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Conversations With Milan Kundera

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# Conversations With Milan Kundera\*

by JORDAN ELGRABLY

## I. Writing

*Jordan Elgrably:* In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, you speak of graphomania, wherein “everyone surrounds himself with his own writings as with a wall of mirrors cutting off all voices from without.” Graphomania is an obsession with writing books. Do you disagree, then, that writing can only be liberating and healthy, even as private therapy, as a form of self-expression?

*Milan Kundera:* Writing is a form of therapy, yes. One writes to liberate something in oneself. However, this has nothing to do with an aesthetic value. If we confuse this sort of writing—which is entirely sympathetic and legitimate, and has its mnemonic and therapeutic functions—with writing which requires a certain aesthetic, what we consider literature, we fall into graphomania. This is why I’ve found Roland Barthes’ sentence, “Tout est écriture,” very dangerous. He suggested there is an inherent aesthetic value in everything we write. I do not believe in the principle.

*J.E.:* You’ve said that the composition of the novel must be elliptic, and that one must be free “of the automatism of novel technique.” Elsewhere you insisted that “the novel doesn’t answer questions: it offers possibilities.” Would you elaborate?

*M.K.:* What is this “automatism of novel technique”? Let’s make a comparison with music. Take for example the form of a fugue. Certain rules exist according to which we unify two or three voices into a

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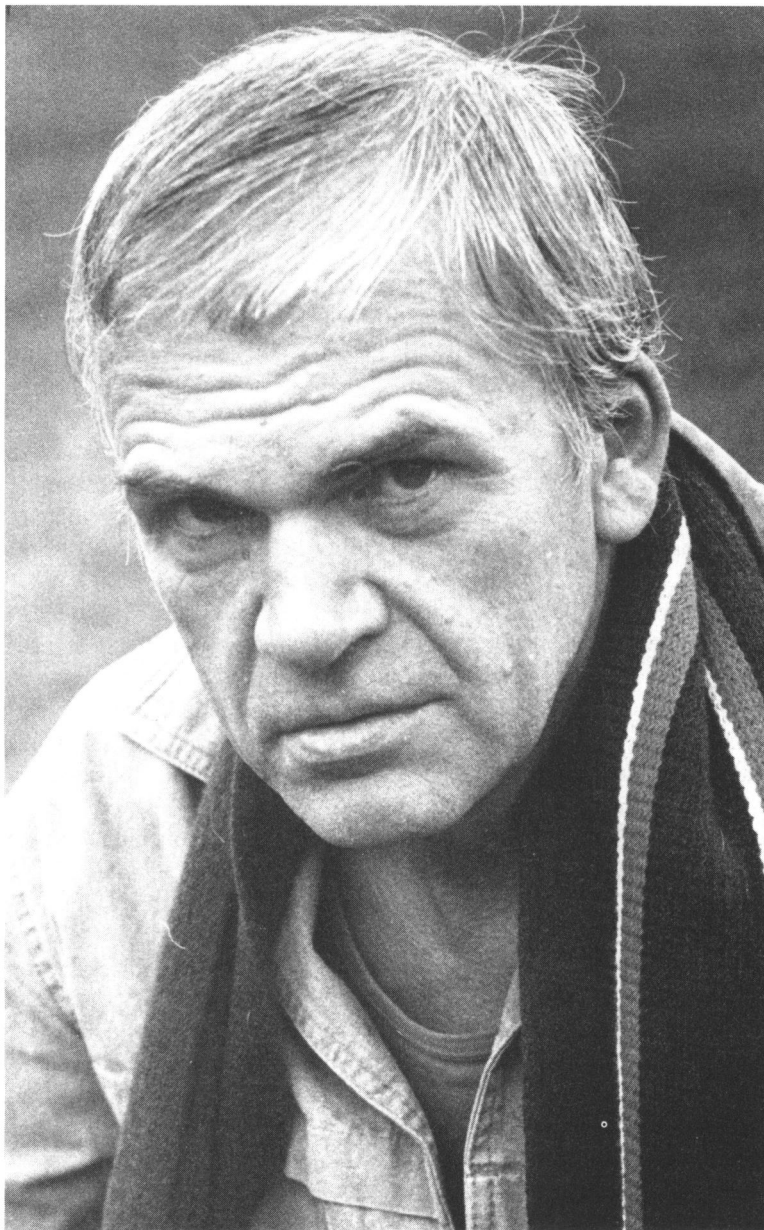
polyphonic composition. At the conservatory, in composition class, you are taught these rules. What is more, you have a tradition of thousands of fugues already written. Thus, you might assign me a little motif as scholarly homework, and I would then write a fugue semi-automatically. This automatism of technique is the constant danger of all musical composition. But the same danger threatens all the arts, and most especially the novel. Look at the immense world production of novels! Novels are virtually beginning to write themselves; it is not the authors but the “automatism and convention of novel technique” which writes them. An author, a true author, must therefore be constantly vigilant against this enormous weight.

*J.E.:* Hence your wish to write a novel in the most elliptic manner possible. Does this mean that you suppress a large number of passages as you proceed at your work table? Are erasures and changes your defense system against this automatism of prose writing?

*M.K.:* Well, it's a fact that I do eliminate a practically incredible number of pages and individual passages. To cross out what one has written is a highly creative act. I'm often shocked when Kafka's commentators (the first among them being Max Brod) quote sentences which Kafka, in his novels, had crossed through. They quote them in the same breath as writing Kafka meant for publication. Here you have a clear example of “tout est écriture” in practice. According to Kafka's commentators, he always wrote with equal value. Now, to leave out a sentence, to understand that it's no good, that it is neither precise nor original, or that it is repetitive—this is an act of exertion which, to my mind, often demands a greater intellectual effort than to write.

*J.E.:* You quote Hermann Broch as having said the novelist's only obligation is the quest for knowledge. Doesn't this somehow suggest that a work of art may, rather than providing aesthetic pleasure, have a quality which is void of certain beauty?

*M.K.:* But what is aesthetic pleasure? For myself, it is the surprise I experience before something which hasn't already been said, demonstrated, seen. Why is it that Madame Bovary never fails to enchant us? Because even today this novel surprises us. It *unveils* that which we are not in a position to see in our daily lives. We have all met a Madame



**Photograph of Milan Kundera**  
*by Aaron Manheimer*

Bovary in one situation or another, and yet failed to recognize her. Flaubert unmasked the mechanism of sentimentality, of illusions; he showed us the cruelty and the aggressiveness of lyrical sentimentality. This is what I consider the knowledge of the novel. The author unveils a realm of reality that has not yet been revealed. This unveiling causes surprise and the surprise aesthetic pleasure or, in other words, a sensation of beauty. On the other hand, there exists yet another beauty: beauty outside knowledge. One describes what has already been described a thousand times over in a light and lovely manner. The beauty of “a thousand times already told” is what I deem “kitsch.” And this form of description is one which the true artist should deeply abhor. And, of course, “kitsch-beauty” is the sort of beauty which has begun to invade our modern world.

*J.E.*: On the one hand you say the novel must be able to demonstrate in a fresh approach a certain knowledge of life. On the other you argue “the novel doesn’t answer questions.” But doesn’t this unveiling of knowledge in *novel* form imply that the writer is putting forth answers?

*M.K.*: Everyone likes to pass judgment. Even before really getting to know someone, one has already decided whether he is good or bad, even before one hears out an opinion one is generally either a partisan or an adversary. This passion for passing moral judgment, this sluggishness to get to know and understand others defines, alas, man’s nature. It is the malediction of man. Now, the novel, at least as I imagine it, counters this human tendency. Above all, the novel strives to comprehend. Eva Bovary is monstrous? Yes. She’s touching? Yes. In other words, she is ambiguous. Try to grasp the word *ambiguity*. If, in everyday life, I should say to you “everything you say seems ambiguous to me,” it would be a reproach. Meaning you either do not want or do not know how to speak your mind succinctly. It isn’t very flattering to be ambiguous, is it? And yet in the art of the novel to be ambiguous is not a weakness. The art of the novel is founded on, indeed, masters the use of, ambiguity. We could even go so far as to define the novel as the art which strives to discover and grasp the ambiguity of things and the ambiguity of the world. This explains why one must never confuse a confession with a novel! A confession shouldn’t be ambiguous, it should clearly and honestly say what is on the confessor’s mind. The novel is not a confession. Rather, it speaks to us of its characters and

the world they inhabit. The novel's objective is to assimilate an understanding of this kaleidoscope of characters. Each one has his own truth and each has a different view of the world. Every character has his individual conception of self and that conception differs tragically (or comically) with what he is in reality. You see, all of a sudden we find ourselves in the universe of ambiguity. Well, the novelist wants to take hold of this ambiguity and say to his reader: do not simplify the world! If you want to understand it you must grasp it in all its complexity, in its essential ambiguity!

*J.E.*: According to Nadine Gordimer, there are "natural" writers, those who begin writing when quite young, and socially-reactive writers, who are inspired to create out of a sense of indignation and outrage. Is your writing indicative of either of these designations, or did you come to it in another way!

*M.K.*: I certainly do not belong in the second category. I emphasize this because my case might seem to be one of someone who began to write in order to protest against something. I belong in the first category of writers, but with a certain reservation. I mean to say that with me this artistic temptation was at first very dispersed. At one time I wanted to work in music, and following that I painted for a time. Then I taught cinema and literature for a while. I was groping around in the arts, trying to find my bearings. Finally, when I was 30 years old, I began to concentrate on prose. And this was when I felt I'd found myself. As far as being swept up by a necessity to react to society, this was not my impulse, not the impulse which made me settle on literature. Let me put it differently: there was not this question of writing *against* or writing to *protest*, but the objective reality which I saw around me was so fascinating and enigmatic that suddenly I was drawn to prose and let everything else fall by the wayside. However, even when I took up prose I continued working with the same aesthetic ambitions I'd acquired early on.

*J.E.*: Witold Gombrowicz wrote and then burned his first two novels, before publishing a collection of short stories and finally a novel (*Ferdurke*). Once you did set out to write fiction, what was your particular evolution?

*M.K.*: Well, I began with the short stories eventually collected in *Laughable Loves*. So that volume, which was originally ten stories rather than seven, was my first accomplished prose. I began as a composer does, designing and numbering his opuses; certain stories were not included in the series. My writing took flight with the first story for *Laughable Loves*. This was my Opus 1. Everything I'd written prior to it can be considered prehistory.

*J.E.*: I was wondering to what extent American culture and literature influenced you. Josef Skvorecky, author of *Cowards*, admits the major influence which American literature and jazz has had on his writing, and in his view, on much post-war Czech fiction.

*M.K.*: Skvorecky is an author who was oriented towards America. It is a bizarre thing, but small nations are very cosmopolitan. You might say they are condemned to be cosmopolitan, because either you're a poor provincial who is aware of very little outside of your immediate environment, other than this small Polish, Danish or Czech literature, or you must be universal and know all literature. One of the paradoxical advantages of the small nations and languages is that they live with all of world literature, whereas an American is predominantly familiar with American literature, and a Frenchman with French literature. Despite this common horizon which Czechs share, there are predilections. Skvorecky is one of those who were fascinated by American literature due to, I believe, jazz itself. He was a jazz musician as a young man and therefore from an early age an Americanist. He has done marvelously good translations of William Faulkner. So Skvorecky's personal originality, for a Czech, is that he is a connoisseur of American literature. I, on the other hand, was always very attracted by French culture and literature. From an early age I read Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Breton, Cocteau, Bataille, Ionesco and admired French surrealism.

*J.E.*: Do you agree with Gombrowicz when he argues that, "The writer is not a professional. In order to write, one requires personality and a certain superior degree of spirituality"?

*M.K.*: A professional? Yes and no. A writer is not a professional in that he must refuse routine. While a professional's knowledge of his métier

enables him to go on with his work, should there ever come a time when the writer has nothing further to say, he must be silent. Whatever professionalism or knowledge of the craft he may possess won't help him. On the other hand, to write does demand a mastery of the craft; it has its technical facets much as does musical composition, which one must study for four years before writing a score or an orchestration. You cannot just sit down and write music. The sort of background which is entailed in music, however, is not readily visible in literature. There is no conservatory for literature. Anyway, writing is a *métier* and it is extremely difficult.

## II. Exile

*J.E.*: In an essay published in *Varia* (Christian Bourgois, 1978), Gombrowicz remarked: "I feel that any artist who respects himself ought to be, and in every sense of the term, an emigré." Could you compare the sense of exile between Gombrowicz and Kundera?

*M.K.*: He may have wished to point out that the particularly strong individualism of the writer inevitably makes of him an exile in a metaphorical sense, that by his very nature he can never be a spokesman for any sort of collectivity, and rather is opposed to the collectivity. The writer is always the black sheep. In his case this was especially obvious as Poles have always taken literature to be something which must serve the nation. The great tradition among major Polish writers was that they were national spokesmen. Gombrowicz opposed and vehemently ridiculed this role. He insisted that we must make literature completely autonomous, embodying the idea as someone who, in Argentina, far from his own country, reflected the essential situation of the writer who is perpetually in exile.

*J.E.*: The difference between yourself and Gombrowicz being that he left Poland for South America and had no desire to return, which in fact he never did, whereas you are much more attached to Czechoslovakia and the fate of that country.

*M.K.*: To the contrary, Gombrowicz was actually quite attached to Poland! Imagine, he left at the age of 35 and throughout his life he wrote only in Polish, and if you read his journals and letters, you will find that the majority of his friends and adversaries were indeed Poles.



Clearly he interacted with and reacted far more strongly to Polish intellectuals than to others. Every one of his novels is situated in Poland or between Poles. I believe he was more attached to Poland than I am to Czechoslovakia.

*J.E.*: All of your novels and stories take place in Czechoslovakia. You've been away ten years now: would you consider writing fiction where the action would take place outside of your homeland?

*M.K.*: This is something really quite mysterious. Gombrowicz left Poland when he was 35. That is to say, he lived the most adventurous years of life in Argentina. In spite of his rather violent relationship to Poland, he could not write about anything else *but* Poland. It is very interesting to see just how rooted we are in the first half of our lives. We are fatally rooted in the first half of life, even if life's second half is filled with intense and moving experiences. Not only is there the question of experience (Gombrowicz did indeed have many important experiences in Argentina), but of obsessions, of traumatism which are inextricably tied to the first half of life—which includes childhood, adolescence and adulthood. To answer your question: No, I don't believe I could situate a novel (should I go on to write another one) in France, for example. But the "how to situate the novel geographically" is one of my major aesthetic dilemmas and is something I am trying to resolve. Already *Life Is Elsewhere* (the novel I wrote in Prague in 1969) is not situated exclusively in Prague. True, the protagonist is a native of Prague who never leaves the city. However, the novel's decor is larger than the decor of my protagonist's story. In effect, although the character cannot be in several places at once, the spirit of the narrator experiences absolute freedom of movement. I tried to develop all of the resultant consequences. Thus, my novel not only deals with events which took place in Prague, but with those in Paris during May '68; it not only deals with Jaromil (the protagonist) but also with Rimbaud, Keats and Victor Hugo. To phrase it technically: the decor of the novel is enlarged *by the narrator's digressions* throughout Europe. Jaromil's decor is Prague, the novel's decor is Europe. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* I took this principle much further. This was a novel I wrote in France. Approximately two-thirds of events related occur in Prague, while the remaining third occur in the Occident. Yet even the stories which unfurl in Prague are seen not from that city but

from the vantage point of someone situated in France; they are bathed in reflections inspired by a life in France. Take, for example, two parts of this novel, each entitled *The Angels*: The first part (third in the novel) occurs simultaneously in 1) Prague 2) in a Mediterranean town 3) the mythical space of a fable 4) in the abstract realm of a critical reflection (an analysis of a feminist book). The later part (sixth in the novel) occurs simultaneously in 1) Prague—an account of the death of my father and of political events in that city—2) a city in Western Europe 3) on a mythical island where Tamina shall end her days. This was my experimentation with the geographical decor of the novel. I consider such experimentation to be extremely important to me and I would like to go on to develop it in a future novel.

*J.E.*: Gombrowicz, then, lived in a metaphorical exile, while you have (prompted by the political stalemate of Czechoslovakia) taken up residence in France and claimed all of Europe as your territory. Can you envisage going home to Prague and living in relative freedom?

*M.K.*: Allow me not to reply. Whenever I have wanted to make a prediction, a political prognosis, I've been mistaken. My sole certitude: in the realm of political forecasts there will inevitably occur the opposite of what I foresee.

*J.E.*: And what do you foresee?

*M.K.*: I'm very pessimistic. I don't believe I'll ever be able to return to Czechoslovakia. It will never be possible.

*J.E.*: Do you maintain close contact with other Czechs, friends?

*M.K.*: Of course, I do have Czech friends who go back many years. But 90% of my relationships are with the French. I came to this country when I was 46. At that age, you no longer have time to waste, your time and energy are limited, you must choose: either you live looking over your shoulder, there where you are not, in your former country, with your old friends, or you make the effort to profit from the catastrophe, starting over at zero, beginning a new life right where you are. Without hesitation I chose the second solution. This is why I do not feel like an emigré. I live here, in France, and I am happy, very happy

here. You asked me if I thought I might one day return to Czechoslovakia and I replied no, the situation will never allow it. But that is only half the truth, for even if I could go back I would never wish to! One emigration suffices for a lifetime. I'm an emigré from Prague to Paris. I'll never have the strength to emigrate from Paris to Prague.

### III. Politics and Culture

*J.E.*: I'd like to enter into a specific discussion of what you have called the politicization of culture. When you say in your essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (New York Review of Books, April 26, 1984): "I think I only know that culture has bowed out," are you not negating the important work being achieved by today's major writers, artists, thinkers and composers? I am thinking of people as various as Garcia Marquez, Stockhausen, Fellini, or Grass. Their work can be said to transcend international boundaries and cultural limitations by forming, through art, a semblance of order out of life's chaos.

*M.K.*: You know, it would not surprise me if a number of the people you mention were to agree with me. I too am writing and creating, and I do not wish to underestimate the value of what I do. Has culture bowed out? I did not mean to say that there are no longer any artists, but that their voices have become less and less audible. We hear them less; the role they play in life has diminished. In other words, the weight of literature, of culture, is less great.

*J.E.*: You also argue there are no more world cultural figures.

*M.K.*: My hypothesis is that in Europe, with the beginning of the Modern Era, let us say beginning with Cervantes and Descartes, once religion no longer played its role of unification, it was suddenly culture and cultural values personified by cultural works which filled the place left vacant by religion, and which defined Europe as a spiritual entity. I think we can safely say that this predominant role of culture is coming to an end.

*J.E.*: But what is culture giving way to?

*M.K.*: I don't know! I am not a prophet; I content myself to confirm an hypothesis. I may be wrong, and if I am, so much the better. I'd be the

first to rejoice if what I've surmised is not true. The future is a question mark.

*J.E.:* Why do dead writers and thinkers, such as Thomas Mann, Camus or Sartre seem to you to have been world cultural figures, while people like Böll, Bellow, Gordimer or perhaps even V.S. Naipaul (each of whom can be considered "engagé") do not merit the same consideration? What defines their quality?

*M.K.:* It isn't a question of their quality; they may be of an even greater quality. Something else is involved. A small anecdote: While I was teaching in Rennes, I disliked giving exams, as I felt it was ridiculous to test what my students might have learned. Therefore, rather than giving the usual exams, I amused myself by doing a survey. I asked questions which had nothing whatsoever to do with the subject of the course. Who is your favorite contemporary painter? And I took it further: Composer? Philosopher? Out of the 40 students in the course, I established that the crushing majority, 38 or 39 of them, not only did not admire a single contemporary French painter, they knew of none. These were literature students, mind you. They knew no contemporary composers, and could be said to know only those philosophers to be seen on television. This is totally fantastic! 20 years ago, even if you asked a tailor or a merchant or your local grocer the same question, he would have replied, why certainly I know Picasso, I know Matisse. There was a time, too, when Picasso was considered a difficult painter; he wasn't a painter for the people, and yet we saw ourselves in Picasso, even if we didn't always agree with him or understand him. He was here, he was present. Contemporary painting is no longer present, or omnipresent.

*J.E.:* Perhaps history is taking a respite. After all, Sartre hasn't been dead very long, nor has Heidegger for that matter. The history of philosophy may be in hiatus. I would like to take this question of the decline of culture just a little further and then we'll move on to something else. We could theorize that if culture was bowing out as you suspect it to be, your novels (for example) would not be bought up in thousands upon thousands of copies, nor translated into some fifteen languages. Why are Turks, Greeks, Japanese, Israelis reading Milan Kundera? Or do you think publicity alone is responsible for selling

your books? Do not people read you precisely because they *are* looking for cultural richness and diversity?

*M.K.*: The success of a book is not very significant. There are hundreds of very poor books which are a hundred times more successful than my own. These bestsellers all function as *current events*. That is to say, they are quickly consumed (in very large quantity) and quickly forgotten in order to make way for another current event. The question then is the following: are my books read as works of art (destined to endure, to uphold the continuity of cultural evolution) or as current events (meant to be quickly forgotten)? In our modern world, in this world of mass media, can a work of art exist as a work of art? The other day, I suddenly heard a few measures of a Brahms symphony, one of my favorites. I looked up and saw, on the television screen, that this music was publicizing a perfume. Now, one can argue: voilà, see how classical music is alive and well today! Thanks to modern advertising even the simplest people can rejoice at the music of Brahms! But does a fragment of Brahms in an advertisement demonstrate the eternal life of the composer, or his death? This said, everything depends on the answer to the question: what proves our success? There isn't any simple answer. Are we read in the same way that people listen to three measures of Brahms accompanying a television ad? In a world totally invaded by the stupidities of the mass media, one looks for a counterweight, something to defend oneself against the diminishing importance of culture. Paradoxically, media poisoning may render art and literature more attractive. I don't know.

*J.E.*: You have often expressed disappointment, even scorn, for the media, particularly where understanding your fiction is concerned . . . Does it seem to you that western intellectuals have been all too ready to read your books as attacks on the Soviet hegemony?

*M.K.*: Of course, my books were received, at first, in the most clichéd way imaginable, and in the most schematic way. My work was seen largely as a literature of opposition to the Soviet regime. This was a purely journalistic interpretation. What is journalistic thinking but rapid thinking and thinking in clichés? Initially the media reception proved to be a curse, but I think that today I am read more or less as I should be.

*J.E.:* You know that, in the United States anyway, you are considered a dissident, a compeer of Solzhenitsyn's, and yet you have tried to make it clear that you are not taking a dissident's stance in your fiction. We are curious about your relationship to him. Was Solzhenitsyn required to disabuse Czech intellectuals of the final vestiges of loyalty to the communist future?

*M.K.:* Let me avoid any misunderstanding. I do have an enormous admiration for Solzhenitsyn, for his courage, for his virulent criticism of Russian communism. He and no-one else succeeded in upsetting and shocking (in the best sense of the word) the Occidental consciousness. But, for me personally, he played no part at all. Czechoslovakia lived its own experience with Stalinism, with the opium of communism. It lived them quite differently than did Russia and suffered its own intellectual consequences. Outside influences? Yes, of course. But it was above all and before all else Poland which played an avant-garde role in the antitotalitarian intellectual resistance. Right at the outset of the 1950s! I recall how much I admired at that time the Polish philosopher Kolakowski, or the dramatist Mrozek, or Kazimierz Brandys! Czeslaw Milosz had already written his pertinent and definitive analysis of Russian communism imported to Poland (and to all of Central Europe) in 1953! *The Captive Mind* is a fundamental work. And another Pole, Gustav Herling, wrote an extraordinary testimony on the gulag around 1950. At the time, thanks to pro-Soviet elements of the western intelligentsia, the book remained unknown. Forgotten. So then, to sum up, if anyone represented an example for me to follow, an intellectual stimulus, it must have been my Polish colleagues. I owe them much. And if I may recommend something, it is this: Study Poland! After 1945, Poland became the real center of Europe. By this I mean that it became the crux of the European drama between East and West, between democracy and totalitarianism, between tolerance and intolerance.

*J.E.:* Jorge Semprun wonders how Czech intellectuals could have refused so long to acknowledge the facts of political life, and he traces their "recovery" to the publication of Solzhenitsyn's works.

*M.K.:* False, utterly false. *The Joke*, which is read as an utterly free, dissident, even anticommunist novel, was something I began to write in 1961! Milos Forman's films and those of other Czech film-makers

were created during the same period, and with what freedom of spirit! Take Skvorecky, whom we mentioned earlier. His first novel, *Cowards*, was written in 1948 and published in 1956. It was a work of considerable freedom of thinking, of criticism and, of course, without any influence by Solzhenitsyn! Or consider, yet again, the work of Bohumil Hrabal, written in the 50s, which could only be published much later. Aesthetically, intellectually, his is a universe which has absolutely nothing in common with Solzhenitsyn, a universe of extraordinary liberty!

*J.E.*: Earlier you claimed yourself a pessimist, and elsewhere you professed your conviction that there is no reason to hope for renewed liberalization in Central Europe. And yet, hasn't Poland seen thaws in its political climate? Isn't East Germany breaking from the Soviet yoke and seriously moving towards more cooperation, perhaps even eventual reunification, with the RFA and the West?

*M.K.*: Such an enormous question.

*J.E.*: Let me scale it down, then, by returning to your own situation. What contact have you had with the Czech government since they revoked your citizenship after the publication of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, in 1979?

*M.K.*: None whatsoever. One day I received a brief letter informing me that my citizenship had been taken away. The letter itself was written in a virtually illiterate manner, spelling mistakes and all! Quite an admirable document, for its barbaric quality. Their decision was explained in one sentence, citing the cause as the publication of an excerpt of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in the *Nouvel Observateur*. However, let us not be led to believe that I lost my Czech citizenship solely because of such an excerpt. One has to review their overall strategy, and that can only be guessed at. But I believe their tactic after '68 was essentially to eliminate the influence which the intellectuals and Czech culture had over the nation. It would be fair to assume that, according to their analyses, the entire Prague Spring, the entire liberalization, was the product of culture and its representatives. Politicians who were opponents of the Soviet Union and who had been making noisy proclamations were, in many instances, more or less pardoned. But culture

was never amnestied! The Russians understood only too well that even a man like Alexander Dubcek, a political figure, was the victim of Czech culture, of Czech cultural *influence*. Intellectuals may not wield political power per se, but they do have a large repercussive influence. This explains why, after the Soviet invasion, writers, playwrights, historians and philosophers were swept off the scene. They were deprived of the right to exercise their professions. They were hard put to find a means to make a living, and so were forced to emigrate. And, once they left the country, all bridges were burnt behind them. This is why the regime wanted to take my citizenship from me; they were waiting for the first pretext. If your citizenship is revoked it means that, according to the law, Czechs must not have anything to do with you. Suddenly, all contact with Czech nationals becomes illegal. You no longer exist for them.

*J.E.*: Do you know if your books are circulating in *samizdat*?

*M.K.*: Joseph Skvorecky directs a Czech publishing operation in Toronto and he publishes my work, so possibly it finds a clandestine route into the country. I don't know.

#### IV. Translation

*J.E.*: You write in Czech and then give your manuscripts to your publisher here, Gallimard. I was wondering if anyone first reads over your work in the original?

*M.K.*: Well, it's difficult. When I was still in Prague, I would leave a manuscript to get cold for several months, and during this period my friends read my work. I found it extremely helpful to know their opinions and reactions. You see where you've been successful and where you've lacked clarity. You need these "test" readers. Now, however, because my novels are written in Czech and my friends are French, I'm alone with my manuscripts.

*J.E.*: And your translators?

*M.K.*: Ah, this is one of the saddest chapters in my experience. Translation is my nightmare. I am apparently one of the rare writers who reads and rereads, checks over and corrects his translations—in my



case in French, English, German, even Italian. I know, therefore, better than most of my colleagues, what translation means. I've lived horrors because of it. I spent nearly six months retranslating *The Joke* in French. The translator—all of this dates back 16 years, while I was still in Prague—did not translate my book. He rewrote it! He found my style too simple! Into my manuscript he inserted hundreds (yes!) of embellishing metaphors; he used synonyms where I repeat the same word; he wanted to create a “beautiful style”! When, 10 years later, I uncovered this massacre, I was obliged to correct almost every single sentence and to prepare an entire new translation! The case of the first English translation was even worse. The editor eliminated a great number of reflective passages; for instance, all the passages devoted to music. By rearranging the order of the chapters he went further, imposing another composition on the novel. Today *The Joke* is reprinted in a reliable and accurate translation.

*J.E.*: Are your manuscripts somehow too difficult to translate?

*M.K.*: I've always thought my texts were quite simple to translate. They are extremely limpid, written in language which is rather classical, clear and without any slang. But because they are so simple, they demand, in translation, an absolute semantic exactitude! Now, more and more, translators have become *rewriters*. I spent three months with the manuscripts of the American translation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and what irksome months they were! My rule of style is: the sentence should be of maximal simplicity and originality. The rule observed by my poor translators: the sentence should appear rich (so that the translator may exhibit his linguistic faculty, his virtuosity) and as banal as possible (because originality could appear as awkwardness on the translator's part; he could be told: “that isn't said in English,” but what I write isn't said in Czech, either!). This way your writing is made to seem flat, it is rendered banal, even vulgar. The same applies to your thought. And yet for a translation to be good it takes so little: to be faithful, *to want* to be faithful. Strangely enough, the best translators of my work are those in small countries: Holland, Denmark, Portugal. They consult with me, overwhelm me with questions, worry about every detail. Perhaps it is that in these small countries they remain just a little less cynical, and are, still, in love with literature.

## V. Life In France

*J.E.*: You have written a play in French, *Jacques et son maître*, an homage to Denis Diderot, as well as several essays. When did you begin to feel comfortable using the language?

*M.K.*: Oh, in the last three or four years. When writing an article I now write directly in French. Naturally, it is never perfect and I do have to be corrected, but this is something for which I have a great passion. Having to hurdle the obstacles of another language fascinates me; it represents an activity I approach with almost sportive cheer. One day I suddenly realized it amused me much more to write in French than in Czech! Writing in French is linked to the discovery of an entire territory unknown to me.

*J.E.*: Might you one day attempt to write fiction in French?

*M.K.*: Well, you've hit on something which took me by surprise: I found that reflection and narration in a language are two totally different enterprises. It's as if each function were governed by a separate area in the brain. I am quite capable of thinking in French; today I even prefer it to Czech. If, for instance, I am to write an essay and must choose I'll choose French. In public interviews, when given the choice between speaking in my mother tongue or my adopted one, I select the latter. And yet I do not know how to tell a single funny story in French. When an anecdote should come out sounding laughable it is clumsy and awkward instead. So, as I was saying, to develop a thought and to relate a story are two different skills. I know that I would like to write my next novel in French, but I doubt I'd be capable of it. If I now had to describe in French just how you are sitting, how the pen is poised in your mouth, I couldn't do it: my description would be terribly *mala-droit*.

*J.E.*: And yet you do lecture in French . . . Now that the success of your novels has granted you freedom from financial worry, why do you go on teaching in Paris universities?

*M.K.*: Out of principle, I do not want to depend on literature for money. If you rely solely on literature the dependency can deform you.

The moment you depend on your writing for your livelihood you are obliged to give birth to a success, and subsequently you feel you are risking something. It just isn't a good situation; it might make me overly anxious. I want to feel utterly free with the writing of fiction, and to feel free means to be able to risk incomprehension, failure, even hostility to your work. From this point of view, I think it is a good thing that you teach and that you are employed; from there you are completely free to work and are not anxious about your income.

*J.E.:* And the question of time: does teaching leave you the free time you require?

*M.K.:* Of course, some of your time is taken up, but I wonder, really, whether that time can be considered lost. I don't think so. What I'm teaching is extremely open. I'm not a slave in any way. Each year you are obliged to talk about something else, and if you are called upon to lecture on new material, you yourself have to study new material and you have to think. This necessity to think and to study is ultimately a good thing. Furthermore, you are always in contact with at least a few interesting people. I find it very dangerous for a writer to be estranged from the world he inhabits.

*J.E.:* Kundera as professor is relating information and ideas to his students, but how much is he receiving in return?

*M.K.:* I receive quite a bit because I do make friends, and I do meet people whom I might not otherwise have had the possibility of meeting. I don't think you can cut yourself off from new encounters with others. The danger of solitude, that cloistered environment another kind of writer might live in, is alien to me. The world is the writer's laboratory. If I wasn't at the university, I would certainly choose another employment, even if temporary—I might even choose, and this is the summit of blasphemy, to work with a journal, and thus not to lose touch with life.

*J.E.:* Writing and writing alone, then, is not living, in your view? Here you are essentially at odds with Kafka, who felt that what wasn't literature wasn't worthwhile.

*M.K.*: Yes, but let's not forget that he was employed as an insurance agent. I mean that he had a much larger contact with the world at large than we've been led to believe. He wasn't just a bureaucrat locked up in his office; Kafka met people every day, simple people, people with problems. Even bureaucracy is a part of life. Kafka wasn't at all isolated from society.

*J.E.*: You've noted that, "in Kafka, those who find their place in society do so by renouncing their solitude and, in the long run, their personalities." We know that a sense of privacy has been of paramount importance to you. I was wondering whether this need first made itself felt before or after the 1968 Soviet invasion of your country?

*M.K.*: Oh, long before '68. Privacy has been my obsession. I might exaggerate by saying that I am in a sense "sculpted" for discretion.

*J.E.*: In a recent interview you remarked that it was hard for you to lose the public you had been accustomed to until you were in your 40s. Did you then, do you now, write with a particular kind of reader in mind?

*M.K.*: I commented that it was hard to lose that public, because, paradoxically, it wasn't hard. It is a paradox which really surprises me. Difficult to explain. But, I felt relieved; I felt strangely relieved because I knew even as I wrote *Life is Elsewhere* and *The Farewell Party* that I was no longer being published and that I had been erased from public view. For the seven years I was out of work there was no question of getting anything published. In other words, I was a corpse, someone who no longer existed. But I was happy!

*J.E.*: How did you get by without gainful employment?

*M.K.*: Fortunately, I had some revenue tucked away in the bank, money which was left over from sales of *The Joke*. Vera and I lived as though on some sort of grant—very modestly indeed. But then, you don't need much. Vera gave English lessons on the sly, and now and then I would take on some small job under the names of others. I wrote a play and a radio script this way and was paid accordingly. It was really quite funny to be writing under someone else's name; an enjoyable mystification. I must say that for the first few years of this period, we really amused

ourselves. On the side I wrote these two novels, with the certitude that the Czech public would not read them. I must tell you how this fascinated me, because there is, in a small country, a certain pressure by the public which is disagreeable. They fatigue you and, at times, you may even become a little afraid of them. You are vulnerable; you know in advance when the public is going to detest you for something you might say or do. None of this has anything to do with politics. I'm referring merely to public likes and dislikes. Imagine Czechoslovakia as a village where you're known to practically all and sundry. It is extremely discomfiting! Everything you do may be the subject of gossip and slander. Thus, you find yourself unconsciously making compromises for your public. You may think you are being encouraged, but in reality the pressure of your public shapes you, and you feel that you may not be willing to write all that you might like to.

As I was saying, I wrote *Life Is Elsewhere* and *The Farewell Party* in total liberty, convinced that no Czech would ever read them. At the time I hadn't considered they might be published by Skvorecky's Czech press in Toronto. They were written under the illusion that they weren't for the Czech public but for one unknown.

*J.E.:* In writing *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, you knew you had already attracted a world audience. Did this knowledge affect you in any way?

*M.K.:* Such an audience is so much more abstract. When I wrote *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* I was still living and teaching in Rennes. The French public still did not know who I was. I feel it is essential to maintain a certain anonymity, which is why I am averse to an author exhibiting himself on television. There is a certain danger in talking about oneself. Public curiosity is never limited to the novel in question. An actor can court the public's voyeurism, but not a writer.

## VI. Women

*J.E.:* I've remarked that throughout much of your work, women are often of only average education and intelligence, whereas men are frequently intellectuals and professionals. Is this incidental or deliberate?

*M.K.:* Certainly this has something to do with my subconscious. But I don't entirely agree with the observation. There are several female

characters who are clearly intellectuals. Sabina, for example, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

*J.E.*: Sabina is intelligent, yes, but is she really an intellectual? I find her more of a sensual intellect, something I associate with a painter.

*M.K.*: I don't know whether or not a painter is an intellectual, but in any case Sabina is a woman endowed with a strong mind. I might even go so far as to suggest that her thinking is the most lucid in the novel, perhaps, as well, the coldest and most cruel. The other characters do not think as clearly as she does. In *The Farewell Party*, Olga is an intellectual, and then too you have the female doctor in *Laughable Loves*, whose thinking is the most cynical and lucid. So your observation is not entirely true. It is true, however, that others also may see these things you speak of. Recently I asked myself, quite suddenly, Lord, where on earth did you get the character of Lucie from, this Lucie in *The Joke*? Here in France everyone assumes that when you've written a novel you've written your autobiography. I know when I'd published my most recent novel, people were saying to Vera, "You were a photographer?" Just so it was supposed that Lucie in *The Joke* was taken from real life. Well, where *did* I find her? The answer is that of all the women I have known in my life, Lucie represents the only type which I have not encountered. Never, in reality, have I known a truly simple woman. I had know a number of women who were mediocre, women like Helena in *The Joke* (her I knew by heart). But because Lucie was precisely the kind of woman I'd never known, something drew me to want to discover her. Lucie is a woman who is at once simple and enigmatic, and enigmatic because she is so simple. Normally you would consider that which is complex to be enigmatic, yet Lucie is so simple that I did not understand her. A positive simplicity, a simplicity adored, Lucie was a kind of counterbalance to my own visceral cynicism; she was an experience beyond my own experiences. Here is the most imaginative and inventive part of *The Joke*. Lucie is true poetry; she is not *Wahrheit* but *Dichtung*.

*J.E.*: If it is largely true that women characters in your novels are not usually portrayed as intellectuals, there is yet a kind of equilibrium owing to the fact that men are far more severely criticized than women. Tomas in *Unbearable Lightness* is endlessly torn between his predilec-

tions and his fears, his desire for freedom and his love for Tereza. While the narrator juxtaposes lightness and weight, Tomas is a prisoner of his own morality; no one excuses him, least of all himself.

*M.K.*: Perhaps.

*J.E.*: I was wondering if you agree with Georges Bataille when he says eroticism is in a sense laughable?

*M.K.*: I don't know.

*J.E.*: The sexual act in your novels and stories represents a major preoccupation along with laughter and the lightness of being.

*M.K.*: Dear Jordan, there are questions which I like to answer, and there are others that I neither wish nor know how to respond to. Both the rational and the irrational participate in writing. The rational, this is the aesthetic of the novel, the way in which the aesthetic is situated in the history of literature, and so on. Well, here are questions I speak of with ease. But then, there is the true content of the novel: the characters, the obsessions, the eroticism . . . Voilà, you have things which I know how to deal with only in and by way of the novel. I don't know how to tell you why the women in my novels are the way they are. Neither would I venture to explain why it is that the act of love-making plays such a great role in my work. Here is the realm of the unconscious, of the irrational, a realm quite intimate to me. There is a limit beyond which the novelist can theorize no further on his own novels and whence he must know how to keep his silence. We have reached that limit.