I realised I wasn't in love with her in the least, so I pulled away from her without climaxing, and she looked up at me almost frightened and said, "Hey, what's going on?" but by then Honza had taken my place, and the sighs started up again. (51-52)

Instead of the solidarity heralded by the bottle passed from hand to hand – 'all four of us drank from it' (51) – we have class separation, revulsion. Ludvik makes explicit his attitude in describing the encounter with another unnamed sexual object, 'a woman whose monstrous height had earned her the nickname Candlestick. She was ugly, but what could we do?' (52). 'It all seemed revolting and pointless' (52) Ludvik remarks. 'Had I perhaps felt the stirring of some moral principle? Nonsense: it was revulsion, pure and simple.' (52-53). Revulsion is the keynote, a revulsion experienced by Ludvik, an inner emotion, but projected through his narrative onto the women encountered. Women become the objective correlatives of his mood, bearing the burden of his revulsion.

The revulsion from sexual sharing is reinforced in the later narrative by Kostka of Lucie's sexual 'Initiation' (196). Again the incident is presented negatively, this time with an added brutality and violence. 'There were six of them and one of her,' (195) the section opens. But for all that note of concerned compassion, the reader who enjoys representations of male sexual violence on women is well provided for. The plangent rhythms of Kostka's narration add to the pornography of cruelty by evoking associations of sacrificial suffering, a heightened aura of religion and fine art. The communal aspects are brought into the foreground here through the christian terminology that is used to characterize Kostka's narration.

She spread her legs. She was afraid – she knew what it meant – but did as she was told. Then she screamed, and the blood gushed out of her. The boys roared, raising their glasses, pouring the sparkling rotgut down their leader's back, all over her body, between their legs, and bawling vague phrases about Christening and Initiation, and then the leader stood up from her and the next member of the gang went over and took his place, and so it went on in order of seniority . . . (195-96)

The Joke is structured on a series of parallels and contrasts, linked images and episodes. The paralleling of these two sexual episodes serves to exclude a third possibility. Revulsion and coercion (Lucie is slapped hard across the face when she

attempts to refuse the sixth boy) are the presented poles; shared, equal participation is excluded. The parody of christian communion serves to add a quasi-blasphemous note to the presented sexual episode; it insists on degradation as the key note, the degradation of christian imagery serving as further metaphor for the degradation of the sixteen year old Lucie. But the communion imagery is also there to be degraded in itself; any idea of communion – social, religious or sexual – is presented negatively. This denial of communion, of equal sharing, is the note of the novel's sexual politics. All the male fantasies of hierarchy, authority and power over the submissive, degraded or debased woman are rehearsed. Rape, seduction of the stupid, purchase of the prostitute, and trickery comprise the enacted sexual events.

The denial of a voice to Lucie in the novel's polyphony is the sexism of exclusion, of absence. The final treatment of Helena, however, is all too present. The sexual humiliation of Helena, mediated through Ludvik's account, might possibly be claimed as dramatized evidence of Ludvik's sexism. But what Lodge calls 'the humiliating consequences of Helena's overdose'⁵ cannot be so easily accepted. The tablets she takes in her suicide attempt turn out to be laxatives, the potential tragedy becomes excretory farce. And this humiliation of Helena is narrative, not interpretive. It is achieved by the novelist's plot, not by his character's perhaps critically represented point of view. And once again the humiliation is given full visual representation.

There before my eyes, on the wooden seat, in the stench of the latrine, sat Helena. Pale, but alive, she looked up at me in terror and instinctively tugged at her skirt, but despite her best efforts she couldn't even bring it down to the mid-thigh region, and holding on to the hem with both hands, she squeezed her legs tightly together. (250)

Tragedy is denied. Helena survives. But this is not a case of a positive ending emerging. There is nothing positive in Helena's humiliation. Jaroslav also is saved from death at the novel's end; he suffers a heart attack, but survives. And similarly survives in no positive way:

And what I said to myself was although he would probably get over it, as the second fiddle had predicted, he would lead a very different life, a life without passionate devotion, without jam sessions, a life under the watchful eye of death, and I was struck by the thought that a person's destiny often ends before his death and Jaroslav's destiny had come to an end. (266)

The note is one of futility. There is humiliation here, too; Jaroslav 'looked up at me and said it had all happened because we'd stayed, he hadn't wanted to stay' (266). The

⁵ Lodge, p. 115

cimbalon ensemble, playing in the open air restaurant, is unable to hold the attention of the new generation:

Meanwhile, the audience had undergone a gradual metamorphosis: the half-empty tables of people following our performance with enthusiasm from the start had been taken over in large part by a crowd of young people (perhaps from the village, more likely from the town) who ordered beer and wine (at the top of their voices) and were soon (as soon as the alcohol had time to take effect) indulging their uncontrollable need to be seen, heard, recognized. (263)

The role of folk music has been one of the continuing themes of *The Joke*. At the novel's end it is presented as having no living role for the new generation of young. Nothing is shown as having any role. The nihilism is omnipresent.

The nihilism is there in the way Kostka's christianity is derided. It is presented with that easy 'exposure' of christianity as sublimated sexuality: the presentation is in itself quite unsublimated, nakedly explicit:

One day I asked her whether she believed in God. She responded in a way I considered peculiar. She said neither yes nor no. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't know". I asked her whether she knew who Jesus Christ was. She said she did. But she didn't know a thing about Him. Only that He was somehow connected with the idea of Christmas. It was all a haze, a few chance images that made no sense together. Until that time Lucie had known neither faith nor doubt. I suddenly felt a moment of vertigo, something akin to what a lover must feel when he discovers no male body has preceded his in his beloved. (192)

That Kostka can explicitly consider 'that all my talk of Jesus and God was no more than a cover for the most carnal of desires' (200) in no way makes this age-old derision of christianity any less a cliché. To have the christian figure considering this offers a variation on the old formula, but it is nonetheless an old formula, as old as the anti-feminist formulae we have already noted. We might recall Swift's account in *The Mechanical Operation of Spirit* in which sublimated sexuality issues in sectarian enthusiasm. Swift's target was both mechanist reductionist rationalism, and mechanical (i.e. working class) radical sectarianism. And so with Kundera, it is the radical christian, the practising christian, who is the target for destabilization. The state's opposition to the church that causes Kostka to lose his job can be seen by western bloc readers as evidence of the evils of communist intolerance of freedom of speech and worship. But how then do we interpret the novelist's discrediting of the christian impulse? Indeed Kostka later re-interprets that pressure from the state:

And what was the real reason behind my voluntary resignation from the university fifteen years ago? I didn't love my wife. She was six years older than I. I couldn't stand her voice anymore or her face or the monotonous tick-tock of the family clock. I couldn't live with her, but neither could I inflict a divorce on her, because she was a fine woman who had never done anything to hurt me. And suddenly I heard the saving voice of an appeal from on high. I heard Jesus calling me to forsake my nets. (206-7)

This undercutting of Kostka's christianity, presenting it as but the ideology of sensuality, may be seen as a sop to official attitudes of the mid-sixties. But it is just that christianity that is in accord with communism, that radical, practical primitive christianity as represented in Kostka's life of cooperation and sharing that Kundera chooses to undercut. Kundera offers nothing on the reactionary aspects of the church, its authoritarian, hierarchical structures, its privileging of church buildings, bricks and mortar, wealth. Kostka's sexual 'hypocrisies' in no way undercut the practical effects of the radical, loving and charitable aspects of primitive christianity.

The Joke leaves us with a vision so sceptical of human possibility that it is effectively nihilistic. This is not just to remark the lack of positives. The confrontation and denial of the values of socialist realism may have been the conscious strategic stance, the aesthetic challenge. But the consequence is a consistent degradation of human values. We may feel sorrow for sacrificial victims like Lucie; but it is something other than dignity to be the object of sorrow. The young are especially derided; Helena's would-be lover, his pimples and constipation presented as marks of his contemptibility, the absconding folk king off to the motorcycle races, and the whole wave of youth who disregard the cimbalon recital. This might seem remarkable in a young man's novel – Kundera began writing it in 1962 when he was thirty-three, he tells us. (v) But Kundera's hostility to the young has its political base. He told Olga Carlisle in 1985:

My scepticism in relation to certain values that are almost totally unassailable is rooted in my central European experience.

For instance, youth is usually referred to not as a hase but as a value in itself. When they utter this word, politicians always have a silly grin on their faces.

But I, when I was young lived in a period of terror, and it was the young who supported terror, in great numbers, through inexperience, immaturity, their all-or-nothing morality, their lyric sense.⁶

At the same time, the past is presented in *The Joke* as equally absurd. The preserved folk ceremony is allowed nothing of value.

⁶ Olga Carlisle, 'Down life's dark tunnels with Milan Kundera,' *The Weekend Australian*, June 8-9 1985, p. 16.

I was prepared for the lack of taste, I was prepared for the alliance of true Folk art with kitsch, I was prepared for overblown speeches by idiot orators, yes, I was prepared for the worst in bombast and hypocrisy, but what I wasn't prepared for was the sad and almost touching *shabbiness* of it all . . . (217)

The wildflower beauty of Jaroslav's dream is not an adequate substitute for humanity: 'A wild rose bush appears before me on the verge. It is covered with tiny roses. I stop, enraptured.' (105) The respect for ordinary, daily human activities characteristic of eastern European movies, recurrent scenes of domesticity like preparing meals presented with a respect for the dignity of everyday labour, is here denied. Instead we have Jaroslav's smashing of the kitchen. The strength of socialist art, the value-bearing bases of its humanism, are here confronted and rejected. Pretty well everyone in the novel is presented as feeble, failed or fraudulent. This may be a satisfying vision of Czechoslovakian life for the western anti-communist, but in the totality of the nihilism the question inevitably raised is, Can it be true? The excess of negativity ultimately explodes this bitter tale.