The Fallen Idyll:  
A Rereading of Milan Kundera  

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The closing pages of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, entitled "Karenin's Smile," left me—still leave me—at once dazzled and bewildered: dazzled by their beauty, by the semantic and formal richness and completeness that characterize them, but also plunged by them into bewilderment, released into a free-fall of unending questions, unending questioning.

I must try to understand this bedazzlement and this bewilderment, try to discover how they work, together and one upon the other. That is why I am writing this essay, an essay which will take the form of a meditation centered around two themes: the idyll and beauty.

But first, why did I experience such a shock? No doubt it originated in the particularly sharp contrast between these pages and what I had considered up till then to be the central tendency of Kundera's work, a tendency which my reading of his previous novels had led me to define as irony, as a distrust of all forms of lyricism, as the radical critique of innocence, in a word, as a form of philosophical satanism manifesting itself above all in destruction, derision, and a subversive, gutter-level scrutiny undermining all values, political and poetical ones especially.¹ I know of no other literary work which goes so far in this respect, which refines to such a degree the art of disillusionment and lays so bare the fundamental deceit and fraud which feed our lives and thoughts. No work, in short, so alien as this to the spirit of the idyll: on the contrary, one of the constants of this work is to expose, through the existence and the thoughts of the characters—Ludvik and Jaroslav in The Joke, the narrator of "Nobody Will Laugh," the heroine of "The Hitchhiking Game," Doctor Havel and Edward in Laughable Loves, Jakub in The Farewell Party, Tamina and Jan in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, the valet of Jacques and His Master—the insignificance and the unsurpassed buffoonery of the world.

How, then, could there be a place for the idyll in such a universe? How could the final part of The Unbearable Lightness of Being—all gentleness

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lit by the smile of a dying dog—ever be possible? Adding to this incongruity was the fact that the idyll occurs, within the novel itself, just after the section entitled “The Grand March,” which deals with shit and with kitsch, and wherein the author’s irony is more radical than perhaps anywhere else in his work.

All in all, these pages were something of a scandal. And yet, they possessed a truthfulness, and an evidence as unavoidable as those which typify the most satanic parts of Kundera’s work. These pages revealed to me another Kundera or, at least, forced me to correct my perception of his work (and, therefore, my perception of its repercussions in me, in the core of my conscience, which it had come to express in the most exact manner). And this correction, as always, was possible only through a reopening of the question, through a de-simplifying of my perhaps too one-sided idea of the work of Kundera, of what it had to say to me, possible only through an examination of this paradox: the writer, the voice of devastation was also that of the idyll.

II

A rereading of the work of Kundera leads, in fact, to the discovery that while the most elaborate and the most sustained figure of the idyll is to be found in “Karenin’s Smile,” it is far from being the only “idyllic instance.” Many other analogous figures appear in the earlier stories and novels; indeed, they are so numerous that it does not seem exaggerated to say that here is to be found one of the major themes of Kundera’s work or—better yet—that this constitutes one of the most powerful motors of the characters’ existences, that is, of the very dynamic force of the novelistic imagination.

But as is the case for all Kunderian themes, this one is ambiguous, polysemous in essence, and cannot be reduced to anything stable and definitive. Its meaning, like that of Sabina’s strange paintings in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, is stamped by the essentially interrogative nature of the novelistic discourse and cannot be formulated other than by the evocation of a sort of semantic counterpoint, which, doubling it continually, and ceaselessly revealing its underside, thus renders it unstable and all the more rich and fascinating.

Perhaps nothing better expresses the ambiguity of the theme of the idyll than the ending of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. Beside the sea, on a desert island—the idyllic decor par excellence—Jan and Edwige stroll along a beach where all the bathers are naked. She sees in this an image of paradise and of humanity freed at last, whereas he is thinking of the Jews on their way to the gas chamber. It is then that they speak of Daphnis and Chloë.
Jan sighed "Daphnis" again. "Daphnis, Daphnis..."
"Is that Daphnis you're saying?"
"Yes," he said. "Daphnis."
"Glad to hear it," said Edwige. "It's time we got back to him. Back to the time before Christianity crippled mankind. That's what you meant, wasn't it?"
"Yes," said Jan, even though he had meant something completely different.²

This mutual incomprehension deserves closer study. Both Jan and Edwige long for the idyll, a "state of the world before the first conflict; or outside the conflict; or with conflicts that were no more than misunderstandings, and thus false conflicts." This longing for a happiness based on harmony could be called their "idyllic conscience."

However, even if they both experience the same longing, each gives it a different meaning, and the images into which Edwige and Jan project their common longing are not the same. Thus, each possesses, nurtures a personal "idyllic conscience" in which is expressed a sort of individual "myth" governing both life and imagination.

It is in this sense that I spoke earlier of the idyll as "motor": I believe, in fact, that it is possible to define the existential dynamics or "law" of all Kunderian characters by the idyll each carries within (or that carries each character), that is, by each one's particular "idyllic conscience." Let us reread, for example, The Joke. At no time does the knowledge we have of the characters appear so complete and so rich in significance as when they are grasped in an "idyllic situation," that is, when we see them through the filter of the idyll that "inhabits" them. Helena: the joy of a one-voiced crowd singing the praises of the revolution. Jaroslav: in a field, close by a wild-rose bush, riders are passing, escorting a veiled king. Kostka: a hilly country, where pardon reigns. For each, happiness resides in the concretization of his or her singular idyll, unhappiness in its destruction.

But let us go back to Jan and Edwige, naked on the beach. Each feeds within a certain image of the idyll, each imagines in his or her own way Daphnis's universe wherein conflict has no place. But their mutual incomprehension is deeper than it seems, for their respective images of the idyll are more than merely different: they are contradictory. Standing among the nudists, Edwige believes herself to be close to Daphnis. Jan, on the other hand, knows himself to be irreparably separated from Daphnis, and realizes that for a coming together to be at all possible, either he would have to flee the beach, or the beach would have to be deserted. The idyll according to Jan is not only different from the idyll according to Edwige, it is its contrary, or, more precisely, its negation.

Thus, the same movement—the longing for harmony and peace—generates in response to it, two images—two meanings—of the idyll, both of which are abundantly illustrated in Kundera's work. In order to better understand these two antagonistic yet intertwined images, I propose to define the one as the idyll of innocence ("Edwigin"), and the other as the
idyll of experience ("Jannian"), innocence and experience having here something of the "Blakean" meaning attributed to them by Northrop Frye.

As a complete inventory of the two paradigms formed, in Kundera's work, by the various figures representing the two types of idyll, would be out of place here, I will concentrate instead on the most striking ones.

III

To the paradigm of innocence belong two major recurring images, contradictory at first glance, but revealed in the Kunderian novel to be profoundly analogous, rooted in the same desire and opening out into the same universe. One of these images is, as it happens, the nudists' beach which, for Edwige, reactualizes Daphnis's island. Variants of this image include not only party scenes and collective orgies (at the film girl's villa in Life Is Elsewhere, at Karel and Marketa's, and then at Barbara's, in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting), but also the evocation of that "music minus memory," of that "elementary state of music" produced by electric guitars. There too, in effect, all conflicts are abolished:

Everyone can come together on the basis of those simple combinations of notes. They are life itself proclaiming its jubilant "Here I am!" No sense of communion is more resonant, more unanimous, than the simple sense of communion with life... Bodies pulsing to a common beat, drunk with the consciousness that they exist. (180-81)

The second image of the innocent idyll is none other than the revolutionary ideal which promises to end conflict by transforming the world into a perfect, intact circle, free of dissidence and division. This perception of Communism as an aspiration towards an idyllic state is frequent in Kundera's work and is particularly evident in the various evocations of Prague 1948, at a time when the revolution seemed to invite all to enter into "a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man nor man against other men, where the world and all its people are molded from a single stock" (8).

Between Edwige's beach or rock music on the one hand, and the Communist ring-around-the-rosy on the other, there is but an appearance of opposition. Looking one day at photographs of a nudists' colony and of the Russian tanks entering Czechoslovakia, Tereza remarks: "They're the same." The two images or figures of the idyll of "innocence" present in fact the same fundamental characteristics. I would like to focus on two of these which are, in any case, closely related: the abolition of the individual and the rejection of limits.

Like the Communist paradise, orgies, rock ecstasies and Edwige's beach not only render solitude impossible, but forbid it as well. This is a universe of fusion, of the dissolution of the individual in an assembled, collective
One, and "anyone who refuses [to be part of it] is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless." This particular idyll is "by definition . . . one world for all" (8-9).

It is also a world which accepts no limits, a world in which all limits are denied and transgressed. Edwige is jubilant upon reaching "the other side of the inhuman world our civilization imprisons us in" (228); Gustav Husak declares to the assembled children: "Children! You are the future! . . . Children! Never look back!" (174, my italics). This idyll is located beyond all borders, be they those of individuality, of culture, of morality or even of existence. To contingency, to weakness, to doubt or to bitterness, it opposes plenitude: the plenitude of joy, the plenitude of freedom, the plenitude of being. Resembling in this the "lyric attitude" that states "(True) life is elsewhere," it claims to redeem the vile and imperfect workaday world, riddled with uncertainty and pockets of nothingness, by establishing a superior mode of existence in which all desires are realized, and all things infused with meaningfulness.

This first type of idyll—whose singularities authorize us to consecrate the Idyll—calls to mind the universe of continuity which Georges Bataille described in his study of eroticism and which he linked, precisely, to the dismissal of that which is forbidden, to transgression. Of such is made Edwige's happiness, and that of Marketa during the orgy, and that again of the militants dancing in the streets of Prague: theirs is the feeling of having transgressed, of having crossed a border and of having been granted access in this manner to a novel state of being, infinitely more true, more simple and more beautiful than that which they have left behind.

IV

A leitmotiv reappearing throughout Kundera's work, the Idyll is in fact one of its central myths and, as such, becomes a means of understanding, if not our existences and our world, at least their horizons. But this myth inverts all enchantments, repelling rather than seducing, threatening, not beckoning. And it is here, perhaps, that Kundera's "satanism" is most evident, in the ruthless critique of the Idyll, the careful dismantling of its promised marvels. This is criticism of a most radical kind. Its target is not merely this or that image of the Idyll, this or that ideological or political credo claiming to be the Idyll incarnate. No, this concerns the deeply rooted individual and social underpinnings of the aspiration towards the Idyll, of the Idyllie faith which prefers the "world beyond" to the "world down here," unity to discordance.

This criticism takes several forms. Whether explicit or veiled, expressed through cynicism or through derision, at all times it lays bare the lie and the horror that are implicit in the Idyll. An example of this would be the island, peopled by Daphnises and Chloës, to which the rocker Raphael has dragged
Tamina (in part 6 of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting). One could also point to the universal victory, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, of kitsch over shit, kitsch being none other than the expression of the Idyll’s own beauty.

But the Kunderian critique of the Idyll is expressed in another way as well, the most significant perhaps, and one that I would like to explore further here. I am referring to the elaboration, throughout Kundera’s novels, of a second network of images, of a second paradigm based this time on what could be called, paradoxically, the “anti-idyllic idyll” and that, earlier, I labeled the “idyll of experience.”

We have already seen what form Jan’s “anti-idyllic conscience” takes; but he is not alone in nurturing such a conscience: to the same paradigm belong many even richer images, provided by other characters.

The first two such images are to be found in The Joke. One is, of course, that final scene involving the little folklore orchestra which Ludvik has joined. The scene contains several motifs traditionally associated with the idyllic mode: music, a garden, friendship, peace. But this theme has already been illustrated earlier in the novel, when Ludvik, interned in a military camp and having “left the road that was to have been [his] life,” meets Lucie. Nowhere else, perhaps, does the “anti-idyllic” character of this particular type of idyll emerge so clearly as in these pages where exclusion paradoxically gives rise to happiness:

I was convinced that far from the wheel of history there was no life, only vegetation, boredom, exile, Siberia. And suddenly (after six months of Siberia) I’d found a completely new and unexpected opportunity for life: I saw spread before me a long-lost meadow (lost beneath history’s soaring wings), the meadow of day-to-day existence, and in that meadow I saw a poor, pitiful girl, but a girl eminently worthy of love—Lucie.

What did Lucie know of the great wings of history? When could she have heard their sound? She knew nothing of history, she lived beneath it. History held no attraction for her, it was alien to her; she knew nothing of the major problems of our times, the problems she lived with were trivial and eternal. And suddenly I’d been released."

Another example of this occurs in part 6 of Life Is Elsewhere, that “quiet interlude” in which appears the middle-aged man, who lives “his idyllic state of non-fate,” all the while tending “the lamp of kindness” for Jaromil’s girlfriend.

One could also cite, in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, the little hotel in the Alpine village where Tamina and her husband take refuge after leaving their country.

When they . . . realized they were alone, cut off from the world which had been their entire life to that point, she felt liberated, relieved. They were in the mountains, mercifully alone. They were surrounded by unbelievable silence. For Tamina, it
was an unexpected gift . . . silence for her husband and herself; silence for love. (96)

The final figure I wish to recall, prefigured in the above scene, is one in which the features of the paradigm emerge most markedly and it is, as I said earlier, the one which inspires this entire essay. I am referring, of course, to the closing pages of The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

The examples I have given all offer the image of a quietened world from which conflict has disappeared and where something that must be recognized as happiness reigns. What distinguishes these figures from those of the first group? What distinguishes these idylls from the Idyll?

V

Their most striking characteristic is solitude or, at any rate, an atmosphere of close intimacy. It is alone, on his island with Chloë, that Jan imagines Daphnis. The little orchestra, at the moment that Ludvik joins it, is also alone, faced with an indifferent public and doomed to become “an abandoned island” like “a glass cabin at the bottom of the sea.” The middle-aged man, too, is isolated, living apart in a small apartment, “concentra[t]ing entirely on himself, on his responsibility-free amusements and his books.” As for Tomas and Tereza, they have broken with all their former friends and acquaintances, and have cut “their life in two like a ribbon”: in their village far distant from Prague, they are now “together and alone.”

These, then, are private idylls, born of rupture. These idylls are not, however, produced by simply separating oneself from the multitude. Ludvik, for example, is indeed alone after he and Lucie have gone their separate ways and he has left the mine and yet, because of his need for vengeance, he is still living in hell, for vengefulness is but another way of consenting once again to History and of remaining its prisoner. He will not be freed until the end of the novel when, having come to understand that vengeance is vain, he accepts that his fall will be indefinite, that he will remain indefinitely apart. At that moment only will the idyll become possible and only then will Ludvik put his clarinet to his mouth and rediscover the forgotten folklore. In short, Ludvik does not come to this experience as to a Grail that he has been seeking all his life; rather, it comes upon him as a revelation lodged deep within his failure, at the lowest point of his fall and of his banishment.

Solitude, then, is not true unless it implies not only distance from the group, but also, and above all, a radical desolidarization which puts an end to all communication and definitively disqualifies both the group and its longing for the Idyll. The loner, the hero of the private idyll, is always a deserter.

There is nothing of the Assumption or of an accession to another life in
this particular idyll. It is, in fact, the exact opposite of these things, being rather a voluntary turning away from any other life. Thus, the middle-aged man stands, "his back turned on History and its dramatic shows, on his own fate." In other words, the condition of the idyll, here, is not transcendence but rather backing away; not the transgression of the forbidden, but that even more radical transgression: the transgression of transgression. Nor do Tomas and Tereza, in their village, live on "the other side" of the border—where life changes itself into destiny, where meaningfulness and plenitude prevail, where history is in motion. Their peace is a fleeing, a falling away from the border, into this world of "non-fate," of non-plenitude, of repetition and of flawed meaning. Lucie's world.

To the extent that the other Idyll is essentially positive, this one could be said to be essentially negative. It could even be defined, very precisely, as the non-Idyll, that is, as the world upon which descend, as the Idyll builds itself up, forgetting and devastation.

And this same world, in the refuge of Tomas and Tereza, takes on the aspect of an isolated house in which a dog lies dying.

VI

If kitsch is the expression of innocence, beauty is that of the idyll of experience. The motifs to which beauty is associated in Kundera's work constantly intersect with those which, up to now, we have used to describe the "Jannian" idyll. Beauty itself is transformed by these motifs into a "negative" category, that is, it is tied into the process by which one detaches oneself from the Idyll. Separated then, and alone, one plunges into a kind of abandon and thereby discovers that which was hidden.

Or rather: thereby rediscovers. For we do not go towards beauty, we come back to it, we fall back towards it, once we have completely broken with the Idyll which, luring us with its promises, has been dragging us beyond the borders and towards a world better than the one in which we have been living. Here again, Kunderian beauty—and it is in this regard that it opposes itself most strongly to "modern" beauty—is born not of transgression but rather of what has just been named the transgression of transgression. This beauty is what transgression leaves behind, abandoned outside its territory, and which is destined to fade away. In a word, this beauty is that, itself, that has been transgressed, that is, forgotten, despised, rejected by the Idyll.

It is thus that the traditional music of Bohemia appears at the end of The Joke. Ludvik's attachment to it is renewed at the very moment that it is spurned by all and that Ludvik himself consents to his own descent.

I had (unexpectedly) found [this world] in ruins; and not only in ruins, but abandoned; abandoned by bombast and hullabaloo, abandoned by political
propaganda and social utopias, abandoned by the swarms of cultural officials... that state of abandonment had purified it; it had cleansed it as a body about to expire is cleansed; it had luminated it with an irresistible final beauty; that state of abandonment had given it back to me.

And his “sorrowful feeling of love for a world left behind years before” causes Ludvik to recall, to rediscover the presence of Lucie. With her poverty and her “ordinary quality,” Lucie had led Ludvik into a “gray paradise” and had thus been his “guide back” into beauty.

It is towards the end of his stay in the health-resort town, at a moment when he is preparing to leave his country—that is, because he has broken with and is now “outside of his life... on the reverse side of his biography”—that Jakub, in The Farewell Party, also has a sudden revelation of beauty. But this beauty, but Kamila, is, at that point, lost to him. It is the same for Sabina: when Franz asks her, “What is beauty?”, she does not know what to answer, but thinks back to her student days, to a time when “her soul [was being] poisoned by the cheerful marches issuing incessantly from the loudspeakers.” One day, though, she had wandered into a church where the mass was being celebrated and she had been “entranced”:

What she had unexpectedly met there in the village church was not God; it was beauty. She knew perfectly well that neither the church nor the litany was beautiful in and of itself, but they were beautiful compared to the construction site, where she spent her days amid the racket of the songs. The mass was beautiful because it appeared to her in a sudden, mysterious revelation as a world betrayed.

And “from that time on [Sabina] had known that beauty is a world betrayed.” For the Idyll—represented here by the “cheerful marches” of the student brigade Sabina worked in—can realize its ideal of elevation only by devaluing that which is in favor of that which should be. In other words, the Idyll involves what Kundera terms “l’oubli de l’être,” the forgetting and the elimination of that which is complex, incoherent or fragile in being, in favor of simplified and coherent Being, with neither divisions nor weaknesses. And that is why kitsch expresses it so exactly, kitsch, which, with its “categorical agreement with being,” must at all costs ignore shit, that is, ignore all the contradictions and the precarity of being. Kitsch can triumph only by setting up “a folding screen... to curtain off death.” And this reduction, this substitution of Being for being, is precisely where Jaromil’s lyricism, Edwige’s ideal or rock music come together with revolutionary totalitarianism: the wish to embellish the world cannot come true unless all that resists or eludes it is rejected and destroyed.

And it is precisely in that residue that the idyll and beauty are to be found. Fading, endangered, “sunk as deep as Atlantis” (104) beneath silence and forgetting, beauty gives rise then not so much to exaltation as to a sort of drazled compassion. By compassion, I mean charity, kindness towards those who are weak and mortal, such as Lucie in The Joke, such as Karel's
mother and her poodle in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, such as Bob the dog in The Farewell Party, such as the crow Tereza comforts in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, such as, above all, the dying Karenin.

But this "compassion for a devastated world" is also a bedazzlement in the face of being, of its nakedness and its "hereness," beyond—or rather, this side of—the mirages, the meanings and the speeches which mask it. And it is "quelque part là-derrière," far away from the Idyll, and flanked by Tomas and Tereza who, we've known for a long time now, are going to die, that Karenin, already surrounded, he too, by waiting death, smiles his fragile, his starveling, his gentle smile.

I wish to express my thanks to Jane Everett of McGill University for translating this essay from the original French. —F.R.

NOTES:

7 The Joke, 61.
9 The Joke, 264.
10 Life Is Elsewhere, 280.
11 The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 282.
12 Life Is Elsewhere, 280.
13 The Joke, 260-62.
14 The Joke, 56, 61.
16 The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 109-10.
17 L'art du roman, 35.
18 The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 248, 253.
19 The Joke, 262.
20 "Somewhere, behind." These words come from a Czech poem by Jan Skacel; their French translation given here is the title of the fifth part of Kundera's recent book of essays, L'art du roman.