Chapter One

Introduction: Laughter and The Book

The birth of the art of the novel was linked to the consciousness of an author’s rights and to their fierce defense. The novelist is the sole master of his work; he is his work. ¹

--Milan Kundera

Little does he shun strong opinions on Communist Czech and totalitarianism in works, Milan Kundera is deprived of his citizenship after publishing The Book of Laughter and Forgetting in France in 1979.² Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1929, Kundera is both the victimized and the blessed under the Communist reign. Kundera had participated in the Party when he was eighteen years old and celebrated for the takeover of Communist government in 1948, but he was soon expelled from the Party for “I said something I should not have said” (BLF 92)³ two years later. After publishing The Joke (1967) and Life is Elsewhere (1973), fast popularity made Kundera listed among those unwelcome intellectuals for the government. During Husak’s normalization, Kundera and other radical intellectuals “los[te] their traveling privileges and their jobs; their books [were] removed from shelves” (Misurella xiii) in 1970. Not until 1975 did Milan and Vera Kundera receive the assistance of the French government and were granted the visa to France where they begin their immigration life. Though he still lives in France, Kundera’s “contact with Czech nationals

¹ This quotation is from The Curtain, p100. This book is henceforth abbreviated as Curtain for convenience.
² Kundera depicts his experience of being revoked of the citizenship in the interview with Jordan Elgrably in “Conversation with Milan Kundera.” He said, “One day I received a brief letter informing me that my citizenship had been taken away. The letter itself was written in a virtually illiterate manner, spelling mistakes and all! Quite an admirable document, for it’s barbaric quality” (Elgrably 16).
³ This quotation is from The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, p 92; this book is henceforth abbreviated as BLF for convenience.
becomes illegal” (Elgraby 17) after he is no longer a Czech citizen. Ironically, after being expelled from the circle of Communist Czech, Kundera is favorably known as “a novelist for the world” for his complex narrative and delicate scenario, lucid observation of humanity and edged stand against totalitarianism.

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* has established Kundera as “a novelist for the world”⁴ for its complex variation structures, and it meanwhile excavates the human condition on the themes of laughter and forgetting. This complexity provides critics varying approaches; some are fascinated by its intricate narrative, and some meanwhile focus on thematic issues such as forgetting or laughter. Favoring distinguishing structures of this novel, Fred Misurella and David Lodge, meticulously examine the formation and structure of this novel. Misurella notices that Kundera’s cautiously represses authorial control by using “parabasis,” since “he restored to an old tale teller’s stratagem, stepping from behind the fictional narrator’s mask and personally addressing his readers” (Misurella 20). Lodge in “Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism” regards the seven parts “flow or leak into each other, not via narrative continuity, but through the omnipresence of the authorial voice who comments, digresses and interjects, often in very personal and ‘non-fictional’ ways, and through the repetition-with-variation of certain themes and motifs,” (Lodge 163) and this structural complexity “never allows the reader the luxury of identifying with a secure authorial position that is invulnerable to criticism and irony” (167).

Besides the impressive structure, the “forgetting” theme of this novel always catches critics’ eyes, but it sometimes results in the unwanted historical examination,

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⁴ This is Fred Misurella’s term. “A Different World: The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,” *Understanding Milan Kundera*, p19. About the complex structure, Misurella describes this novel is “a diverse mix of characters and biblical references, a varied combination of literary forms—essays, autobiography, and fantastic tales—and held the mixture together with the personal of the narrator and the unifying themes of memory and loss” (Misurella 19). Kundera’s narrative strategy of “parabasis” makes this novel as an “old tale teller’s stratagem” (20).
which evades Kundera’s intention.\textsuperscript{5} Overemphasizing on forgetting, critics either are obsessed with Tamina’s fragmentary memory for her dead husband Pavel or industriously compare textual events to contextual facts and phenomenon. As the former critics take a psychoanalytic approach to understand characters, the latter ones rashly dilute the pureness of the novel by imposing historical-sociopolitical readings. Nina Pelikan Straus does know Kundera’s worry of “a danger of over-theorization” (Straus 249) and corresponds various motifs to current literary theories:

- Mother and The Angels VI, are ripe for psychoanalytic analyses of Oedipal struggles; […] The Students Stands Up for Lermontov, itself mimics the Bloomian analysis of literary anxiety; Tamina’s variations are mythic parables which, as Kundera deconstructs them, satirize the strategies of deconstructionist and structuralist analyses; “The Border” is a parody of epistemological criticisms (what are the limits of what can be known?) (Straus 263).

However, as Straus concludes “yet for Kundera, none of these interpretations take priority over the meaning he intends—a meaning which insists upon the fact that his book and its language refer to the world outside: to history as he has experienced it” (263), she paradoxically reveals her penchant for the correctness of history. On the other hand, interested in historical facts, Maria Nemcova Banerjee even meticulously identifies those incognito poets in Writers Club with historical figures to restore the obscure circumstances.\textsuperscript{6}

Like Straus, Banerjee focuses more on the theme forgetting, but she reminds us the importance of laughter by initiating two noteworthy yet unfinished discussions

\textsuperscript{5} Kundera indicates his writing strategy of this novel in \textit{The Art of the Novel}. We will examine Kundera’s explanation in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{6} Banerjee compares the characters with the historical figures in her essay. She regards that Goethe is Jaroslav Seifert, the poet descending alludes to Calvary, poet ascending to Paul Eluard, and Boccaccio is Kundera (Banerjee 171-3).
of laughter: the malicious demonic laughter and Papa’s final understanding smile. Though Banerjee thinks laughter is the product only “after the Fall,” she believes “it is a manifestation of human individuation that carries the Devil’s mark” (Banerjee 158). On the other hand, Papa’s final understanding smile that reveals the border between life and death elevates the meaning of laughter to the extreme.

Given that laughter is one of the main themes of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, it contains layered characteristics and recurs in varying episodes with diverse representations. Firstly, following the circled people, we hear carnival laughter without carnivalesque essence in the street. After Klement Gottwald received Clementis’ fur hat on the balcony in February 1948, liberal Bohemia had become Communist Czechoslovakia. Two years later, a carnival circle was held in the public square where only the totalitarian-rule believers were invited to dance inside. We can differentiate their laughter from carnivalesque laughter in the old-time marketplace owing to the contribution from Mikhail Bakhtin, who has combed the genealogy of laughter and various representations of carnival in *Rabelais and His World*. In this erudite yet insightful book, Bakhtin reveals the inverse power of carnival against the official system and the importance of laughter for the people in Rabelais’ time. For his achievement, Kundera acclaimed that, “And yet Rabelais, ever undervalued by his compatriots, was never better understood than by a Russian, Bakhtin” (*Curtain* 36).

Milan Kundera and Mikhail Bakhtin, indeed, do share several similarities: suffering from totalitarian terror, they treasure crafty narrative strategies which preserve the art of the novel intact and highly pay tribute to humor, which is both the legacy of Rabelais and the extreme representation of individuality—away from the control of the authority. Akin to the narrative, Stephen Benson reminds us the sibling link in musical polyphony between Kundera and Bakhtin by pointing,
I have placed Bakhtin’s work alongside the critical writings of Milan Kundera, a novelist particularly attuned to the relationship between music and the novel. Although Kundera never mentions his predecessor by name, their respective ideas about musical polyphony as a model for narrative are strikingly similar (Benson 293).

Besides the musical narrative mentioned by Benson, Mark Weeks reminds it is humor that reveals the “obvious kinship” (Weeks 131) between Kundera and Bakhtin, though humor is used as a “slippery term” (131) for its ambiguity in Kundera’s works. Yet, both Kundera and Bakhtin regard mighty humor can defy the dominant delimitation of the authority or temporarily invert the monolithic official system.

In *Rabelais and His Time*, Bakhtin claims the value of carnival is mainly derived from laughter, this daily forbidden expression, turns to be a rare redemption for the public only during carnival season. In Rabelais’ time, laughter is long regarded as the devil’s gift and unwelcome for the official system, as the constitution of this jolly expression cannot be examined in advance. We cannot tell that laughter is produced out of detecting irony of things or indicating sacrileges before it bursts out. It is this inverse potential which threatens the authority and the church is banned. Thus, to liberate silenced laughter is extraordinarily meaningful for the people. By laughing, people can relieve themselves from strict social norms and the hierarchy and temporarily transgress the authorial delimitation. This inverse laughter is what Bakhtin treasures most in carnival. After combing the classical comic theory, Frank Stevenson identifies Bakhtinian laughter as “scorn-laughter” in “Comic Noise and the Textual Surfaces.” Even though carnival laughter of people is liable to redeem their individualities by revealing their scorns for the authority, it eventually restores or renews the social order once carnival ends.
Furthermore, in “Part Three, The Angels” of the book, Kundera differentiates the outsider from the angelic circle and demonic laughter from laughable angelic laughter, while he favors the demonic one. It is humor that decides the distinctive difference between the two kinds of laughter, since angelic laughter is but a mime without humor. Inheriting the comic tradition of Rabelais, Kundera defines laughter as the devil’s singular gift, which accords with Bakhtin’s notation in *Rabelais and His World*. However, under the totalitarian reign, inverse laughter to puncture the official diminishes and the humorous laugh turns luxurious, since most of the time we merely hear the angelic laughter, which is overloaded with meanings such as political acclaim or religious faith. As laughter is no longer laughter, we find the evil of totalitarianism.

It is humorous laughter that is what Kundera treasures most and would firmly justify in his works. Once participated in the ring dance in Wenceslas Square, Kundera was blinded for the lethal charms of the angelic world, where the poet and the hangman tightly hand each other. But, after two years, Kundera, no longer being a member of the circle, can take a detached attitude to examine the passionate crowd. He wanders around the angelic crowd and hears their meaningful laughter, and is faintly preoccupied with sense of resignation. Francois Ricard captures this gentle resignation in Kundera’s writing, since it “never states that it is subversive, does not propose a theory of subversion or make a lot of noise. Subversive it is, but simply, softly, insidiously one might say, yet deeply and without remission” (Ricard 58). For Ricard, though Kundera meaningfully digresses from harsh attacks on Communist Czech, his subtlety and lightness contrarily “increase the subversions’ effectiveness” for making “the subversion at times nearly imperceptible to the reader in a hurry, even if, despite himself, he can not help but be secretly shaken” (59). Rather than painstakingly depicts the terrible circumstances under the totalitarian-authority rule, Kundera merely compares two kinds of laughter. With no pass to the magic circle,
Kundera watches angelic people soar into the air and hears their diminishing laughter, while he stays as the dumbfounded wingless devil, whose ironic laughter is his only weapon to threaten the harmonious circle. After hearing bitter demonic laughter outside the circle, Ricard writes down his moved response for Kundera’s gentle subversion in his “Satan’s Point of View.”

Laughter is capable of crossing any visible or shapeless border. In “Part Seven, The Border,” the leading hero Jan who laughs mostly knows best the secret of border crossing. He has perceived the existence of the border after being frustrated for his precocious sexual discontent. Relying on sensuous experience to understand things, Jan crosses the border for laughing sacrilegiously in the graveyard or mocking Barbara’s party, which is a modern mutative carnival. In Terry Eagleton’s perspective, this collective debauchery is not far from a modern concentration camp while faintly contains carnivalesque characteristic, for “[b]odies are interchangeable for both Stalinism and carnival, transgression prized by both revolutionary and cynic” (Eagleton 30). However, to participate in this private carnival endangers one’s individuality, since “the supposed singularity of erotic love uproariously repeated in a wilderness of mirrors, each individuated body mockingly mimicking the next” and “Kundera recognizes the profound comedy of repetition” (29). In Barbara’s villa, we find a comedy derived from sensual repetition and hear Jan’s ironic laughter. Laughter, for Kundera, is never a simple biological reaction, but contains its ambiguity to reveal one’s awareness or doubt, malice or self-mockery. By laughing, one transgresses the ideological border and completes his individuality.

Giving voice to laugh, the following chapters aim at justifying the linkage between Bakhtin and Kundera and the essence of carnivalesque laughter, then differentiating demonic laughter from angelic one, tracing the route to cross the border via laughter, and finally connecting humorous laughter to Kundera’s art of the
novel. In Chapter Two we firstly side with Kundera to stroll along the merry yet phony carnival circle, which contains no genuine carnivalesque essence. Comprehending carnivalesque laughter helps us to capture the pure representation of laughter in an age when laughter is overloaded with meanings. To distinguish the devil from the angelic crowd is our priority in Chapter Three. Though both groups do laugh, untuneful laughter helps us to distinguish humorous demonic laughter from miming angelic laughter. As we have conceive the power of carnivalesque laughter and demonic one, we are informed that laughter is capable of crossing the limited border of things, to puncture the ideological meanings. The border is not only an existence but also the everyday experience for characters of this novel. We are going to examine how laughter equips characters for crossing the border of totalitarian terror in the fourth chapter. The focus of the final chapter, however, shifts to Kundera’s lasting concern to reveal the humor, which is the synonym of the wisdom of the novel, and to represent human condition to the utmost in his works.

Charles Molesworth said it is “Kundera’s faith in the novel as an instrument of truth-telling, and his historical vision of Europe” (Molesworth 65). Being a book full of strong opinions, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting certainly reflects Kundera’s historical concern, and meanwhile reveals “the consciousness of an author’s rights” (Curtain 100) to preserve individuality with laughter.