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Language, Memory, and Exile in the Writing of Milan Kundera

Christopher Michael McCauley
Portland State University

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Language, Memory, and Exile in the
Writing of Milan Kundera

by

Christopher Michael McCauley

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requirements for the degree of

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in
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Thesis Committee:
Annabelle Dolidon, Chair
Jennifer Perlmutter
Gina Greco

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Abstract

During the twentieth century, the former Czechoslovakia was at the forefront of Communist takeover and control. Soviet influence regulated all aspects of life in the country. As a result, many well-known political figures, writers, and artists were forced to flee the country in order to evade imprisonment or death. One of the more notable examples is the writer Milan Kundera, who fled to France in 1975. Once in France, the notion of exile became a prominent theme in his writing as he sought to expose the political situation of his country to the western world—one of the main reasons why he chose to publish his work in French rather than in Czech. This thesis analyzes the themes of language and memory in connection with exile in two of Kundera's novels, *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli* (1978) and *L'Ignorance* (2000). We contend that these concepts serve as *anchors* and *tethers*, stabilizing forces meant to help exiled characters recreate their identity outside of their homeland. By exploring notions of language and memory in these novels, Kundera demonstrates how the experience of exile affects the human condition during the latter half of the twentieth century.

To Kevin, Kareem, and Arlyn.

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Introduction

Approaching a Fragmented and Transnational Identity

“For a novelist, a given historic situation is an anthropologic laboratory in which he explores his basic question: What is human existence?”

-Milan Kundera, *Preface, Life is Elsewhere*

During the second half of the twentieth century, the former Czechoslovakia underwent numerous changes in all aspects of its society: national borders, language, political structure, government regime, culture, art, and literature to name a few. Because of the extremely oppressive Soviet presence in the country after 1968, many people, especially political activists and artists, were forced to flee the country illegally. Milan Kundera was among them.

Kundera arrived in France in 1975 after buying papers that allowed him to escape his homeland. A writer and member of the Communist party in Czechoslovakia, he continued to write in France, rejecting his former language and culture and insisting that his work be considered works of French literature. The experience of exile became a very important theme in his novels from then onward—many of his works either take place in his former home, or include exiled Czech characters. Exile affects the characters in every aspect of their development and their social environment, including language and culture, memory and forgetting. These aspects contribute to lost identity or unstable connections to reality. Through his characters, Kundera shows that exiled people cannot connect to a normative social or cultural experience either in a foreign land or in the homeland. I contend that through recurrent themes of language and memory, Kundera approaches the notion of exile as an unstable and fragmented identity that leads the characters to identify neither as French nor as Czech, starting them on a journey to a new *exiled* identity. In

order to show this, I will analyze two of Kundera's novels, *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli* (1978) and *L'Ignorance* (2000).

Historical Context

Kundera's writing underwent tumultuous evolution over his career. Before leaving Prague, he had been a well-known writer and political figure, and an outspoken member of the Communist party. His novels, plays, and political commentaries were widely read throughout Czechoslovakia, often largely acclaimed; although at times they caused political disputes among his contemporaries. His dissident voice against Soviet control, especially after the Warsaw Pact Invasion of 1968, ultimately led to his forced removal from the country.

Today, we refer to the period directly following WWII as the Cold War. The former Czechoslovakia is perhaps one of the more heated examples of political instability of this era, especially in the mid to late 1960s. Many aspects of the political climate of mid-century Czechoslovakia led to this situation. Notably, there were several shifts in political leaders, their political party affiliations and approaches to government, and wavering support by the people of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ). These changes began with the election of Klement Gottwald to the presidency in 1948 shortly after the ratification of a new constitution advocating for a shift from a democracy of the bourgeoisie to a more citizen-centered democracy (Bažant 335). Gottwald's rise to power marked the first of several Czechoslovak presidents who were also Communist Party leaders. Gottwald's presidency also set the precedent of instilling political fear among the country's citizens. During his presidency, Gottwald's extreme socialist policies and strict control of citizens led to the sentencing and death of over 250 innocent people tried for

crimes against the government. In total, 280,000 people were put on trial and condemned for political crimes against the state. This trend caused Czechoslovakians to fear their government, causing constant unease among the population (Bažant 335).

Several years of Soviet occupation accompanies this narrative of intense political control, especially impacting the economy and monetary system in Czechoslovakia. A universal fiscal reform occurred in 1953, which devalued the Czech crown so much that citizens lost upwards of 80 percent of their earnings and savings. This change, which occurred overnight on June 1, 1953, further strengthened the already severe police state that completely controlled the lives of citizens. The economy became completely centralized; all private business ownership was eliminated in order to make every person an employee of the state. Adults were legally required to carry papers at all times, and lost or damaged papers were a severely punishable offense (Bažant 337-338).

However, the government attempted to provide benefits to people to gain support for the centralized economic system. This collectivist system favored workers in ways that allowed them ample vacation time, inexpensive meals, and fully subsidized healthcare. The government guaranteed workers a certain amount of security in their jobs, a fact credited as the main reason this government lasted as long as it did. Unfortunately, the working class eventually grew weary because of the hardships the economic system placed on their families, and the harsh and strict regulation of all aspects of their daily lives. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, morale among the people became quite low as citizens continued to lose freedoms within the system.

As the years went on, Czechoslovakians started to revolt and claimed political freedom in their country, including a decentralized economy, less restrictive public

ensorship, and greater mobility and travel freedom for citizens. Finally, in 1968, Czechoslovakians were ready for a change in political order and an end to their lack of freedoms, beginning with free speech. Newspapers and other media outlets began practicing free expression, defying censorship, and letting people voice adversarial and dissident political views. The media and writers alike became more aggressive and assertive in their representations and interpretations of politics and economics. Groups of prominent authors, including Kundera, published *Literární noviny*, a literary magazine with political themes, which aimed to create a space for the public to express its own voice. A general sentiment of reclaiming the country for the people began to spread among the citizens (Bažant 342).

For a significant period of time leading up to August 1968, it seemed as if their efforts would prove successful. However, Soviet control, with the help of the sphere of Warsaw Pact nations—a Soviet treaty creating an official link of central and eastern European nations as a direct reaction to the creation of NATO in 1955—took a stand and invaded Czechoslovakia on August 20-21, 1968. The blunt force exerted during this attack resulted in the regression of progressive Czechoslovakian sentiment, turning the country into a highly regulated, monitored, and oppressed pawn of Soviet socialist intentions in the Eastern Bloc. The period now known as The Prague Spring¹ abruptly ended with a sharp return to strict Soviet Communism. For the next two decades, Czechoslovakia suffered from poor cultural and economic growth, strict government

¹ The Prague Spring refers to the period from 1963-1968 during which Czechoslovakian citizens and political leaders enjoyed a reform of Socialism, which allowed for greater political freedom throughout the country (Heimann 211).

regulation of the arts and media, tight borders and strict control of human movement and activity.

It was not until the Velvet Revolution and the subsequent fall of Communism in 1989 that Czech citizens began to enjoy basic freedoms. This shift was peaceful, and mainly included quiet demonstrations by younger generations and students who took on the political causes of their parents' generation in order to end the oppressive KSC control. These efforts were the main contributing factors to the end of more than forty years of Soviet influence on the country. The following year, Czechoslovakia organized public elections, and in 1993, the country dissolved into the two we know today: the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Two Novels

The exile experience from the former Czechoslovakia has had an important influence on European history, and has left a significant footprint on the literature of the twentieth century, especially in Kundera's writing, due to his personal involvement with exile from this country (Bažant 347-348). When the Prague Spring occurred, Kundera was one of the more noteworthy advocates for change to the current system of government. Although he was a supporter of the Communist Party, Kundera, like many of the other writers and influential people of the time, believed in a less restrictive government that would allow its citizens more opportunities to identify with their cultural heritage as Slovaks or Bohemians². Unfortunately, this short period of cultural prosperity

² Bohemia refers to the western region of both the former Czechoslovakia and the modern-day Czech Republic, while Slovakia made up the eastern part of the former country.

and expression ended with the Warsaw Pact Invasion. The much more restricted government cut off Kundera's voice. For a time, he tried to stay in Prague to write and preach about the political situation, but eventually the atmosphere became too oppressive for him. His writings about the political scene in Prague were highly contested by both the government and other contemporary intellectuals. He purchased papers to allow him and his wife to leave the country in 1975 (Lodge 137).

In Czechoslovakia, Kundera had been a well-known academic, having taken his studies and eventual career as a writer from Brno to Prague. Naturally, his escape from Prague in 1970s did not stop him from writing. His goal, in fact, was to continue to write to expose the political situation of his homeland, and to "act upon his conviction that the Czechoslovak experience with the Soviet invaders must be made universally known" (Matejka, 213). His first novel written in France, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (*Le livre du rire et de l'oubli* in French, and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in English) was written in the Czech language, and set in both Prague and Bohemia and in France. The book, first published in French translation in 1979, includes several episodes criticizing the Communist regime and its effects on its citizens. The novel's abrupt style and candid interpretations of the situation in Czechoslovakia expose the harsh conditions of the Soviet invasion around the globe. As a result of this novel's publication, the Czech government stripped Kundera of his citizenship, leaving him with no national identity until he became a French citizen in 1981.

The shift from the language of writing (Czech) to the language of publication (French) is unique. Upon arrival in France, Kundera denounced much of his previous writing, and consequently, he was very explicit in asserting that his first novel written

outside of Czechoslovakia be considered French. For this reason, he worked directly with a translator to ensure the most faithful translation possible for the novel. Kundera spoke French, but at this moment in his exile, he did not have the proper linguistic competency to produce an entire literary work in French. This collaborative translation became an important step in his transition as a writer in and of exile. Further, the necessary step of direct translation for the “frenchification” of his novel was an important step in defining cultural identity in a real context of exile. It is difficult to say whether this collaboration influenced the themes and plotlines of the novel. However, Kundera’s own personal history and his goal to expose his homeland’s turmoil (or his vision of it)³ is certainly related to the topic at hand.

The structure of *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli* is non-traditional. Each of the seven chapters of the novel recounts an individual story, unrelated in content to the previous one. However, the themes and motifs in the stories are all the same—banal perspectives on the everyday lives of characters in the shadow of the regime change in Czechoslovakia. Themes of lust, forgetting, travel, laughter, and identity emerge, linking the chapters together as one unit, rather than seven individual short stories. The back cover of the novel ensures the reader understands the text as a novel, and not as a collection of stories: “tout ce livre est un roman en forme de variations. Les différentes parties se suivent comme les différentes étapes d’un voyage qui conduit à l’intérieur d’un

³ Kundera’s interpretation of the political situation was in direct opposition to that of Vaclav Havel’s, another writer and public figure at the time. This disagreement, which never fully ended, is one of the main reasons Kundera fled the country and Havel stayed. Kundera’s interpretation of “Czech Destiny” outlined in his essay of the same title, was highly contested by Havel, who eventually became the first elected president of the Czech Republic in the early 1990s (Bažant 385-386).

thème, à l'intérieur d'une pensée, à l'intérieur d'une seule et unique situation dont la compréhension se perd pour moi dans l'immensité." In other words, the novel is a group of variations on themes, organized in a non-linear and unconnected fashion to provide a more holistic understanding of the author's message. Our analysis focuses mainly on one character, Tamina, a widowed exilée⁴ living in the French countryside. She works as a server at a local restaurant, and her story focuses around the relationships she builds with French people, and the attempts she makes to reconnect with her past. We will also look briefly at two other examples from the novel: the first, involving Mirek, a political dissident who attempts to evade Soviet police; second, the story of Christine and her young lover, a student and poet, who keep secrets and never reveal their true intentions to one another.

The second novel analyzed in this thesis, *L'Ignorance*, was written in French, but first published in Spain in 2000. The unconventional publication reflects one of the main questions the author poses in the novel: after exile, which country does an exilé belong to? This novel focuses on the return of exiled characters to Prague after a long absence, demonstrating how time can affect the psychological state of the exilé. The themes in *L'Ignorance* are imperative to understanding the exilé's connection to culture, language, and relationships, helping us to understand Kundera's new approach to exile.

In regards to linear structure, *L'Ignorance* is a more traditional novel. It tells the story of Irena, a Czech woman who flees from Prague to France after the Warsaw Pact

⁴ In this thesis, we will use the French noun, *exilé(e)*, to refer to characters that have been exiled from their native country, in order to more clearly distinguish from the English adjective "exiled".

Invasion with her husband and young children. Once in France, Irena lives the difficult life of an exiled immigrant—little money, and trying to adjust to a new country and culture. Shortly after arriving in France, her husband dies and she has to raise her children there, alone. After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Irena returns to Prague for the first time to visit old friends and family and to reconnect with her homeland. There, she realizes that her personal identity, her understanding of the world, and her mindset about politics, government, and former friends and lovers are at odds with those of the people who had never left the country. Although the plot is clearly structured, Irena's character and identity are fluid and fragmented, similarly to those of the characters in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*. In addition, Irena's relationships to other characters, including other exilé(e)s, Czech people, and French people, create a poignant juxtaposition between her period of exile, and a glimpse at what her life may have been had she never left Prague. This aspect of the plot provides additional insight into the status of Czechoslovakian exile in the twentieth century, and the way in which the path of exile reshapes identity.

We focus on these two novels because of their placement in the overall span of Kundera's work. *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli* was written at the beginning of Kundera's exile, when Czechoslovakia was still under Communist control. *L'Ignorance* was written after the end of Communism in the country, thus providing a different approach to the identity of the exilé, who is no longer in political danger. Our analysis considers the difference in political context that separates these two novels in order to examine the approach to the themes and notions used to represent the exile experience.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter One, we explore the notion of exile to provide a more solid

understanding of the term. The definition of the word, though it remained unchanged for centuries, becomes nuanced when referring to different experiences of exile in different historical and political contexts. To build a broader understanding of the term, we will address the meaning of exile in relation to the historical context of Kundera's novels, as well as its place in literature across time.

Chapter Two will begin the analysis of Kundera's novels, focusing on the relationship of exile with language. Often, exilés undergo a unique linguistic culture shock over the course of their exile in a foreign land. Additionally, because of the close connection between language, culture, and ideology, language proves critical to the experience of exilés and their way of expressing and evaluating their journey. We will note the importance of language as a stabilizing force, linking the exilé to his homeland (referred to as an *anchor* in this thesis).

We will then look at the occurrence of exile as a divider between an exilé's old life and new life. Because of its rupturing nature and the physical distance between the homeland and the new country, memory plays an important role in linking the exilé to the past (which we refer to as the *tether* that connects the exilé to his or her *anchor*). Chapter Three will evaluate the role of memory in the experience of exile, noting that time and nostalgia for the past lead to a skewed sense of self-awareness. In order to highlight these concepts, we will assess the motif of the photograph as representative of the past and its role in memory, history, and exile, especially in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*. Lastly, because each individual remembers the past in different ways, the experience of exile is further questioned by the memory of the exilé and the memory of friends and loved ones left behind.

Furthermore, in both chapters two and three we will examine the role that relationships play in the lives of these characters. Sexuality, both a recurrent theme in Kundera's work and an aspect of identity that is already fluid and fragmented, presents an interesting aspect in the role of the exilé's search for identity. The motivations behind relationships tend to be based on the need for stability, whether in the new country or in the homeland. We will evaluate these motivations and their effect on the consciousness of the exilé over time in relation to the themes of language and memory.

Le livre du rire et de l'oubli and *L'Ignorance* represent the span of Kundera's writing. Despite the more-than thirty-year separation between the two novels, we note the recurrent presence of the same motifs and themes, suggesting a stasis of ideas throughout the experience of exile. Through a close analysis of the characters and themes in both texts, we will show how Kundera approaches exile as a non-normative identity, one that leads the characters on endless journeys of self-discovery and self-definition against a backdrop of political oppression and confusion, during a time of global instability. The political uncertainty leads this identity to become fluid and unstable. Although characters of exile attempt to regain a steady connection to reality, the impact that their past has had on their psyche is significant, and leads them to an open and ever-evolving sense of existence. Finally,

Chapter One

Understanding Exile in Literature: Definition vs. Experience

Before delving into the textual analysis of exile, it is important to define what the experience of exile has meant over the years, what it means specifically in the context of the former Czechoslovakia, and finally how Milan Kundera represents exile and exiled characters. Because there are multiple experiences of exile, there cannot be one specific and singular description of the term or of the experience. Kundera's literary representations of exile, based on the real experiences of Czechoslovakians in Western Europe, are multiple. Nevertheless, we can examine the historical background of exile as a global concept, and narrow it down further to the context of the former Czechoslovakia in order to build a stronger definition of exile as an identity in Kundera's two novels.

In the broadest sense, an *exilé* is a person displaced for an extended period from his or her native land due to political turmoil or oppression. Over the years, this idea and definition of exile have not changed. The original Latin form of the word, *exul/exilium* refers to a banished person, or the act of banishing a person, since antiquity. However, due to the nature of the definition of exile, the experience that it describes varies greatly from person to person, time period to time period, and sociopolitical context to sociopolitical context. For example, in ancient Rome, a criminal convicted of an act punishable by death had the option of execution or expulsion from the country. Other examples of exile as a punishment include British colonial forms of banishment to colonies in the Americas or Australia as a means of getting rid of political dissidents and criminals (Knapp 1). The exile of political leaders to remote islands was also practiced in many different contexts. Two famous examples are Napoleon's exile to Elba and later

Saint Helena Island, or the more contemporary example of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment on Robben Island. During the second part of the twentieth century, the global political and economic scene ignited a new wave of exile around the world due to the effects of the Second World War, widespread Soviet influence, and the constant international tension of the Cold War. Due to the totalitarian nature of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia and other central European countries, and the fear of incarceration by the regime, people began fleeing their homes.

Thus, in some cases, such as several of those analyzed in the present study, people choose exile in order to save their life. During the Soviet occupation of the former Czechoslovakia, the government condemned people in droves because of their connection to dissident political activities or their personal acquaintance and involvement with people implicated in such behavior. As a result, many of these people chose to leave the country of their own accord before being arrested. They did this to save their lives even though it meant relinquishing their family, friends, culture, and language.

This was the case for Kundera himself, whose radical views were cause for great concern in the eyes of the Soviet rulers. Even after his departure, his writings caused uproar among government officials in Prague, and as mentioned earlier, he eventually lost his Czechoslovakian citizenship. Before leaving Prague, Kundera's writing was heavily influenced by his involvement with the Communist Party. After the Warsaw Pact Invasion, he became involved in political writing, publishing a famously contested manifesto titled "Czech Destiny" in which he evaluates the political and social effects of the invasion, and his vision for the future of the country. Several of his contemporaries were not so lucky, and it is possible that some of the characters in his novels (especially

in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*) represent these figures, or the fate that Kundera would have met had he not been able to escape the country. The voluntary aspect of exile was very common in the context of Czechoslovakia—the government's main tactic for dealing with dissidents was imprisonment and death, and not forced expulsion from the country. As a result, Western Europe saw a significant number of Czech refugees during the 1960s and 1970s.

Categories of Exile

Knapp, in her book on writers of exile, uses a Jungian approach to analyze this theme in a transnational context by studying authors from all over the world who write about their own or other's experiences of exile. Her reading of exile suggests that the conscious and the unconscious are interconnected and work simultaneously in order to achieve *individuation*. She says,

Individuation, which distinguishes each individual as unique and separate from the collective, is developed in terms of the personalities, actions, and events surrounding the lives of the characters focused upon in the works analyzed. The inner life of the characters may then be experienced by the reader as a living entity, provoking reflection upon the characters as well as a desire to assess the play, novel, poem, or essay in terms of the reader's own existential condition, or with regard to its aesthetic value. To do so may develop readers' analytical faculties, making individuals increasingly aware of their attributes and deficiencies, and in so doing, helping them to remain open to new enrichment and greater fulfillment in their lives. (Knapp 15-16)

In the experience of exile, individuation, or separation from the whole, can be destructive rather than constructive in regards to building a stable identity. Entrance into a foreign world (language, government, culture, customs, control, friendships, lack of friendships and family, etc.) can cause an exiled person to feel negatively othered, pulling him or her farther away from a solid connection to the self and a physical location, creating different

levels of identity, a fragmented sense of self. Literary representations of exile allow us to study the psychological impact of the experience, providing us with a broader interpretation of this idea. Further, writers of exile, such as Kundera, open up a historically relevant dialogue about the political situation that led to exile, breaking down the borders of silence and oppression that motivated it as a course of action in the first place. Based on Kundera's narrative and Knapp's arguments, we will approach exile in this project from two different directions—inner and outer, and two different functions—punishment and self-defense. This way, we can understand different experiences, their motivations, and their implications and effects on characters.

First, exile can occur in a more historically traditional sense of the word: as a punishment for dissidence or for crimes against the governing body of a particular geographic location. To be *exiled*, in this sense, connotes a specific kind of crime against the country, but also the people, the culture, and all of the values that the country stands for. Knapp calls this *exoteric exile*, which emphasizes the external reality and expulsion of one person from a particular physical location (1). Traditionally, exoteric exile is categorized by a direct physical and disciplinary reaction to crimes by the governing body that considers them especially dangerous. However, it is also applicable to an individual who decides to flee his or her country for safety reasons.

To support the idea of esoteric exile, we must consider the fact that a physical change of location, albeit the most obvious aspect of exile, is secondary to its psychological impact. Exilés' mental states change due to opposing ways of seeing, thinking, and observing the world. Edwards contends that, "...by its very nature, exile is a psychological experience, a response of mind and spirit to customs, codes, and political

actions; and so its qualities have to be measured by the figures projected on the historical ground” (17).

Exile can also be considered from an internal standpoint, that is, exile that does not involve expulsion from the country, a kind of exile that Knapp classifies as *esoteric* (2). The idea of exile within the confining borders of political boundaries may appear contradictory; however, exile can suggest situations in which an individual feels cast out from his or her society, culture, or family, but is unable to physically leave. Although exoteric exile is predominant in Kundera’s work, several characters in his novels experience this other conception of exile. For example, characters in both novels feel the burden of the oppressive Communist state, but are unable to flee. They experience marginalization and otherness in relation to other characters, and their experience contrasts with the exoteric *exilé* narrative.

Knapp notes that esoteric exile comes from “a withdrawal on the part of the individuals from the empirical realm and a desire or need to live predominantly in their inner world. Such an inward thrust implies, psychologically, an emptying of the conscious mind of activity related to the external world and its channeling into subliminal realms” (Knapp 2). In other words, inner exile is a protection mechanism that relies completely on psychologically separating oneself from the physical conditions or context, when one is not willing or able to flee national borders.

Again, exoteric and esoteric exile can both stem from a personal decision to distance oneself from the mainstream culture or governing body or it can be imposed upon an individual due to oppressive political practices or the need for a punishment. People estranged from families or cultures in either of these two kinds of exile undergo

the loss of a former identity, a process of individuation, and the attempt at creating a new, post-exilic identity.

Preliminary Examples in Kundera's Work

Many characters in Kundera's novels have been affected by the oppressive nature of the Soviet takeover during the latter half of the twentieth century (see Introduction). However large or small their involvement in political activities, these characters are seen as enemies of the state and are thus automatically in danger. Some were lucky and escaped the control of their oppressors. Tamina and her husband in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*, for example, escaped Soviet control during a holiday and eventually made it to France. Tamina's husband, later deceased, had been involved in political activities that threatened both of their lives. They left behind all their belongings in order to escape their life in Prague. Her subsequent widowhood furthers her sense of exile in a land to which she never wanted to travel. Tamina never overcomes the instability the upheaval that exile and death introduced to her life, and eventually succumbs to these stressors by taking her own life.

Tamina's story initially parallels that of the main character of Kundera's later novel, *L'Ignorance*. A Czech woman from Prague, Irena, is also forced abroad because of her husband Martin's political involvement and the danger this placed on their lives in their homeland. During the escape to France with their two young children, Martin dies. Irena must continue her life abroad, raising her children alone and working odd jobs in order to support herself. Luckily she has studied many languages, and eventually builds a solid life in Paris, connecting with her new identity as an exilée. She assimilates to French culture and favors it over that of her homeland and voices disinterest in returning

to Prague when the borders reopen after the Velvet Revolution. Eventually, the stable identity that Irena believes she has built deteriorates when she returns to Prague after the Velvet Revolution and is forced to face her lost Czech identity. Although her story does not end as dramatically as Tamina's, Irena realizes the danger of forgetting her past because of her emotions and connections to time and memory.

Kundera also represents characters that never succeed in physically escaping the borders of the Soviet controlled Czechoslovakia, but who experience esoteric exile. The first fictional character⁵ in *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli*, Mirek, is travelling across the country to meet a former lover. He wants to come to terms with the affair they had several years earlier. His ultimate goal is to destroy letters they once exchanged in an effort to clear his name from past transgressions that may suggest his dissension from Communist control. The inquietude he experiences throughout his journey and the worry associated with his potential status as an enemy to the state already makes him a political exile. He has been targeted as a dissident, flagged for treason, when the novel begins. Mirek is too late to save himself, and the government control will not allow him to escape. Government police follow him throughout his entire journey, and although he succeeds in reconnecting with his former lover, he is arrested upon return to his apartment, his belongings ransacked and seized by the government, and his son, completely uninvolved, also taken to prison. Mirek's exile, while very different from that of Tamina and Irena, shows the hazard of political dissidence during this time, suggesting the dangers of searching for the past in order to avoid condemnation in the future.

⁵ The distinction of *fictional* character is made here to differentiate from the historical anecdote about Gottwald and Clementis that Kundera uses to open the novel.

Like the example of Mirek, several other characters undergo this sort of cultural and belief-related isolation throughout the books discussed in this study. Although these characters are still physically in their homeland, they are exiled from a life they knew before the regime change. These esoteric exilés present similar characteristics to characters who are physically exiled from their homeland, most notably the concepts of searching, remembering, and forgetting. Because of the political power overhead, these characters experience their own loss of identity, an identity that they also need to reestablish in some way, but that is not always possible.

Kundera, especially in *L'Ignorance*, explains at length the idea of longing and nostalgia and how different languages have engrained these ideas in language (focusing specifically on untranslatable Czech expressions for missing someone you love, which includes aspects of nostalgia). He juxtaposes historical and literary examples of nostalgia and exile with the stories in his novels, notably the myth of Odysseus.

Odysseus, who was separated from Ithaca, his homeland, for twenty years, experienced emotions of longing and nostalgia during this time away after the Trojan War—emotions that led to a certain melancholy during his journey despite the relationships and connections he made throughout. Upon his return to Ithaca, however, he notices that despite his absence for two decades, his compatriots and loved ones do not recognize or understand these experiences as meaningful; they disregard this aspect of his past, and focus on the present, on their own histories, their own culture. As a result, he loses connection to his identity as Ithacan because of the disconnect between the life he had known abroad, and the life he might have known had he never left.

Once again, we can note that exile is as much a psychological experience as it is

physical. Kundera's characters, even those who build semi-successful lives for themselves abroad (like Irena), do not have the proper emotional tools to separate memories of their homeland from the emotional state of exile and fully immerse themselves into their new lives as foreigners. We picture these memories and emotions of exiled persons as tethers that are still attached to their homeland; these fragmented and cloudy emotions never fully disappear for Kundera's characters.

The tether becomes an important motif in the experience of exile as represented in Kundera's books. Because of the overwhelming experience these characters undergo, a personal anchor is necessary to re-stabilize one's identity. In this analysis, we note that the language of the homeland serves as the anchor that an *exilé* tries to use to stabilize themselves abroad, and that their memories serve as the tether (described above) that connect them to the anchor, albeit in an unsteady and fluid manner. Language and memory are crucial in self-perception and understanding. Nevertheless, they are also aspects of identity that are subjective and constantly changing as time goes on.

Methodological Approach

In this study, we will approach the exiled experience as a psychologically identity-changing experience of otherness. *Exilés*, such as the characters represented by Kundera, undergo overwhelming emotions of disconnect from their homeland, more specifically from the culture or experience they had known prior to a shift in political power or control. They show how fragile identity can become when emotional torment overpowers an already precarious situation.

Chapter Two Exile and Language

An important and striking aspect of the exilic experience is the sociolinguistic difference between the culture of origin and the new culture. Exilés go through a process of integration during the transition into a new country. In the examples of Kundera's characters who move from the Czechoslovakia to France, the French language is forced upon characters that may or may not have had prior exposure to it. Since it is understood that language is inherently connected to culture, the exilé experiences a linguistic shock during this transition. The two novels underwent a similar linguistic shift due to the author's exilic circumstances, thus providing additional insight into the effect of language on the exiled experience.

Each language provides a different framework for this connection due to the evolution of ideas and cultural practices. Because of the vast diversity of languages around the globe, it is not a far-fetched idea that people from different cultures have different connections to human existence because of the linguistic structures laid out and conditioned for them from their childhood. As such, this chapter considers language not only as a system of communication specific to a country or culture, but also in terms of specific words and conceptions that belong to the culture. Over the years, this concept of language, known as linguistic relativity, has become widely accepted in realm of applied linguistics:

Language is a guide to social reality...it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes...the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world in which different societies

live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (Sapir 162)

In other words, different languages address certain objects, concepts and emotions from different perspectives, which in turn shapes the way people understand their identities.

Further, because languages approach social reality from multiple perspectives, we can look at the different geographic areas in the novels as isolated from one another.

Language, here, includes written texts, such as letters and personal writing, and the role they play in characters' expression of identity.

It is thus important to look at Czech concepts inside these two French novels.

Because the majority of exiled characters are of Czech origin, many of the descriptions, emotions, and concepts come from the Czech language. As such, the authorial "I" in the novels takes it upon himself to explain certain ideas that a French reader may not understand. With these words and concepts explained for us, we can approach the text from a more Czech point of view.

Lítost

Kundera, who originally wrote *Le livre de rire et de l'oubli* in Czech, names an entire chapter of his work *Lítost*, the word for an emotion that is easily comprehensible in Czech culture. The inclusion and definition of this word is integral to the understanding of the emotions, actions, and decisions of the characters. Kundera tries to cross the boundary created by a Czech social reality into a French one by including this Czech concept in his French book. Similarly to the idea outlined by Sapir, the word *lítost* exists in Czech but not in French—a prime example of the linguistic relativity of languages.

To convey *lítost* properly to the French reader, a three-and-a-half-page definition is provided. Even before analyzing and understanding this concept, it is clear that the linguistic distinction is significant, since there is no direct translation. What is just a simple word in Czech is a complicated concept that requires examples and an extensive definition in French:

Lítost est un mot tchèque intraduisible en d'autres langues. Sa première syllabe, qui se prononce longue et accentuée, rappelle la plainte d'un chien abandonné. Pour le sens de ce mot je cherche vainement un équivalent dans d'autres langues, bien que j'aie peine à imaginer qu'on puisse comprendre l'âme humaine sans lui. (LRO 186)

With this opening, before even translating its meaning, the reader understands the characterization of the word as well as its significant contribution to the way in which the narrator understands it. This first description of the word immediately ties it to emotion. Moreover, the narrator cannot seem to imagine a world without this word. The reader, presumably non-Czech, should feel intrigued⁶.

The didactic voice directly relates *lítost* to the plot, and helps the reader gain a broader understanding of the actions of the characters and the themes in the text. Passages such as this one draw a gray area between authorial voice and fictional narrator. We feel that Kundera has inserted himself into his novel in order to communicate directly to the reader. We find no direct evidence that suggests that the narrator is the author, but this passage on *lítost* demonstrates that the French voice must explain the meaning and

⁶ We can observe that in the original Czech version of the novel, this section is still written to explain the concept of *lítost* to the reader, regardless of the fact that the Czech reader understands this word. This fact confirms Kundera's intent to ensure the "frenchness" of his novel because we note the evolution of the text from the original Czech to the translated French.

existence of this word in order for the reader to understand fully a Czech mindset in the context of a French novel.

The narrator provides examples of times when one of the characters, referred to as the student, experienced *lítost* in his youth. The first example is when a girlfriend beat him at a swimming race, and he realizes his inadequacy in relation to her. Another time, the student is unable to play the violin in front of his tutor, due to a lack of talent and motivation. After providing these examples, the narrator finally reveals the definition of *lítost* he has worked out: “La *lítost* est un état tourmentant né du spectacle de notre propre misère soudainement découverte” (LRO 186).

In order to explain the meaning of *lítost*, the narrator tells the story of a country woman, Christine, and her lover, a young student in Prague, who hide their true intentions and emotions from each other during a brief romantic tryst in the city. These two characters come from two different worlds—the city and the country; and due to a strong sense of individuation, they eventually realize that their backgrounds will keep them apart. This realization, combined with their inability to communicate straightforwardly with one another leads them to feel *lítost*. These characters are not exiled in the traditional sense (either esoteric or exoteric), but the narrator uses this example in order to explain the concept on a more basic level. By using this term to connote the experience of both exiled and non-exiled characters, the narrator connects the two experiences so as to magnify the emotions felt by his exiled characters.

Lítost is an emotion that is intimately linked to the narrative of exilés while abroad and when they return to the homeland. By including *lítost* in his work, Kundera ensures that the reader can benefit from the perspective of a Czech exilé, further exposing

the characteristics of the exile he is writing about. In the following chapter, we will see how Tamina experiences *litosť* in her search for an anchor into the past.

Stýská se mi po tobě

At the beginning of *L'Ignorance*, the etymology of the concept of nostalgia is a major topic. The section begins with the ancient Greek terms, and gracefully makes its way through several European languages whose conceptions of nostalgia have evolved from the original words *nostos* (return) and *algos* (suffering). The narrator defines nostalgia as “la souffrance causée par le désir inassouvi de retourner” (*L'Ignorance* 11). Many European languages (notably English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese), in addition to the word *nostalgia*, have synonyms that more closely represent the linguistic characteristic of the specific language. This is important, according to the narrator, because each of these words has different semantic nuances that reflect the idea of sadness and the impossibility of returning to one’s country:

Les Tchèques, à côté du mot *nostalgie* pris du grec, ont pour cette notion leur propre substantif, *stesk*, et leur propre verbe ; la phrase d’amour tchèque la plus émouvante : *stýská se mi po tobě* : j’ai la nostalgie de toi ; je ne peux pas supporter la douleur de ton absence. En espagnol, *añoranza* vient du verbe *añorar* (avoir de la nostalgie) qui vient du catalan *enyorar*, dérivé, lui, du mot latin *ignorare* (ignorer). Sous cet éclairage étymologique, la nostalgie apparaît comme la souffrance de l’ignorance. Tu es loin, et je ne sais pas ce que tu deviens. Mon pays est loin, et je ne sais pas ce qui s’y passe. (*L'Ignorance* 12)

This passage, which continues to include other European languages and their treatment of the concept, serves several purposes. Positioning this passage at the beginning of the text as a sort of introduction (in typical Kundera fashion of introducing concepts in a direct and didactic way) introduces nostalgia as a central theme for the novel. Right after, we learn about Irena, the main character, and a Czech exilé in France. The second, and

perhaps more striking purpose, is to explain the evolution of the concept of nostalgia, so that the reader can understand it from the point of view of the characters in the novel. We already know that Irena is Czech, so she will understand the idea of missing someone or something as a feeling of nostalgia because of the word *stýská* (a declension of the noun *stesk*, which implies sorrow and sadness, adding an additional layer of emotion to the sentence). The narrator further compares this Czech sentence to its best French equivalent: “*je m’ennuie de toi*”. The French verb *s’ennuyer* is described as weak and cold, and fails to express such an important notion, according to the narrator. This passage is a clear representation of Kundera’s goal of breaking down referents to provide a more global perspective on the themes in his novel.

The inclusion of these words in Kundera’s work is not merely to highlight Czech identity, but rather, it is to bridge a gap between languages—break down the sensibility of one language and open it up into another:

“[he] regards the estrangement of language, a world of signs, from the world of things as a historical, rather than necessary condition. It is a condition, in Kundera’s view, that the writer must vigilantly oppose, even if his resistance to these solipsistic tendencies may never wholly succeed. In his own fiction Kundera strives to create a kind of writing that[...]forces open a window to the world of referents beyond language and its system of signs. (Pifer 62)

In other words, in including concepts from multiple languages in his novel, Kundera ensures the reader understand the human condition from a broader context, rather than one that limits to one linguistic ideology or another.

If we consider the ways in which Irena conceptualizes nostalgia versus the way her French surroundings view it, we note an immediate opposition. Irena’s French friend, Sylvie, wants her to return to her country now that the Communist regime has been

overthrown. For Sylvie, who views this concept from the “weak French perspective”, and who has never experienced a true sense of “mal du pays”, this is simple: “c’est la révolution chez vous...Ce sera ton grand retour” (*L’Ignorance* 10). In other words, Sylvie, who has no personal connection to exile, and no real feeling for nostalgia, views the situation as easy. Irena can just go home. For Irena, whose connection to the term stems from the strong and poetic Czech idea, as well as her twenty-year exile, returning is more emotional. In France, she no longer feels like an outsider—it has been twenty years, and her identity there is solid and established. She no longer has a need for *individuation*. However, Sylvie’s simple suggestion begins Irena’s second journey of self-discovery, when she makes her return to Prague.

A multi-lingual plot

As we look deeper into the novels, a more profound connection between and culture and exile develops. Erdinast-Vulcan notes that writing about exile can be dangerous because it is difficult to make a distinction between the experiences of exiled writers, and the literary representations of experiences of exile (251). This matters because of the relationship of the writer to the story and whether the writer is inside or outside his or her homeland, and whether or not the intended audience is part of the culture of origin, or the culture of the new country (language is included in this distinction).

Erdinast-Vulcan notes the important effect of otherness on exilés. She says, “the exilic mode of being, a living on boundary lines, produces a relativization of one’s home, one’s culture, one’s language, and one’s self, though the acknowledgement of otherness” (251). In other words, the homeland of an exilé will always remain an important point of

reference and comparison. This brings us back to the idea of an anchor that roots the exilé in the homeland. Following this example, the anchor that grounds the exilé to their past is the language of origin. Language is the aspect of culture that provides a solid framework for understanding and communicating cultural practices and identities.

Erdinast-Vulcan also connects the Saussurean notion of linguistic arbitrariness to the exile experience (252). A native speaker has no reason to question the link between sounds and words with the objects and concepts they represent. However, once one describes the same concepts and objects with foreign words, one realizes the linguistic difference and deeper meaning behind the word. A foreign language complicates the way in which a person interprets culture and the world. During exile, when everything is foreign, the linguistic shift that occurs in their new environment can be uncomfortable and awkward.

In *L'Ignorance*, language and its use is one of the most important aspects of Irena's life. In Prague, she studied foreign languages and literature. Thanks to her competencies in Czech, French, and Russian, she finds a job as a translator. Irena is thus predisposed to a certain cultural understanding that would allow her a more successful transition. However, this does not necessarily make her exile easier. In France, even after twenty years of exile, Irena is completely isolated from the Czech language because of her husband's death (he was the only one she could speak Czech with) and due to the difficulty in communication between the two countries during this period. She is completely immersed in French. In addition, her romantic involvement with Gustaf, a Swedish émigré, forces her to speak only in French because they do not speak each other's native language. Although they have differing competencies of the language, their

geographic location determines this aspect of the relationship, and as such proves to shape it. Unlike the experience of Tamina described previously, Irena's isolation from the Czech language proves to be a very stabilizing force during her period of exile. Her relationship with Gustaf has a positive effect on her psyche and identity expression as an exilé:

Elle n'avait plus personne avec qui parler tchèque, ses filles refusant de perdre leur temps avec une langue si évidemment inutile ; le français était pour elle la langue de tous les jours, sa seule langue ; rien ne lui avait donc été plus naturel que de l'imposer alors à son Suédois. Ce choix linguistique avait déterminé leurs rôles : puisque Gustaf parlait mal le français, c'est elle qui dans leur couple était la meneuse de la parole ; elle s'enivrait de sa propre éloquence : mon Dieu, après si longtemps, elle pouvait enfin parler, parler et être écoutée ! Sa supériorité verbale avait équilibré leur rapport de forces : elle dépendait entièrement de lui mais, dans leur conversations, elle le dominait et l'entraînait dans son monde à elle. (*L'Ignorance*, 92)

Irena's total separation from Czech and her daughters' refusal to learn and speak the language serve as an additional reason that French is so important in her life. Her twenty-year period of exile has allowed her to master the language in a way that makes her identity more solid, and helps to strengthen her personality and her dominance in her relationship. French can be seen as the most important aspect of her daily life because it is the strongest tie to her home (Paris), and to her loved ones (her daughters and Gustaf). Further, the fact that she feels dominant in the relationship due to her better command of the language shows how her growth in France over time has led her to separate from her prior identity as Czech, and accept her new French identity in a strong and stable way. Although she comes to depend on Gustaf emotionally and financially, she can still control the way in which they communicate.

Nevertheless, once they go to Prague together after the fall of Communism, the language of communication shifts to English, and Irena's linguistic comfort disappears. Around the same time, Gustaf decides to expand his business into a new office in Prague. Because of this, they travel to Prague at the same time. There, their roles switch:

Or, Prague remodelait le langage de leur couple ; il parlait anglais, elle essayait de persister dans son français auquel elle se sentait de plus en plus attachée, mais n'ayant aucun soutien extérieur (le français n'exerçait plus de charme dans cette ville jadis francophile), elle finit par capituler ; leurs rapports s'inversent : à Paris, Gustaf avait écouté Irena assoiffée de sa propre parole ; à Prague, c'est lui qui devient parleur, grand parleur, long parleur. (*L'ignorance* 92-3)

Even though Prague is her hometown, the shift in her language use is striking. Her command of English, despite her multilingual capabilities, is poor, and she becomes a passive member of the relationship. Gustaf, who does not speak Czech, becomes the central communicating figure because of his English skills, and because more people in Prague (including Irena's mother) can communicate with this language. Irena feels a certain sense of familiarity in the streets of Prague and when catching up with friends because she can speak Czech with them, but upon returning to her home, to Gustaf, the person with whom she is most familiar, the language changes, and she is less at ease. Although she is in her home country, she feels even more foreign and vulnerable.

Gustaf, who is foreign in Prague, should serve as a kind of stabilizing force for Irena when they are together there. However, the linguistic power shift separates the two lovers in an irreconcilable way. In Prague, Gustaf connects more with Irena's mother due to strong chemistry and a mutual affinity for English (her mother does not speak English well, but is excited enough about using her weak language skills during Gustaf's visit, as she rarely has the opportunity to do so):

« Nous sommes forts, toi et moi. We are strong. Mais nous sommes aussi bons, good, nous ne ferons de mal à personne. Nobody will know. Personne ne saura rien. Tu es libre. Tu peux quand tu veux. Mais tu n'es pas obligé. Avec moi, tu es libre. With me you are free! »
 Elle l'a dit cette fois sans aucun jeu parodique, sur un ton on ne peut plus sérieux. Et Gustaf, lui aussi sérieux, répond : « Oui, je comprends. »
 « Avec moi, tu es libre », ces mots résonnent en lui longuement. La liberté : il l'a cherchée chez sa fille mais ne l'a pas trouvée... (*L'Ignorance* 175)

In this brief moment, both Irena's mother and her lover betray her, while they are in her homeland. The failed linguistic link between Irena and Gustaf mirrors a successful linguistic connection between Gustaf and her mother. Although the latter reflect on the situation, and whether or not they betrayed Irena, they ultimately decide that they did not : "c'était une normalité des plus normales" (176). While Irena is going through the identity crisis of her return from exile, her two most stable relationships crumble, and find solace in one another. The situation eventually leads to the deterioration of her relationship with Gustav and a culminating episode of mutual infidelity.

Language, Power, and Exile

Based on the examples provided above, we observe a direct relationship between language, agency, and power in the context of exile. Language, as a framework for communication and understanding culture, is a powerful force that governs a person's mindset and self-expression. In situations of exile, when people are forced out of their linguistic comfort zone, there is a noticeable loss of power on the part of the exilé. They are no longer able to communicate effectively or appropriately. Because of the intimate relationship between language and culture, their entire outlook on the world and on cultural artifacts is altered, adding a layer of otherness to their already fluid and unsolidified existence in relation to their physical location. Finally, the social dynamics

between people who communicate in one language or another contribute to the solidification or the further destabilization of exiled identity.

When writing about exile, it is necessary to make connections between different languages in an attempt to understand the cultural origins and to bridge the gap between old and new identities. Finally, shifts in language lead to uncomfortable power dynamics between people of different linguistic backgrounds, creating a further sense of otherness. Because of the intimate connection between language and culture, this shift in power can eventually lead to a breakdown of identity and a loss of stability.

In her essay on narration in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*, Pifer notes:

It is through language, Kundera reminds us, that we name or identify not only things but ourselves. Identity, like the meaning in a text, arises from difference; and the ability to differentiate one word from another—or one thing, one event, one person, one author, one culture from another—depends on memory. Memory of the past, recorded as history, keeps alive our sense of differentiation and identity; it prevents us from slipping into the “nameless infinity” of “undifferentiated reality.” (Pifer, 65)

In other words, language is the main tool we use to distinguish one thing from another or one person from another, to make sense of our environment. Next, we will see how memory works with language to anchor identity. Both *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli* and *L'Ignorance* demonstrate a connection between language and memory—Tamina in her search for stability, and Irena and Josef in their search for a renewed identity after a long period of absence.

Chapter Three Exile and Memory

Memory is at the core of human sensibility, and its relationship to identity in the context of exile is crucial. In Chapter 1, we discussed the concept of the anchor in the homeland—aspects of identity expression that tie the individual back to their country of origin. In Chapter 2, we noted that language is one of the main anchors of identity for the exilé. In this chapter, we will see that memory is what tethers this anchor to the homeland. We will also see how time and memory interact and contribute to the evolution of identity of exiled characters in Kundera’s novels, especially Tamina in *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli*, and Josef and Irena in *L’Ignorance*.

If we look closer at the titles of the two novels, we can already extract the theme of memory. *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli*—laughter and *forgetting*, suggests, even before turning the cover, the theme of memory. Its juxtaposition with memory is thought-provoking. How might *forgetting* and *remembering* function together? A book of forgetting seems to imply a book that expounds reasons to erase the past and move towards the future. Laughter might be a remedy, or a medicine for forgetting. The concepts of *ignorance* (the refusal to understand, acknowledge or see, or the act of ignoring something) the other novel’s title, and memory or forgetting are also closely related:

Memory gives us continuity and complexity, profound pleasure as well as deep pain. Forgetting gives us simplicity, obliviousness, the pleasures of the moment, the satisfaction of pure bodily existence...Kundera carries the images which constitute these four paradigms⁷ (the two opposed pairs) into his depiction of personal life as well, where interesting correlations

⁷ Eagle’s essay also considers an opposition between “demonic laughter” and “angelic laughter” in the text, a theme less pertinent to the analysis in this thesis.

with love, faith, lyrical passion, physical sexual satisfaction, eroticism, power, and narcissism are revealed. (Eagle 153)

In other words, Kundera creates a binary opposition between the concepts of memory and forgetting that constructs a basic framework for many aspects of the characters' decisions and identities. A certain kind of "play" exists between the two concepts. Characters often find themselves in situations where they are confronted with forgotten memories, or where their memory does not match up to reality. We also observe several moments in which two characters remember the same event differently. In the novels, these moments present the most significant anecdotes of identity search. Titling these two novels with the words, *forgetting* and *ignorance*, Kundera ensures the reader makes connections with the characters and their actions, the theme of exile, and the historical context that shaped and inspired them.

Forgetting is often disregarded in the study of discourse because it is a "commonplace" notion concerning the idea of memory. However, it provides an insight into the role of memory and the effect it has on people and characters. The fragmentary process of forgetting for exiled characters shapes our understanding of their psychological and personal development. Forgetting has a dynamic affect on the exilé, who goes through an altering journey characterized by redefinition and self-discovery :

We value forgetting because it negates, because it lacks positive value or content. Forgetting contributes to memory insubstantially, only by deletion, without offering a substantial ground of rhetorical, political, or ethical practice in its own right. However, the commendable substance of memory is never in question. (Hawhee & Vivian 90)

The effect that forgetting has on an individual is just as poignant as concrete memories. Although forgetting is a gray area, we will see through the examples in this chapter how characters face previously-forgotten aspects of their life before exile.

Damnatio memoriae

In the case of the former Czechoslovakia, the oppressive government played a role in altering memory and history in order to protect its interests and prevent political dissidence. People were *instructed* to forget the past, a fact which is most explicit in the way the regime manipulated photographic images. This not only altered the global community's understanding of Czechoslovakia, but it also forcefully thwarted popular resistance to the regime.

The first chapter of *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli* opens with a historical anecdote about former Czechoslovak leader, Klement Gottwald, that exposes such manipulation. This episode recounts a famous address that Gottwald made to the people of Prague in the early stages of the Communist takeover. Because of the importance of this event, numerous cameras were present, and iconic photographs were taken. The evolution of one of these photographs and the mnemonic intent of its censorship opens the novel:

Gottwald était flanqué de ses camarades, et à côté de lui, tout près, se tenait Clementis. Il neigeait, il faisait froid et Gottwald était nu-tête. Clementis, plein de sollicitude, a enlevé sa toque de fourrure et l'a posée sur la tête de Gottwald.

La section de propagande a reproduit à des centaines de milliers d'exemplaires la photographie du balcon d'où Gottwald, coiffé d'une toque de fourrure et entouré de ses camarades, parle au peuple. C'est sur ce balcon qu'a commencé l'histoire de la Bohême communiste. Tous les enfants connaissaient cette photographie pour l'avoir vue sur les affiches, dans les manuels ou dans les musées.

Quatre ans plus tard, Clementis fut accusé de trahison et pendu. La section de propagande le fit immédiatement disparaître de l'Histoire et, bien entendu, de toutes les photographies. Depuis, Gottwald est seul sur le

balcon. Là où il y avait Clementis, il n'y a plus que le mur vide du palais.
(LRO, 13-14)

Clementis' role in this anecdote is brief, but the role he plays in illustrating the actions of the Communist party and their altering of history is essential. He was an important foreign minister and member of the Communist party whose role was influential enough for him to be present at this public event. Gottwald had just been made the first president of Communist-era Czechoslovakia. He was the most powerful person in the country. Clementis' natural instinct to lend the president his hat can thus be seen not only as a sign of respect but also as a form of patriotism in support of the regime change.

Kundera does not provide further information about Clementis' accusation of treason, his incarceration, or the proceedings that later led to his execution. All we know is that a mere four years passed between his presence at one of the most iconic moments in Czechoslovakian history and his death (the historical accuracy of this anecdote is, however, confirmed in Chapter 4 Pichová's book). The government, as a method of ensuring that his treasonous behavior would have no further influence, manipulated this famous photograph to erase him from the records. As mentioned in the passage, everyone knows this photo—it has been used in countless brochures and political propagandist publications. It is an icon of the Communist regime. In the eyes of the government, however, Clementis' entire existence is erased. This is a *damnatio memoriae*, that is, a deliberate political act on the part of the Communist regime to avoid being overthrown, and to provide an example to its citizens of what may occur should they dissent in a similar way. Government officials needed to alter the photo to ensure their own protection. Ignorance and passivity are associated with this example of *damnatio*

memoriae, as the Czech people accepted this photographic manipulation as valid and appropriate. This anecdote illustrates a skewed vision of reality on the part of the government as well as a total power control over the past, which trickles down to its people. It also shows how people can be quick to forget the past, and move on to the future.

Clementis was executed for his political resistance (again, the reader does not know the full context of the story). However, execution was not enough. The government felt the need to erase him even further—to banish him from history and delete his legacy. Today, the Czech government acknowledges Clementis' existence and even includes the photograph (original and manipulated versions) in digital form on the government's website, but until the Velvet Revolution in 1989, it was as if Clementis had never existed, let alone lent a hat to his president.

Despite his erasure, Clementis' shadow remained present in the manipulated photograph. Kundera highlights this in his chapter in order to show that despite the intent of the government to destroy a man's existence, he could never fully be erased from history, and small clues remained: "De Clementis, il n'est resté que la toque de fourrure sur la tête de Gottwald" (LRO 14). The people of Czechoslovakia, although legally obligated to forget this man's influence on their country, could not fully forget him because of his presence in the photo, marked by the fur hat that was not deleted. His deletion from history is a metaphor for exile, because it highlights the way in which the past is easily forgotten. Czechoslovakians who decided to flee the country during the period following Gottwald's tenure did so in order to avoid the same fate: deletion, condemnation, and death.

This passage is representative of memory as a focus in Kundera's work. Moreover, since one of Kundera's goals in writing is to expose the situation in his country while addressing western culture vis-à-vis the French reader, an anecdote of oppressive Communist censorship adds a historically accurate and emotional component to the very first words he published as a writer in exile. It reinforces the connection between the fictional narrative and empirical political facts—an *effet de reel* as Barthes would call it. In a way, Kundera nods to his former compatriot and fellow Communist by opening the book with his story. Clementis' association with the memory of the Czech people in relation to the sociopolitical ideology of the mid-twentieth century sets the stage for other characters to grapple with their own problems of remembering and forgetting.

More photographs, Fewer Memories

As discussed in the previous chapter, Tamina, the most prominent figure of exoteric exile in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*, wants to remember the past because it is the only way to ground her identity as a Czech woman and to reconnect with the fading memory of her now deceased husband. In her case, memory and language contribute to the stabilization of her situation. One of Tamina's primary methods of creating this connection is a photograph of her husband.

In Prague, she kept a journal chronicling everything she and her husband did together during their eleven years of marriage. She recorded their vacations, their love story, and all the different nicknames he had given her over the years. However, because of their hasty departure, she had to leave these journals and her husband's love letters behind at her in-law's house. Now in France, she attempts to rewrite those journals from

memory, but her memory is failing her. It is not surprising that Tamina cannot remember the details of her relationship, the most stable aspect of her identity prior to becoming an exilé, because of the trauma of her escape and exile. This trauma alters her memory and her perception of time and self: “Car Tamina est à la dérive sur un radeau et elle regarde en arrière, rien qu’en arrière. Le volume que son être n’est que ce qu’elle voit là-bas, loin derrière elle. De même que son passé se contracte, se défait, se dissout, Tamina rétrécit et perd ses contours” (LRO 138).

Included in the items she left behind in Prague were all of the photographs they had taken together. The only photograph that remains of her husband is his passport photo, a government issued document:

Elle regardait cette pauvre image tamponnée, écornée, où son mari était pris de face (comme un criminel photographié par l’Identité judiciaire) et n’était guère ressemblant. Chaque jour elle se livrait devant cette photographie à une sorte d’exercice spirituel : elle s’efforçait d’imaginer son mari de profil, puis de demi-profil, puis de trois quarts. Elle faisait revivre la ligne de son nez, de son menton, et elle constatait chaque jour avec effroi que le croquis imaginaire présentait de nouveaux points discutables où la mémoire qui dessinait avait des doutes. (LRO 134-5)

Tamina engages with this photo in a sort of mnemonic ritual. She envisions the photograph evolving into the body of her husband and she can imagine his face turning and moving, and remember his actual appearance and movements. The purpose of the photograph is just that: an aide-memoire for Tamina to preserve a specific point in time. However, this specific photograph contradicts the search for pleasure. The passport photo shows the subject in a very controlled and austere way. It represents her husband’s former identity as a Czechoslovakian citizen, conforming to the oppressive state and controlled by its will. The worn condition of the photo, the government stamps that cover

it and the lifeless expression in her husband's face does not present the individual in the happy way that Tamina would like. He appears like a criminal, an ironic but just description due to their hasty escape from the country. Thus, the photograph marks a rupture between the memory that Tamina wants to have and the actual purpose of the photo: "In a break with the past, its rituals and ancestry, memory appears to have been torn and as a result we busy ourselves with defining 'sites of memory' and attributing objects of the past with symbolic significance" (Cross and Peck 130-131). In other words, Tamina is forgetting her husband as she is trying to remember him. Their departure from the country starts his erasure like Clementis' deletion from historical photographs. The document is illegal in the eyes of her homeland, and at the same time, ironically, it no longer exists. Tamina's use of the photograph directly contradicts its original purpose. Regardless, it is the only physical piece of evidence anchoring her to the past.

Tamina's journal and *Litost*

Tamina withstands deep emotions of *litost* throughout her exile in France. Her relationship to the photograph of her husband described above serves as an unstable anchor to the past. Although she creates a mnemonic ritual with the photograph, it does not lead her to reconnect fully with her husband or his actual body, leaving her feeling empty, lost and disappointed. Although her personal situation allows her amnesty and the ability to return to Prague, she is afraid because of the legacy of her husband.

Communication with loved ones in Prague is spotty—she is afraid.

Tamina's secondary attempt at building an anchor is similarly precarious to her ritual with the photograph. To reconnect with her previous identity (identity as a Czech person in Prague), she aims to re-obtain the packet of notebooks and letters she left

behind that include correspondence and detailed notes on her relationship with her husband. These are physical representations of her prior identity as Czech and as wife. Now, as an exilé and a widow, these personal words and correspondence are her only hope for happiness and stability:

Elle veut avoir ses carnets pour que la fragile charpente des évènements, telle qu'elle l'a construite dans son cahier, puisse recevoir des murs et devenir la maison qu'elle pourra habiter. Parce que, si l'édifice chancelant des souvenirs s'affaisse comme une tente maladroitement dressée, il ne va rien rester de Tamina que le présent, ce point invisible, ce néant qui avance lentement vers la mort. (LRO 138)

Tamina recognizes the integral role these notebooks play in her life. In France, her new home, she does not feel at home. In a way, the notebooks are another “site of memory” as noted above by Cross & Peck. They represent the possibility for happiness, stability, and the ability to finally create a new home. The words her husband used to call her (it is explained that each year he developed a new pet name for his wife), are lost except for their existence in her diaries. According to Pifer, the human tendency to “[rely] on human and cultural identity upon language, and of language upon memory” is key (65). In order to find a new identity and to regain strength and motivation, Tamina needs to remember these words. They lie deep within her memory, but the trauma of exile is blocking them from coming out.

Despite her inner turmoil, Tamina knows how to use her likeable personality and good listening skills to draw people in. She becomes widely known for being a good listener, a skill that not only helps her make money in her job as a waitress at a local bar, but one that helps her draw in people who can potentially help her in her quest. Although she does not fully reciprocate these feelings, she still attempts to use them to her

advantage. She knows that if she is unable to fully connect with her past, creating connections with the present might be a successful way of rebuilding her past identity, in turn, ensuring stability for the present and the future.

To get the documents, she relies on the relationship she has built with a French man, Hugo, after a similar attempt with her friend Bibi does not work out. Hugo has a telephone in his apartment. From there, she is able to speak her own language on the phone, connect with former loved ones, and hide her ulterior motives. Hugo, who is romantically interested in Tamina, promises to go to Prague to retrieve the notebooks from her brother. As a rite of confirmation, Tamina sleeps with Hugo, despite the inner turmoil this makes her feel:

Voici trois ans qu'elle songeait avec crainte à cet instant. Voici trois ans qu'elle vivait sous le regard hypnotique de cet instant. Et il était arrivé exactement comme elle se l'imaginait. C'est pourquoi elle ne se défendit pas. Elle l'acceptait comme on accepte l'inéluctable. Elle ne pouvait que détourner la tête. Mais ça ne servait à rien. L'image de son mari était là, et à mesure qu'elle faisait pivoter son visage l'image se déplaçait à travers la pièce. C'était un grand portrait d'un mari grotesquement grand, plus grand que nature, oui, exactement ce qu'elle imaginait depuis trois ans. (LRO 171-172)

This moment of intimacy is not pleasurable for Tamina. The “presence” of her dead husband at the scene symbolizes the transgressive nature that she associates with the sexual act. Although her husband has died, her main mission in life is to remember him and to stay faithful to him. For Tamina, this act is a business contract between herself and Hugo; however, the disapproving nature that the presence of her husband’s memory has on this episode makes her feel further lost, alone, and broken.

But Hugo cancels his plans to Prague because he realizes that Tamina does not love him, that she was only using him. Tamina’s *litost* is the result of her destroying any

chance of connecting her tether—she suddenly realizes this goal as impossible. He was her last hope. The chapter ends with the bleak suggestion that she will never feel happiness again, nor return to Prague: “elle a continué de servir des cafés et elle n’a plus jamais téléphoné à Prague” (LRO, 180). This decision not to call Prague again describes a solid rejection of her native tongue. In France, she has nobody to speak with in Czech. A failed attempt at reconnecting ultimately leads her to stop trying, and to accept her fate. She is too afraid to return to Prague because of the government’s power and control over the people. She succumbs to a negative *individuation*, in which she completely shuts herself out from the world around her, and possible future tethers, relationships, and happiness. Eventually, her attempts to reconnect fully with the past and to re-obtain her diaries fail her. These relationships she built in France, give her false hope in her quest for anchorage, and ultimately leave her feeling the emotion of *lítost*.

Plural Memories, Unparalleled Experiences

In *L’Ignorance*, Irena is more successful than Tamina in reconnecting with her old country on a personal level. During one of her trips back to Prague⁸ she has an encounter in the airport while awaiting her departure: she runs into a former lover, Josef, also an exilé traveling back to Prague for the first time.

Un jour, à l’aéroport de Paris, elle passa le contrôle de police et alla s’asseoir dans la salle d’attente. Sur le banc d’en face, elle vit un homme et, après deux secondes d’incertitude et d’étonnement, elle le reconnut. Agitée, elle attendit le moment que leurs regards se rencontrent et elle sourit. Lui aussi sourit et inclina légèrement la tête. Elle se leva et alla vers lui qui se leva à son tour.
« On s’est connu à Prague, n’est-ce pas ? » lui dit-elle en tchèque. « Tu te souviens encore de moi ? »

⁸ Although it is not explicitly stated, the novel’s narration suggests that she has started to return to Prague fairly often.

—Bien sûr. (*L'Ignorance* 47-48)

Although it takes her a moment, Irena remembers meeting this man, and she is deeply moved by this encounter. Their conversation leads them to realize they have had similar experiences over the years. Josef has spent his exile in Denmark, and has led his life as an exilé much like Irena: he built a life, started a career and a family. At the moment of their reunion, however, he finds himself at a crossroads, and he is returning to Bohemia because of a certain melancholy and loneliness.

Irena remembers their meeting fondly: “Jamais elle n’avait oublié leur rencontre lointaine... Leur histoire d’amour s’était interrompue avant d’avoir pu commencer. Elle en garda du regret, une plaie jamais guérie” (*L'Ignorance*, 49). For her, their original encounter was meaningful because it made her feel desired and interesting. The memory of their meeting was strong enough that she kept it with her throughout her life—her time in Prague, her marriage, her exile, and her return. However, Josef does not remember her at all, and only says he does out of politeness. It is possible that he just does not recognize her; regardless he searches through his layers of memory in order to remember her name. He cannot, but because he is intrigued by her memory of and attitude towards him, he agrees to see her again during his stay in Prague.

One of the final episodes in *L'Ignorance* involves the physical reconnection between these two characters. Interestingly enough, this episode occurs simultaneously to the one that occurs between Gustaf and Irena’s mother. They find themselves involved in an intimate situation in a hotel the day of Josef’s departure. During this incident, Irena finally realizes the truth:

Elle a tout compris : ce n'est pas seulement qu'il a oublié leur rencontre dans le bar, la vérité est pire : il ne sait pas qui elle est ! Il ne la connaît pas ! Dans l'avion, il ne savait pas avec qui il parlait. Et puis, soudain, elle se rend compte : jamais il ne s'est adressé à elle par son nom !

In this moment of extreme vulnerability, Irena realizes the true dynamic between her and Gustaf, and experiences a feeling of *litost*. The anchoring aspect of his memory suddenly fails. A solid piece of her identity, one that she kept with her throughout her exile in France, disintegrates in a matter of seconds. The symbolic significance of their brief past together no longer matters, because it is not a shared memory.

Layered Memories of Time and Space

Prior to the episode described above, upon his arrival in Bohemia, Josef goes directly to the cemetery where his mother is buried. This trip mirrors the mnemonic experience he lives as an exilé returned. First, during his drive to his hometown in the countryside, he gets lost because the landscape has changed—new construction of buildings lines the route. These buildings do not match what he remembers. The French word *dérouté* is used to describe his experience looking for the cemetery. He is “rerouted” from his memory: what he remembers, he does not see (the idea of being “rerouted” also brings to mind the “uprooted” aspect of his departure from Bohemia and exile in Denmark).

Finally, upon arriving at the cemetery, his memory is further “rerouted” when he sees the effect of the communist regime on the graveyard:

Il regarda la stèle ; le marbre était couvert de nombreux noms : apparemment, la tombe était devenue entre-temps un grand dortoir. Entre l'allée et la stèle, il n'y avait que du gazon, bien entretenu, avec une plate-bande de fleurs ; il essayait d'imaginer les cercueils au dessous : ils devaient être les uns à côté des autres, par rangées de trois, superposés sur plusieurs étages. Maman était tout en bas. Où était le père ? Mort quinze

ans plus tard, il était séparé d'elle par au moins un étage de cercueils.
(*L'Ignorance* 51-2)

The fragmented and layered organization of the graves in this cemetery mimics the treatment of Czechoslovakians during the period of Communist oppression, an experience that Josef and other exilés did not go through because they were away. Suddenly, upon returning to the country, the memories and emotions that he experiences are similar to this layered structure. There is a lack of temporal understanding from Josef's perspective. While observing the status of the cemetery, he recalls the day of his mother's funeral, envisioning the cemetery in its former state, and imagining the funeral of his father, an event that he had to miss. His visions and thoughts contradict what he sees. In looking at the names on the tombs, he learns the deaths of many people he knew—family members and loved ones included. In this moment, Josef feels caught between two worlds, feeling estranged from his homeland.

In her book on memory and exile in the work of Kafka and Kundera, Píchová theorizes that the exilé is always torn between Kierkegaard's concept of two neighboring kingdoms, each one inaccessible to the other. She notes:

The art of negotiating between these two kingdoms [...] is a complicated one. This task challenges the powers of the imagination because the émigré must juggle the lure of the potentially suffocating, yet well-known past and the pull of the inevitable forgetting, exacerbated by the pressure to leave behind all that he or she was and to quickly be assimilated into the present, the new country. (Píchová 2).

However, Josef has succeeded in crossing the “forbidden” boundary from one kingdom (his land of exile) to the other (his homeland). We understand that his negative emotions are not because he did not know about these deaths, but rather, because his exile led him to be viewed in a similar way: during his absence, he was forgotten, essentially regarded

as deceased himself. Thus, the fragmented connection he perceives from his memory and the actual states of things prevent him from re-identifying with his past.

This experience, while possibly more personal and emotional, explains why he forgets Irena. The lapse of time, and the different events that occurred separated him so much from fact, that he is no longer part of his own memory. This is why he does not remember Irena, but this may also be because she does not anchor him to the past. On the contrary, Irena felt a strong connection during their meeting. She uses this memory of Josef as an anchor to the past. The layering effect privileges certain memories over others. For Irena, the encounter with Josef was integral to her identity in Prague. For Josef, it was not.

Cultural Connections and Memory

Irena has a similar upsetting encounter with memories of the past during her first visit to Prague. As we have seen, she has built a stable life in France, and does not recognize her exile as traumatic until she returns to Prague for the first time.

Reconnecting with her old friends helps her regain a sense of her old identity. However, it also highlights the difficulty of return. During her first trip home, she reconnects with a group of women whom she knew prior to her departure twenty years earlier. To make this reconnection, she brings several bottles of French wine to share:

Elle a feuilleté ses anciens carnets d'adresses, s'arrêtant longuement sur des noms à demi oubliés ; puis elle a réservé un salon dans un restaurant. Sur une longue table appuyée au mur, à côté des assiettes de petits-fours, douze bouteilles attendent, rangées. En Bohême, on ne boit pas de bon vin et on n'a pas l'habitude de garder d'anciens millésimes. Elle a acheté ce vieux vin de bordeaux avec d'autant plus de plaisir : pour surprendre ses invitées, pour leur faire fête, pour regagner leur amitié. (*L'Ignorance* 38)

Many of these people, however, are “*demi oubliés*” and disconnected from Irena’s current state of mind and memory. Regardless, she invites them, hoping to reestablish former connections. The idea of being “half-remembered” relates to the layering effect of fragmented memories discussed above. The lack of linear structure in Irena’s memory has led her to forget certain details, and privilege others. By only “half” remembering people, she acknowledges how her time away has affected her connection to her old relationships.

Wine is Irena’s method for reconnecting. Her bohemian origins did not give her an appreciation for wine; her exile in France, however, allowed her to adopt this part of her new culture as something she loves and appreciates, and wants to share with her compatriots. Now, connecting the two cultures, French and Czech, she can bridge the gap between her old and her new self, share her experience with Czech women, and introduce them to her new culture.

Her attempt fails. Irena, caught up in her love for wine, does not consider the importance of beer in Czech culture and does not envisage that her old friends may simply be uninterested in the wine she brings because they have no positive connections to wine: “Elle a failli tout gâcher. Gênées, ses amies observent les bouteilles jusqu’à ce que l’une d’elles, pleine d’assurance et fière de sa simplicité, proclame sa préférence pour la bière. Ragillardies par ce franc-parler, les autres acquiescent et la fervente de bière appelle le garçon” (38). Irena does not remember this importance: “Irena se reproche de n’avoir plus de goût pour la bière; elle a appris en France à savourer la boisson par petites gorgées et s’est déshabituée d’avaler une abondance de liquide comme l’amour de la bière exige” (40-41). In rejecting her wine, Irena’s friends nullify her twenty-year

experience in France: they only care about the connection they had prior to her departure. This episode reveals the double-effect of exile. Irena is considered a foreigner in her new country, but has adopted the cultural values and practices in France. Now in an attempt to reconnect with her old culture, the rejection of the wine by her old friends exiles her again—she does not belong in France, according to French people, and now she does not belong in Prague.

Eventually, one of the women suggests they try Irena's wine. This is after everyone had been drinking beer and the atmosphere has become more warm and convivial. They do not follow Irena's lead, but the lead of this other woman. Ironically, this same friend proclaimed they ought to drink beer in the first place, and one of the people whose names Irena does not remember right away. Her suggestion to drink the wine almost saves the evening for Irena, who now feels accepted again into her group of friends. Soon again, the connection fades:

Irena est sous l'emprise d'une vision soudaine : des chopes de bière à la main et riant bruyamment, un groupe de femmes accourt vers elle qui distingue des mots tchèque et comprend, avec effroi, qu'elle n'est pas en France, qu'elle est à Prague et qu'elle est perdue. Ah oui, un de ses vieux rêves d'émigration dont elle chasse vite le souvenir : ces femmes autour d'elle ne boivent d'ailleurs plus de bière, elles lèvent des verres de vin et trinquent encore une fois à la fille retrouvée ; puis, l'une d'elles, rayonnante, lui dit : « Tu te rappelles ? Je t'ai écrit qu'il est grand temps, grand temps que tu reviennes ! » (*L'Ignorance* 43-44)

Irena finds herself in a situation that has always terrified her, one in which her friends ignore the experience she lived as an exilée, essentially deleting everything she has grown to know, learn, and love. The simple contrast of beer and wine, which to the Czech women seems unimportant, affects Irena in a way that makes her feel foreign in her homeland. Her friend's question about memory at the end of this passage—*do you*

remember? I wrote you that it is time for you to come home!—further this distance. Irena considers *home* as France. Although her memories anchor her to Bohemia and to the former relationships that she had with these women, her home is no longer Prague. It took her returning to visit to realize that she feels like a foreigner in her homeland, and more of a member of society in a foreign land. This skewed connection to memory, her exile, and her identity unravel her sense of self in a matter of one evening.

Irena's contrast of cultures is not an isolated incident, nor is this type of situation unique to her return, as we see a similar situation in Josef's personal story. Because of the layering effect of his memories, Josef's anchor when he arrives in his hometown again relies on memories of places and objects, rather than memories of events or people:

Avant de quitter le Danemark, il s'était représenté le face-à-face avec les lieux connus, avec sa vie passée, et s'était demandé : serait-il ému ? froid ? réjoui ? déprimé ? Rien de tout cela. Pendant son absence, un balai invisible était passé sur le paysage de sa jeunesse, effaçant tout ce qui lui était familier ; le face-à-face auquel il s'était attendu n'avait pas eu lieu. (L'ignorance 53)

The anticipation of his trip led him to question the emotions he would experience upon reconnecting with the old locations of his childhood. However, when he arrives, he recognizes almost nothing. The broom metaphor destroys his mnemonic anchor. Josef's memory fails him; not because what he perceives is a warped view of reality, but because reality is completely different from his memory.

The image of a broom becomes an important metaphor in Josef's story, and in the idea of return from exile. The omniscient narrator draws a comparison between Josef's return and the return of Odysseus from his twenty-year absence from Ithaca:

Le gigantesque balai invisible qui transforme, défigure, efface des paysages est au travail depuis des millénaires, mais ses mouvements, jadis

lents, à peine perceptibles, se sont tellement accélérés que je me demande : *L'Odyssée*, aujourd'hui, serait-elle concevable ? L'épopée du retour appartient-elle encore à notre époque ? Le matin, quand il se réveilla sur la rive d'Ithaque, Ulysse aurait-il pu entendre en extase la musique du Grand Retour si le vieil olivier avait été abattu et s'il n'avait rien pu reconnaître autour de lui ? (*L'Ignorance* 55)

The narrator highlights the similar nature of Irena and Josef's story with Odysseus' and shows the Czech exilé experience as the modern version of the Odyssey. Josef recognizes nothing; Irena's true experience is ignored.

Josef's connection to physical objects is not only important in regards to places, but also to objects that belonged to him prior to his departure. His visit takes him to his brother's apartment in a building that used to belong to their father. The government expropriated the building once the regime changed, but the family stayed in the home as tenants. This space, unlike the exterior appearance of the town, was more familiar, and it contains several objects that personally belonged to him, notably, an old painting:

Ils conduisirent à travers l'appartement pour lui montrer les changements survenus après son départ. Dans une pièce il vit un tableau qui lui avait appartenu. Après s'être décidé à quitter le pays, il avait dû agir vite. Il habitait alors une autre ville de province et, obligé de tenir secrète son intention d'émigrer, il ne pouvait pas se trahir en distribuant ses biens à ses amis. La veille de son départ, il avait mis ses clés dans une enveloppe et les avait envoyées à son frère. Puis il lui avait téléphoné de l'étranger et l'avait prié de prendre dans l'appartement tout ce qui lui convenait avant que l'Etat ne le confisque. Plus tard, installé au Danemark, heureux de commencer une nouvelle vie, il n'avait pas eu la moindre envie d'essayer de savoir ce que son frère avait réussi à sauver et ce qu'il en avait fait. (*L'Ignorance* 60-61)

Josef never thought of this painting while in exile, even though it seems to represent all the possessions he left behind. His new life gave him no reason to—he started a new career, married, raised children, bought new objects, and was happy. However, the painting is no longer his. His father kept it in his hospital room while he was dying. His

brother's wife, Katy, has grown to love and connect with its beauty—it served as a mechanism of peace and stability for her over the years, a period of time which Josef's brother categorizes as “des années atroces” (63).

Conversely, upon his return, Josef experiences a skewed sense of reality due to the unrecognizable aspects of his homeland, but then this painting becomes a tether to the past and to his identity. He recognizes this object—he can see it, touch it, and connect with it. Moreover, Josef personally knew the artist, and when he sees the painting, he remembers the day he purchased it and his relationship with the painter.

Now, Josef wants to reclaim the painting as his own; this proves difficult because not only has the ownership of the painting changed to Katy, but the emotional connection has also shifted. Even though she never left the country, Katy has used this painting as her own tether during the Communist regime. Unfortunately, this object cannot serve as the anchor for multiple people. Josef does not understand why his brother and sister-in-law do not offer the painting to him but are instead more concerned with him reconnecting with old friends: “Comment! Sa belle-sœur se rappelle son ami N. mais son tableau, elle l'oublie ? [...] Le tableau était à lui, lui seul, avec son nom inscrit à côté de celui du peintre ! Comment pouvaient-ils, elle et son frère, faire semblant qu'il ne lui appartenait pas ?” (68-69).

The plot raises the question: to whom does the painting belong? Josef renounced his ownership of the object when he left the country by entrusting it to his family members, and over time, the painting's symbolism has changed drastically. Does his exile signify a permanent change in ownership of his possessions? Is the painting like the house, repossessed by the government and now owned by someone else? The thought of

returning the painting to Josef does not cross Katy's mind, because she feels it belongs to her. His return does not mark her in the same way, and does not change any aspect of her daily life, her home, and her own memory. Josef leaves without the painting, feeling unhappy and even more lost than he had before, when he did not recognize anything.

The social and political context that surrounds Homer's *Odyssey* is not that of the twentieth-century exile of Czechoslovakians. As we have already established earlier, the experience of exile is what changes, not the concept. All three—Irena, Josef, and Odysseus went through the tribulations of physical separation from the homeland for an extended period. Although the reasons that surround this separation are unique to each individual, exile furnishes the same kind of emotions and realizations when the return is possible.

Memories, Anchors, Layers

The examples provided in this chapter illustrate the effects of memory and forgetting on the characters of exile in the two works. Memory is one of the most stabilizing aspects of the exile experience because memory is a strong tether to the homeland. However, memories are individual, and as time passes, the aspects of memory that are important to individuals change. In other words, characters who experience the same events, remember them in different ways, and form different mnemonic associations. In Clementis' case, his memory was officially "erased" by the government. This was a warning to other citizens to avoid dissident behavior. However, those who did exile themselves underwent a similar mnemonic erasure because they consciously removed themselves from the country. The return from exile, as seen with Irena and Josef, an act meant to help with reconnection, exposes a disconnect from memories and

highlights the danger in rebuilding relationships that lead to the further destabilization of exilé identity.

Conclusion

Towards a Broader Understanding of Exile

In the preceding chapters, we have seen several examples of how Milan Kundera treats his exiled characters. We note that language and memory are two of the main aspects of identity affected by exile. Through their experiences both in a foreign land, and in returning to their homeland, we see how their personal awareness is stretched to the point where their identity becomes unstable.

In the chapter on language and exile, we noted the occurrence of a socio-linguistic shift. In his work, Kundera includes words and concepts that stem from the Czech language to bridge the gap between a Czech mindset (the mindset of the exilé) and a French one (the mindset of the presumed reader). Underscoring terms such as *lítost* and *stýská se mi po tobě* opens up a connection between the two languages and the ideologies associated with them. Language serves, then, either as a stable anchor to the homeland and to the country of exile, or the opposite. In Tamina's case, her isolation from the Czech language and her separation from her personal writings torment her constantly. Irena, who has a strong command of the French language, and has come to identify closely with it, feels an even more striking linguistic shift when she is forced to return to Prague and adopt English as a lingua franca. A certain power is associated with language, and when one is thrown from their linguistic comfort, some of this control they have over their identity goes away.

In Chapter 3, we observed the role of both memory and forgetting in the narrative of the exilé. Memories tie us to our past; thus, for the exilé in Kundera's work, it is the tether to the homeland. We see that memory is intimately connected to every aspect

of identity, including language and relationships. We also noted the equally important affect of forgetting on the exilé's sensibility. Forgotten memories present a poignant view of the psychological stability of an exilé, and the strength of his or her anchor and identity. We notice that the memories of exilés become fragmented and layered, suggesting an unstable connection to reality, and a skewed sense of time. In other words, over time, memories have become warped and disjointed; exiled characters make different connections to them, based on their own personal experience of exile. In addition, because each individual person has a different connection to memory, they will prioritize them in different ways, leading to the layered effect that we note. When characters are confronted with the reality of their exile, which does not match up with their memory or their perception, they realize the full gravity of their situation.

In Chapter 1, we established the approach to exile in Kundera's work as a psychologically identity-changing experience of otherness. We have deconstructed this in the remaining chapters. All of the examples in our two categories, memory and language, lead the exilés to realize a shift in their identity. Tamina, no longer connected to her past by marriage or language and unable to remember her life fully prior to arriving in France, crumbles. Her inability to achieve a stable identity leads her to fall into a state of shock, and commit suicide. Irena and Josef, who both built successful and stable realities in their new countries (France and Denmark), do not experience this breakdown of identity until their return to Bohemia. There, their fragmented and weak connection to memory and language, and their self-serving sexual forays end in the realization of their instability and unhappiness.

As a result, we can identify exile as a non-normative identity—one that is categorized by uncertainty and variability across several aspects of the self. The exiled identity does not present itself in the most positive light; in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*, it fails quickly. In *L'Ignorance*, however, it prevails for an extended period of time. It is only upon return to the homeland that characters endure the negative aspects of this classification, when their individuation becomes self-apparent.

Suggestions for Further Research

This examination of exile in the work of Kundera opens onto other paths of study. Primarily, expanding the study to include other exiled Czech writers and their representation of exile could draw similar and expanded conclusions on the notion. Writer Jan Drábek comes to mind. After fleeing to Canada, Drábek wrote about the situation of émigrés, and the clash that occurs between generations of exiled people. We could consider writers such as Ota Filip, Pavel Kohout, and Jan Beneš (Skvorecky 310-313). These writers were all exiled and expelled from Prague at least temporarily, and fled to different countries. Their treatment of exile in different languages would offer a more holistic understanding of the concept in our times.

Another useful research track would compare writing on exile, versus writing of immigration. Interestingly enough, literary theorist and novelist Paul Tabori, himself an émigré from Hungary during the twentieth century, denies the relationship between exile and nostalgia. He does not consider himself an exilé because his departure from his homeland was completely his own choice. In speaking about his own venture into a new land he says:

...in the past thirty-four years I have felt not the slightest pang of the

exile's nostalgia... Those of my exile friends who would listen I tried to advise by stressing the simple truth that it was very difficult to lead a suitcase life—that after a while they had to unpack, literally and symbolically, something that as a non-exile I had done long ago myself. And perhaps my own peculiar attitude, my non-involvement, may have given me a somewhat more balanced approach, a slightly less biased understanding of the exiles' plight and pride, glory and shame. (Tabori 13)

Tabori's outlook on his own experience of "exile" or immigration perhaps sets him apart from others in similar situations. He did not want to see himself as a victim of his situation, but rather as a strong-willed enterprising person, who did everything in his power to benefit from his situation as a foreign-born person in order to be as successful and powerful as possible. Comparing the outlook on leaving a country as an émigré, rather than as an exilé, could add an interesting level of comparison.

Finally, Milan Kundera's oeuvre is much more extensive than the two novels evaluated in this study. Expanding the analysis to other novels written could also help to enlarge the new understanding of exile that he presents. In this study, for example, we noticed several similarities between Tamina in *Le livre de rire et de l'oubli*, and Irena in *L'Ignorance*. However, because of the placement of these characters in the timeline of his work, we observed that Irena's exile is explained and approached from a different perspective. By analyzing other novels that Kundera wrote, such as *L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être* (1984), *L'Immortalité* (1990), and *La Lenteur* (1995), we can attempt to recognize the evolution of his description of exile.

A New Identity

As we mentioned on page 7 of this thesis, one of Milan Kundera's goals was to expose the sociopolitical situation of his country. He does this through the inclusion of his exiled characters that represent his own experience, and that of countless other people

forced out of Bohemia during the Soviet occupation. By representing the exilé in this way, and focusing on his experience and themes in such a deep and developed manner, we see the emergence of exile as its own identity. We note the importance of stability in relation to this particular identity; a shift in language, an unsound relationship, or a forgotten memory can act as a trigger that throws the exilé off balance. Although the exiled identity has many positive factors, such as expanded relationships and linguistic capacity, these same factors can serve as its downfall. Nevertheless, Kundera's expanded notion of his country's history and political condition in the twentieth century provides us with a strong understanding of the exiled experience, and an expanded comprehension of the human condition.

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