

**Between Exile and Nostalgia:
A Reading of Milan Kundera's *Ignorance***

Dr Monica Garoiu

Abstract

The present article examines the Czech-born author Milan Kundera's French novel, *Ignorance* (2003), focusing especially on its representation as a modern rewrite of Homer's *Odyssey*. To that end, I will seek to explore the poetics of homecoming and the search for identity in the light of Odysseus' *Great Return* to Ithaca, which Kundera weaves into his narrative just to deconstruct it masterfully. Exposing our romanticized vision of the Odyssean "nostos," Kundera points out its inadequacy in this era of migration and exile, a world where the static ideal of home is no longer relevant.

Resembling his characters in *Ignorance*, Milan Kundera – born in 1929 in Brno, Czechoslovakia – immigrated to his adoptive country after being deprived of his social and political privileges for participating in the 1968 Prague Spring. Living in France since 1975, it was only twenty years later that he adopted the French language as the language of his writings.¹ Before becoming a Francophone writer, Kundera was an accomplished and internationally recognized Czech novelist, literary theorist, poet, and playwright. Among his most celebrated books around the world are the novels, *The Joke* (1967), *Life Is Elsewhere* (1969), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1975), and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984); his collection of short fiction, *Laughable Loves* (1969); and his essays, *The Art of the Novel* (1986), *Testaments Betrayed* (1993), and *The Curtain* (2005). His erudition, satire, and acerbic irony, which he considers the essence of the novel, permeate all his texts.

Conscious of the unavoidable loss of the original meaning in the process of translation, Kundera translated or closely supervised the translation of many of his works. Dissatisfied with the French critical reception of his first two novels published in France, he decided to have his novel, *Ignorance*, first published in translation three years before its publication in its original language, French.²

Kundera's Czech and French oeuvres

Ignorance (2003) is the third novel of Kundera's French cycle, following *Slowness* (1995) and *Identity* (1998). It is followed by his last work to date, *The Festival of Insignificance* (2013), a rich and enchanting novel considered the apotheosis of his oeuvres. As the critic François Ricard argues in his postface to the Folio edition of *Ignorance*, Kundera's French novels preserve the main formal characteristics of his Czech writings: "[T]he familiar reader of the Czech Kundera immediately feels at home by approaching the French Kundera: it is the same 'voice,' the same 'method,' the same aesthetic universe," (*Ignorance* 233)³ and in the author's words, the same "thematic unity" which "guarantees a novel's coherence" (*Art* 82).

For example, his debut novel, *The Joke* (1967) – a Kafkaesque work telling the story of a tragic farce⁴ – inaugurates the technique of multiple narrators. The intertwined dramas of the four protagonists/narrators – Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav, and Kotska – cover, through their reflections, several decades of Soviet-controlled communism and their own lives. The story, however, takes place only over a few days during the Normalization period following the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. All the narrators have a distinct style, which helps the reader to identify them when challenged with the sudden switch of perspective. According to Kundera, this polyphonic novel contains the germ of his later works of fiction: it declines the omniscient role of the author and his confession, although he inserts his personal background into the text; it investigates the human condition through the prism of the stories of characters who are seeking their own truths, and it sheds new light on the political and historical context embedded in the various storylines; it transforms private problems into universal ones; it is constructed on the basis of a "meditative interrogation" (*Art* 31).

Although Kundera's second novel, *Life Is Elsewhere* (1969), seems less sophisticated than *The Joke* since it is told in a chronological order from the perspective

of a single narrator, it is a complex satiric novel which adds other key elements that can be identified across the rest of his works. François Ricard states that “*Life Is Elsewhere* is the harshest work ever written against poetry.”⁵ Originally titled *The Lyrical Age*, the book recounts the entanglement between poetry, revolution, and youth. The author superposes the story of its Praguian hero, the innocent poet Jaromil – “a young man whose mother leads him to display himself to a world he cannot enter” (*Art* 84) – set in a Stalinist society, with fragments from the biographies of the greatest poets. Lyricism dominates his narcissistic world, a world without nuances that resembles ideology. It is through Jaromil’s mordant portrait that Kundera satirizes the Czech passion for poetry which resulted in a cultural infantilism – a puerile approach to life and politics that put a blindfold on the reality of a world of suffering and torture – and indirectly critiques the Communist regime. Since history is destructive and deceiving, real life is outside history, elsewhere. With regard to the narrative, one can point out that *Life Is Elsewhere* represents another example of Kundera’s novelistic counterpoint “uniting philosophy, narrative, and dream” (*Art* 80). Moreover, he introduces a technique related to that of several narrators, the multiple point of view of the reflective third-person narrator. This digressive narrative voice, a “movable observation tower,”⁶ contributes to changes of perspective and of the story’s hegemony.

Returning to the comparison between the two sides of Kundera’s textual space in two different languages, Czech and French, critics are keen to see a thematic continuity, a variation on the same themes or “existential inquir[ies]” (*Art* 32) that are at the base of his novels: identity and otherness, exile and homecoming, love and deceit, and memory and forgetting, among others. As highlighted by François Ricard, in *Ignorance*, one can hear echoes of two other emigration novels, *Farewell Waltz* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*; the protagonists remind the reader of other “exiled” characters such as Ludvik from *The Joke*, or in the case of Milada, of the suicidal feminine characters from *Life Is Elsewhere* or *Immortality* (233-34).

Having studied composition and musicology before turning to writing, music left an indelible mark on the structure of Kundera’s texts, which all are patterned after musical compositions. The author’s training as a professional musician explains his frequent references to Bach, Beethoven, Janacek, and Messiaen, as well as his acute interest for the structure of his “compositions.” In *The Art of the Novel*, he asserts that the

“mathematical system” of his novels – their division into parts, chapters, and paragraphs – is also rooted in music: each part, complete in itself and characterized by a different “narrative mode,” is a movement, each chapter a measure variable in length. As for the tempo, “[e]ach of the parts in [his] novels could carry a musical indication: *moderato*, *presto*, *adagio*, and so on” (*Art* 88). Kundera points out that the tempo is “determined [not only] by the relation between the part and the number of chapters it contains,” but also “by the relation between the length of the part and the ‘real’ time of the events it describes.” (*Art* 88). Contrasts in tempi determine shifts in the emotional atmosphere of a novel, which is another lesson Kundera learned from music: “Like it or not, each passage of a musical composition conveys an emotional expression. The sequence of movements in a symphony or a sonata has always been determined by the unwritten rule of alternating slow and fast movements, which almost automatically meant sad or cheerful movements” (*Art* 89).

On the same note, one can argue that Kundera’s Czech novels echo Beethoven’s symphonies – complex, impetuous, and polyphonic – while his French works resemble Bach’s fugues – shorter, more discrete, and displaying a provocative contrapuntal narration.

The return to the homeland in *Ignorance*

Through the homecoming of its two exiled protagonists – or *émigrés*, a term that Kundera seems to prefer – Irena, exiled to France, and Josef, to Denmark, *Ignorance* tells a tale of return to the homeland or, as I argue, of the impossibility of the Great Return. After twenty years of absence, they return to a post-communist Czechoslovakia only to encounter disappointment and disillusion: estranged friends, unrecognizable places, and a different-sounding mother tongue. Moreover, no one shows any interest in the protagonists’ new life or the hardships of their exile: the loss of their partners – Irena lost her husband and father of her daughters, while Joseph, his wife – the painful adaptation process in their new country, their alienation, and nostalgia. The worries they experienced prior to taking the risk of returning home became legitimate. Afraid of being rejected in their old homeland by their former fellow citizens, they question the relevance of the myth of the Great Return in the 21st century.

Moreover, one can easily connect the characters' life stories with the author's biography. As we have previously pointed out, Kundera, like his protagonists, is an *émigré* born in Communist Czechoslovakia – which he prefers to call Bohemia. The main characters' mnemonic journey as well as some of the auctorial interventions reveal details of their lives or of others during the Stalinist regime, many of which could be linked to the author's life as well: the persecution of dissidents by the Party, Josef's political *faux-pas*, the psychological blackmail, the necessity of joining the Party in order to have a career, the guilt – “Everybody was hunting down the guilty and everybody was being hunted down” (92). Thus, through these autobiographical echoes, Kundera confronts, in an indirect manner,⁷ his Communist past and the torment he endured before choosing exile: he was twice banished from the Party, he lost his job as a professor, his books were banned, and he was erased from his country's literary history. However, his citizenship has been restored after more than forty years, which could be interpreted as a symbolic return to his homeland's cultural memory.

Getting back to *Ignorance*, the novel opens *in medias res* with a conversation in a Parisian café between Irena and her French friend, Sylvie, who represents the Western idea of the moral necessity of the return to one's homeland in order to get closure. Kundera ironically questions this commiserative attitude of certain Westerners for whom all exiles are cast in the same mold:

“What are you still doing here?” Her tone wasn't harsh, but it wasn't kindly, either; Sylvie was indignant. “Where should I be?” Irena asked. “Home!” “You mean this isn't my home anymore?” Of course, she wasn't trying to drive Irena out of France or implying that she was an undesirable alien: “You know what I mean!” “Yes, I do know, but aren't you forgetting that I've got my work here? My apartment? My children?” (3)

Furthermore, Sylvie's reaction makes her realize that although she feels at home in France and identifies as a French citizen, she remains to the French an *émigrée* who belongs to her homeland. Comparing her situation to Odysseus', Irena is finally convinced of the necessity of her returning “home”: “Odysseus lived a real *dolce vita*

there in Calypso's land, a life of ease, a life of delights. And yet, between the *dolce vita* in a foreign place and the risky return to his home, he chose the return" (8).

Regarding Josef, the other main protagonist, he had no interest in returning, but his late wife who convinced him that "not going was unnatural, unjustifiable, it was even foul" (71). The desire to fulfill her last wish as well as to escape his loneliness propelled him to travel back to Prague.

Irena and Josef's fortuitous encounter at the Paris airport, while awaiting their departure, introduces the reader to the theme of memory and forgetting. Irena recognizes in Josef the young man from her distant past who had once flirted with her at a bar. Although tempted, Irena had refused his invitation to accompany him to his apartment, but kept the "stolen" ashtray he gave her as a souvenir. Her vivid memory of this episode contrasts with Josef's amnesia. He does not recognize her, but out of politeness and weakness, fails to admit it: "Didn't we know each other in Prague?" she said in Czech. "Do you still remember me?" "Of course." "I recognized you right away. You haven't changed" (46). If that encounter is for Irena an anchor to the past, for Josef, it simply foreshadows his detachment from it.

Josef's selective memory becomes more revealing as the novel progresses. When reading his high school diary, fragments of his platonic love for a young girl come to life before his eyes. However, he fails to identify with his past and his former self. The omniscient narrator calls his condition "masochistic distortion of memory": "[H]e only remembers situations that cause him to be dissatisfied with himself" (74). He vaguely remembers his relationship with this girl – who further in the novel turns out to be Milada, the only person at Irena's gathering who communicates with her – who, according to his selective recollection of the event, used her class trip as an excuse to meet a new boyfriend. At the end of the novel, the reader finds out that Milada's perspective is antithetically different: she attempted suicide in the mountains, where she almost froze to death.

When Milada's character is introduced in the novel, the narrator insists on her physical description: her unchanged hairstyle and beautiful face that wrinkles when she speaks, and which she often checks in the mirror. Since her name is not pronounced, we could be ignorant of her identity. However, with these clues provided by the narrator, an attentive reader has no difficulty in identifying Josef's teenage love as Milada. The reader

realizes that her reason for cultivating ignorance in others is to protect herself from a judgmental society. Moreover, one should highlight the feminine suicidal intratextuality in Kundera's fictional universe – e.g. *The Joke*, *Life Is Elsewhere*, and *Laughable Loves*, among others – which proves the author's antiromantic tendency as well as his penchant for ridicule. To paraphrase Kundera in *Life Is Elsewhere*, taking one's own life is tragic, while failing suicide is laughable. Moreover, Milada, as other Kunderan heroines, is victimized by the gaze of others and by herself.

Ignorance, The Odyssey, and nostalgia

Homecoming is another thematic pillar of *Ignorance*. Paramount in any *émigré's* imagination, the idea of homecoming and belonging to one's native country is undermined by Kundera's novel. As Katarina Melic points out in her article "The Arithmetic of Emigration or How to Live Elsewhere," from its beginnings with Homer's *Odyssey*, Western literature has been exalting this myth of the great hero and wanderer who, after twenty years of adventures, chooses to return to his loyal wife, Penelope, and to his ordinary and ephemeral life – a paradoxical decision since he was offered an eternal life full of pleasures by the beautiful and divine Calypso: "In Book Five of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells Calypso: 'As wise as she is, I know that Penelope cannot compare to you in stature or in beauty. ... And yet the only wish I wish each day is to be back there, to see in my own house the day of my return!'" (7-8)

On a moral hierarchy, Penelope ranks much higher than Calypso. In other words, Odysseus' choice, his preference to reconcile with the finitude of life, which is our human condition, has shaped a symbolic "moral hierarchy" that became in time a collective praise of the return and nostalgia at the expense of a definitive break with one's origins. The 16th century French poet Joachim du Bellay excellently expresses this idea in a sonnet of his *Regrets*:

Happy he who like Ulysses has returned, successful from his travels,
Or like he who sought the Golden Fleece,
Then returned, wise to the world
To live amongst his family to the end of his age! (sonnet XXXI)

According to the narrator, the word “nostalgia” – a melancholia central to the desire to return – is associated with the pain caused by ignorance. Etymologically, it derives from the Greek *nostos* – return – and *algos* – suffering.

To express that fundamental notion, most Europeans can utilize a word derived from the Greek (nostalgia, nostalgie) as well as other words with roots in their national languages: anoranza, say the Spaniards; saudade, say the Portuguese. In each language these words have a different semantic nuance. Often they mean only the sadness caused by the impossibility of returning to one’s country: a longing for country, for home. ... In Spanish anoranza comes from the verb anorar (to feel nostalgia), which comes from the Catalan enyorar, itself derived from the Latin word ignorare (to be unaware of, not know, not experience; to lack or miss). In that etymological light nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don’t know what has become of you. My country is far away, and I don’t know what is happening there. (4-5)

In Odysseus’ case, the remedy to his suffering is the return to his Ithaca. In his philosophical essay *Irreversibility and nostalgia* (1974), Vladimir Jankelevitch, a Russian-born French philosopher, posits that Odysseus suffers from what he calls *closed nostalgia*: an elementary form of nostalgia, “the most simple and optimistic” (340), since Odysseus longs only for his home and the happiness associated with his return. His suffering ends at the same time as his exile: once back home, he is completely cured of his homesickness with no sadness or regrets. On the other hand, the *open nostalgia* is the exact opposite: the pain and suffering would not end at the return. The exile would start anew in a different territory where finding oneself could be a great challenge.

Thus, Kundera’s protagonists are suffering from open nostalgia: Irena’s return to Prague does not help her regain a sense of her old identity. She cannot reconnect with her old friends; her exile does not spark any interest; her tastes in clothes, food, and drinks have evolved; and her hometown became almost unrecognizable. All this makes her feel different, alienated, an exile in her own country. A notable example is the gathering Irena arranges for her former friends: she brings a case of excellent Bordeaux wine that nobody touches. Instead, they order beer, an inexpensive and popular Czech drink:

Rejecting the wine was rejecting her, thought Irena. Her as the person she is now, coming back after so many years.... She left here as a naive young woman, and she

has come back mature, with a life behind her, a difficult life that she's proud of. She means to do all she can to get them to accept her with her experiences of the past twenty years, with her convictions, her ideas; ... Irena faults herself for having lost her taste for beer; in France she learned to savor a drink by small mouthfuls and is no longer used to bolting great quantities of liquid as beer-loving requires. She raises the mug to her lips and forces herself to take two, three swigs in a row. (37-38)

This episode highlights not only the cultural clash between them, but also the different mentality of Western and Central Europeans. Irena's gesture offends her Czech friends who perceive it as an exhibit of her superior financial situation. She also fails to understand that her old friends have no cultural connections to wine. Nonetheless, by rejecting her wine, she feels as if they invalidated her twenty-year experience of exile. Hurt by their disinterest regarding her life in France, she suddenly realizes that Bohemia is no longer her home.

Regarding Josef, his encounter with his family and his homeland is even more unsettling. His brother and his family live in his old house, confiscated by the Communist Party after he eloped, but given back by the government after 1989. In the house, things that were once dear to him are now owned by his sister-in-law or his brother. For example, an original "painting that recalled the Fauve artistes from the turn of the century" (61) which he had received as a gift from a well-known painter hangs on their wall and he recognizes his old watch on his brother's wrist. Although being a widower is an integral part of his identity, he refuses to tell them his wife has died. Overwhelmed by unease and timidity, he does not reclaim anything.

While visiting his hometown, Josef does not recognize the places of his childhood, or the names on the tombstones in the cemetery. He cannot reconnect with any places or physical objects that anchored him to his past. Furthermore, being isolated from his mother tongue for twenty years, the Czech language suddenly sounds different to him and makes him feel more estranged – a failed connection that shows a shift in his identity:

What had happened to Czech during those two sorry decades? – Josef asks himself.
... Was it the stresses that had changed? Apparently. Hitherto set firmly on the first

syllable, they had grown weaker; the intonation seemed boneless. The melody sounded more monotone than before – drawling. And the timbre! It had turned nasal, which gave the speech an unpleasantly blase quality. ... Josef was listening to an unknown language whose every word he understood. (54-55)

For one moment, however, this strange feeling gradually leaves him, and he can enjoy a light conversation with his only longtime Czech friend, N. Joseph realizes that contrary to his conscious way of speaking Danish, after “recognizing” Czech, “[t]alking was like flying, and for the first time in his visit he was happy in his homeland and felt that it was his” (160). Unfortunately, his joy dissipated soon thereafter; his friend and his wife were not willing to ask him questions about his life, his choices, or his wife. Struck by his wife’s absence, “he understood: if he stayed here, he would lose her. If he stayed here, she would vanish” (160).

Subsequently, Irena and Josef’s disconcerting homecoming seems to be diametrically opposed to Odysseus’ reunion with Ithaca. Unlike our protagonists, Odysseus finds his kingdom almost the same as he left it twenty years before. However, what he recognizes first is the old olive tree, which prompts the Kunderan omniscient narrator to ask:

Would an Odyssey even be conceivable today? Is the epic of the return still pertinent to our time? When Odysseus woke on Ithaca’s shore that morning, could he have listened in ecstasy to the music of the Great Return if the old olive tree had been felled and he recognized nothing around him? (54)

The answer, as *Ignorance* will suggest, is negative. Odysseus’ recognition or *anagnorisis* was not without challenges since Athena made him unrecognizable to his son Telemachus, his wife Penelope, his father Laertes, and his servants. Disguised as a beggar, he is prompted to reveal his identity through different signs: an old scar recognized by his wet nurse, Eurycleia; his sincere words, accepted as such by his son, or his knowledge of certain things of the past – the fruit trees he received as a gift from his father, the immobile bridal bed, carved from an olive tree, that he shared with Penelope. However, there is only one direct recognition scene: Odysseus’ short reunion with his old

and loyal dog, Argos, whose deteriorated state reflects the degradation and disorder of the country. Once his identity as a father, son, husband, owner, and king are reestablished, Odysseus' exile comes to a close, giving place to the comfort and equilibrium of being at home.

Mourning or Melancholia?

In Freudian terms, one can relate Odysseus' return to the end of his twenty years of mourning Ithaca. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud defines mourning as "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (153). One can equate Odysseus' sufferings due to his severance from home with "normal grief" in which "the loss of the object is undoubtedly surmounted, and this process ...absorbs all the energies of the ego while it lasts" (Freud 166). Although Odysseus is overwhelmed with exhaustion, he carries out his task and reestablishes himself as a king. His "long and arduous struggle is ... crowned with success" (Freud 165).

Contrarily, Kundera's protagonists cannot accomplish their mourning, their own ignorance or that of others acting as obstacles that alter this normal process. Their *anagnorisis* or recognition is not successful. As previously discussed, when Irena and Josef meet at the airport on their way to Prague, Irena immediately recognizes in Josef the young man she once briefly met. Josef, however, fails to recognize her, but is too ashamed to accept his ignorance. Josef is also ignorant of the consequences of his teenage breakup: his then-girlfriend, Milada –who in an unforeseen set of circumstances becomes one of Irena's friends in Prague – after attempting suicide, loses an ear, symbol of her psychological mutilation. As for Irena's and Josef's friends and families, they are all ignorant of their life in exile and show no interest in finding out any details of it.

Thus, the protagonists seem to be seized by melancholia, a condition opposed to mourning. Freud asserts that melancholia "contains the same feelings of pain" (152) as mourning. However, "[t]he object has not perhaps actually died, but has become lost as an object of love (e.g. the case of a deserted bride). ...[O]ne feels justified in concluding that a loss of this kind has been experienced, but one cannot see clearly what has been lost. ... [One] knows whom he has lost but not *what* it is he has lost in them" (Freud 155). If Milada's character is a clear case of melancholia, Irena's and Josef's open wound

might have a cure: identifying the object of their loss and regaining their self-esteem, which they question incessantly.

At the end of the novel, in an ironic reworking of *The Odyssey*, they spend Josef's last night together in the country in a hotel room – a “non-place” as defined by the French anthropologist, Marc Augé: a space of transience where human beings remain anonymous and that does not hold enough significance to be regarded as a “place” – which symbolizes their feelings toward themselves and their homeland. On the night table, they find a copy of *The Odyssey* in Danish, which opens a discussion on the parallels between the wanderings of the Homeric hero and their own. They question Odysseus' joyous return, his recognition by Penelope, and her faithfulness:

“I thought about Odysseus too,” [Irena] tells Josef when he returns. “He was away from his country like you. For twenty years.”...“But at least he was pleased to be back.”“That’s not certain. He saw that his countrymen had betrayed him, and he killed a lot of them. I don’t think he can have been much loved.” “Penelope loved him, though.” “Maybe.” “You’re not sure?” “I’ve read and reread the passage on their reunion. At first, she didn’t recognize him. Then, when things were already clear to everyone else, when the suitors were killed and the traitors punished, she put him through new tests to be sure it really was he. Or rather to delay the moment when they would be back in bed together.”...“Was she faithful to him all that time?” “She couldn’t help but be. All eyes on her.” (Kundera 176-77)

Talking about Penelope's night with Odysseus, Irena becomes giddy and repeats her sentence “with the explicit mention of her sex organs” several times, in words more and more obscene. As a result, Josef will experience an epiphany. Being “aroused to a degree he has never been since he left [his] country” (178), he unexpectedly realizes the power of those dirty Czech words over him:

[A]ll those words –coarse, dirty, obscene – only have power over him in his native language (in the language of Ithaca), since it is through that language, through its deep roots, that the arousal of generations and generations surges up in him. Until this moment these two have not even kissed. And now thrillingly, magnificently

aroused, in a matter of seconds they begin to make love. Their accord is total, for she too is aroused by the words she has neither said nor heard for so many years. A total accord in an explosion of obscenities! Ah, how impoverished her life has been! (178-79)

As Kundera states in *The Art of the Novel*, obscenity is “the root that attaches us most deeply to our homeland” (145).

Although the protagonists’ relationship proves to be a one-night stand – foreshadowed by the liminality of the hotel room, a modern substitute of home – it has a powerful impact on their self-knowledge. Their unsuccessful return to their homeland becomes, however, a great return toward themselves. Being able to discover deep down in themselves the roots of their Czech identity through forgotten words in their maternal language, they become finally aware of their dual identity. This difference they embrace within them will provide them, as Julia Kristeva states in her essay *Strangers to Ourselves*, “with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of [their]imagining and thinking” (13-14).

Rhizomatic Identity

The protagonists’ exilic adventure and the failure of their Great Return highlights their hybrid, rhizomatic identity, as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Their odyssey contradicts the Western idea of a single profound root, their belonging to an ancestral national culture located in a geographical space. The rhizome, however, is utterly different:

... unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. ... Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, ... the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature. (42)

Thus, Irena's and Joseph's identities are rhizomatic, multiple, born not from their past but from their present. They are nomads who participate in a community that transcends geographical borders:

It is in this sense that nomads have no points, paths, or land, even though they do by all appearances. If the nomad can be called the Deterritorialized par excellence, it is precisely because there is no reterritorialization afterwards with the migrant, or upon something else as with the sedentary.... With the nomad, on the contrary, it is deterritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself. ... The land ceases to be land, tending to become simply ground (sol) or support. (Deleuze and Guattari 413)

The characters' rejection of rootedness in Kundera's novel coincides with the acceptance of a mode of being in which homeland is "but a camp in the desert."⁸ Their refusal of Europeanness redirects their attention toward the salvific potential of an apolitically conceived geography.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Ignorance*, a meditation on exile and nostalgia, has a strong intratextual relationship with Kundera's other Czech and French works. Written in French, this third volume of his French tetralogy could be seen as a bridge between the two sides of the author's novelistic universe. One can highlight the reiteration of several themes – such as alienation and exile, memory and forgetting, love and deceit – through its Czech protagonists who challenge the stereotypes of Eastern/Central-Western Europe in the modern world. Moreover, from a technical standpoint, one can add the polyphony, the authorial historical and cultural digressions, and the irony, omnipresent in his novels.

Ignorance challenges one of the oldest myths of the Western world, the myth of Odysseus' Great Return. Highlighting the similarities between the protagonists' story and that of Homer's hero, it shows the Czech exile as a modern version of *The Odyssey*. Their connection to European history, cultures, languages, and relationships makes the reader understand Kundera's approach to exile: he (Kundera) expresses the idea that in our

contemporary world, our sense of national belonging should weigh as much as any other experience. Since national identity is a strong European concept, the author questions Europeanness and seeks to prove, through the wanderings of his characters, that the Great Return to one's homeland is no longer "a viable solution" (Munteanu 15). Kundera's Europe is an affective and "supranational" community, "conceived not as territory but as culture" (*Art* 81).

According to Kundera, homeland is a dated and relative concept: "For the very notion of homeland, with all its emotional power, is bound up with the relative brevity of our life, which allows us too little time to become attached to some other country, to other countries, to other languages" (121). Thus, mirroring the novel's protagonists, one should be able to name homeland the place where one feels at home.

Moreover, *Ignorance* represents Kundera's literary statement of his past, his Czech roots, and a justification of his liberating exile. It also highlights the creative fusion of past and present through the prism of imagination as strategy of successful exiles. For, in the end, one's memory of home(land) is a narrative built on selected memories. *Ignorance* becomes, therefore, a pivotal part of remembering.

Notes:

¹ Kundera's official biography states only: "Milan Kundera was born in Czechoslovakia in 1929 and since 1975 has been living in France."

²In 2000, *Ignorance* has been published in translation in Spain, Portugal, and Italy— where it became a bestseller – three years before being published in France in 2000.

³ My translation.

⁴As a joke, Ludvik, the main protagonist/narrator, writes a postcard to his girlfriend, stating: "Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!" (p. 29). Punished, he was expelled from the university and the Party.

⁵In the postface to the French edition of *Ignorance*, pp. 232-33.

⁶Peter Kussi, "Milan Kundera: Dialogues with Fiction," in Harold Blum, *Milan Kundera*, p. 14.

⁷In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera states: "The novelist is one who, according to Flaubert, seeks to disappear behind his work..." (p. 157).

⁸E. M. Cioran, *History and Utopia*, New York, Arcade Publishing, 2015, p. 10.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *Milan Kundera*. Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
- Deleuze, Gilles, Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Blummsburry Academic, 2004.
- Frank, Søren. *Migration and Literature. Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjøerstad*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." 1917, translated by J. Riviere. *Collected Papers*, edited by M. Khan, vol. IV. London: Hogarth Press, 1971, pp. 152-170.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Oakland: UC Press, 2019.
- Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *L'irréversible et la nostalgie*. Paris: Flammarion, 1974.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.
- . *Encounter*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.
- . *Ignorance*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003.
- . *The Joke*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- . *Life Is Elsewhere*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000.
- . "The Tragedy of Central Europe." *New York Review of Books*, vol.31, no. 7, 26 April 1984, www.kx.hu/kepek/ises/anyagok/Kundera_tragedy_of_Central_Europe.pdf. Accessed 7 July 2021.
- Melic, Katarina. "L'Arithmétique de l'émigration de Milan Kundera ou comment habiter ailleurs." *Annual Review of the Faculty of Philosophy/Godisnjak Filozofskog Fakulteta*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2010, pp. 33-40, http://unsff.ff.uns.ac.rs/fakultet/izdavacka_delatnost/fakultet/godisnjak/2010/GODISNJAK_XXXV-3_10.pdf. Accessed 7 July 2021.

Miletic, Tijana. *European Literary Immigration into the French Language. Readings of Gary, Kristof, Kundera and Semprun*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2008.

Munteanu, Dana L. “Placing Thebes and Ithaca in Eastern Europe: Kundera, the Greeks, and I.” *Arion*, vol. 17, no.1, Spring/Summer 2009, pp. 1-15.

Pireddu, Nicoletta. “European Ulyssiads: Claudio Magris, Milan Kundera, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.” *Comparative Literature*, vol. 67, no. 3, September 2015, pp. 267-86, www.jstor.org/stable/24694591. Accessed 7 July 2021.

Valiakhmetov, Albert, Guzel Golikova, Nadezhda Pomortseva. “The Czech (Czechoslovak) ‘Osmichki’ in the Novels by Milan Kundera: The Problem of Memory and Forgetting.” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2015, pp. 543-49.

Vitali, Ilaria. “L’ailleurs, le chez-soi et le monde : la Weltliteratur de Milan Kundera”. *Venus d’ailleurs. Ecrire l’exil en français. Publifarum*, no. 17, 2012, pp. 1-8, www.farum.it/publifarum/ezine_pdf.php?art_id=210. Accessed 7 July 2021.