
In praise of a slowness that was ahead of its time. The melancholic, almost prophetic gaze of Milan Kundera

The death of Milan Kundera, born in Brno in 1929, marks not only the passing of a great writer, but also a rupture in the temporal landscape of the short twentieth century: His books, including the celebrated *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), represent some of the most critical, radical and yet objective portrayals of a time when sexual freedom clashed with the supposed Garden of Eden of Eastern European communism, when sentimental ideals were confronted with the melancholy of routine, disillusionment, materialism and the end. A great writer, but constrained by the limitations of his time, including politics. Those who will come after him, in fifty years' time, may then embark on the risky process of making conclusive or pseudo-conclusive definitions. Nevertheless, we can begin by saying, Kundera was an all too clear narrator and poet - even to the point of distortion dictated by melancholy - of a time of disillusionment, when the great ideals of a society of equals crumbled under the blows of armies 'fraternally' summoned to set things right with cannon fire and bloodshed. The former Czechoslovakia (Brno is now in the Czech Republic) was the scene of such contradictions, where the Great Father intervened to save communism from the pitfalls of "bourgeois democracy in disguise". An advocate of reform communism, he was exiled to France after his novels were banned and he was dismissed from his university teaching post. Love, habits, contradictions, the recognition of chance and the contamination of things made him a layman's reflection of a reality in which suffering, oblivion and emptiness were hidden beneath the much-vaunted sentiments, political pronouncements and grandiose and progressive fortunes that Leopardi had hitherto abhorred. The reference to the Italian author is not unwarranted. His open scepticism, his refusal of a progressive narrative, his rejection of -isms, i.e. belonging to schools of thought that claim to solve all human problems, were the cornerstones of his life and writing. Kundera made his literary debut, not as a novelist but as a poet, with his book *Man is a Big Garden*. The title of three of his short story collections, 'Laughable Loves', which met with some success, already gives an insight into the writer's world view: a merciless gaze that transcends external representation and delves into the contradictions and the unspoken in people's stories. History itself begins to be seen with a sense of insignificance and oblivion. Betrayal, unwanted but necessary abandonment, the Prague Spring and the repression that followed, the possibility of a career, its rejection and gradual self-destruction, in short, the collapse of the Hegelian and essential meaning of history, both great and individual, are the basic elements of *"The Unbearable Lightness of Being"*, his celebrated and most widely read novel in the West, made into a film by Philip Kaufman. But elsewhere, for example in *"Slowness"*, Kundera depicts the tendency to distort the world. He attacks Western thought, which he often considers utopian and unrealistic, and prophetically evokes a vulgar form of consumerism, reassessing a slowness that includes memory and remembrance, a kind of survival, in a world seemingly devoid of such meaning. He saw celebrity as a lack of authenticity, as an obligation to reproduce a fabricated part of oneself rather than the truth. That's why he always lived in seclusion, far removed from even the most virtual arenas that fast-paced modernity offers as the only way to validate oneself. Something that, thanks to his coherence, will not happen to his memory.

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