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A Joke and Nothing More: Voice, Writing and the Kunderan Comedy of Failed Finitude

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As a second year Comparative Literature major, Joseph Hong became interested in the topic of political comedy and, after visiting Prague, he became interested in its rich intellectual history. The works of Milan Kundera most especially appealed to him. However, Joseph began to feel that the brilliantly comic aspects of his work were being undermined by political interpretations. Hoping to re-assess the comic in Kundera's novels, Joseph decided to write an independent research paper on this topic to truly refine his methods of literary analysis. The UC Irvine Humanities Honors Program provided him with a structured way to conduct independent research.

Abstract

Many scholars have interpreted Czech novelist Milan Kundera's work *The Joke* as a political satire. This emphasizes the political qualities of this text, as it argues that *The Joke* comically critiques the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's injustices and inherent contradictions. In response to these political understandings, Kundera himself once responded, "Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story!". Despite this authorial claim, many have persisted in their political readings. Thus, a hermeneutic—or interpretive—impasse still exists. How do we reconcile Kundera's conceptions of his own work with this body of academic criticism? Resolving these tensions requires turning to Kundera's later novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. This text provides a theory of the linguistic mediums of voice and writing that can be applied to *The Joke*. Reading *The Joke* through the lens of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* allows for an understanding of the Kunderan subject in its inability to properly handle these mediums of language. This emphasizes the comic rather than the political as the crux of the Kunderan text. *The Joke* then becomes a work of meta-political comedy—a comedy about the subject's inability to produce satire. What is at stake, therefore, is a theory of skepticism towards political comedy: Are we able to produce viable political humor despite our own subjective failures?

Faculty Mentor

Photo
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Text to come

Key Terms

- ♦ Aural Presence
- ♦ Authoritarian Symbolic Order
- ♦ Authoritarian/Object Voice
- ♦ Failed Finitude
- ♦ Hermeneutics
- ♦ Split Subjectivity

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Introduction

Born in 1929, novelist Milan Kundera earned literary fame during the Stalinist occupation of Czechoslovakia. Kundera used the political oppression occurring in his country as the context for most of his narratives. He gained international recognition as a result of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia banning his work, resulting in his eventual exile in 1975. Many readers of his first novel, *The Joke*, linger on the politically menacing qualities of the negative representations of the Communist Party. This text portrays the regime as militant and unjust in its persecution of dissenters. However, it is ultimately this novel's dark humor, experimental style and overall philosophical profundity that threaten not just Stalinism but a more general category of authoritarian phenomena. The Kunderan text challenges its readers to reassess both popular notions of political humor as well as traditional methods of reading. Through a complex comedy, *The Joke* subversively critiques not only political but also linguistic and ontological oppression.

First published in 1967, *The Joke* follows a non-linear narrative that uses a sequence of first-person narrators. While various characters narrate their respective eponymously titled sections of the novel, the text frames its greater narrative through the first-person narration of Ludvik, the novel's protagonist. The novel begins with Ludvik returning to his hometown after a decade of working in a military labor camp. He had volunteered to work at this camp after being exiled from the university and the Communist Party for writing a political joke. The novel's narration thus vacillates from the time surrounding the younger Ludvik's conviction to that of the older Ludvik's return to his hometown.

As a young university student, Ludvik had fallen in love with a classmate named Marketa. While the text describes Ludvik as cynical and sarcastic, it characterizes Marketa as having a naïve loyalty to the Communist Party. Ludvik reflects on his younger persona: "At [Party] meetings I was earnest, enthusiastic, and committed; among friends, unconstrained and given to teasing; with Marketa, cynical and fitfully witty; and alone (and thinking of Marketa), unsure of myself and as agitated as a schoolboy" (*The Joke*, 33). Using Ludvik's memory of his former self, the text suggests the fractured nature of its protagonist's subjectivity. In contrast, Ludvik describes Marketa as "the type of woman who takes everything seriously (which made her totally at one with the spirit of the era)" (31). This stark difference between Ludvik's multiple personalities and Marketa's solidarity with "the spirit of the era" is exacerbated by Ludvik's "fatal predilection for silly jokes and Marketa's fatal inability to understand them"

(31). These tensions between the lovers are amplified when Marketa is sent away to a Party training course. Ludvik's already profound disappointment with his lover's relocation was worsened by Marketa's relative nonchalance as she, "far from sharing [Ludvik's] feeling, failed to show the slightest chagrin and even told [him] she was looking forward to it" (34). Despite this geographic separation, Ludvik and Marketa continued their romantic relationship by writing letters. However, their contrasting attitudes towards their current situation remained apparent. At the height of his cynicism and emotional frustration, Ludvik sent Marketa the postcard ("to hurt, shock, and confuse her" (34)) that would result in his conviction: "Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik" (34). While Ludvik wrote this joke in the private context of his romance with Marketa, the joke would have severe repercussions for Ludvik in the public sphere of politics.

After weeks of no response from Marketa, the District Party Secretariat summoned Ludvik to a meeting with the Party University Committee. At the meeting, he is questioned regarding his relationship with Marketa. After answering some banal questions about their interactions, Ludvik is shocked to learn that the committee is in possession of his highly questionable postcard. Ludvik is then interrogated more aggressively regarding his ideological alignments. Following this trial, a shaken Ludvik is dismissed and told to await the Party's decision concerning his punishment.

Upon exiting the meeting room, Ludvik remembers that his close friend and colleague Zemanek is currently the Party chairman who would determine Ludvik's fate. Reassured, Ludvik returns to face his jury and to discover his punishment. To Ludvik's despair, Zemanek has decided to expel him from the Party and the university. After spiraling into despondency, Ludvik enlists himself in a military labor camp. Over a decade later, Ludvik returns to his hometown to seek revenge from Zemanek, ultimately seducing and humiliating the wife of the man who had ruined his life.

Prevalent Readings of the Kunderan Text

While scholarship done on *The Joke* has covered a diversity of topics, the tensions between private and public spaces in Kundera's work have possibly been the most important. This binary opposition provides for many scholars a point of departure for analyzing the relations between the private phenomena of sexuality and the public concerns of politics. For example, Fred Misurella comments on the importance

of this opposition in *The Joke*: “[P]rivate life and public life are juxtaposed, with private life destroyed or, frequently, diminished by changes in public affairs...love and sex are treated purely as manifestations of self interest” (Misurella, 24). From the tensions between the public and the private emerges this second key binary, according to Misurella. Sex and politics, many scholars have argued, are analogous phenomena in Kundera’s work. The opposition is noticeable even in the brief summary of *The Joke* above, as Ludvik writes the joke to exercise emotional power over Marketa. Various critics like Eagleton, Eagle and Misurella have noted that erotic and political relations behave identically within the Kunderan text, the act of intercourse merely representing one subject’s exercise of power over another. This body of scholarship ultimately argues that the Kunderan text destabilizes the division of the public and private, as the public affairs of politics contaminates the intimate privacy of sexuality.

The next two crucial topics of scholarship are two aspects of the same theme: the subject. The first is the aesthetics of the Kunderan subject—that is, the ways the text constructs the self through literary techniques like narration and humor. Most scholars interested in the aesthetics of the Kunderan subject comment on its opacity, instability and failures. Scholars like Craig Cravens and Lubomír Doležel discuss these qualities of the Kunderan subject by analyzing Kundera’s methods of narration. *The Joke*’s use of various first person narrators offers a glimpse into the Kunderan subject’s complexities. Many critics argue that Kundera’s humorous style also contributes to an understanding of the subject. Mark Weeks writes that the Kunderan text configures humor not as an instrument of historical or social change, but as a way for individual subjects to produce “divergences and interruptions” rather than “historical linear movement” (132). The scholarship on the aesthetics of the Kunderan subject thus understands the topic in its various aspects, rather than naïvely attempting to totalize subjectivity in the Kunderan universe.

Finally, many readers of Kundera have analyzed the politics of the subject that result from the historical context of Central European Stalinism. The presence of the Communist regime in Kundera’s novels, especially in *The Joke*, is obnoxious and difficult to dismiss. Scholars like Roger Kimball comment on how this contentious political backdrop constructs an inherently political narrative. Ellen Pifer argues that the Kunderan subject with all of its flaws and complexities undermines the Stalinist regime’s attempts to simplistically totalize and generalize its citizen-subjects. According to Pifer, the Kunderan subject’s very imper-

fection represents a political rebellion against totalitarian ideals of a state based on grossly romanticized subjects in solidarity (Pifer, 64). Unfortunately, this political reading of *The Joke* reproduces this fallacious romanticism by praising the political capacities of these imperfect subjects.

Kundera himself has expressed contempt for these political readings of his work. In a well-known interview, when asked if *The Joke* was a work of political satire, Kundera responded, “Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story!” (*The Art*, ix). Roger Kimball responds to Kundera’s claim by arguing that completely trivializing the political element of this novel would be to “ignore the element that, more than any other, grants it its authority and weight” (Kimball, 208). Leaving this disagreement between the political and apolitical interpretations of *The Joke* unresolved would prevent a complete understanding of Kundera’s work in general. Emphasizing the comedy of the Kunderan text, however, might produce a solution to this impasse.

I attempt to intervene in this body of scholarship by turning to the comic qualities of Kundera’s work and the mediums of language through which the comedy is materialized. While *The Joke* may seem like a political text to some critics, Kundera’s later work *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* provides a way of reading *The Joke* as comic. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was first published in 1979, twelve years after *The Joke*, as a collection of five separate but thematically related short stories. The crucial importance of the linguistic mediums of voice and writing in both of these texts authorizes this comparative analysis. Language in both its textual and aural, or vocal, forms in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* produces a guide for delineating the functioning of writing and voice in *The Joke*.

Understanding how text and speech behave in the Kunderan universe subsequently highlights the comic rather than the political quintessence of *The Joke*. An explication of these linguistic mediums demonstrates how comedy embeds itself in the destabilization of the previously discussed sex-politics binary. I then locate a comic subject where the political and the erotic overlap in the Kunderan text, using Mladen Dolar’s *A Voice and Nothing More* and Alenka Zupancic’s *The Odd One In: On Comedy* for theoretical support. I ultimately argue that the Kunderan subject and its interactions with language within the opposition between politics and sexuality produce a comedy of failed political humor. Thus, my essential claim is that the Kunderan text represents a meta-political comedy—a comedy about political comedy. My analysis demonstrates how the Kunderan subject and its

inability to properly handle language and thus its own subjective being can only result in the comic failure of political humor. This conclusion will be reached by again using *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* as a type of theoretical manual for understanding *The Joke*.

Between Absence and Presence

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, voice and its opposition to writing catalyze the decomposition of key binary oppositions. The novel's many narratives directly confront the traditional associations of writing with absence and speech with presence. Kundera understands that writing as a medium can preserve itself without a present author. Voice, on the contrary, requires a speaking subject present. Kundera destabilizes absence in writing and aural presence through subtle ironies that energize the comedy of his narrative.

In the short story "The Angels," two sisters Gabrielle and Michelle give an academic presentation on Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* and subsequently demonstrate the unreliability of voice. In the crucial scene of this short story, we find the two sisters presenting their analysis of Ionesco's play to their colleagues and instructor. As the sisters explicate the comic essence of *Rhinoceros*, the narrator explains that the sisters had a previous conflict with one of the other students named Sarah. Sarah had skipped class one day to spend time at the beach, and when she asked the sisters for the class notes she had missed, they pompously refused. Noticing an opportunity for revenge, Sarah runs to the stage during the sisters' presentation and kicks each of them in the buttocks. The audience begins laughing hysterically, and the narrative describes the teacher's profound response to what was simply a petty act of revenge between young students: "Madame Raphael, who had initially been caught off guard and was stupefied, realized that Sarah's intervention was an episode devised for a carefully prepared student prank whose aim was to shed light on the subject of their analysis...reading by means of praxis, of action, of a happening" (*The Book*, 102-103). Here, the instructor, Madame Raphael, mistakes Sarah's misbehavior as a highly clever and self-aware method of analyzing *Rhinoceros*. However, this misinterpretation does not endanger an appropriate understanding of the actual text.

In addition, the comedy of this crucial scene began much earlier than the sisters' presentation, when Gabrielle and Michelle refused to give Sarah the class notes for the day she was absent from school. These written notes can be understood as evidence of a student's presence in class on a

given day. Gabrielle and Michelle therefore refused to allow Sarah to feign presence through text or writing—that is, the class notes. As the sisters prohibited the written notes to grant Sarah a false presence for the day that she was absent, in a comedic reversal, Sarah refused to allow the sisters to grant the written text of *Rhinoceros* an aural presence. Thus, the medium of writing moderates the absence-presence opposition in this narrative. Sarah comically disrupts and invalidates the presentation allowing Madame Raphael to understand *Rhinoceros* independently from the sisters' aural presence.

Ultimately, this vignette in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* demonstrates the Kunderan text's use of voice and writing as the materials for comedy. Further, this scene comically belies the reliability of aural presence, as the audience's laughter results in Madame Raphael's misinterpretation. This destabilization can be applied directly to the scene of the trial in *The Joke*, where a failed aural presence results from the isomorphic and sometimes synthetic relationship between sexuality and politics. While many critics have emphasized the functional similarities between these two phenomena in the Kunderan text, it is actually the mediums of voice and writing that regulate their analogous behavior.

The Erotic and the Political: The Split in the Kunderan Subject

In "Lost Letters," *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* presents writing and voice as the phenomena that mediate the binary opposition of sex and politics. The story introduces its protagonist Tamina as she endeavors to acquire the love letters that her now deceased husband had written her. Several years before the present narrative, Tamina and her husband had fled Prague to escape political persecution. To avoid encounters with police officers checking suspicious luggage, they decided not to depart with the bulky parcel containing the love letters (115). Since the death of her husband shortly after their emigration, Tamina has longed to re-obtain those letters to preserve the memory of her husband. She thus becomes obsessed with acquiring these written love letters they had exchanged, and Tamina consequently begins to instrumentalize her peers.

Through Tamina's desire of again possessing these letters, the narrative portrays the phenomenon of partial aural presence. Partial aural presence can be distinguished from a complete aural presence in that the former splits the voice and the speaking subject. An example of Tamina's natural inclination for partial presence clarifies this terminology: "Everyone likes Tamina. Because she knows how to lis-

ten to people. But is she really listening? Or is she merely looking at them so attentively, so silently?" (110). Here, the story introduces Tamina as a good listener, yet the narrator remains skeptical, as Tamina grants those who speak to her only a partial presence. She intensely acknowledges the speaker's physical presence while neglecting the actual speech. From Tamina's perspective, the speaker's aural presence is split: the voice has been severed from subject. However, on one occasion, a complete aural presence abruptly occurs while Tamina listens to her friend Bibi: "[Bibi] told her she was planning to go with her husband on vacation to Prague that summer. With that, Tamina thought she was awakening from a sleep of several years" (111). Tamina "awakens" to Bibi's full aural presence when Tamina notices an opportunity to exploit their friendship to retrieve the love letters. Bibi therefore enters a "complete" aural presence as a means for Tamina to reconstruct memories of her husband.

When Bibi unexpectedly decides against visiting Prague, Tamina begins to foster a romantic relationship with Hugo, a young pseudo-intellectual with connections in Prague who has been obviously attracted to Tamina for several years. As she did with Bibi, Tamina grants Hugo a full aural presence. Aware of Hugo's infatuation, Tamina takes advantage by feigning a reciprocal attraction. The two thus make love several times as Tamina attempts to manipulate Hugo into obtaining her love letters. Here, Tamina uses voice and her own aural presence as the currency within the politics of the erotic. By acknowledging Hugo's full presence and granting him her own complete attention, Tamina maintains the advantage in the relationship as she attempts to exchange aural presence for Hugo's retrieval of the letters. After developing what she felt was a satisfactory sexual relationship with Hugo, she raises his suspicions when she begins to incessantly ask him when he will be visiting Prague.

Realizing Tamina's true motives, Hugo also decides against visiting Prague in an act of revenge. Hugo pretentiously claims that he would be persecuted in Prague for a politically controversial article he had recently written: "The article has caused a great stir...Your police know who I am. I know they do" (158). Hugo's explanation for why he cannot travel to Prague contains both sexual and political dimensions. At the mendacious, yet manifest, level Hugo refuses to visit Prague because of his political publication in which he, "talk[s] about the problem of power" and "analyze[s] how power works" (158) While at a more latent level, Hugo refuses to retrieve the letters in a vengeful act of sexual domination over Tamina. Here, Kundera juxtaposes governmental politics and the politics of sexuality. Further,

it is writing and voice, materialized through Tamina's full aural presence, her husband's letters and Hugo's articles, that serve as the stakes and rewards within these power relations. These mediums of language therefore regulate the politics of sexuality between Hugo and Tamina. The ironic hypocrisy here is that Hugo uses a publication that critiques political power to make a power play within a sexual relationship. Hugo uses a public (or political, to be more specific) form of writing to dominate within his private relationship with Tamina. Further, Hugo's political publications prevent Tamina from acquiring a private form of writing—her husband's love letters.

Hugo also blends politics and sexuality more explicitly through writing. Before his realization of Tamina's agenda, Hugo expresses the desire to write a book: "I want to write a book, Tamina, a book about love, you know, about you and me ...it'll be a political book too, a political book about love and a book of love about politics..." (156). Here, Hugo attempts to compete for Tamina's attention and to ultimately distract Tamina from the love letters. But again, Hugo's writing competes with Tamina's lost letters, the embodiment of her late husband. The text demonstrates this competition through a metaphor:

[Tamina] is perched on her émigré and widow past as on a skyscraper of false pride....Filled with envy, Hugo is pondering the tower of his own that he has been trying to put up facing her skyscraper and she has been refusing to see: a tower made out of one published article and a projected book about their love. (157)

Thus, there exists a competitive element between Hugo's political article as public writing and Tamina's husband's love letters as private writing. The text constructs an architecture of envy for Hugo, which illustrates Hugo's ineptitude in the formidable face of Tamina's longing for her husband. While Tamina exercises power by granting others full aural presence, Hugo attempts to dominate through his writings.

In *The Joke*, Ludvik similarly uses writing to assert dominance within a romantic relationship. However, Ludvik fails to regulate the politics of sexuality with writing, and his joke and postcard ultimately fall into the hands of the Party. Before turning to the scene of Ludvik's trial, the circumstance in which the incriminating postcard was written requires explication. After Marketka leaves for the training camp, Ludvik becomes frustrated and emotionally unstable as a result of his stagnated sexual relationship with Marketka.

He expresses frustration at their relationship consisting only of “a few kisses” (*The Joke*, 34). His anxieties are only deepened by Marketa’s blasé attitude towards the difficult romantic situation. Marketa seems to prioritize loyalty to the party, while Ludvik obsesses over maintaining a passionate romance with Marketa. In response to being defeated by Marketa’s naïve loyalty to the Party, Ludvik sends her this flagrant letter to engage in a different kind of politics.

At the height of his cynicism and frustration, Ludvik writes the joke to Marketa (“Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik.”). The joke embodies the tensions between political loyalty and romantic love that had hitherto been straining Ludvik and Marketa’s relationship. In a naïvely political sense, the joke obviously satirizes the Party’s romantic idealism. However, in another sense, Ludvik sends this joke to Marketa in an attempt to exercise his own power within the politics of their romance. Thus, politics and erotic love are again crucially linked. Ludvik uses the naïve sense of the political as merely a scapegoat for provoking an emotional response from the apparently romantically apathetic Marketa. Ludvik sends Marketa this flagrant letter to essentially remind her and himself of his emotional dominance over Marketa. The joke’s embodiment of the political and the sexual ultimately reflects Ludvik’s own subjective duality. Ludvik is divided into a political subject who gently mocks the project of the Party and an erotic subject who attempts to dominate within the politics of sexuality.

As it had been originally confined to the medium of writing, the joke enters aural dimensions when the Party intercepts the letter and prosecutes Ludvik for political disloyalty. Ludvik narrates his trial:

Do you think socialism can be built without optimism? asked another one of them. No, I said. Then you’re opposed to our building socialism, said the third. What do you mean? I protested. Because you think optimism is the opium of the people, they said, pressing their attack. The opium of the people? I protested again. Don’t try to dodge the issue. That’s what you wrote. (37)

Here, Ludvik is rendered powerless within the aural presence of his prosecutors. The members of the jury continue their accusations within this vocal arena:

We know you have two faces—one for the Party, another for everyone else. I had run out of arguments and kept reiterating the old ones: that it was

all in fun, that the words were meaningless and that there was nothing behind them but the state of my emotions, and so on. I failed completely. (38)

The jury understands Ludvik’s joke only from the perspective of the aforementioned naïve sense of the political. The party fails to see both the sexual and political components of Ludvik’s persona. As a result of the party’s inability to go beyond this superficial understanding, the jury consequently reads from an authoritarian angle, ultimately limiting and crippling their understanding of the joke. This interpretation settles for the simple explanation: Ludvik’s disloyalty to the party. As the party leaders reduce Ludvik’s entire being to a simple binary of two faces, one good and one bad, they fail to see the actual complexities of Ludvik’s persona. The trial demonstrates how the true, sexually-charged intentions of Ludvik’s joke and letter cannot be voiced during a public indictment and must thus be ignored or displaced for the purposes of this authoritarian hermeneutic, or interpretive, method.

The joke reflects the internal struggle between Ludvik’s political loyalty and his desire for Marketa. He writes the joke in an attempt to use political satire within the politics of sexuality. As a result of the Kunderan subject’s internalized blending of sex and politics, voice and writing produce the symptoms of a split subjectivity. The irony here is that the jury charges Ludvik of having “two faces,” yet the reality is much more extreme. While the jury accuses Ludvik of being a hypocrite, hypocrisy is too crude of a term to characterize his persona. Rather, Ludvik’s subjectivity contains a much more severe split.

Mladen Dolar’s *A Voice and Nothing More* clarifies this split through a discussion of the politics of the voice. Borrowing Aristotle’s terminology, Dolar splits the voice, establishing an analogy “between the articulation *phone-logos* and *zoe-bios*” (Dolar, 106). Dolar defines *phone* as the voice of animality, exemplified by exclamations of pleasure and pain. *Logos* represents the civilized voice that sustains the social life through discourse. Analogously for Dolar, *zoe* represents a form of life that embodies primal instincts and produces *phone*, whereas *bios* represents life that depends on *logos* to reside within socio-political propriety (105-106).

The Kunderan subject corresponds with Dolar’s two voices: while Ludvik participates as a political subject under the regime’s authority, his erotic subjectivity attempts to sustain his romantic and sexual relationship with his lover Marketa; while Ludvik’s *logos* grants him a position within the Communist Party, his *zoe* operates outside of the Party’s

politics. Dolar's understanding of voice via Aristotle relates to Ludvik's split subjectivity and its interactions with the authoritarian jury. In terms of aural presence, only half of Ludvik's subjectivity is present during the trial. Ludvik's jury silences the undercurrent that is the voice of Ludvik's *zoe*, the sexual *phone* that was the true motivation for writing the letter. Therefore, aural presence fails as it did in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* as Ludvik's *zoe* is displaced and remains absent from the interrogation. An understanding of this incomplete aural presence thus illuminates the split in Ludvik's subjectivity. The jury punishes Ludvik through the *logos* only to necessarily fail to resolve the true problem hidden in Ludvik's subjectivity. Despite political exile and persecution, Ludvik's sexual *Odd One In: On Comedy* remains untouched as it navigates the reader through the novel's narrative, seeking a highly sexualized revenge by seducing a political official's wife. Ultimately, the jury fatally fails to perceive Ludvik's split subjectivity as a result of its faulty methods of interpreting text.

The Comedy of Authoritarian Hermeneutics

The politics of textuality in *The Joke* can best be understood through the phenomenon of graphomania in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The text describes graphomania as “a mania for writing books” (*The Book*, 127). Banaka, a famous novelist in the story cynically characterizes the act of novel-writing: “[T]he novel is the fruit of a human illusion. The illusion of the power to understand others...All anyone can do...is give a report on oneself. Anything else is an abuse of power” (123-124). According to Banaka, novel-writing results from a self-inflated agency, which manifests itself through an attempt to assert its authority over the Other. Here, the graphomaniac and its dogmatism become analogies for Ludvik's jury and its authoritarian interpretation of the joke.

The jury's relationship with text corresponds to Dolar's notions of the authoritarian voice and the object voice. In a discussion of these voices, such as those of dictators like Adolf Hitler, Dolar states that, “the voice swallows the letter” (Dolar, 117)—that is, the text becomes secondary to the authoritarian voice. The jury's authoritarian voice swallows the letter to conveniently interpret Ludvik's joke in any way that incriminates him. Further, the jury's aural materiality can be understood through what Mladen Dolar refers to as the object voice—a voice capable of mechanically serving the needs of the Party. Dolar describes the object voice: “The impersonal voice, the mechanically produced voice (answering machines, computer voices, and so on)

always has a touch of the uncanny...The mechanical voice reproduces the pure norm without any side effects” (22). Through a reading of Ludvik's dialogue with his jury, the presence of the object voice in *The Joke* becomes clear. For example, when Ludvik fails to remember the specific joke, the jury members respond:

We'll be glad to refresh your memory, they said, and read me my postcard aloud: Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik. The words sounded so terrifying in the small Party Secretariat office that they frightened me and I felt they had a destructive force I was powerless to counter. (*The Joke*, 37)

In the questioning of Ludvik, the text presents speech without quotation marks, and the voice of the jury seems to lack a specific, localized source. Rather, the jury's aural presence emanates from a more generalized space. The jury is simply referred to as “they,” and the jury's own voice becomes excessively normalized to the point of the uncanny. The jury's aural presence begins to manifest itself as more than mere dialogue when the quotation marks signaling concrete speech disappear. Its aural presence mutates into the object voice, a voice “without side-effects”—one that can promote Party ideology through the medium of a voice whose normalcy has been radicalized to a mechanical extreme.

The graphomaniac and the authoritarian object voice operate in what can be referred to as an authoritarian symbolic order. While a symbolic order is defined as the social world of language, interpersonal relations, ideology, and the law, the authoritarian version constructs and imposes insular, self-serving interpretations of these phenomena. Within the authoritarian symbolic order, the graphomaniac and the jury endorse a dogmatic understanding of the world through text. However, the authoritarian symbolic order provides fertile ground for comedy.

A short story in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, “Litost,” narrates a gathering of prominent regional poets, all of whom the narrator has pseudonymously named after canonical writers like Petrarch, Goethe and Boccaccio. The text draws attention to Boccaccio as it describes him as “someone who is surely there by mistake...it is obvious that poetry has not kissed his brow and that he does not like verse” (*The Book*, 177). The figure of Boccaccio becomes even more distinct from these other poets when he comically interrupts Petrarch's dramatic storytelling (181). Boccaccio's rudeness initiates an extended exchange

of insults between the poets. In the aftermath of this scene, Petrarch explains to a young student who had attended the event, “Boccaccio is a jackass. Boccaccio never understands anyone, because to understand is to merge and identify with. That is the secret of poetry” (198-199). Petrarch then discusses Boccaccio’s association with laughter and joking: “Joking is a barrier between man and the world. Joking is the enemy of love and poetry...Boccaccio doesn’t understand love. Love can never be laughable” (199). Boccaccio can be understood here as a critic of these lyric poets’ naïvely romantic optimism. Boccaccio’s comic presence dampens these poets’ celebration of love as a purely beautiful phenomenon.

In “A Different World: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*,” Fred Misurella argues that, “Boccaccio, whose earthy humor makes him a clear surrogate for Kundera himself, becomes the foil for all that poetic thinking” (Misurella, 35). Boccaccio thus serves as the Kunderan text’s critique of lyric poetry’s romanticized notions of the subject. Like the graphomaniac who dogmatically distributes personal worldviews, the lyric poets in this scene operate within an authoritarian symbolic order as they attempt to “merge and identify with” the “Other” through writing. However, these attempts contain the naïve assumption of a romanticized subject, one that can be successfully “merged with.” The graphomaniac, the jury and the lyric poets each possess romantic ideals of complete subjects. Even Madame Raphael in “The Angels” fails to recognize the absurdity of Sarah’s act. She instead defers to a romantic ideal of “reading by means of praxis,” refusing to consider an alternate meaning behind the disrupted academic presentation and the audience’s laughter. As Terry Eagleton has astutely argued, the Kunderan text’s “carnavalesque impulse presses any such romantic idealism to the point of absurdity” (Eagleton, 51). He further notes, “Stalinism cannot be opposed by romanticism...precisely because it has a monopoly of it” (54). Ludvik’s joke and Boccaccio’s rudeness therefore disturb these naïve notions of the self not through more romanticism but through the comic. While Ludvik’s split subjectivity belies the Party’s ideals of an optimistic political subject, Boccaccio’s comic absurdity contaminates lyric poetry’s romantic beliefs in love and beauty.

More specifically, Boccaccio, as the “barrier between man and the world,” along with Ludvik and his split subjectivity disrupt what can be called the biomorality embedded in the optimism of the authoritarian symbolic order. In her *Odd One In: On Comedy*, Zupancic argues that the biomorality of the “contemporary ideological climate” has conditioned the individual to believe that if she “feels good,” then she

is a “good person” (5). What results is the distortion of comedy’s definition, as the textures and the dynamics of the genre are adjusted to fit the emotional needs of its audience. This “ideological rhetoric of happiness” (5) is subtextually present in both the Party’s and the lyric poets’ respective accusations towards Ludvik and Boccaccio.

Through the logic of the Party’s biomorality, a joke that fails to make the listener “feel good” about Party loyalty is a failed joke. In the case of Ludvik, the jury operates within an authoritarian symbolic order in which one who causes “bad feelings” by attempting to corrupt the Party’s romantic ideals of optimism is a “bad person.” However, Kunderan subjectivity precludes a self who can simultaneously “feel good” and “be good.” In writing the joke, Ludvik attempts to satisfy his sexual *zoe* by committing a political crime through his *bios*. This split thus makes impossible a subjectivity that can be configured into the authoritarian symbolic order’s biomorality. Like the jury, the graphomaniac and the lyric poets can only fail to understand the joke because comedy exists outside the romantic ideals of complete and normalized subjects—that is, the authoritarian symbolic order. It is this disjunction between the ideal subject of the authoritarian symbolic order and the reality of the split subject that produces the Kunderan comedy.

The Kunderan Comedy of Failed Finitude

Zupancic argues that a key characteristic of the comic persona is that of a failed finitude, a “*contradiction in finitude itself*” (52). Zupancic continues: “In this perspective, the most accurate way to articulate the question of human finitude/infinitude would be to say: *Not only are we not infinite, we are not even finite*” (53). The split in Ludvik’s subjectivity can be understood as a symptom of the comedy of failed finitude. Ludvik’s joke emerges from the split in Kunderan subjectivity—that is, the gap between the *zoe* and *bios*. In the case of Ludvik, it is his awkward inability to synthesize his dual personas that motivates him to write the joke, and the joke is thus a byproduct of his failed finitude. Ludvik claims that his “schoolboyish agitation over Marketa,” which caused him to write the joke, “stemmed not so much from being in love as from [his] awkward lack of self-assurance” (*The Joke*, 33). His confession immediately before writing the postcard also indicates a split subjectivity: “I too believed in the imminence of a revolution in Western Europe; there was only one thing I could not accept: that she would be so happy when I was missing her so much” (34). Ludvik thus writes the joke because he fails to close the gap between his political beliefs and his desire for Marketa. Ultimately,

the written text of the postcard as well as Ludvik's aural attempts to defend it represent the materiality of Ludvik's failed finitude and the comic crux of the novel.

Zupancic comments on the materiality of comedy: "Comedy is materialistic because it gives voice and body to the impasses and contradictions of this materiality itself" (Zupancic, 47). In *The Joke*, it is voice and writing that provides the comedy's materiality by providing a symbolic order that exposes the failed finitude of the Kunderan subject. The figure of Banaka in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* provides the most explicit example of voice and writing serving as the materiality for comedy. After reading an extremely negative review of his new novel in the newspaper, Banaka runs into a public area and exclaims, "I'm nothing, do you understand? I'm nothing! I don't exist!" (*The Book*, 146). This moment essentially presents a comic perversion of the Cartesian *cogito* ("I think, therefore I am"). The instant Banaka shouts "I don't exist!", he exists. However, his subjectivity is clearly split between the writing Banaka and the speaking Banaka. An erasure of the writing Banaka occurs when his readership expresses distaste for his work. The speaking Banaka arrives only to announce the annihilation of its writing counterpart. Further, both Banaka and his critic exist within the authoritarian symbolic order. The critic's review is represented by Banaka's reaction as a dogmatically final judgment of Banaka's latest work. It is therefore this authoritarian symbolic order that exposes this split between the writing and speaking Banaka—and thus a failed finitude—that subsequently produces the comedy.

Like Banaka, Ludvik exists in an authoritarian symbolic order embodied by the Party. Therefore, the political phenomenon of the authoritarian symbolic order provides only the context that helps illuminate the comedy of the Kunderan subject's failed finitude. These politics resting at the manifest level of the Kunderan text serve only as a theoretical prelude for the comedy of the Kunderan subject. Through its failed finitude, the Kunderan subject simultaneously operates in and outside of the authoritarian symbolic order and thus fails to undermine it. While Ludvik's *bios* is indicted by the jury, his *zoe*, the truly subversive element of his subjectivity, resides outside of the Party's *logos*. This structural impasse demonstrates how political jokes fail because they cannot be understood within the authoritarian symbolic order. Political readings of the novel become problematic through this comic understanding of the Kunderan text. As a text that demonstrates the impossibility of political humor by the Kunderan subject, *The Joke* is a work of meta-political comedy.

The key flaw in the political understanding of *The Joke* can be best elucidated through a brief critique of Ellen Pifer who writes that Kundera's novels "celebrate difference at every level" (Pifer, 66) and that his work attempts to "dispel the intensity of any single, or single-voiced, narration" (67). Pifer here interprets *The Joke* as a critique of the authoritarian symbolic order through a celebration of humanistic differences, even if they include blemishes in subjectivity. On the contrary, the Kunderan text with its notion of failed finitude is not a naïve celebration of differences between subjects but rather an examination of the differences within the subject. Kundera's novels therefore dispel even the possibility of a successful single-voiced narration. Instead, they present partial or incomplete voices, those of the severed *bios* and *zoe*, which produce comic situations in their interactions with the authoritarian symbolic order. Therefore, reading *The Joke* using the phenomena of voice and writing in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* illustrates the emergence of a comedy and not a politics from the depths of the Kunderan subject's political, linguistic and ontological failures.

Laughter: Concluding Remarks

Laughter as an aural artifact in the Kunderan text deserves some attention. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* includes a brief anecdote in which the devil laughs in mockery of God's benevolence. As the devil's laughter is contagious, all those inhabiting the world begin to laugh at God. In a clever response, an angel begins laughing hysterically "to rejoice over how good and meaningful everything here below was" (*The Book*, 87). However, this reaction is reciprocated: "Seeing the angel laugh, the devil laughed all the more...because the laughing angel was infinitely comical... Nowadays we don't even realize that the same external display serves two absolutely opposed internal attitudes. There are two laughs, and we have no word to tell one from the other" (87). Here, laughter operates as a form of post-linguistic discourse—that is, nonsense that challenges the tyranny of sense. An analysis of this laughter enlightens an understanding of the Kunderan subject and its significance within the greater comedy.

In his theoretical analysis of voices as literary phenomena, Dolar only briefly discusses the "postlinguistic" qualities of laughter: a voice "which requires a more sophisticated cultural conditioning than the acquisition of language" (Dolar, 29). Further, Dolar argues that "laughter is different from the other [voices]...because it seems to exceed language in both directions at the same time, as both presymbolic and beyond symbolic; it is not merely a precultural voice

seized by the structure, but at the same time a highly cultural product which looks like a regression into animality” (29). Through Dolar’s commentary, laughter in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* can be understood as the aural proxy of the Kunderan subject in *The Joke*: a phenomenon that escapes the dominion of the authoritarian symbolic order by simultaneously transcending it and failing to reside within it. The Kunderan text essentially conflates laughter and the Kunderan subject to preclude their residence within an authoritarian symbolic order. While Dolar’s laughter transcends the sense-making of the linguistic, Kundera’s laughter functions as nonsense that challenges the tyrannical nature of the authoritarian symbolic order. The “laughable laughs” of the devil and angels thus reflect the Kunderan text’s immersion within a postsymbolic order, one that rejects the production of singular meaning. Like the laughter that cannot be subjected to one interpretation, Ludvik’s subjectivity with his repressed motives for writing the joke escapes the Party’s authoritarian reading. The Kunderan text therefore challenges its audience to read within this postsymbolic order in which simply locating a political message is an inherently authoritarian method of reading. Unilaterally political interpretations of *The Joke* ironically reproduce the authoritarian symbolic order of the Party, graphomaniac and the lyric poets. The Kunderan text encourages laughter as a hermeneutic process by producing a meta-comedy about the impossibility of political satire within an inherently authoritarian symbolic order. Therefore, what is at stake is a theory of political humor and its reception. The Kunderan text ultimately demonstrates how the authoritarian symbolic order is precisely that which cannot understand the joke. The subject in its failed finitude and comedy in its absurdity can only fail within a landscape of grossly idealized politics.

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