

**“An invincible Czech horde”: Political and Social Implications of
Moravian Folklore in Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*.**

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Abstract

This article studies the treatment of Moravian folk music in Milan Kundera’s 1967 first novel, *The Joke* (*Žert*). Reconstructed as the performative practice through which timeless collective memory is enacted, folklore appears as a vector of resistance to state-sponsored Communism in the post-utopian context of the novel. By probing the limitations and potentialities of this vision, this argument sheds light on the complex intersections of folklore, tradition, and collective identity in Communist Czechoslovakia and paves the way for a critical consideration of identitarian discourses based on a mythical reconstruction of the past.

“Communism was modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture; modernity streamlined, purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable.”

[Zygmunt Bauman 1992: 167]

Milan Kundera’s first novel, *Žert* (*The Joke*), originally appeared in Prague in 1967 under the auspices of the publishing house of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, *Československý Spisovatel*.⁽¹⁾ Set in 1965 during a period of relative apathy, the novel recounts the misfortunes of the hero, Ludvík Jahn, in the wake of an innocuous joke. In order to impress a girl, the young student, an ardent Communist at heart, sends her an insolent note deriding state-sponsored ideology and purporting to reject it in favor of discredited Trotskyist views. Unfortunately, the note is not treated as a joke. Ludvík is judged by a tribunal of his peers and, despite his vehement protestations of innocence, he is expelled from the university and sent to a penal army unit. The severity of the sanction imposed on Ludvík owes much to the intervention of one of his classmates, Pavel Zemánek, a man who plays in the same folk music

band as he. While most of the novel depicts Ludvík's ordeals following the unfortunate episode, the narrative is framed by his calculated liaison with Helena, Zemánek's wife, whom he resolves to seduce in retaliation. However, their short-lived affair ends on a bitter note when Ludvík realizes that by seducing Helena he helped Zemánek put an end to their loveless marriage.(2) His carefully crafted revenge backfires, making this failure the last development in a series of ironic twists plaguing the hero's life (*osud*, fate, in his own words). Ludvík eventually comes to the bitter realization that Man, the subject of Kundera's humanistic paradigm, holds no sway over the course of his life, a realization that goes a long way towards questioning the dominant Enlightenment-inspired Communist ideals of the day [Čulík 2000]. This, Michael Berman asserts, is the true joke in the novel: history's facetious reminder that its course is inevitable and that Man has no control over "Destiny" (*osud*), either individual or collective. It is a fallacy to which Ludvík had fallen prey, for he believed that "[communism was] inaugurating a human era in which man (all men) would be neither *outside* history [*dějiny*], nor *under the heel of history*, but would create and direct it" [Kundera 1992: 71; 1967: 71; author's emphasis].(3)

In addition to Ludvík, three narrators guide the plot, each embodying an archetypal position on the most pressing issues of 1965 Czechoslovakia: Helena the romantic Party hard-liner, Jaroslav the folklorist, and Kostka the Christian. This multiple focus allows for digressions into the private lives of each of the protagonists and the aspects of social life most central to their preoccupations. Through narrative polyphony, Kundera derides the hubristic pretense to know and be able to master reality. The novel thus hints at a world of possibilities beyond the univocal nature of the sign or, in this case, the necessary interpretation of any sequence of events as the unfolding of the great narrative of Communist History. Peter Steiner has convincingly ascribed to each narrator a distinct perspective on time which underpins his or her approach to social life. Drawing from Karl Mannheim's study of ideology and utopia, Steiner recognizes in Kostka a chiliastic utopian living outside time in a world suffused with God's presence. In contrast, Ludvík and Helena both embody Socialist-Communist utopia, while Jaroslav finds in the scholarly study of folklore a means of communion with the timeless spirit of the community. Each character values one specific temporal dimension (Jaroslav the past, Kostka the present, and Ludvík and Helena the future) and this configuration of time determines

their respective engagements with the past and tradition on both the individual and the collective levels.

For all four narrators, *The Joke* is a narrative of disillusionment, of post-utopian irony. Yet, Ludvík is the only protagonist to embark on a thorough questioning of his original ideals; he is also the only one to attempt to adjust to evolving circumstances, although his unsuccessful efforts eventually doom him to “vertigo” and oblivion [Steiner 2000: 204]. Through their attempt to perpetuate their anachronistic monolithic ideals, the other narrators witness the collapse of their respective belief systems, only to be symbolically removed one by one from the forefront of the novel—Kostka through a sin that excludes him from the perpetuation of his Christian ideal, Helena through her attempted suicide and Jaroslav by a debilitating heart attack. By the end of the book, all that is left is bitter disillusion and the inability to project oneself into the future. Communist ideology, which arrogated to itself a monopoly on historicity and teleological development, goes bankrupt, as do the alternative utopian systems presented in the novel. The characters are thus abandoned to a disenchanting, futureless world. Universal oblivion for all deeds and wrongs prevails, as does universal irresponsibility: “everything will be forgotten and nothing will be redressed,” concludes Ludvík as he pauses one last time to consider his inconsequential destiny [Kundera 1992: 294; 1967: 279].

Forsaken by their respective ideologies, the protagonists suffer symbolic death and succumb to oblivion. But if Helena, Kostka, and, to a lesser extent, Jaroslav seem incapable of defeating the irresistible logic of annihilation, Ludvík at least endeavors to survive the collapse of his belief system. As utter devastation threatens to be the inescapable outcome of the narrative, the novel presents one last twist in the plot, an epiphany of sorts. Here Ludvík comes to realize the cause of his alienation – his disinterest in the world and his taking refuge in impersonal abstraction: “because we did not know how to commiserate with the devastated things, we turned away from them and so injured them, and ourselves as well” [Kundera 1992: 313; 1967: 298]. This realization comes in the last scene when Ludvík rejoins the folkloric band of his youth to participate in a performance under the direction of Jaroslav. Thus, as Ludvík abjures his former aloofness from the world, it is through this rekindled musical connection to the past of his community that he attempts to reach salvation one last time: “I loved that ancient world [of folklore and tradition] and begged it to offer me sanctuary and to save me” [Kundera 1992: 311; 1967: 296]. This resort to folklore as

the last panacea against an all-pervading feeling of despair is intriguing and this essay seeks to investigate the modalities of Kundera's refashioning of the motif of Moravian folk music in the post-ideological context of the novel. So central is the trope of folk music to the novel that *The Joke* has often been considered a crucial text in understanding the ways in which folklore intersects with conceptions of history and collective identity in Communist Czechoslovakia [see, for instance, Beckerman 1996: 38]. Kundera's treatment of the question through the subjective perceptions of four stock characters provides unique insight into the ramifications of the official manipulation of folklore. In Jaroslav's perspective, which Ludvík belatedly endorses, Moravian folk music offers a form of popular resistance to the eroding promises of Communism as the end product of the grand narrative of Marxist history. To him, it is an unadulterated repository of collective memory, both self-sustaining and free from any contact with successive regimes: "a tunnel beneath history, a tunnel that preserves much of what wars, revolutions, civilizations have long since destroyed aboveground" [Kundera 1992: 133; 1967: 133]. Such a postulate, however, is problematically oblivious to the long-standing history of the appropriation of folklore for political purposes, both in post-1948 Communist Czechoslovakia and in the earlier period of Czech "bourgeois ethnography" [Scheffel and Kandert 1994: 16]. I contend that the construction of memory and collective identity ensuing from Jaroslav's configuration bears the mark of distortion. His continuous efforts to mobilize this mythical memory as a basis for a collective identity, enacted historically, are doomed to failure. More fruitful is the novel's vision of subjective interaction as a dynamic producing moral responsibility and individual freedom. Thus, Kundera's dealings with folklore illuminate the potentialities and limits of an identitarian discourse based on a mythical reconstruction of the past. They pave the way for a general consideration of the value of folklore and tradition in the construction of identity.

For historian Pierre Nora, the advent of modernity coincides with the eradication of traditional forms of memory. The "acceleration of history" breaches the continuum represented by the collective heritage of tradition. With the process of nation-formation emerges a new vision of historiography, which would be conceived as a perfected version of memory and which would keep the reconstruction of the past free of subjective interpretation and forgetting. History is henceforth reconfigured as scientific in its purpose, a "true" (i.e., definitive) version

of collective memory.(4) In the context of nation formation (or regime consolidation), the construction of an official collective memory legitimizes one normative vision of the past, construing alternate perceptions as particular and incomplete. The lived memory of tradition is therefore removed from the foreground and enshrined in hollow memorials, where its rich and sedimented nature is effectively obliterated.

Following the dynamic described by Nora, Communist modernity endeavored to incorporate traditional culture into the new socio-political order. Folklore was to play a crucial role in the definition of the new state’s cultural politics. Channeled into pro-Communist rhetoric, folk art became an object of official enthusiasm. It allowed Communist ideology to put on the unobtrusive garb of tradition in its fight against bourgeois ideals. After the 1948 coup, Czechoslovakian artists and ethnographers, performers and scholars of folklore, were forced to participate in the elaboration of new ideological processes. President Gottwald’s speech at the 1948 Congress of National Culture delineated a few of these new directions [Gottwald 1950]. The President declared the end of artistic “bourgeois formalism,” which was an unacceptable relic of a past of servitude to élitist groups. In its place, a popular or folk culture was to be promoted, which would serve a national purpose by embracing any means necessary to effect the triumph of the people [Gottwald 1950]. Social realist artistic output would be judged according to several criteria mostly derived from Gorki’s principles—realism, optimism, partiality, effectiveness (political and ethical), intelligibility, nationalism (but not chauvinism), incorporation of the popular (*lidovost*), collectivism, heroism, and sensitivity to contemporary needs [Viney 1953: 487-490]. In the field of ethnography, journals such as *Český Lid* [*Czech Folk*] marked a sharp turn towards Marxist scientific paradigms, which also permeated fieldwork [see, for instance, Skalníková 1951; for an overview of the main Marxist advocates of People’s ethnography, see Scheffel and Kandert 1994: 16].(5)

These doctrines were in alignment with the principles inaugurated in the Soviet Union less than twenty years earlier [Miller 1990: 4]. They effectively transformed folklore, the “grassroot expressive practices of any group of people who share at least one common factor,” into folklorism, “the conscious use of folklore in popular, elite or officially sponsored culture” [Olson 2004: 6]. Folklore was reinvented to allow the masses to direct the creative process so as to promote the advancement of Socialist values at all levels of society. Following Gorki’s definition of

folklore as the creative expression of the toiling masses, it became “people’s creation” (*narodnoe tvorčestvo*). In Czechoslovakia, Viney reports that “[t]rue *lidové umění* is... no longer folk-art in the old sense, but art created for, and appealing to, the workers, peasants and working intelligentsia” [Viney 1953: 488]. This new form of folklore emphasized personal interpretation and creation over the transmission of long-standing tradition. Creative intervention was used to promote class consciousness in an effort to displace other forms of social relationships. Folklore thus evolved into a conscious and deliberate act of representation, a performance of new identifications. Accordingly, new forms of folklore came into being. In the 1930s, the Soviet Union had taken advantage of the pedagogical potentialities of folklore to develop class consciousness in the rural masses and to create powerful myths of model rural workers, myths which all arts would incorporate and disseminate. As the image of the peasant was endowed with positive significance, folk music was redefined as *narodnaia muzyka*, “the music of the people,” thus obliterating any distinction between rural and urban workers [Olson 2004: 39]. The new folklore applied traditional motifs and structures to contemporary subjects and political figures and has often been dubbed “pseudofolklore” by those outside the Soviet sphere.(6) In Czechoslovakia, urban workers’ culture garnered much attention, especially in the (coal) mining community, which was one of the key sectors of the national economy [Scheffel and Kandert 1994: 17]. In keeping with the new definition of folklore as the production of any group of workers, urban folk ensembles formed by factory workers blossomed, fostering class awareness in the process. As festivals and performances were facilitated by a politics of decentralization, provincial musical life was revitalized and, at its onset, the regime’s enthusiasm for folklore was embraced by large segments of society and academia [Viney 1953: 491; Scheffel and Kandert 1994: 17]. This is not to say, however, that new Communist folklore completely replaced older forms. A traditional repertoire subsisted in parallel with new production and continued to exert great attraction. Jaroslav’s attempt to re-enact a traditional peasant wedding (albeit in a purged, Communist-sanctioned form) illustrates how deeply attached both scholars and amateurs were to old forms of folklore. By the 1960s, however, disenchantment had replaced initial fervor and folklore was increasingly perceived as an exhausted form of expression, one crippled by years of state-sponsored deformation.

Interestingly, Marxist propaganda did not radically transform the Czechoslovakian ethnographic tradition. The fact that the transition from “bourgeois ethnography” to “people’s ethnography” took place so smoothly testifies to the continuities between the two. Although Communist sponsorship inaugurated new attitudes towards the process of folkloric production, its approach to folklore as an object of study perpetuated some of the methods of “bourgeois ethnography.” From its inception in the nineteenth century as an attempt to revive awareness of Czech identity in the partly Germanized middle-classes, ethnography subordinated its methods to the pursuit of a distinctly political agenda. Conceived as a Slavic response to German domination, Czech identity was sought in the peasant communities of the countryside and had the explicitly patriotic aim of establishing the purely Czech origin of national culture. “Bourgeois ethnography” thus constructed an image of typical Czech identity that scholarship was expected to corroborate [Scheffel and Kandert 1994: 19]. Although the discipline was far from homogeneous, its development followed two main directions: preserving a “disappearing” Czech peasant culture from the influence of Germanized urban culture and proving that original Czech culture as intrinsically pure and free from any German inflection [Grill 2004: 28]. Interpreting scientific data to advance a political agenda was therefore not a practice introduced by Communism. As well, ethnographic methods remained similar: repeated, short visits rather than long periods of fieldwork, use of questionnaires rather than in-depth interviews [Grill 2004: 54]. This essentializing approach to Czech identity (“native studies,” in Scheffel and Kandert’s terms) made differentiation from the German Other its priority. In this respect, it neglected to engage in a critical consideration of national culture as a multi-layered construct where processes of identity formation intersect with a variety of factors (gender, social status, religion, ethnic origin). Identity was constructed as an objectively defined, historically stable, and homogeneous object. For that reason, these essentialist representations were marked by the seal of mendacity and distortion, just as ethnographic representation during the Communist period would be.

More evidence of continuity can be found in the similar origin myths elaborated by both ethnographic traditions. The imaginary invoked here is that of pan-Slavism, itself a main topic of interest in pre-revolutionary ethnographic practice. The cultural bonds between the Czechs and other Slavs intersected with anti-German sentiment from the days of the National Revival to anti-Nazi resistance during the

occupation. When the Soviet Union came to liberate the Czech lands, most of which had been a German protectorate during the war, it seemed that Slavic solidarity was finally prevailing. As Scheffel and Kandert report, “manifest destiny was at work” [1994: 20]. The reclaiming of the pan-Slavic myth legitimized Communist rule as an authentic, natural outgrowth of past history. Official rhetoric was thus able to reproduce a simulacrum of continuity that obscured its destructive impact on intersubjective relations.

The Joke actively resists this dynamic of distortion. The novel presents state-sponsored propaganda as a force wreaking havoc on the subject’s interaction with the world. Intersubjective relations of affection, loyalty, and feeling within society are displaced by official collective ideals, a process which is so utterly successful in the novel that lonesome Helena comes to consider the Party as her one and only friend [Kundera 1992: 20; 1967: 20]. An alternative form of social relations is necessary; Ludvík and Jaroslav set out to effect it through the performance of traditional folk music. While both protagonists formerly embraced the new state-sponsored directives regarding folklore (although for different reasons), they both eventually come to regard Moravian folk music as a pristine repository of folk memory and traditional values (in Nora’s words, “memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage”). In their eyes, it constitutes an alternative source of identification, which reinstates morality and places it at the heart of social relations.

The quest for a continuous, moral identity that would not suffer from the depersonalization of the process of history underlies Kundera’s critical engagement with Communist modernity. In his essay “Sixty-three Words,” Kundera associates individualism and subjectivity, two concepts essential to the emergence of European creativity and artistic originality, with the advent of seventeenth-century European modernity: “The coming of *les Temps Modernes*... European individualism is born, and with it a new situation for art, for culture, for science... In Europe, we are living the end of the Modern Era: the end of individualism; the end of art conceived as an irreplaceable expression of personal originality; the end that heralds an era of unparalleled uniformity” [Kundera 1986: 149-50]. For Kundera, European modernity is two-faced or, to borrow his celebrated formula about the history of the novel, divided into two “half-times.” On the one hand, in its earlier form, it is valued for bringing about the development of European art and culture, along with the modern values of cultural unity and identity [Kundera

1986: 127-8]. On the other, as Kundera shows, European modernity also contains the seeds of its own obliteration (in “Notes Inspired by ‘the Sleepwalkers’” [Kundera 1986: 49-50]). Whereas the early embodiments of modernity promoted the advancement of the European Enlightenment (in Kundera’s paradigm, the “supreme values” inherent in that stage of culture), its later developments seem to have progressively moved away from the primacy of the subject and obliterated the “supreme values” of individuality and communal coexistence on which European identity rests [Kundera 1986: 128]. The end product of this dynamic is the dehumanizing totalitarian order depicted in the novel.(7)

Kundera’s implicit contention in his depiction of folkloric tradition as a “fictitious world of stable principles and fixed order” is that the obliteration of the values of individuality and responsibility is untenable [Karfik 1969: 332]. The dual structure of his concept of history highlights a dynamic whereby each stage depends on its corollary, making a complete rejection of the past impossible. The concept supposes a transhistoric reading of events which associates cause and effect across time. The moral corollary of this supposition is that the memory of past wrongs will outlive them and allow justice to be rendered. The rupture of the continuum between the deed and its consequence does not simply prevent the rectification of moral wrongs;(8) it also excludes the community from history. Kundera’s bipartite concept illustrates the necessity of restoring awareness of the first half of history, on both the individual and collective levels, to allow a critical reading of the second half in terms of compensation and correction. If such awareness cannot be gained within the paradigm of Communist history, then an alternative form of historicity must be elaborated.

Although many episodes in the novel illustrate the effects of tradition at the individual level, I am interested in assessing Jaroslav’s concept of musical folklore as a basis for collective identity. In this respect, his discussion of the origins of Moravian folk music in Part IV is crucial. His first step is to disassociate Moravian music from its Bohemian counterpart, which he links to baroque European music or “art music.” His analysis emphasizes the non-derivative character of Moravian musical culture: “the songs we sing in southern Moravia can’t be explained away by art music” [Heim 1972: 49; Kundera 1967: 129].(9) The songs possess idiosyncratic features which, in his eyes, prove their originality. Folk music becomes the expression of local responses to Western-inspired high culture, here Bohemian music

described as “serenad[ing] the barons and assorted landowners with the latest minuets or sarabands from Italy” [literally, “the Italian school,” Heim 1972, 51; Kundera 1967: 132].

Jaroslav sees Moravian folklore as a vector of peasant resistance to corruption by exogenous models. His view is reminiscent of the early ethnographic interest in peasant culture as a repository of cultural authenticity. Moreover, he associates Moravian music with archaic anti-intellectualism and sensory gratification, a model which he holds in sharp contrast to the over-codification of scripted high music [Heim 1972: 50-51; Kundera 1967: 130-131]. For instance, Moravian folk music does not respect rules of rhythmic equivalence based on symmetry (one note is divided into two halves, etc.) and the instability it generates explains its excessive, mysterious feel: “what do you do with a measure that has two beats of unequal length? Our biggest problem today is getting the original rhythm of a Moravian song down on paper” [Heim 1972: 51; Kundera 1967: 131]. Moravian music therefore exceeds ethnographic attempts to capture and appropriate its “essence.” Its spirit (“its own mysterious laws”) cannot easily be rendered through hollow formal adaptations. It thus remains unscathed by official transcriptions, preserving its inner quality throughout the vicissitudes of history.

This untainted locus of identity nevertheless bears the mark of various cultural influences. In reverse chronological order, Jaroslav records four of them: Western European folk music, which came through contact with Bohemian folklore, Hungarian folklore brought by “Gypsy” migrations, Slovakian seventeenth and eighteenth century musical forms, and fourteenth century Wallachian songs [Heim 1972: 51-52; Kundera 1967: 132-133]. But beyond this intricate history of migratory influences, the mystical past to which Jaroslav ultimately refers is the Great Moravian Empire, “the first great ninth-century Slavic dominion... [when I] look far into our past... I see the ancient Slavic world.” The mysterious, undecipherable nature of Moravian music is a product of its distant origin; these songs pertain to a bygone Golden Age and the performers’ inability to comprehend their exact rhythmical nature and lexical meaning testifies to the music’s resilience to any appropriation or corruption. It is not surprising therefore that Jaroslav should end the survey with an evocation of ancient Greek scales: “the structure of our oldest folk songs was in fact analogous to that of ancient Greek music...they pass on to us a bit of antiquity” [Heim 1972: 52- 53; Kundera 1967: 134]. For Jaroslav, Moravian folklore rests on a mythical eternal present of tradition undisturbed by the course of modern history.

Whereas Western European powers underwent modernization, his narrative presents the Czech lands as lying outside the march of progress (and Germanization): “During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Czech nation almost ceased to exist. In the nineteenth century it was virtually reborn. Among the old European nations it was a child... a modest culture... the only narrow footbridge across the two-hundred-year gap” [Kundera 1992: 128; 1967: 127]. The only cultural influences acknowledged are the ones linked to the geography of the Moravian empire, as if the music’s evolution were circumscribed by its history: “Even though its borders were scattered a thousand years ago, they remain firm on the oldest level of folk music” [Heim 1972: 52; Kundera 1967: 133].

If Jaroslav deems the intrinsic qualities of traditional culture to be impervious to the passing of time, he nevertheless endeavors to associate folklore with the development of Communist history. Jaroslav’s early opportunistic attempts to adapt folklore to “life as we live it now” aim to further his own folklorist agenda, namely bridging the gap between mythical tradition and the contemporary world [Kundera 1992: 155; 1967: 155]. In the days following the 1948 takeover, official support gave folklore a legitimate place in national culture and the unfolding of Communist history: “[These] ideas corresponded to our innermost dreams. They elevated us to a historic greatness” [in the original Czech: “it tied the fate of our band with the fate of the Communist Party;” Kundera 1992: 139; 1967: 138-139]. Thus, Jaroslav’s participation in the great state-sponsored effort to adapt folklore to contemporary realities is not portrayed as an attempt to alter the intrinsic nature of folk music, but rather as a mere “concession,” an effort to stimulate a folk revival [Kundera 1992: 155; 1967: 155]. It does not call into question his avowed loyalty to pure, unadulterated folklore. His purpose is rather to use this repository of traditional values to correct the imbalances plaguing contemporary life, to restore history’s two-fold structure. In his eyes, his concessions constitute a temporary compromise which does not affect the wholesomeness of his project: “I protested. We were barely getting started. We wanted folk music to be as popular as possible. That was why we had to make concessions to popular taste. The most important thing was that we’d created our own *contemporary* folklore, new folk songs with something to say about life as we live it now” [Kundera 1992: 155; 1967: 155; author’s emphasis]. Through these efforts, folklore becomes a historical force used to excavate history’s forgotten first half: “It would be so simple to find peace in the world of

fantasy. But I've always tried to live in the two worlds at the same time without giving up one for the other. I must not give up the real world even though I am losing everything in it" [Kundera 1992: 159; 1967: 159].

However, his attempts to reconcile the timelessness of folklore with the imperatives of history never come to fruition. In the narrative, his efforts come undone in the last chapters of the novel (set in the 1960s) when Jaroslav realizes that his son Vladimír, whom he has envisioned as his successor, refuses to lead the Ride of Kings, a traditional Pentecostal procession. Jaroslav's disappointment finds no echo in his family, who consider the procession to be a worthless relic of the past: "[Vlasta said that] I was living in another world. I was a dreamer. They didn't want to take my ideals from me, but Vladimír was different [...] He's more interested in motorcycles than in horses in streamers. What of it? Vladimír is a modern person" [Kundera 1992: 306; 1967: 291]. In this respect, Jaroslav's family is no exception. The novel recounts several episodes where folklore is depicted as an object of ridicule [see for instance, Kundera 1992: 126; 1967: 125-126]. Integrating tradition with contemporary social life seems impossible. Newly-discredited Moravian culture stands marginalized and its sphere of influence seems to be restricted to a few devotees. Due to its incommensurability to the time in which it is mobilized, its potential as a vector of active resistance is limited and it is on a pessimistic note that the book ends: "I [Jaroslav] could not imagine any continuation. I had always lived in two worlds at once. I believed in their mutual harmony. It had been a delusion. Now I had been ousted from one of those worlds. From the real world. Only the other one, the imaginary world, is left to me now. But I can't live only in the imaginary world" [Kundera 1992: 308; 1967: 293].

The friends' experience at the last concert only reinforces Jaroslav's feeling of estrangement. The musical encounter, which should be one of communion with the audience, the performance of a collective memory, becomes an alienating moment for the performers: "The more melancholy we felt, the more we turned in towards one another, playing for ourselves rather than for the audience, forgiving the audience, so that we managed to create through the music a protective enclosure in the midst of the rowdy drunks" [Kundera 1992: 315; 1967: 300]. The recollection of the great Moravian past becomes an individual affair: Jaroslav's heart-attack in the middle of the concert definitively excludes him from the world. As the narrative ends, the reader is left with only

one certainty: whatever role folk music will play in the revival of a collective identity in the future, now is not its time.(10)

The failure of Jaroslav’s efforts results from a fundamental confusion, the ramifications of which illuminate the intersections of folklore, memory, and subjectivity beyond the scope of the novel. Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieu de mémoire* provides a compelling framework for investigating the nature of this dynamic. For Nora, the term *lieu de mémoire* designates a site of memory “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself ..., certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” [Nora 1989: 7]. Nora’s term thus applies to Jaroslav’s imaginative, alternative construction of collective identity around timeless folk music. Yet, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* assumes added significance in that it also marks the end of the subject’s immediate relation to his or her culture and history: “There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory,” explains Nora [Nora 1989: 7]. Because *lieux de mémoire* are imagined as loci of continuity in the face of radical estrangement from one’s environment, they do not exist on the same level as the subject who mobilizes them. In *lieux de mémoire* memory is reconstructed, not lived. Through them, the subject maintains only a tenuous tie to the imagined past; the static form of tradition they preserve is removed from the present with which it has become incommensurate. The strong emphasis on Jaroslav’s reflexive reconstruction of folklore from handbooks presents ample evidence that, in his case, tradition is a true *lieu de mémoire*, an ideal viewed from a distance: “Jaroslav was a dyed-in-the-wool Moravian patriot and a folklore expert, and he availed himself of his own wedding to satisfy his ethnographic passions [*pro své národopisné vášně*] by arranging the festivities around a structure of old popular customs... all reconstructed more from textbooks of ethnography than from living memory” [Kundera 1992: 47; 1967: 44].(11) The authenticity of these reconstructions of tradition remains questionable since they are elaborated from a subject position located within the modern historical paradigm: “Jaroslav...presumably mindful of his career...gave the church a wide berth, even though a traditional wedding was unthinkable without a priest...he had the “patriarch” give all the ritual speeches, but purged them all of biblical motifs, even though it was precisely on these motifs that the imagery of the old nuptial speeches was based” [Kundera 1992: 47; 1967: 44-45]. By incorporating the timelessness of tradition into the present of history, Jaroslav only corrupts tradition; his avowed “concession” reaps no

reward. His goal of restoring the integrity of history's bipartite structure proves impossible to achieve. The memory resorted to does not constitute the first half of Communist history; its reconstructed, imaginary nature precludes its inclusion into the narrative of history altogether. It remains confined to the realm of the mythical and thus cannot steer historical forces towards an awareness of the past. Jaroslav's fundamental confusion of *lieu de mémoire* and *milieu de mémoire*, or reconstructed and lived tradition, impedes any actual historical valence since the memory mobilized is but one more example of false consciousness in the novel.

However, if reconstructed folklore cannot restore the integrity of Communist history on the collective or institutional levels, its performance can certainly reinstate the notions of subjectivity and moral responsibility emblematic of the first half of Kundera's history of modernity. In reference to folklore in the Soviet Union, Laura Olson concludes, "it is possible to speculate that the actions of the performers formed a kind of tacit resistance—or at least enacted self-assertion in the context of a regime that aimed to remove such possibilities" [Olson 2004: 50]. This "tacit resistance" takes the shape of a renewed awareness of one's subjectivity. This dynamic aligns with Nora's conclusions on the failure of collective memory: "The atomization of a general memory into a private one... gives everyone the necessity to remember and to protect the trappings of identity... The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals." [Nora 1989: 16]. In this respect, the choice of a musical medium is very appropriate for the enactment of an individual memory congruent with Nora's precepts.(12) Ludvík's recourse to folklore during the last concert follows the same logic—through folk music, he performs his subjectivity, anchoring individual memory in his performance. Yet, while individual, this process is not a solitary experience: "the more melancholy [the performers] felt, the more [they] turned in towards one another" [Kundera 1992: 315; 1967: 300]. Although the enactment of a collective memory with which the audience can identify is impossible, a collective performance of subjectivity does take place for the musicians. Restoring social interaction between subjects, the collective performance of folklore thus participates in the reconstruction of an order of moral obligation, which is the basis for any process of socialization and which alone can guarantee the realization of individual freedom through history. This acknowledgement of a moral imperative is the limited form in which Kundera's two-fold concept of

history comes to be realized in the post-utopian context of the novel. Through it, the subject gains access to a non-totalitarian narrative of history, one which has not yet reached its end-point. Kundera’s insertion of a parallel, independent model of social relations undermines the monolithic vision imposed by Communist ideology. In this independent model the mythical “invincible Czech horde” of Moravian folklore, a group made up of countless individual voices interacting with each other, joins more orthodox symbols of national identity. In later writings, Milan Kundera expressed his belief in the future of a culturally-independent Czechoslovakia. In his essay “The Czech Lot”, he attributes the destruction of Czechoslovakian culture to Soviet hegemony and emphasizes the importance of constructing nations distinct from the two great Cold War powers [Kundera 1968]. Through their resistance to processes of global homogenization and their struggle to assert their own identity, these countries, he believes, will foster individualism and uniqueness in the face of uniformity. In a word, they will restore modern European values. This, to Kundera, is their historical mission. Through his defense of Moravian traditional musical forms and of the performance of subjectivity inherent in them, it is at this mission that Kundera hints twenty five years before the Czech Republic and Slovakia could aspire to fulfill their role.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay won the Euro Pop Award for Best Graduate Essay on European Popular Culture at the 2008 Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association convention in Albuquerque, NM. I wish to thank Ken Dvorak, Phil Heldrich, Jack Hutchens, and Chunhui Peng for their support of this project.

1 Completed in December 1965, the novel was not released until April 1967 due to Kundera’s reluctance to make the various changes requested by Communist censors. When the book finally came out in its unrevised form, only one year prior to the Prague Spring of 1968, critics received it with enthusiasm and the Union awarded it its 1968 literary prize. No less than three editions of the text were sold in a matter of days for a total of 120,000 copies [Kundera 1985: 457]. However, this popularity was to be short-lived. In the wake of the “normalization” following the Prague Spring, a press campaign attacked the novel for

being a counter-revolutionary piece; the text was subsequently banned and withdrawn from libraries throughout the country. Around the same time, Gallimard released the French translation of the book. The warm reception of the book in France effectively launched the novel on the international scene, making it one of the most lucid analyses of the enduring political situation in the Eastern bloc, of which the Prague Spring was but the most visible and recent symptom.

2 For an analysis of the sexual politics of the novel, see Frances L. Restuccia 1990.

3 The first number in parentheses refers to 1992 English translation by the author; the second corresponds to the original 1967 Czech text.

4 The discourse on collective memory, Nora's reconfigurations included, finds its source in the writings of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1930s (*On Collective Memory*). I have adopted the definition of collective memory recorded by K.L. Klein's as "a set of recollections attributable to some overarching group mind that could recall past events in the (admittedly poorly understood) ways in which we believe that individuals recall the past" [Klein 2000: 135]. In contrast, the tendency to replace it with an official memory can be defined as "the interaction between institutional and individual memory... as a top-down process: elite constructions of memory shape the memories of groups and individuals" [Lebow 2006: 10].

5. For theoretical discussions of the appropriateness and implications of the concept of ethnography in a Czechoslovakian context, see Grill 2004: 18-20; Scheffer and Kandert 1994: 15-16.

6 This dynamic is described in the novel: "The Communist Party went all out to create a new way of life. It based its efforts on Stalin's famous definition of the new art: socialist content in national form. And national form in music, dance, and poetry could come from nowhere but folk art" [Kundera 1992: 141; 1967:142]; "And we didn't sing only the traditional lays about brigands slitting their beloveds' throats, we wrote new pieces *all our own*, songs about Stalin or about the plowed fields or the harvest or cooperative farms. No longer was our song just a memory of the past. It was alive. It was part of contemporary history. It accompanied it" [Kundera 1992: 141-2; 1967: 142; my emphasis].

7 Kundera associates this "twilight" of European culture with the political shift in Central Europe towards authoritarian forms of government, here assimilated to a form of "political nonexistence" for these countries [Kundera 1986: 125].

8 As his quest ends in absolute failure against the force of endless irony governing history, Ludvík concludes, “...*eternal memory* (of people, things, deeds, nations) and ... *redressibility* (of deeds, mistakes, sins, wrongs) [are] both... false faiths... everything will be forgotten and nothing will be redressed. The task of obtaining redress (by vengeance or by forgiveness) will be taken over by forgetting” [Kundera 1992: 294; 1967: 279].

9 For the reasons behind the choice of Moravian regional identity as opposed to other regions of the Czech lands, see Beckerman 1996: 39. Beckerman argues that Moravia stood as a pause between Czech and Slovak identities, as a “mythical and forgotten land.” Due to the lacunae present in the 1992 author’s translation of the text, I resort to Michael Heim’s translation of the chapter in his 1972 article. The second set of page numbers still refers to the Czech original.

10 I am referring to Mark Slobin’s illuminating discussion of the role the persecution of the Czech rock band Plastic People of the Universe played in the genesis of the Charter 77 group, one of the actors of the Velvet Revolution [Slobin 1996: 6].

11 *Národopis*, “nationography” was used before World War II as a synonym for *lidopis* or “folkography” [Grill 2004: 18]. Jaroslav’s choice of the former in lieu of the Communist sanctioned *etnografie* mobilizes an earlier tradition of folkloristics and constitutes an implicit critique of Marxist paradigms of ethnographic research.

12 In his introduction to *Retuning Culture*, Mark Slobin discusses music’s “mutab[ility], flexib[ility], and volat[ility]” in relation to group identity and memory, which makes music the optimal medium for “anchor[ing] individual memory and group consciousness, placing them out of the reach of the State” [Slobin 1996: 3-4]. Olson makes a similar argument as she argues that “[b]esides embodying the participants’ goals, performance [of music] also helps to constitute identities and social groups. It is a medium in which cultural identity can be not only expressed but enacted” [Olson 2004: 12].

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