Chapter Five

Conclusion: Man Thinks, God Laughs

But what is that wisdom, what is the novel? There is a fine Jewish proverb: Man thinks, God laughs. Inspired by that adage, I like to imagine that Francois Rabelais heard God’s laughter one day, and thus was born the idea of the first great European novel. It pleases me to think that the art of the novel came into the world as the echo of God’s laughter. ¹

--Milan Kundera

In his Jerusalem address, Kundera cites the Jewish proverb “Man thinks, God laughs” to clarify what he regards as the wisdom of the novel. To understand the wisdom of the novel, it is our prime concern to understand the novel mentioned by Kundera. Kundera finds a perfect archetype of the novel from the novelist Gustave Flaubert who speaks not for his own ideas but “seeks to disappear behind his work” (Art 157) and “[has] always done [his] utmost to get into the soul of things” (Curtain 60) in writing. As Flaubert avoids being the spokesman of his work, we find only what Emma Bovary thinks in Madame Bovary. Only by this process of being invisible, a novelist can listen to “another voice than that of his personal moral conviction”; he is listening to the “the wisdom of the novel” (Art 158). The wisdom of the novel reveals when the novels are more intelligent and richer than the thoughts of their authors. But what is the wisdom of the novel? Kundera turns to the Jewish proverb:

¹ This quotation is from Kundera’s “Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe” (157-65), The Art of the Novel, p.158.
“Man thinks, God Laughs.” He identifies the process of thinking is to differ from the truth, by saying that “man thinks and the truth escapes him. Because the more men think, the more on man’s thought diverges from another’s. And finally, because man is never what he thinks he is” (Art 158). It is this gap between the truth and man’s thought that stirs God’s laughter, and it is the humor that completes the wisdom of the novel since the comic of the Middle Ages.

Among those keen-eyed humorists, Rabelais is the one who guards laughter and meanwhile denounces agelasts, who do not laugh and have no sense of humor, for dear life. Kundera said,

Rabelais’ erudition, great as it was, has a meaning other than that of Descartes. The novel’s wisdom is different from that of philosophy. The novel is born not of the theoretical spirit but of the spirit of humor. One of Europe’s major failures is that it never understood the most European of the arts—the novel; neither its spirit, nor its great knowledge and discoveries, nor the autonomy of its history. The art inspired by God’s laughter does not by nature serve ideological certitudes, it contradicts them. Like Penelope, it undoes each night the tapestry that the theologians, philosophers, and learned men have woven the day before (Art 160).

Derived from God’s laughter, the spirit of humor that “contradicts” ideological certitudes is preserved intact in carnival. In the real life, laughter is capable of inverting the social codes and defying the official system, and is strictly prohibited from the public sphere out of its inverse nature except in carnival. The might of carnivalesque laughter can be parallel to the magic of Penelope’s undone tapestry that successfully discourages those unwelcome suitors; it threatens the ideological solidness and temporarily suspends the hierarchy and social norms. In carnival,
people allowed to express themselves are redeemed occasional laughter; these laughing people are written down in Rabelais’ world. After centuries, Kundera addresses laughter preserved in Rabelais’ works as the wisdom of the novel and takes Rabelais’ side to fight against agelasts.

The contemporary agelasts, ably living in the totalitarian world, are different from those of Rabelais’ time. They are called “angels” in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting; though some of them do laugh, their laughter is angelic one, full of meanings but no humor. However, for Kundera, angelic laughter is but a failed mime of demonic laughter, which could be malicious, meaningless, or canrivalesque. However, angels laugh to approve their ideals and agreements and they seldom doubt their belief and convictions, as playing the partisans of divine creation. Angelic laughter is neither carnivalesque laughter guarded by Rabelais, nor demonic laughter praised by Kundera. As he finds the angelic circle in the Wenceslaus Square, Kundera knows he has to side with the devil and is expelled from the idyllic angelic world.

The angelic world is a production of totalitarianism. Kundera depicts the background of the magic ring in Testaments Betrayed by saying, “[a]fter 1948, through the years of Communist revolution in my native country, I saw the eminent role played by lyrical blindness in a time of Terror, which for me was the period when ‘the poet reigned along with the hangman’” (Testaments 155). Like a lonely devil who finds the lyrical absurdity of the angelic circle, Kundera thinks Communist Prague as “a gulag that has poems plastering its outside walls and people dancing before them” (155). Though Kundera firmly indicates his stand against the totalitarian world, he indicates his resignation in the interview with Roth by saying,

Nowadays, people all over the world unequivocally reject the idea of gulags, yet there are still willing to let themselves be hypnotized by totalitarian poesy and to march to new gulags to the tune of the same
lyrical song piped by Eluard when he soared over Prague like the great archangel of the lyre, while the smoke of Kalandra’s body rose to the sky from the crematory chimney (Roth 80).

Kundera definitely comprehends the paradoxical hypnotization of totalitarianism on people, but he intends to provide us a demonic perspective, which is unwelcome not only in the glass house but also on the island of children.

Unlike angels, the devil never apprehends this world as the only absolute truth and laughs without musing on comic effects. Besides this, demonic laughter is ambiguous; it maliciously punctures our faith and conviction with doubts, and it is light enough to bring us a relief. When demonic laughter “denote[s] the absurdity of things, the angel on the contrary mean[s] to rejoice over how well ordered, wisely conceived, good, and meaningful everything here below [is]” (BLF 87). To numb our sense of humor is the evil of the angelic world where laughter is nothing but an instrument in agreement with the totalitarian world. But Kundera turns to remind us the values of humorous laughter in this novel. Sara’s malicious laughter is full of superior scorn and self-awareness. Jan’s sacrilegious laughter reminds us the absurdity of the border in our life. Papa’s final understanding smile indicates his lucid and consciousness by mildly ridiculing Husak on TV. It is laughter that really liberates characters from the border of the angelic world and completes them. Being the devil’s singular gift, laughter is meant to contradict the ideology rather than to strengthen the official system, to doubt our convictions rather than to consolidate the almighty. Ricard thus commented, “to read Kundera is then to adopt Satan’s point of view on politics and history, on poetry and love, and in a general way on all knowledge. And it is really for this reason that Kundera’s work is not only pure subversion, but also pure literature” (Ricard 63). In fact, we find no political accusation of the totalitarianism in this novel, but we can perceive Kundera’s slight
resignation over the absurdity in the angelic world where laughter becomes meaningful. Ricard regards Kundera’s lightness and subtlety more effectively subverts the ideology and finds pure subversion within, and thinks *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* as “pure literature” for providing only the relativity of things rather than solid knowledge. The ambiguity of laughter undoubtedly accomplishes this work both as pure subversion and pure literature, since laughter mocks the absurdity of things while makes things less weighty. This ambiguity represented the wisdom of the novel is what Kundera would carefully preserve in his writing.

Kundera considers the novel is “a different planet” where “a different universe based on a different ontology; an *infernum* where the unique truth is powerless and where satanic ambiguity turns every certainty into enigma (*Testaments* 25). There is no question that the wisdom of the novel reveals when the echo of God’s laughter is captured.