Chapter Three

The Demonic Laughter Bursting out from the Angelic Crowd

What actually remains of that distant time? Today, people regard those days as an era of political trials, persecutions, forbidden books, and legalized murder. But we who remember must bear witness: it was not only an epoch of terror, but also an epoch of lyricism, ruled hand in hand by the hangman and the poet. The wall behind which people were imprisoned was made of verse. There was dancing in front of it. No, not a danse macabre! A dance of innocence. Innocence with a bloody smile.¹

--Milan Kundera

The circle holding by Paul Eluard and his fellows in Wenceslaus Square in 1950 was an unprecedented carnival. Even though the merry crowd did know the executions of radical intellectuals and potential rebels happened the very day before, with smiles on faces and ideals in minds, they danced for the Communist government. There is no question that this semi-carnival composed by the hangman and the poet reminds us the interim of great confusion in Czech.

The period that began from Klement Gottwald’s reception of Clementis’ fur hat in the winter of 1948 to Gustav Husak’s reign in the 1970s, frames the setting of the Book of Laughter and Forgetting.² Entailing a serious of sociopolitical changes,

¹ The quotation is from “Part 6, The Middle-Aged Man”, Life is Elsewhere, p270. This novel is henceforth abbreviated as Life.
² Klement Gottwald (Nov 23, 1896-Mar 14, 1953), Communist politician, the former party leader and prime minister, was elected as the president of Czechoslovakia after the take-over of Communist Party in 1948. “Part I, Lost Letters” of the Book begins from his speech in the balcony in February of 1948. Based on the description from Life is Elsewhere, Gottwald “was denouncing the traitors who had planned to cripple the Communist Party and to block the nation’s progress toward socialism” (Kundera 126).
these two decades did confuse Bohemians. It was once regarded the best time for the younger generation and workers who, in 1950, cheered for the Communist Party that promised them the revolutionary future and a popular-based government. It was also the worst time, since what followed in this period, were sequential purges in the Gottawald era, Prague Spring and the invasion of Russian tanks in 1968, Jan Palach’s self-immolation, and the reign of Gustav Husak, the President of Forgetting. Without doubt, even if those poets and hangmen who circled in the square had no premonitions of the disillusioning future, their alibi did not suffice to rid them from the guilt of executing their peers. Notwithstanding, rather than denounces their sang-froid, Kundera further reassures us their innocence by calling them “angels,” as if the inevitable murders were negligibly caused by the turbulent time. Blinded with the revolutionary expectation and unrelenting faith in their new government, the angelic people were made innocent by their persistent innocence in this lyrical age. Kundera calls these innocent youths “angels,” but this appellation is used less as an ironical trope of denouncement than an expression of resignation—for the changes of time.

The Poet Takes Side

In the turbulent time, nothing is more striking than witnessing the dance of innocence circled by the poet and the hangman. When Eluard cited his poems about joy and brotherhood, the circling participants, having well known the executions the day before, strived to prove their innocence by dancing. In the postscript of *Life is Elsewhere*, Kundera depicts his witness to this era as “a trauma,” since “when an executioner kills, that is after all normal; but when a poet (and a great poet) sings in accompaniment, the whole system of values we considered sacrosanct has suddenly

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*Gustav Husak (Jan 10, 1913-Nov. 18, 1991) succeeded Alexander Dubcek as the long-term leader of Communist Party of Czechoslovakia since 1969, and was elected president in 1975; his rule is known as “normalization.” In *the Book*, Husak is described as “the President of Forgetting” for obliterating histories of Bohemia, such as expelling historians and radical intellectuals from their posts, renaming of streets, while paying tribute to the youth and pop culture.*
been shaken apart” (*Life* 310). Though this harmonious danse macabre might entail issues over the complicity between the people, or further, the moral responsibility of the intelligentsia, this performance is hard to be unrelated to the totalitarian rule then.

During the Communist reign, the ideal of revolutions is not only justified but also elevated. This magic circle dance is the best example. After narrating the tragedy of the short-lived Communist poet Jaromil, Kundera said that “it is important to stress that these peculiar pseudo-revolutions, imported from Russia and carried out under the protection of the army and the police, were full of authentic revolutionary psychology and their adherents experienced them with grand pathos, enthusiasm, and eschatologic faith in an absolutely new world” (*Life* 309-310). For sensational revolutions, Hans Renner ascribes the political agitation to the prevalent influence of the “divide and rule” policy of the Communist Party. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) had always identified itself as the one and only guardian of national interests; opponents of them would be accused of “enemies of the people” (Renner 7). To unsettle the bedrock of old-time democracy, CPCz mainly appeals to the collective “anti-intellectual” sentiment of the people. For Renner, the Party “managed to stir up an anti-intellectual mood, and even feelings of hate towards the Czechoslovak intelligentsia among the workers” by treating the terms “‘intellectualism’ or ‘intellectual’ with as much scorn as fascism did with the terms ‘democracy’ or ‘democrat’ ”(29). This totalitarian strategy effectively disrupted the

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3 Hans Renner (1946-), a Czech historian, lectures in the University of Groningen, Netherlands. The following quotations are from his *A History of Czechoslovakia Since 1945*. From Renner perspective, Czechoslovakia’s democracy has failed for two reasons: one is the mistaken policy favoured the Soviet Union, and the other is since Dr. Edvard Benes, leaders of Czechoslovakia “did their utmost to find favour with the Kremlin regarding home affairs as well” (Renner 4). Since Gottawald was elected as the president in 1948, Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) not only successfully controlled the whole country but also copied the totalitarian reign of Kremlin. What followed the Marxist-Leninist doctrine were sequential class struggle and political purges, whereas the younger generation and poor workers were favoured as the salt of the earth in Czech then. Detailed information about the shift of CPCz and the history of totalitarian reign could be referred to Renner’s book.
Czechs by applying a rough dichotomy to demonize the Party’s adversary as “enemies of the people.”

In order not to be the target for holders of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, the intelligentsias who had long been categorized as one social stratum encompassing both the capitalist and the proletariat sided with the working class. That is, most intelligentsias conceded to the normalization in a totalitarian society to avoid the jeopardy of being false-charged or executed. As for the converted intelligentsias, Renner said,

[t]he non-communist intelligentsia, partly corrupted by the Party, partly gagged and frightened, kept quiet and rapidly adapted to their new role. They showed their solidarity with the working class by a new outward appearance and a ‘proletarian’ behaviour. They forswore the tie, this ‘banner of the bourgeoisie’ and wore open collars. They discarded the hat and went for the cloth cap. At work they wore blue overalls, in the canteen they used only soup spoons rather than fork and knife, and on Sunday they took part in ‘collective activities’ (Renner 30).

Thus, with his proletarian camouflage, the poet who participated in the “collective activities,” tightly gripped his fellows and frenziedly dances in the public square. It was a dance of joy and brotherhood. Absorbed in this lyrical atmosphere, the intelligentsia not only took side with radical youth and workers but also firmly believed the Communist Party, which promises people forthcoming revolutionary progress. The paradox behind his choice, however, was that before joining in the circle, this innocent intelligentsia had been bought by his lyrical expectation designed by the government. The circle containing carnival scale guaranteed the passage to happiness and welfare only for totalitarian authority-rule believers.
Two Worlds

Carnival in the past enabled people to turn a marketplace into an inverse autonomy by temporarily suspending daily restrictions of social norms and hierarchy. In this unofficial world, profane languages and curses were nonmalignant, while luxurious feasts were badly desired. The crowned clown received the degrading abuse from the carnival crowd; grotesque bodily features, such as gaping mouth or abnormally huge phallus, were exposed on parade. Full of sensual spectacles and eccentric displays, the marketplace served as a popular centre of a second world beyond the reach of the official system. Being the synonym of liberation for people in Rabelais’ time, carnival indeed created an alternative unofficial world imbued with “the atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity” (RW 153) that might be viewed as the contributing factor to explain its importance for all.

As the location of carnival moves from the marketplace in Rabelais’ time to the public square in Kundera’s time, the authentic ideal of carnival has been challenged. Without providing an alternative second world for all the people, it is this magic circle what has complicity in the totalitarian authority-rule for expelling any potential rebels or indocile individuals. In other words, if the old-time marketplace is a stage without footlights for all to stand out against social norms and the hierarchy, the downtown square in Prague seemingly has failed to provide this popular-based space. Displaying a restrained carnival under the watch, Wenceslaus Square functions rather than an old-time marketplace to liberate the people but as a “closed bloc”4 dominated by the government. With a free pass obtained by common faith in the totalitarian authority, the majorities are permitted to dance in the circle; meanwhile the doubted ones are forbidden. There is no question that this magic circle has consequently separated the world into two parts, the merry domain for the angelic

4 It is Renner’s trope to describe CPCz. “Whereas the CPCz acted as a closed bloc, this could not be said of the Czechoslovakia noncommunist parties” (Renner 5-6).
innocent people, nonetheless, the bleak one for those being singled out. Bona fide is that the old-time carnival to provide an alternative world against the official system and to liberate people from the strict hierarchy has faded away during the Communist rule. What follows is an unwanted separation between two worlds, a vast totalitarian domain expanding from the centre of this magic circle, and the peripheral remaining space. It is the dual Prague separated by carnival.

To elucidate the dual world denoted by carnival, we distinguish settings of this book into two parts: one is the vast, merry, angelic circle, while the peripheral could never be included in the former domain. The former could be named as “the angelic world,” but the latter one, instead of being named as the demonic zone to the contrary, had better be regarded as a space “that breaks all the rules of perspective”\(^5\) where the outsiders also break the rules of the angelic world.

I. The Angelic World

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* endows with an alternative perspective to witness the totalitarian world by providing narratives of outsiders, those who are expelled from the angelic circle. Representing the collective ecstatic innocence, the unbreakable angelic world is a “closed bloc” for people with communist faith in Prague as well as in the West. It is unbreakable for solid meaningfulness admitted by people both inside and outside the totalitarian country. Besides this, among the several parts of this novel, the angelic world occurs in different forms, sometimes representing as a magnificent circle in the public square, sometimes minimizing to a threesome in the classroom, even as an orgy in a private villa. Despite of its multiple transformations, the presence of the angelic world is hardly ignored. Rather than embracing “the historical moment and the atmosphere of lyric ecstasy belong to the world evoked in *Life is Elsewhere,***” (Banerjee 161) mentioned by Maria Nemocova

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\(^5\) It’s Kundera’s term for breaking the rules of perspective. He points out Tamina’s hometown Prague “while leaving anonymous the town where my story takes place” (*BLF* 109).
Banerjee, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is liable to take side with the fringe, since the narration of the outsider Kundera does provide a fringe perspective. Banerjee’s considers that “all around Kundera, the angelic members of his generation are celebrating the victory of their murderous innocence by holding hands and dancing in a ring” (161). That is, if Life is Elsewhere represents the detailed interiority of those innocent participants, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting focuses on that of the estranged. To explore this angelic world, firstly, its meaningfulness has to be highlighted, while what follows is to differentiate its various, dazzling, camouflaged mutations.

Compared with other doctrines, meaningfulness is denoted as a rule to justify the righteousness of those innocent angels in a totalitarian world where individualities diminish. Given that any slogan or public act would enable any possible inversion against the government, the authorities concerned filter the hidden meanings before forwarding to the public, regardless of the arbitrary measurement only based on the Party’s benefits. It is the freedom of speech and publications and meetings that is restrained to prevent any potential rebel to promote strong opinions against the official system. The Party has to ensure the public that these restraints are meaningful and never far from the national interest to rationalize the coming dominations. Apropos of the absurdity of a highly meaningful world, Terry Eagleton comments it as

[a] situation where everything is meaningful is certainly oppressive: the logical extreme of such an attitude is paranoia, a condition in which

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6 Even though Benarjee has acutely pointed out the textual connections between Life is Elsewhere and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting here, I would further interpret her point as if Life is Elsewhere represents the detailed interiority of those innocent participants, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting focuses on that of the estranged. Indeed Jaromil’s initiation in Life is Elsewhere provides us an archetype of a passionate radical youth in the lyrical age of revolution. Thus, I would like to further interpret the coherences between these two novels in Chapter Four. Besides this, I would explore the connection between The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Unbearable Lightness of Being in this Chapter.
reality becomes so pervasively, ominously meaningful that its slightest fragments operate as signs in some sinisterly coherent text. Kundera tells the story in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* of a Czech being sick in the middle of Prague, not long after the Soviet invasion of the country. Another Czech wanders up to him, shakes his head and says: ‘I know just what you mean’ (Eagleton 187).

It is pervasive to find lots of people suffering from this paranoia tend to over-interpret the meanings of things and are enthusiastic to justify their meaningful individualities.

Mirek is a tragicomic Czech hero who suffers for overestimating the meaning of his life. Though Mirek had left the television crews and became a construction worker, like those intelligentsias driven from their former posts, the Party would not promise him a peaceful life until he renounced what he had said and written against the government in public. Bearing the motto “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Kundera 14) in mind, Mirek keenly viewed himself as a solid fighter against the totalitarian world. He meticulously recorded those strong opinions of his and his friends as if to defend for the spirit of the constitution. In fact, “Mirek was in love with his destiny, and even his march toward ruin seemed noble and beautiful to him,” (14) he found his individuality even more distinctive in this difficult life. With the fracture of the forearm, Mirek was permitted of a short vacation. Rather than rearranging those diaries and mails what might cause him to prison, Mirek thought it was more urgent to retrieve the love letters for Zdena twenty-five years ago. If one could design his lifespan at will, Mirek would like to erase his ugly first mistress from his past to perfect his life, for whose disproportional big nose indicating the tasteless of his youthful passion tasteless. For Mirek, his connection to his life was that of a sculptor to his statue or a novelist to his novel. It is an inviolable right of a novelist to rework his
novel. If the opening does not please him, he can rewrite or delete it. But Zdena’s existence denied Mirek that author’s prerogative. Zdena insisted on remaining on the opening pages of the novel and did not let herself be crossed out (BLF 15).

Obsessed with the paranoid to perfect his struggled life by reclaiming his love letters, Mirek, finally accompanied by his friends, was sentenced for piles of unhidden controversial statements in his flat.

As the Communist propaganda blurs the vision of Western sympathizers, the harmonious ring tempts them to engage in the revolutionary illusion of the totalitarian world. Little can they resist the sensational ring dance in a distant totalitarian country; they are stimulated to form various innocent circles in their liberal states. They tend to idealize the revolutions elsewhere, since they could never understand the meaning of the circle, which is merely a carnival without the inverse carnivalesque essence, from where they look and side it.

This myth of understanding people from the other world is penetrated in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. It is the mutual misunderstanding that justly functions the relationship between Sabina and Franz. For Franz, a well-bred French professor, Sabina’s complex background embodies his feeling of “a curious mixture of envy and nostalgia” (ULB 98), since he always felt his book life to be unreal. He yearned for real life, for the touch of people walking side by side with him, for their shouts. It never occurred to him that what he considered unreal (the work he did in the solitude of the office or library) was in fact his real life, where as the parades he imagined to be reality were nothing but theatre, dance, carnival—in other words, a dream” (ULB 96).

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7 This novel is henceforth abbreviated as ULB for convenience.
He has no idea that as the May Day parade begins, Sabina would try her best to evade the agitated crowd; he has no idea as French sympathizers mourn for the turbulent condition in Czech, what Sabina left unsaid is

Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison (*ULB* 96-7).

Rather than fathoming pervasive evil of the marching people, Franz, who loves to embrace his kitsch, yearns to raise his fist and shout the slogan among them. In the long run, the people living in the lyrical states where no sequential political purges has ever happened, no Soviet tanks have ever invaded, and no one has ever immolated to protest the totalitarian reign of the Communist Party, are more fascinated by the meaning of the circle than those from the totalitarian world.

Being immersed in her agitated sentiment, the literature teacher Madame Raphael always finds the magic circle which “speaks to us from the ancient depths of our memories” (*BLF* 88-9) attractive and yearns for being involved in varying circles. Madame Raphael, like Franz, who is obsessed with “a curious mixture of envy and nostalgia” for the totalitarian world, lives in liberal France but always pursues any possibility to be assimilated within circles. Though she lectures the play *Rhinoceros* “by Eugene Ionesco in which the characters, possessed by a desire to be similar to one another, one by one turn into rhinoceroses,” (77) she falls into the trap as most Western sympathizers do by overestimating the meaning of mass movement. Her quest for circles is described as follows,

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8 The immolator is Jan Palach (Aug 11, 1948-Jan 19, 1969), who killed himself after the Russian invasion beginning from August 1968 to reform the aftermaths of Prague Spring. In his “Esch Is Luther,” Kundera pinpoints the impressive role of Jan Palach to Czech people. I would further elucidate this allusion in the following chapter.
[a]ll her life she had looked for a circle of men and women with whom she could hold hands in a ring dance, at first in the Methodist Church (her father was a religious fanatic), then in the Communist Party, then in the Trotskyist Party, then in a Trotskyist splinter party, then in the movement against abortion (a child has a right to life!), then in the movement to legalize abortion (a woman has a right to her body!), then she looked for it in Marxists, in psychoanalysis, in structuralists, looked for it in Lenin, in Zen Buddhism, in Mao Tse-tsung, among the followers of yoga, in the school of the *nouveau roman*, and finally she wishes at least to be in perfect harmony with her students, to be at one with them, meaning that she always compels them to think and say the same things she does, to merge with her into a single body and a single soul in the same circle and the same dance (*BLF* 89).

Admittedly, Madame Raphael is never lonely, for her pets Gabrielle and Michelle would write down whatever she said and think just as she does. As both girls played rhinoceroses by wearing paper horns, their sameness reminded Madame Raphael the meaning of the circle where individualities dissolved. This is the corporate happiness what she had searched for long in varying ring dances. Finally, Madame Raphael took her pets by hands to make a threesome magic circle. They danced and laughed in harmonious accord until they fly into the sky, while “the dumbfounded students heard the fading, radiant laughter of three archangels” (104).

Concerning to this grotesque scene of three flying archangels, it is Gustav Husak’s rule of “organized forgetting” (*BLF* 218) that justifies the lightness of these angels after two decades. Being the President of Forgetting since 1969, Husak had obliterated Czech histories and people’s memories by renaming the streets, persecuting political adversaries, driving one hundred and forty-five Czech historians
from the universities and research institutes, cozying up to unsophisticated children by exaggerating their importance, then pleading with a rock singer to stay in Prague. In the normalization period, Husak favored especially children and pop music; the angelic innocence and blank memory of the former were easily directed and instigated by the authority concerned, while the latter “represented music without memory” (249) could collude with an ahistorical totalitarian government. As Husak was entitled as “Honorary Pioneer” and awarded the red kerchief around his neck by children, Kundera and his dying father were watching the ceremony on television. Husak was seemingly absorbed in the merry moment, and made his stimulating speech by saying “Children! You are the future! Children, never look back!” (239). This is Husak’s call for children. Once, facing the leaving of pop singer Karel Klos, Husak was depressed and showed his concern by writing him a personal letter, because he knew how important a pop singer means to Czech people. In a world where childlike innocence and music without memory are extraordinarily valued, people are docilely taught to be like angels. Yet, this light angelic world is not an unprecedented one. Two decades ago, as Kundera was expelled from the magic circle, he already found the dancing people “were flying like birds and [he] was falling like a stone, that they had wings and [he] would never have any” (95).

II. The World without the Rules of Perspective

Apart from the angelic world where everything means, there is an alternative world where the meaning of the former appears redundant. It is no zone where the devil struggles against the angels; on the contrary, it is more like a laissez-faire space beyond the measurement and restrictions of the angelic world, a place for those who stand outside the circle. Coming from the totalitarian world but having never stepped into the circle in Prague streets, Tamina, the principal heroine of this novel, works as a patient waitress in the west of Europe. Rather than revealing the foreground of the
story, it is her distant hometown that is introduced during Tamina’s first presence. About Tamina, Kundera said,

[t]his time, to make clear that my heroine is mine and only mine (I am more attached to her than any other), I am giving her a name no woman has ever before borne: Tamina. I imagine her as tall and beautiful, thirty-three years old, and originally from Prague. I see her walking down a street in a provincial town in the west of Europe. Yes, you’re right to have noticed: I refer to faraway Prague by name, while leaving anonymous the town where my story takes place. That break all the rules of perspective, but you’ll just have to make the best of it (BLF 109).

This description denotes two unconventional writing strategies. Firstly, though Kundera seemingly lays bare his writing strategy, he distinctly indicates Tamina’s idiosyncrasy by claiming his authority over her, while playfully reminds readers his identity as a storyteller. Apropos of this humorous claiming, Banerjee finds “the Cervantesque echo” of “for me alone Don Quixote [is] born, and I for him,” (146) which is revealed in this claim. On the other hand, Kundera simultaneously takes an unconventional strategy that breaks the rules of perspective by focusing on distant Prague while blurring the setting of the story. Breaking the rules of perspective eludes normal human perception, as the object of the background appears more obviously than that of the foreground. Despite the fact that it is Tamina’s background that means for Western sympathizers, it is meaninglessly represented without the rules of perspective of the angelic world where everything means. From these two perspectives, Tamina is introduced as an individual, though not being included in the angelic circle, she means for both readers and the author.
It is Mama’s faulty vision that provides us an alternative to inspect a world without the rules of perspective. After Papa’s funeral, Marketa and Karel sympathized with every change of Mama, such as her pitiful loneliness and gradual shrinkage, even her dimmer eyesight what they thought annoying. Changes on Mama appeared disproportionately against time; as she got older, she was smaller, lighter, more childlike and with dimmer vision. They had known her diminishing eyesight for a time, because Mama could not distinguish the boundary stones from a distant village, “but her faulty vision seemed to express something more basic: what appeared large to them, she found small; what they took for boundary stones, for her were distant houses” (BLF 40). Once an invasion of tanks from a neighboring country shocked all the people, Mama was merely infuriated by the pharmacist who forgot to pick the pears of her backyard. Mama’s reaction confuses both Marketa and Karel, as if the pears are more important than the tanks. Nonetheless, as times goes by, Karel realized that the answer to this question was not as obvious as he had always thought, and he began to feel a secret sympathy for Mama’s perspective, which had a big pear tree in the foreground and somewhere in the distance a tank no bigger than a ladybug, ready at any moment to fly away out of sight. Ah yes! In reality it’s Mama who is right: tanks are perishable, pears are eternal (BLF 41).

During Mama’s meant-delayed stay, it is the epiphany of perishable tanks and eternal pears that crosses Karel’s mind. Unknown to the following debauch, Mama recited a poem what she failed to represent fully when she was thirteen to the young couples and the guest Eva, who reminded her of old intimate Nora. Without interrupting Mama’s long story, Karel meaningfully tantalized two aroused women (for their coming threesome debauchery) behind the toilet door. Because,
What interested him wasn’t the story told by Mama but Mama telling the story. Mama and her world [that] looked like a huge pear on which a tiny Russian tank had alighted like a ladybird. The toilet door on which the principal pounded his fist was in the foreground, and very much beyond that door, the eager impatience of the two young women was barely visible (BLF 63).

The long-planned threesome debauchery temporarily suspends while Mama repeats her negligible stories in the foreground. This is the magic of breaking the rules of perspective, which not only inverts the meanings of priorities but also revalues them. It is Mama’s free association of Eva and Nora that recalls Karel’s childhood fantasy on cloud nine. Gazing at Eva, whose T-shirt hardly covering her pubic thatch, Karel remembers peeping the five-meter-high naked Nora from back in the changing room. Obsessed with this magic, Karel penetrates into Eva as a four-year-old boy into his dreamy yet unreachable diva, laughing and shouting wildly. Adopting Mama’s faulty vision, Karel animates the lovemaking with the extraordinary beauty, which “is an abolition of chronology and a rebellion against time” (73). By breaking the rules of perspective, Karel transgresses the frame of time and find the alternative beautiful world. For Fred Misurella, Mama’s faulty perspective acutely bridges several main motifs of this novel; he said,

it is [Mama’s] faulty memory that triggers Karel’s transformation, the moment of beauty during which he experiences a “rebellion against time” that unites a naive childhood memory with his adult erotic experience. In that way the key words of the book’s title, laughter and forgetting, join together, and, with that juncture as bridge from the motif of forgetting in “Lost Letters,” Kundera moves on to treat the subject of laughter directly in the next section (Misurella 25-6).
From Mama’s faulty association to Karel’s deliberate adoption, we can find that without the limited rules of perspective and chronology, the sense of beauty appears ubiquitous and can be comprehended timelessly. It is the beauty, which is “an abolition of chronology and a rebellion against time,” achieves an alternative world where tanks are perishable while pears are eternal, where the meaningful circle appears meaningless, and where Mirek, Karel, Zavis Kalandra, Kundera, Sarah, Tamina and Jan stand.9

Inharmonious Laughter

Centered in Wenceslaus Square, the magic circle is competent to function as carnival of Rabelais’ time by providing a stage where social norms and regulations are temporarily suspended, but it unfairly bans the entrance gate while favors those who innocently side with the official system. This ban strictly determinates the key attribute of the angelic crowd, since some have undergone severe thought control while some have been brainwashed by Party’s propaganda prior to their ecstatic dance or unscrupulous spitting in public. From the magic circle in the Gottwald era to red kerchief circling on Honorary Pioneer Husak’s neck, what remain concealed are the murders of mavericks and the fact of driving one hundred and forty-five historians from the universities and research institutes. That is, carnival in Kundera’s time contains only the festive scale and the merry atmosphere but without its popular essence. Failing to provide a stage without footlights for all, this modern carnival consequently serves more as a “safety valve” of the authority concerned than “a blow against to the epistemological megalomania of the official culture” (Clark and

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9 In “Erasing History & Deconstructing the Text: The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,” Nina Pelikan Straus regards characters “Mirek, Karel, Tamina, and Jan are all Kundera’s doubles” (Straus 251) and analogizes “Kundera’s own falling out of the political circle dance” to Mirek’s falling which is “like a stone from the ‘angelic’ ascendancy to a ground that is prison or exile” (254). Besides this, in “Part Three, Angels” Kundera wandered around the circle in Wenceslaus Square, and said “I knew that I did not belong to them but belonged to Kalandra, who had also come loose from the circular trajectory and had fallen, fallen, to end his fall in a condemned man’s coffin” (BLF 93). In debt to Straus’ interpretation and Kundera’s description respectively, I regard this alternative world is open for characters mentioned above.
Holquist 313) which Bakhtin would unwearily pay tribute to. There is no question that the transgressive potential of carnival has fainted step by step, yet it barely survives within the circle. Only by stepping outside the angelic circle, the beauty that contains an abolition of chronology and a rebellion against time reveals, since the rules of perspective is never the only measurement on the alternative periphery. Only by stepping outside the angelic circle, carnival does exist.

It is laughter that determines the peripheral position of carnival, as its reflexive potential directs people to transgress social norms, and meanwhile threatens the solidity of the authority. Laughter was long regarded aggressive, since it represented, said Bakhtin, “the least scrutinized sphere of the people’s creation” and was prohibited in public occasion in the Middle Age and Renaissance. Yet, popular carnival comparatively provided people rare occasions free from the social regulations. Being allowed to redeem their laughter during carnival, people participated in varying ceremonies or eccentric exhibitions to freely express their feelings and bodies while suspending daily regulations and the hierarchy. In fact, they were redeemed not only laughter but also individualities in the process of participating carnival. Bakhtin thus pays tribute to the transgressive potential rooted in carnival laughter by reviewing the relationship between laughter and varying festive forms in his *Rabelais and his World*.

Carnival challenges the official system from two aspects: festive forms and unconventional exhibitions threaten the social norms and prohibitions, and carnival laughter, meanwhile, mightily liberates people from the spiritual shackles of the hierarchy then. But as we examine the dancing crowd, we cannot hear carnival laughter from the angelic circle. To define the characteristics of carnival laughter, Bakhtin said,
[c]arnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival (RW 11-12).

In other words, carnival laughter is no privilege for carnival participants but for all, and moreover, its ambivalence that enables carnival to transgress social norms and regulations. Apparently, the ideal of carnival laughter for all and to transgress has failed in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. In this book, the scale of popular carnival shrinks to a centered magic circle only for innocent people, and their laughter represents the least discontent with the Communist government. Even though these people circle and praise for the brotherhood and love, we hear no ambivalent laughter that asserts and denies, buries and revives at the same time. Intriguing is that once stepping outside this angelic circle, we hear another kind of laughter that is out of tune with the angelic chord, and we hardly misunderstand this carnivalesque inharmonicity.

**Humor and Carnivalesque Laughter**

Laughter functions as an invisible yet audible border that clearly distinguishes the angelic circle from the peripheral, and the innocent people from the maverick in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. To be the measurement, laughter is de facto concerned more with the humorous laughter burst out from the social text than the pure release of energy.

Stevenson reminds us that the classical comic-theory types are mainly divided into two branches: Freudian laughter concerns with the linguistic-mental text, while Bergson/Bakhtin’s “scorn-laughter” (Stevenson 79) bases on the disruptions from
social text in his “Comic Noise and the Textual Surface.” Admittedly, though “both
the linguistic-textual (Freud) and social-textual (Bergson, Bakhtin) models we have
comic inversion as a means of restoring and renewing the psychic/social order by
‘setting’ it back to its middle (normal) position,”(93) representations and causes of the
two laughter vary. As Freudian laughter turns to be the release of excess energy
stimulated by the comic effect, Bergson/Bakhtin’s scorn laughter is ambivalently
aroused by the sense of superiority of the comic “whose primary purpose is social
correction” (94). Blended with the ambivalent nature, the latter

laughter becomes not the release of excess energy (comic effect) but
the expression of one’s own (social) superiority, one’s scorn. In this
case we do not begin with a stimulus (incongruity) that is then
responded to (laughter), but rather with an act of expression (laughter)
which produces incongruity (social distancing) (Stevenson 94).

That is, scorn-laughter raises when people willfully “express” their sense of
superiority to indicate they are different from the target by laughing. Stevenson
further elucidates that

[i]n its mockery (through exaggeration) of the comic target, [then,]
Bergsonian/ Bakhtinian scorn-laughter becomes a force of social
distancing one whose ultimate purpose is the correcting of society: we
create or rather exaggerate the pre-existing “difference” of the social
order—in Bergson by temporarily “ostracizing” the too-rational, too-
mechanical man, in Bakhtin by temporarily inverting the whole socio-
political hierarchy—in order to overcome them, to “flatten out” or
“normalize” society (Stevenson 94).

Since scorn-laughter is derived from those who detect the incongruity of the comic
target and willfully burst out laughing, it expresses their sense of superiority at the
same time. These people express their awareness and self-reflection by laughing at
the absurd. The scorn-laughter might sound mocking, deriding or malicious while
express sense of humor and clear-sightedness of those who laugh. By distancing
themselves from the comic target, the humorous and the clear-sighted laugh at what
they regard as the abnormal and the deviant while they strive to inverse the ridiculous
sociopolitical hierarchy, though the power of their laughter lasts only for seconds.
This is Bergsonian/Bakhtinian scorn-laughter, the carnivalesque laughter.

This same carnivalesque laughter can also be heard on the margin of
Wenceslaus Square. Once the circle dance begins, outsiders expelled from the angelic
carnival can only establish their superiority by laughing at the circle formation,
turning their laughter into another force of social distancing, despite its feebleness to
correct the society. Intriguingly, it is carnivalesque laughter that justifies the outsiders
their peripheral characteristic. Though they cannot pretend naïve angels after being
expelled from the angelic carnival, their superiority is restored when mocking angels.
Standing on the edge, outsiders can see the absurdity of the circled formation clearly
from a distance. They can easily perceive the angelic blind passion, but they show
their superiority by mocking laughter; they can instantly detect the armed police
behind, but they express their irreconcilability by deriding laughter. By laughter,
outsiders are redeemed their humanities. Even if their laughter might not change
circumstances as expected, they freely express sense of humor and self-mockery
while they are outside the angelic circle.

It is the sense of humor that decides the attribute of carnivalesque laughter,
which could mightily transgress the border of the angelic circle, since humorless
laughter is nothing but the release of excess energy. After exaggeratedly distancing
ourselves from the comic target, we laugh to express our difference and assure
ourselves our superiority. Thus, carnivalesque laughter not only differentiates the two
groups of people but also explicates the difference between two kinds of laughter. However, Kundera assured us this measurement to judge people when relating to his personal experience in an interview with Philip Roth in 1980. In retrospect of his personal experience, Kundera said,

I learned the value of humor during the time of Stalinist terror. I was twenty then. I could always recognize a person who was not a Stalinist, a person whom I needn’t fear, by the way he smiled. A sense of humor was a trustworthy sign of recognition. Ever since, I have been terrified by a world that is losing its sense of humor (Roth 78).

The highly self-conscious laugh produced by humor differentiates Stalinist believers from the disbelievers, who heartedly laugh at the absurdity of the official system. As humorous laughter represents as the measurement of one’s self-awareness and political stand in the contemporary, it is its nostalgic malice and simple mock in Rabelais’ works what Kundera is obsessed with. In the beginning of Testaments Betrayed,10 Kundera said,

Rabelais’ time was fortunate: the novel as butterfly is taking flight, carrying the shreds of the chrysalis on its back. With his giant form, Pantagruel still belongs to the past of fantastic tales, while Panurge comes from the yet unknown future of the novel. The extraordinary moment of the birth of a new art give Rabelais’ book an astounding richness; it has everything (Testaments 3).

Undoubtedly, this new art that richens Rabelais’ works is humor, which is revered as the legacy of Rabelais by Kundera. As for Kundera’s tribute to Rabelais, Mark Weeks concludes that, “[i]t is perhaps because such aesthetic, social and moral elevation of humor is inevitably attended by a concern for its well-being that the

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10 This book is henceforth abbreviated as Testaments for convenience.
subject has remained, thematically and as a structural principle, at the core of Kundera’s work” (Weeks 131). Weeks reassures us the value of humor that pretends the mighty role to consolidate one’s subjectivity from the aesthetic, social and moral dimensions. Furthermore, he combs the kinship between Kundera and Bakhtin by pointing,

For Kundear it is [humor] which defies the monolithic delimitation of discourse, of political correctness, recalling “the superbly heterogeneous universe of those earliest novelists” that he sees at the beginning of modern Europe (*Testaments* 4). In this he reflects an obvious kinship with Mikhail Bakhtin, whose polemical notions of the carnivalesque both found a model in Rabelais and were formed in the context of early to middle twentieth century Stalinist state oppression. (Weeks 131).

Carnivalesque laughter that keeps our subjectivity in tact under the totalitarian control is nevertheless fringy and muffled in the angelic circle, but it is humor that helps us to transgress the invisible yet audible border.

**Two Kinds of Laughter**

Although both people inside and outside of the circle can laugh, Kundera painstakingly differentiates the angels’ laughter from the devil’s laughter in “Part Three, The Angels.” Before elaborating the characteristics respectively, Kundera defines angels and the devil beyond our stereotyped recognition, since

[i]o see the devil as a partisan of Evil and an angel as a warrior on the side of Good is to accept the demagogy of the angles. Things are of course more complicated than that. Angels are partisans not of Good but of divine creation. The devil, on the other hand, is the one who
refuses to grant any rational meaning to that divinely created world (BLF 85-6).

We are firstly taught to refuse the simple dichotomy of angels and devil, because both angels and the devil play no traditional or biblical roles in this book. Angels are the partisans of divine creation, accepting the given world without doubt. On the other hand, the devil “who refuses to grant any rational meaning to that divinely created world” doubts. When he finds it absurd when all the angels merrily accept this divinely created world without doubts, the devil burst out laughing to show his scorn and his superiority over the angels.

I. Laughable Laughter

Laughter is unheard of in the angelic world until the devil ruins the tranquility. Being partisans of the divinely created world, angels are unfamiliar with expressing their individualities or scorns by laughing. Since

[in origin, laughter is thus of the devil’s domain. It has something malicious about it (things suddenly turning out different from what they pretended to be), but to some extent also a beneficent relief (things are less weighty than they appeared to be, letting us live more freely, no longer oppressing us with their austere seriousness) (BLF 86).

It is the duality of laughter that both inverts the restricted order and relieves us makes itself unknown to the partisans of the divine. The ambiguity of laughter enables angels to transgress the delimitation of the given world; they would doubt and relieve themselves of the meanings of the divine creation via laughter. Thus, laughter was long regarded as the demonic domain, because it might ruin angels by redeeming them excessive individualities and vain superiority. But, angels learned how to expressing laughter when encountering the laughing devil.
The first time an angel heard the devil’s laughter, he was dumbfounded. That happened at a feast in a crowded room, where the devil’s laughter, which is terribly contagious, spread from one person to another. The angel clearly understood that such laughter was directed against God and against the dignity of his works. He knew that he must react swiftly somehow, but felt weak and defenseless. Unable to come up with anything of his own, he aped his adversary […]. [B]ut [angels] giving them an opposite meaning: whereas the devil’s laughter denoted the absurdity of things, the angel on the contrary meant to rejoice over how well ordered, wisely conceived, good, and meaningful everything here below was (BLF 86-7).

From angels’ aping laughter, we find the “meaning” of laughter is given. Unlike the meaningless of the demonic laughter, angelic laughter carries the mission to praise this divinely created world all the time. However, practice does not always make perfect; indebted to angels’ aping, the essence of laughter diminishes.

It is the repetitive laughter that makes angelic laughter laughable. Apart from laughter, repetition de facto changes the essence of things. Karl Marx’s famous quotes in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” has pointed out this paradox by mentioning, “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occurs, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. ” The farce repeats as angels ape the demonic laugh. The devil’s first laugh may be tragic, since the devil laughs at the absurd and his demonic laugh is mainly derived from the malice or mockery. But angels misunderstand the expression of laughing and simplify the meaning of laughter to indicate their agreement with the divine. Besides, angels are unable to laugh other than imitating the devil. This imitation turns laughing into a mechanical act. Combing Bergson’s comic theory,
Stevenson reminds us repetition does turn laughing into a highly mechanical act. Bergson said, “[w]e laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing” and “[f]or life in its true vitality should never repeat. There where we see repetition, complete similitude, we always suspect the mechanical functioning behind the living” (qtd. in Stevenson 91). Stevenson combines a Serresian reading and interprets the mechanical occurs when “order becomes frozen into redundant (rigid, mechanical) hyper-rationality or hyper-order” (91). In other words, repetitive angelic laughter is not only mechanical act but is produced by hyper-rationality or hyper-order. As abstract laughter turns to be mechanical (a thing), it becomes laughable at the same time.

Being derived from hyper-rationality or hyper-order, meaningful angelic laughter is reduced to be laughable laughter as it repeats. For this mechanical potential, Weeks further correlates the angelic laughter to Jean Baudrillard’s “simulacra” by saying,

laughter had even come to represent the ultimate simulation, but that as such it relinquished its power to undermine from outside a hegemony of simulacra. This is an advanced variation on the strategic (angelic) duplication of laughter Kundera had described in Laughter and Forgetting (Weeks 145).

Admittedly, the repetitive angelic laughter relinquishes the original meaning that demonic laughter would pursue, but turns itself into the simulacrum of the demonic (carnivalesque) laughter. For the relinquishment of laughing power, in his “Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera,” Terry Eagleton considers that

[e]very time something is repeated, it loses part of its meaning; the unique, on the other hand, is a romantic illusion. This contradiction in Kundera can be rephrased as a tension between too much meaning and
too little. A political order in which everything is oppressively meaningful buckles under its own weight: this is the realm which Kundera names the ‘angelic’, an intolerable existence since a degree of non-meaning is essential for our lives. The demonic exists to puncture this stifling logocentrism: it is the laughter which arises from things being suddenly developed of their familiar meanings (Eagleton 184-5).

For Eagleton, as angelic laughter loses its meaning whenever it repeats demonic laughter, only demonic laughter “which arises from things being suddenly developed of their familiar meanings” pierces the suffocating logocentrism.

II. Demonic Laughter

In stark contrast to the miming angels, the devil, being aware of his idiosyncrasy and superiority, tends to express his disagreement with the divine creation or derision of the angels by laughing. Demonic laughter consolidates his superior distinction from those comic angels once it bursts out. After hearing aping laughter, the devil’s reaction is intriguingly described as, “[s]eeing the angel laugh, the devil laughed all the more, all the harder, and all the more blatantly, because the laughing angel was infinitely comical” (BLF 87). The devil laughs at the absurdity of miming angelic laughter, since, for him, authentic laughter is firstly meaningless. Banerjee thinks that “[t]he Devil’s laughter, as Kundera hears it, is an explosion of malice at the discovery of an imperfection at the core of being, but tempted by a distinct sense of relief” (Banerjee 158). This “explosion of malice at the discovery of an imperfection at the core of being” indicates the cruelty characteristic of laughter, which means to reveal the meaninglessness.

Inherited Rabelais’ comic tradition, both Kundera and Bakhtin appreciate the meaninglessness and the maliciousness of authentic laughter, though they call it demonic laughter and carnivalesque laughter respectively. For Bakhtin, carnivalesque
laughter is capable to temporarily invert the social system, while Kundera regards that mighty demonic laughter punctures the angelic meaningfulness of aping laughter. About the origin of laughter, Bakhtin takes the same stand as Kundera by mentioning: “[l]aughter was sent to earth by the devil, but it appeared to men under the mask of joy, and so they readily accepted it. Then laughter cast away its mask and looked at man and at the world with the eyes of angry satire” (RW 38). Here, Bakhtin reassures us the cruelty of laughter by warning us off its mask. Since this “masked” laughter is the gift from the devil, it examines man and this world ridiculously and scornfully. Furthermore, Bakhtin’s masked laughter could find an echo in Kundera’s demonic laughter. In The Art of the Novel, Kundera reminds us the authentic cruelty of laughter, because

[b]y providing us with the lovely illusion of human greatness, the tragic brings us consolation. The comic is crueler: it brutally reveals the meaninglessness of everything […]. The real geniuses of the comic are not those who make us laugh hardest but those who reveal some unknown realm of the comic (Art 125).

For Eagleton, this cruel characteristic revealing “the meaninglessness of everything” is similar to the estrangement effect or the temporary carnivalesque inversion. In “Estrangement and Irony,” he said,

[t]he demonic is the laughter which arises from things being suddenly deprived of their familiar meanings, a kind of estrangement effect akin to Heidegger’s broken hammer, and which a monstrous proliferation of the supposedly singular can bring about. Meaninglessness can be a blessed moment of release, a lost innocent domain for which we are all nostalgic, a temporary respite from the world’s tyrannical legibility in which we slip into the abyss of silence. The demonic is thus closely
associated in Kundera’s fiction with the death drive, a spasm of
deconstructive mockery which, like carnival, is never far from the
cemetery. It is a dangerous force, [...] it has a malicious, implacable
violence about it, the pure negativity of a Satanic cynicism” (Eagleton
30).

It is the meaninglessness of demonic laughter that punctures the familiar meanings,
brings us the momentary release and recalls our nostalgic innocence is capable of
functioning as carnival to liberate us from the official domain. Eagleton is aware of
both the released power and destructive power of laughter, but he pays tribute to the
“pure negativity of a Satanic cynicism” which determines demonic laughter.

Unlike malicious demonic laughter, angelic laughter praises the divine
creation and easily becomes the comic target for its meaningfulness. Derived from
miming, angelic laughter is more a mechanical expression out of hyper-rationality
than impromptus demonic laughter. Banerjee describes angels’ miming as “[their]
pathetic mimicry reads like a dramatization of the Devil’s lesson about laughter, but
upside down” (Banerjee 162-3). There is no question that Banerjee regards the angelic
mimicry is a failed “dramatization of the Devil’s lesson of laughter,” since laughter
twists after being mimed. Even though angelic laughter is laughable, it becomes
ubiquitously in the age when angels rapidly increase. As the lonely devil wrestles
with angels by bursting out into laughter, the borderline between them inevitably
blurs. For this, Kundera indicates that

[I]aughable laughter is disastrous. Even so, the angels have gained
something from it. They have tricked us with a semantic imposture.
Their imitation of laughter and (the devil’s) original laughter are both
called by the same name. Nowadays we don’t even realize that the
same external display serves two absolutely opposed internal attitudes.
There are two laughers, and we have no word to tell one from the other. \textit{(BLF 87)}. 

What troubles Kundera most is we seemingly misconceive two kinds of laughter as the same one and are unable to puncture the absurdity of meaningful laughter nowadays. For the urge to distinguish the two, Kundera provides an extreme expression of ubiquitous angelic laughter in “Part Three, The Angels”. He said, [y]ou certainly remember this scene from dozens of bad films: a boy and a girl are running hand in hand in a beautiful spring (or summer) landscape. Running, running, running, and laughing. By laughing the two runners are proclaiming to the whole world, to audiences in all the movie theaters: “We’re happy, we’re glad to be in the world, we’re in agreement with being!” It’s a silly scene, a cliché, but it expresses a basic human attitude: serious laughter, laughter “beyond joking.” All churches, all underwear manufacturers, all generals, all political parties, are in agreement about that kind of laughter, and all of them rush to put the image of the two laughing runners on the billboards advertising their religion, their products, their ideology, their nation, their sex, their dishwashing powder \textit{(BLF 81)}. 

Unsurprisingly, this “laughter beyond joking” well represents the serious doctrine of the angelic world where every laugh is full of meanings and laughter is meaningful. The worst is, since angelic laughter is laughter beyond joking, it turns to be an absolute expression without suspicion or challenge. As Michelle and Gabrielle happily walk hand in hand, looking forward to play rhinoceros next day, their laughter is precisely the angelic one. When people gather in Barbara’s villa for the collective debauchery, they have to obey every command of Field Marshal Barbara seriously, or turn this naked party into an absurd miming of the concentration camp. However, as
Sarah maliciously kicks the two angelic girls from behind, or when Jan bursts out into malicious laughter after repeating the mechanical coition next to him, it is demonic laughter that mightily crosses the restriction of every manmade border.