Mr. Kundera, The European

The Unbearable Lightness of Being seemed a fitting title for a novel by Milan Kundera. In Kundera's fiction, experience is elusive, never quite what it seems: The grim political realities turn out to be laughable and the jokes to have terrible consequences. Although readers automatically identify Kundera with Eastern Europe, in his new novel, *Immortality*, not even the characters come from there. Ivan Sanders uncovers what is unchanging in Kundera: his exploration of what it means to be a writer today—especially a European writer.

by Ivan Sanders

Eastern Europeans have so often bemoaned the lack of recognition of their cultures that when one of their artists does achieve world standing, they are quick to proclaim him a genius who speaks for the entire region. A Yugoslav writer, Dubravka Ugrešić, recently recalled attending a lecture in Belgrade by a "world-famous" American author who, when asked if he had ever heard of Ivo Andrić, Miroslav Krleža, or Danilo Kiš (all three of them widely translated, and Andrić is a Nobel laureate), replied with a calm "No." And how about the Czech Milan Kundera? his hosts inquired. The much-admired visitor smiled confidently: "Why yes, of course." "The audience breathed a sigh of relief," reports Ugrešić. "As a matter of fact, they would have agreed right then and there to change the name of their country to Yugoslovakia, just so they could continue to claim Kundera as their own."

Paradoxically, the same people who feel vindicated by even a single Eastern European literary breakthrough may look askance at the celebrity scoring the successes. Writers from small countries who make a name for themselves abroad are frequently accused by their countrymen of "internationalizing" their art, of blurring their deepest, most authentic creative impulses. And it is hard to say whether the hostility stems from national insecurities, genuine concern, or plain envy.

For years Czechs have had an uncomfortably ambivalent relationship with Milan Kundera. What they seem to resent is not the fact that he left his native land some 16 years ago and chose France as his new home. Nor are they primarily bothered by the anticommunism of a writer who was himself a vocal party member in the late 1940s. After all, a number of noted Czech émigrés have a similar history. It is his unprecedented success in the West that they have a hard time coming to terms with. A Czech journalist, in a *New Yorker* report last year on the Prague scene,

lashed out at Kundera in a by now familiar manner: "His books are famous. Everybody reads them and thinks they are true." Yet he "writes completely outside of reality here.... Actually, Kundera is not a Czech author anymore. He's become something like a French wit. He should write about France rather than about Czechoslovakia." (Interestingly enough, as we shall see, Kundera does just that in his latest novel, *Immortality*.)

Clearly, though, not everyone in Czechoslovakia is hostile to Kundera's art. Another urban intellectual in the same Prague report defends Kundera by quoting Oscar Wilde:

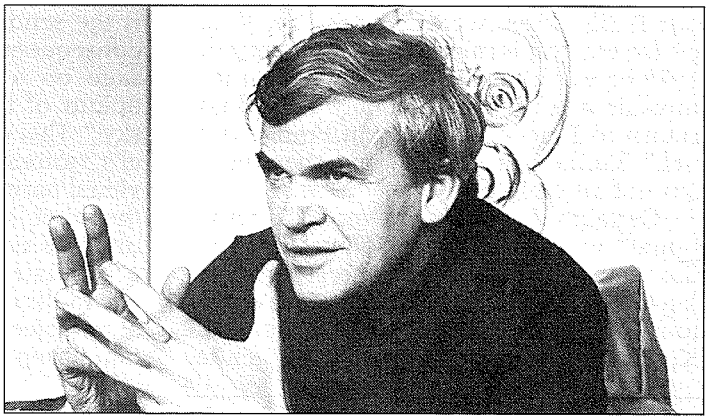
> 'The only thing that cannot be forgiven is talent....' They also cannot forgive him for having had a life for 16 years. They profess to prefer the novels of [Josef] Škvorecky, who hasn't a tenth of Kundera's talent but has devoted his life in exile to the cause of dissident Czech writing.... This is admirable, of course, and Škvorecky is a splendid fellow, of course, but it doesn't make him a great writer; it doesn't even make him a 'truer' writer than Kundera.

Actually, Milan Kundera is an atypical Czech novelist, and he would have remained atypical even if he had never left his native country or his native city of Brno (Brünn). There he was born in 1929 on April first—a rather suitable birthday for a writer whose first novel is *The Joke* and who has two other books with the word "laugh" in the title. The influences that helped shape his writing career were, from the start, unusual. His early interests were not literary but musical. His father was a pianist and a well-known musicologist, the foremost expert on Czech composer Leoš Janáček. Janáček and other musical influences like jazz would shape Kundera's conception of the novel.

After his schooling in Brno, Kundera went to study in Prague, the city of writers and artists from Mozart to Kafka. Prague has long been a European cultural capital, and its residents believe there is a unique "spirit of Prague," which Kundera characterized thus: "An extraordinary sense of the real. The common man's point of view. History seen from below. A provocative simplicity. A genius for the absurd. Humor with infinite pessimism."

When Kundera arrived in Prague in 1948, however, its spirit was under siege by the new Stalinist regime. He took the surprising step of enrolling in the Prague National Film School. Music and poetry were too close to his heart, he later said; he studied script writing and film directing precisely because they didn't exert such an attraction for him—because cinema was an "art which serves the people." Kundera had joined the Czech Communist Party at the age of 18 in 1947. Although he continued writing poetry, the three volumes he published in the 1950s adhered, more or less, to the Marxist tenets in literature: *The Last May* (1955), for example, celebrated a Czech communist hero who had opposed the Nazis. Yet Kundera had already begun his quarrel with socialist realism in art, and even these early volumes, which were deemed cynical, barely escaped the censor's disapproval.

In the early 1960s Kundera returned to the film academy as a professor of literature; among his students were budding filmmakers such as Miloš Forman (director of *Amadeus* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) who would bring about the



A candidate for Immortality? This photo of Kundera, taken by his wife, shows the author in a bearably light mood.

extraordinary resurgence of Czech cinema. Prague in the late 1960s was beginning to feel the liberalizing effect of Alexander Dubček's attempt to establish "socialism with a human face." By 1968 the Czechs were behaving independently enough to cause the worried Russians to send tanks into Czechoslovakia. "Prague Spring" was a seminal event in Kundera's life as it was in the life of his country. For his participation in the events leading up to it—most notably, for his speech to a writers' congress in which he lamented the fate of Czech culture under Stalinism—Kundera was stripped of his position at the film institute. A year later he lost the right to publish in his own country. All of his previous works were removed from bookshops and library shelves.

For the next seven years Kundera was, by his own description, "a corpse, someone who no longer existed." Earnings left over from his enormously successful *The Joke* (1967) helped him scrape by. His wife Vera gave English lessons, and Kundera wrote a play and radio scripts using other authors' names. Meanwhile, he finished two novels in Czech (*Life Is Elsewhere* and *The Farewell Party*), convinced no Czech would ever possibly read them. "But I was happy," Kundera later said and explained why: Czechoslovakia was like a village, and he no longer needed to worry what the villagers would think. Yet even as Kundera disappeared from the Czech literary world, he became more and more known in the West, where *The Joke* in translation had already established his reputation. In 1973 *Life Is Elsewhere* won France's Prix Medicis for the best foreign novel of the year. In 1975 he was allowed to accept a guest lectureship at a French university. He did not return to Prague. "My stay in France is final," Kundera has said, "and therefore I am not an émigré."

Certainly Kundera is a more "international" writer than, say, Bohumil Hrabal, the man considered to be the greatest living Czech storyteller and a far more down-to-earth literary figure. Hrabal has praised Kundera extravagantly as a "great gentleman," "a magnificent novelist," a "complex, cerebral artist," but then added with coy modesty: "I live in another world . . . ." Although Kundera feels a definite kinship with the great Central European modernists—Kafka, Robert Musil, Jaroslav Hašek, Hermann Broch—his true literary forebears are more removed, both in space and time.

Kundera has often said that the reason he feels so much at home in France is that he is enamored of French culture—but not its contemporary culture so much as older French literature. His real inspirations are the prose writers of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment—Rabelais, Diderot, as well as England's Laurence Sterne. What Kundera admires in them is the relish with which they experimented with the malleable building blocks of a still-new literary form. The novel to these writers was a free-for-all, a "wonderful game with invented characters." As its formal components solidified and the genre itself became more respectable, it lost this zaniness. Realism, to Kundera, is simplistic; romanticism, the source of all kitsch. Still, unlike many literary critics, he does not for a moment believe that the novel has exhausted its possibilities. Indeed, Kundera has helped revitalize fiction by being true to the brazenly inventive spirit of its 17th- and 18th-century innovators.

Kundera's innovation is already evident in his first novel, *The Joke*, where he uses a familiar narrative device with a new twist. The central occurrence of the novel is the sending of a jocular—though in its consequences disastrous—political message on a postcard: "Optimism is the opium of the people . . . . Long live Trotsky!" This event is recounted by the novel's various characters, and as each individual narrative completes and contradicts the other, it becomes clear that Kundera's ultimate aim is not to piece together parts of a puzzle (as it is when most writers utilize multiple narrators). Rather than arrive at an objective "reality," he offers different tantalizingly plausible interpretations of it.

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This subjective understanding of experience is a far cry from official Marxist dogma, in which history has one meaning and one meaning only.

Already in *The Joke*, and even more in Kundera's later fiction, the influence of cinema and music is on display. He borrows the quick cuts and montage of film editing, and he relies on the musical devices such as theme and seven-part inventions to break up the narrative of conventional fiction. Too many novels, Kundera has complained, are "encumbered by 'technique,' by rules that do the author's work for him: present a character, describe a milieu, bring the action into its historical setting, fill up the lifetime of the characters with useless episodes." Kundera has adapted a style based on modern musical composers such as Janáček, who created "brutal juxtaposition, instead of transitions; repetition instead of variation—and always [went] straight to the heart of things: Only the note with something essential to say is entitled to exist." "My purpose," Kundera said, "is like Janáček's: to rid the novel of the automatism of novelistic technique, of novelistic word-spinning."

Kundera has perfected the novel of broken narratives, discontinuities, and contradictory exposition. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978), Mirek is a character who lives in a world governed by none of the old novelistic certainties. In 1971, in a halfhearted attempt to avoid official harassment, Mirek tries to retrieve a bundle of love letters written to a one-time girlfriend, Zdena, whom he had known when they were both young and ardent communists. He believes the real reason he wants these letters back, in addition to avoiding possible arrest, is that he is angry at Zdena for remaining an orthodox communist, while he gave up his illusions about the system long ago. But after seeing her again in Prague he realizes he wants to erase all traces of their relationship because Zdena is—and always was—an incredibly ugly woman. As the story progresses, though, Mirek discovers that his affair of old was motivated by mere self-interest: At the time he was a young man on the make and she was useful to him. But then an even more devastating realization hits him. The truest reason he has to destroy all evidence of his affair with this ugly, rigid woman is that he had in fact been in love with her. Each possible motivation is highly believable and also highly suspect. As in *The Joke*, the meaning no longer adheres to the event itself but instead resides in the individual who must interpret it fittingly.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is also Kundera's most political novel. In it he illustrates the effects of totalitarian rule, in particular the brainwashing, the "lobotomizing" of an entire nation. He quotes a famous Czech historian: "The first step in liquidating a people . . . is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was." In public statements, too, Kundera has been quite specific about the evils of state-inspired mind control, of "organized forgetting." Since the post-1968 crackdown, he reminded Philip Roth back in 1980, "Two hundred Czech writers have been proscribed. One hundred and forty-five Czech historians have been dismissed from their posts. History has been rewritten, monuments demolished."

And yet Kundera cannot resist taking a skeptical attitude toward political pieties or challenging firmly held views. In an episode in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, a woman in her seventies experiences disturbing memory lapses and begins to shift her order of priorities in odd ways. When Russian tanks occupy Czechoslovakia in 1968, all she can think about is the pear tree in her garden, which because of all the commotion remains unpicked. Her son Karel and her daughter-in-law are infuriated. "Everybody's thinking about tanks, and all you can think about is pears, they yelled . . . . But are tanks really more important than pears?" the narrator muses. "As time passed Karel realized that the answer was not so obvious as he had once thought, and he began sympathizing secretly with Mother's perspective—a big pear in the foreground and somewhere off in the distance a tank, tiny as a lady bug, ready at any moment to take wing and disappear from sight. So Mother was right af-

IMAGOLOGY

From Immortality:

Imagology! Who first thought up this remarkable neologism? . . . . It doesn't matter, after all. What matters is that this word finally lets us put under one roof something that goes by so many different names: advertising agencies; campaign managers of politicians; designers who devise the shape of everything from cars to gym equipment; fashion stylists; barbers; show-business stars dictating the norms of physical beauty that all branches of imagology obey . . . .

All ideologies have been defeated: In the end their dogmas were unmasked as illusions and people stopped taking them seriously. For example, communists used to believe that in the course of capitalist development the proletariat would gradually grow poorer and poorer, but when it finally became clear that all over Europe workers were driving to work in their own cars, they felt like shouting that reality was deceiving them. Reality proved stronger than ideology. And it is in this sense that imagology surpassed it: Imagology is stronger than reality, which anyway has long ceased to be what it was for my grandmother, who lived in a Moravian village and still knew everything through her own experience: how bread is baked, how a house is built, how a pig is slaughtered and the meat smoked, what quilts are made of, what the priest and the schoolteacher think about the world; she met the whole village every day and knew how many murders were committed in the county over the last 10 years; she had, so to say, personal control over reality so that nobody could fool her by maintaining that Moravian agriculture was thriving when people at home had nothing to eat. My Paris neighbor spends his time in an office, then he sits in his car and drives home, turns on the TV and when the announcer informs him that in the latest public opinion poll the majority of Frenchmen voted their country the safest in Europe (I recently read such a report), he is overjoyed and opens a bottle of champagne without ever learning that three thefts and two murders were committed on his street that very day.

ter all: Tanks are mortal, pears eternal."

It is precisely such provocative perspectives that have moved Kundera's critics to label him brilliant but frivolous. His Czech detractors are especially disturbed by his unrelenting irony, his deraciné relativism and cynicism. To them Kundera is just too clever, too cool a writer, too caught up in his cerebral games.

We ought to find Jaromil, the artist-hero of *Life Is Elsewhere* (1973), for example, downright despicable. He is an opportunist, a hack, who after the communist takeover in Prague turns from flaming avant-garde poet to Stalinist versifier without missing a beat. Yet Kundera has his anti-hero express some rather profound ideas on revolution. He even suggests that propaganda literature can be deeply felt and that the Stalinist period in Czechoslovakia "was not only a terrible epoch but a lyrical one as well: It was ruled by the hangman, but by the poet too."

Of course, Jaromil is a fictional character and *Life Is Elsewhere* a novel. But, like Jaromil, Kundera was a young surrealist poet before the communist takeover, and afterward he turned out volumes of (almost) correct Marxist-Leninist verse. Kundera would soon do a *volte-face*, oppose communist rule, and eventually be forced into exile. Yet—unlike less sophisticated writers—he never repudiated that youthful version of himself. Instead he attempted to understand the initial appeal of communism in Czechoslovakia. The literary critic Jan Kott has said that communism "was that most diabolical of temptations—to participate in history, a history for which both stones and people are only the material used to build the 'brave new world.'" But Kundera recalls, besides such temptations, the idealism. The communists took over in Czechoslovakia, he reminds us in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "not in bloodshed and violence, but to the cheers of about half the population. And please note: The half that cheered was the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the better half. Yes, say what you will, the communists were more intelligent. They had a grandiose program, a plan for a brand-new world in which ev-

eryone would find his place. The communists' opponents had no great dream; all they had was a few moral principles, stale and lifeless, to patch up the tattered trousers of the established order. So of course the grandiose enthusiasts won out over the cautious compromisers."

Other commentators have pointed to some such combination of idealism and opportunism to explain the initial appeal of communism in Eastern Europe. But Kundera has gone further and discovered something not only about himself but about the 20th-century European intellectual. Recalling a debate in his Brno *gymnasium*, Kundera remembered arguing that he would support socialism even if the consequence was a transitional period of cultural darkness. Coming from a politician, such a remark would sound like utter cynicism; coming from a student totally devoted to culture, as Kundera was, the words suggested something else. They signified mistrust of oneself, and intellectuals, Kundera said, are very good at doubting and rejecting themselves. But, in this case, the intellectual was soon to find himself rejected not only by himself but by the new communist regime; "rejected theoretically, practically, even economically." And so this particular Eastern European writer finally had "no alternative but to begin to understand his own importance, his own lot, to start defending his own liberty."

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), Kundera describes an Eastern European world where the possibilities for human action have become flat and limited, yet Kundera, through his style, slyly adds to that flat world nuance and multidimensionality and irony. The novel is the story of Tomas, a modern-day Don Juan whose hedonism is tempered, made more somber, by the realization that constancy and commitment can be as irresistible as the pull of total freedom. Of his two loves, Sabina is associated with lightness, unconventionality, playfulness, but also lack of commitment, rootlessness, and sterility; the earthbound Tereza connotes inertia, rootedness, and provincialism. Tomas ultimately chooses not the self-sufficient Sabina, a kindred spirit, but the hopelessly faithful Tereza. For all his worldliness, Tomas, unlike Sabina, cannot endure the agonizing "lightness of being." One would have thought that Kundera, the puckish ironist, would have a deeper affinity for unfettered, free-floating existence. But Kundera, after all, comes from Czechoslovakia where—as in Poland and Hungary—culture is not free-floating but is rooted in quite specific local and national conditions. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* anticipates, in a sense, the events in Eastern Europe not of 1989 but of 1990, when freedom could not in itself provide the answers.

In his new novel, *Immortality*, Kundera, while playful as ever, is bent on advocating the chastening proposition that freedom is no guarantee against spiritual impoverishment. Human values can shrivel in a democracy, too: They can be trivialized by a different kind of crassness and coarseness, like the popular media. His emancipated, urbane characters can experience the same sense of abandonment, the same *Angst*, as can the harried subjects of political dictatorships. (In the past, Kundera has been taken to task by American neoconservatives for not making the proper distinction between the oppressed life in Eastern Europe and the free life in Western Europe.)

The plot line of *Immortality* involves a curious game of musical chairs played with incestuous infatuation. A graceful and enigmatic Parisian woman named Agnes discovers that the important man in her life has been her taciturn father and not her gregarious lawyer husband. The husband in turn is erotically attracted to Agnes's sister, the high-strung Laura, whom he winds up marrying after his wife's death. What could have been, in other words, a conventional French comedy of manners is made into something else by the interruptions of an intrusive and unabashedly manipulative narrator. He tells stories and anecdotes and injects *bon mots* of his own, which supply variations on such themes as the impoverishment of contemporary culture, the preeminence of "imagologues" (i.e. image-makers and propagandists), and above all, immortality. Kundera uses "immortality" not in any religious sense but to refer to fame, the afterlife of the famous and not-so-famous in posterity's memory. He even

Art imitates terrible reality. The film The Unbearable Lightness of Being *portrays the 1968 Russian invasion of Prague—an important event in the novel and the crucial event in Kundera's life.*

invents a meeting between Goethe and Napoleon and, in a sheer flight of fancy, a dialogue on immortality between Goethe and Ernest Hemingway.

In *Immortality*, even more than in his other recent works, Kundera the intellectual, the man of culture, often obscures the novelist. One need not be a devotee of old-fashioned realism to be bothered by the thinness of novelistic textures. When plot and character are pretexts, a means to an end, as they are in *Immortality*, reading becomes an abstract pleasure, and we find ourselves longing for the denser air of beguiling fiction.

And for all its playfulness, the new novel seems grimmer than Kundera's other fictions. The central character, Agnes, gradually discovers that for her the world is an alien place: She feels her solitude when confronted by the ugliness and unlivability of 20th-century urban life. Whereas the heroine of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* suffered from that awful lightness of being, Agnes realizes that "what is unbearable in life is not being but being one's self." Agnes is driven to suicide when she becomes convinced that her life has reached a dead end. She sits down on a busy highway and stays there until killed by a speeding car, though not before she causes the death of several drivers who swerve their vehicles to avoid hitting her.

Today, there is a feeling abroad that after the revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe the works of hitherto dissident writers have lost their urgency, their luster, indeed their very reason for being. In Kundera's novels (at least until *Immortality*)—the argument goes—so much creative energy is spent on the absurd contortions of the oppressors and the sly evasions of the oppressed that one can't help wondering if all of that is not passé. For many readers, the once breathtaking pronouncements of Eastern European intellectual heavyweights such as Bronislaw Geremek, George Konrád, and János Kis are now mainly of historical interest. Communism may in retrospect turn out to have been (in the words of Polish critic Jaroslaw Anders) "little more than another cruel, but also vulgar and stupid, political system—no longer a subject, that is, for great moral drama."

Certainly if Kundera's novels are read—as many of his new readers in his homeland now read them—less as fiction than as political exposés, they are, or soon will be, passé. Yet as the precarious new democracies of Eastern Europe reveal a worrisome degree of inward-turning and xenophobia, Kundera may prove pertinent for a different reason.

Kundera has always viewed his writings as contributions not just to Eastern (or Central) European life but to the culture of Europe generally. The great modern age in Europe which began with Descartes and Cervantes—when cultural values filled the place left vacant by religion—is now, Kundera argues, in danger of coming to an end. He indicates what shall replace it in *Immortality*: the tissue-thin world of "imagology," a pseudo-reality created by media executives, political campaign managers, and ad agencies.

This "bowing out of culture" is why Kundera thinks that the fate of Prague

Spring in 1968 was, ultimately, a tragedy less of Russian oppression than of European indifference. Because Europe no longer valued its own culture, it could blithely concede the loss of a key element in it, its eastern realm—the one-time home of Kakfa, Rilke, Husserl, and Bartók—as though it had never mattered. "By virtue of its cultural history," Kundera wrote in *The New York Review of Books* in 1984, Central Europe "is the West. But since Europe itself is in the process of losing its own cultural identity, it perceives in Central Europe nothing but a political regime." Kundera, the novelist-historian of the Russian tragedy in Czechoslovakia, is a dated writer; Kundera, the cultural commentator, who discounted the old political chasm between Eastern and Western Europe, and who now dismisses Dostoevsky as a non-European mystifier, remains as controversial a critic as he ever was.

In *Immortality* Kundera again returns to the notion of "Europe," by focusing on the grand figure of Goethe, who was always better appreciated in Central Europe than, say, in the Mediterranean or the Anglo-Saxon world. Kundera is not the least bit interested in offering an idealized portrait of the German poet, but he is certainly wistful about Goethe as a quintessentially European phenomenon. "Goethe," he writes, "is a figure placed precisely in the center of European history.... Not the center in the sense of a timid point that carefully avoids extremes, no, a firm center that holds both extremes in a remarkable balance which Europe would never know again.... Goethe was the greatest German of all, and at the same time an antinationalist and a European."

Is there an implied comparison in *Immortality*? Not that Kundera would claim to be a contemporary Goethe, but rather that he too would write from the same central point in European culture. What Kundera means by Europe—and writing from the central point of it—he made clear in his stormy debate in 1985 with Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Brodsky over the Russian writer Dostoevsky. To be a European writer, Kundera argued, means holding a playful balance between feeling and rationality; it demands enough skeptical detachment so that emotion doesn't supplant rational thought. "What irritated me about Dostoevsky," he said, "was the *climate* of his novels: a universe where everything turns into feelings; in other words, where feelings are promoted to the rank of value and of truth." Brodsky mistrusted any definition of culture that would exclude Dostoevsky. But he had no doubt that "Mr. Kundera is a Continental, a European man," in fact trying "to be more European than the Europeans": "These people are seldom capable of seeing themselves from the outside," Brodsky said. "If they do, it's invariably within the context of Europe, for Europe offers them a scale against which their importance is detectable."

In any case, one thing is certain: Kundera—the writer from whom many Western readers took their sense of Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe under communism—is obviously no longer interested in speaking for his "region." He demands to be judged as a European writer. The old objection that he has internationalized his art he would hardly consider a criticism at all. Several years ago he even had his novels removed from Penguin Books' prestigious "Writers from the Other Europe" series. When Kundera emigrated to France, he was 46—an age, he said, when one's time and energy are limited, and he had to choose: Either he could live looking over his shoulder, to where he was not, in his former country with his former friends, or he could make the effort to profit from the catastrophe, starting over at zero, beginning a new life right where he was. "Without hesitation," Kundera said, "I chose the second solution."

What Milan Kundera wished for has, with *Immortality*, come to pass. In France, and now in the United States, he is no longer seen as an author in exile, an Eastern European émigré, but as a writer who is at home in Europe and in the world.