Novelistic Nostalgia: The Pleasure and the Pain

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1 Mircea Cărtărescu’s Nostalgia, entitled A Dream in the original Romanian (1989), is a dream of literary comparisons. Various ideas for comparative literature papers are playfully proffered by the author himself. He provides for his future scholar, for instance, when he brings into focus volumes by particularly suitable magic realists, or when he strategically deploys famous literary names. Even without this explicit help, who could miss the links to Borges (through labyrinths, forked paths, fantastically created worlds) or Kafka (through absurd metamorphoses) or Schulz (through his dreamy worlds)? I have chosen a comparison that does not stand out immediately, yet is to my mind extremely productive: a contrast between Nostalgia, on the one hand, and Milan Kundera’s The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1979) and Ignorance (2000), on the other. What are the main intersections and divergences to be identified in these three works? Both Cărtărescu and Kundera have tried their hands as professors of literature, essayists and critics, which infuses their fiction with meditations on styles, predecessors, literature’s roles and the creative process itself. Both figure among generally acknowledged masters of postmodern literature. This classificatory label partly rests on two identical phenomena: the above-mentioned metafictional devices, and experiments with fragmentary narration tenuously held together with common themes. Nostalgia shares its problematic status as a novel, due to conspicuous fragmentation, with Kundera’s texts (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, in particular). Kundera has defined the Book “a novel in the form of variations. The various parts follow each other like the various stages of a voyage leading into the interior of a theme, the interior of a thought, the interior of a single, unique situation” (The Book, 227). This statement can, clearly, be applied to Nostalgia as well. Kundera has summarized his “tone-row,” or collection of existential themes, examined in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, as “forgetting, laughter, angels, líost, border” (Art, 84). According to Julian Semilian, a similar tone row for Nostalgia would be “the prodigious child seen as a Jesus of his tiny world, the androgyne as a metaphor for total love, and finally, the nostalgic search for the Creator, in his hypostasis as the book’s author and God” (318). This article
will deal with the aforementioned question of nostalgia, its sweetness and its poison, its
taste and its rejection, as reflected in Nostalgia, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and
Ignorance.

Let us remember that, apart from their pedagogical past/present, Cărtărescu and
Kundera also share a personal experience of exile, internal, external or both. As Semilian
points out, Cărtărescu figured among the Romanian literary underground in opposition
to the official regime (ibid). Kundera, in his turn, also started an internal exile after 1969.
In 1975 he left Bohemia for France, and lived there ever since. His involuntary, political
exile eventually metamorphosed into a voluntary one of the Joycean kind, accompanied
by his transition to writing exclusively in French. As we will presently see, the exilic
situation has resulted in completely opposite tendencies with respect to nostalgia in each
author’s case. Cărtărescu’s English translator acted logically in substituting the original
dreamy title for Nostalgia, since the novel is clearly permeated by the sentiment, mostly
perceived as a highly positive value. In Kundera’s writing, on the other hand, we observe
a gradually developing violent rejection of nostalgia, which was only a necessary evil to
be tolerated in the first place.

In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting we encounter nostalgia incarnate, Tamina, forever
distant from her current life in exile. Her neological name evokes “over there” (in
Bohemia) as opposed to “here” (in France), and her inability to negotiate the border
between remembering and forgetting eventually leads her to death. Here we meet with
nostalgia in its erstwhile meaning. As Svetlana Boym underscores, nostalgia was first
identified as a pathological state in a Swiss medical dissertation in 1688. In those suffering
from the malady, “[l]onging for their native land became their single-minded obsession.
The patients acquired “a lifeless and haggard countenance,” and “indifference toward
everything,” confusing past and present, real and imaginary events” (Boym 3). The Book of
Laughter and Forgetting was published in 1979, four years after Kundera’s emigration to
France. The novel has been extensively examined as Kundera’s creative working-through
of his own exilic experience by Hana Píchová. Tamina’s excessive involvement with her
inaccessible past is portrayed as clearly harmful. The author, nevertheless, displays deep
compassion for his heroine predicated on two factors. Firstly, nostalgia is an unavoidable
part of the human existence, just like an occasional giving in to kitsch in The Unbearable
Lightness of Being. Even the authorial persona has a nostalgic moment for Bohemia’s
greatest poets as they were fifteen years ago.

I am watching them from the great distance of two thousand kilometers [. . .], but
the distance is too great. Luckily, there is a tear in my eye, which, like a telescope
lens, brings me nearer to their faces. [. . .] I see them all against the backdrop of the
luminous Prague of fifteen years ago, when their books had not yet been locked
away in a state cellar and when they chatted loudly and cheerfully around the large
table laden with bottles. (176)

In this passage, we can clearly observe another defining feature of nostalgia, mentioned
by Boym: “At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning
for a different time” (Boym xv). Secondly, even though the need to dwell on the past
eventually costs Tamina her life, and Kundera draws attention to the unreliability of her
memory, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting still underlines the crucial importance of the
effort to remember. This, of course, is one of Kundera’s beloved dialectical paradoxes,
possibly the best known of these being the mutual relationship between lightness and
weight in The Unbearable Lightness of Being.
Between 1979 and 2000, however, Kundera’s stance vis-à-vis nostalgia underwent a curious shift: even if it still remains a necessary evil in the human condition, nostalgia is exposed as the foolishness that gives ignorance its title. At the very beginning of the narrative, the author indulges in one of his favorite exercises; a cross-lingual analysis of the concept he wishes to explore. In this case, nostalgia, the novel’s central theme, comes up for examination. Before examining the way in which Kundera etymologically demolishes the feeling, I would like to point out that he first draws the reader’s attention to its positive side. Nostalgia’s Czech equivalent is “the most moving expression of love; stýská se mi po tobě (“I yearn for you,” “I’m nostalgic for you;” “I cannot bear the pain of your absence”)” (Ignorance, 6). After this concession, however, he goes on to say “[i]n Spanish añoranza comes from the verb añorar (to feel nostalgia), which comes from the Catalan enyorar, itself derived from the Latin word ignorare (to be unaware of, not know, not experience; to lack or miss). In that etymological light nostalgia seems like the pain of ignorance” (6). The comical side effect of this little etymological excursus is that, if nostalgia approximates ignorance this closely, two of the novels discussed here bear identical titles. The objects of the two novels’ nostalgia, and how they react to this “pain of ignorance” (ibid), however, could not be more different.

According to Cătălin Mihăilescu, Cărtărescu is a “cartographer of lost Bucharest” (telephone conversation). Semilian pinpoints the three Bucharests magically re-created as “that of [Cărtărescu’s] mother, that of his first love and that of his poetry” (318). According to Boym, nostalgia means “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s fantasy” (xiii). Without the disappearance of the three Bucharests, then, there would be no novel. It will probably not be amiss in this context to remind ourselves that regions with frequent and violent historical upheavals, such as Bohemia or Romania, germinate nostalgia of a particular type, currently illustrated by its post-socialist wave. Without under-estimating Cărtărescu’s self-professed cosmopolitanism (“Forever Young, Swaddled in Pixels”), we could hardly overlook his attachment to Bucharest. Bucharest, whose forever-destroyed pre-war splendor, as “Paris of the East”, must inevitably be constantly present in its absence, similar to the ghosts of torn-down monuments populating Prague, labeled the city of evil in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. Cărtărescu’s looks over his shoulder into the past are considerably more benign than Kundera’s. In fact, the peaks of authenticity in Cărtărescu’s novel invariably take place either in dreams or in various pasts, whose distance from the rather drab present reality is foregrounded from the first paragraph of Nostalgia’s prologue, “The Roulette Player.”

The author of this meditation on the supreme redemptive powers of textual creation (and on the weaknesses of literary conventions) hastens to set his current writing apart from everything he composed in the last sixty years: “I have written enough literature, for sixty years I did nothing but that [. . .] everything I wrote after the age of thirty was no more than painful imposture” (3). The eighty-year-old creator sees his salvation from death in the story of a roulette player that perhaps took place decades ago. Even if the past recorded here abounds in perverse sadistic titillation of crowds frenzied by the smell of blood in the life-and-death betting game, and thus is very far from innocently idyllic, we cannot help noticing how full of life it is in comparison to the narrator’s present.

The ultimate locus of heightened perceptivity and rich, genuinely authentic experiences in Nostalgia, however, is to be found in childhood. Or, to be more precise, at those thresholds in childhood and adolescence that immediately precede a step in the hero/
heroine’s sexual maturation. Thus the authorial persona in “Mentardy” impresses on us with one summer twenty years earlier:

I realized that it was that period of my life which infused me with all that is original and perhaps even unusual. I can’t understand how I managed to block out till now this perfect, mother-of-pearl globe, locked inside the ashen valves of my life as an unmarried blasé teacher, who lives simply because he was born. (30-31)

This childhood world is illuminated by the miraculous stories and equally startling deeds of a Jesus-like boy Mentardy, whose identification as a prophet includes the Ancients’ “sacred disease,” epilepsy, and his eventual symbolical stoning with clumps of earth. Mentardy’s fall from grace, just as humanity’s within the Christian paradigm, comes through a woman. Once a traveling salesman awakens his sexuality with an obscene picture of a naked woman’s body, Mentardy loses his superiority in more than one sense. Together with sexual curiosity, he also acquires a taste for those cruel and dirty games that he had previously prohibited in his version of the Ten Commandments. In a more subtle way we are thus reminded of what the narrator of “The Roulette Player” told us before, namely, that violence (blood) “is so pleasing to our despicable nature” (12). The transcendence achieved by the group of boys under Mentardy’s influence turns out to be precarious and short-lived: he himself fails to live up to its standards, after which his little friends quickly lose all interest in it. This fact, I will argue, introduces an ironic twist into the post-lapsarian narrative brimming with longing for the lost Paradise.

Another chapter with a particular emphasis on childhood as the locus of intensity incomparable to the adult present in Nostalgia, is “REM.” Here we encounter Svetlana as she comments on the place where her ultimate childhood adventure took place, which echoes that of “Mentardy’s” narrator:

Who could guess that this ramshackle building would become for me the center of my life, the only place worth living for? When they return from a “journey,” heroes have the feeling that the world is devoid of color, that they live in a black-and-white movie, where nothing ever happens, that time doesn’t flow anymore and that real life is no more than a limb of death. (192-193)

Together with other girls, Svetlana plays a series of magical games. Through her prophetic dreams she even approximates the secret of existence as such, discovering reality to be a text written by a mysterious creator. Svetlana’s entry into this magical world is, unsurprisingly, forever barred with her menarche, an equivalent to Mentardy’s initiation into adult sexual desire. As mentioned above, androgyny belongs to the novel’s main themes, which makes this duo of young prophets particularly poignant. Identically to the narrator of “Mentardy,” Svetlana now leads an existence incomparably more prosaic than the magical reality she describes with such lyricism. The locus of meaning and perspicacity in their lives is thus relegated to the inapproachable past.

In Kundera’s case, the situation stands differently. As recently as The Curtain: An Essay in Nine Parts, just released in its English translation, he re-iterates his traditional disgust with youth and its rash mistakes. This time around, Kundera illustrates his point with the example of Cioran, forever tainted by his youthful cooperation with fascism. As is well known, Kundera has a personal stake in this issue – his own early involvement with Czech communism after the 1948 putsch. As Ricard has observed, the author, again and again, populates his works with foolish young men in order to ritually sacrifice them, and hence “reenact the birth of his art” (78-79). Therefore, as we can see, both Cărtărescu and Kundera display a need to return to their childhood/adolescent origins, albeit for opposing reasons: what the first wishes to symbolically re-create (restorative nostalgia),
the latter desires to demolish with a supremely anti-nostalgic gesture. Kundera’s main objection against youth rests upon its propensity for extremes facilitated by what he calls “lyricism,” a matter far from limited to literature. “For me,” writes Kundera, “the lyrical and the epical extend beyond aesthetics; they represent two possible attitudes that man might take towards himself, the world, other people (the lyrical age= youth)” (Art 138). In stark contrast to Cărtărescu, then, Kundera perceives youth as the time of most limited insight. A novelist is “born from the ruins of his lyrical world” (89). If lyricism precludes the creation of novels, is Nostalgia, written by a lyrical poet and infused with a poetic vision of the world, not a novel in the Kunderian universe? Or would its status as a novel be redeemed through the ironic distancing from the very objects of nostalgia that will be discussed here in due course?

In addition to precluding novel writing, the lyrical stance, for Kundera, has even more sinister repercussions. Through its angelically demonic innocence, it allows for tyrannies everywhere, be they tyrannies of communism or idiotic consumerism. We can observe this connection most clearly in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, where Kundera goes so far as to admit to a faint nostalgic desire to return to the diabolically innocent communist dance in which he had participated in his early youth. This is, once again, an impulse natural to the imperfect human condition, yet one should better make a manly effort to repress it: “And the dancing young Czechs, knowing that the day before, in the same city, a woman and a surrealist had been swinging from the end of ropes, were dancing all the more frenetically, because their dance was a demonstration of their innocence” (92-93).

As is well known, Kundera’s most violent indictment of lyricism appears in Life Is Elsewhere (completed in 1970), “a case study in lyricism as a mode of being” (Longinović 145), or “a dialogue between the cynical narrator and his own idealistic youth” (Longinović 144). In this debate, the idealistic youth ends up demolished on more than one level, with the narrator’s scathing sarcasm and a premature, rather comical, death. Kundera has thus succeeded in demonstrating lyricism’s deadly consequences in the most illustrative manner. Another conflict central to Life Is Elsewhere, as Tomislav Longinović correctly observed, is the clash between Kundera’s former identity as a prominent actor on the Czech cultural scene and his new status as an internal/external émigré in search of a new identity.

As Boym points out, political emigrants from the Eastern Block responded to what they believed was an absolute impossibility, their physical return home, with a particular coping mechanism. “The departing immigrants turned the threat of non-return into their destiny and their choice. [. . .] The veterans [of exile] are often defensive and stubborn in their attitudes; they have internalized the non-return that from a physical and political impossibility became a psychological need” (331). We find a benign reflection of this need in an interview given by Kundera in 1984/1985:

I came to [France] when I was 46. At that age, you no longer have time to waste, your time and energy are limited, you must choose: either you live looking over your shoulder, there where you are not, in your former country, with your old friends, or you make effort to profit from the catastrophe, starting over at zero, beginning a new life right where you are. [. . .] One emigration suffices for a lifetime. I’m an émigré from Prague to Paris. I’ll never have the strength to emigrate from Paris to Prague. (59)

The difficulty of this transition, and the intensity of the “need for non-return” for Kundera in the late 1990s, comes across extremely clearly in his rejection of the Czech culture and civilization in Ignorance. Pichová saw in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting an
ultimate creative response to exile. This, I contend, is by no means true of *Ignorance*. Francois Ricard wrote that “*Ignorance* is not so much a novel about return as about its impossibility” (197). This is, of course, true, yet the particular manner in which Kundera illustrates the impossibility does justice to the sadistic impulse he recognizes in himself (cf. Du Plessis Gray 51). The book combines accomplished theoretical meditations on the exilic condition with frequently (but not invariably) frenzied negative imagery tied to the country of renounced return. This imagery stands out due its gendered nature, the juxtaposition of cultivated France to barbaric Bohemia, and the identification of Kundera’s native land with both youthful stupidity and death.

16 The womb/tomb association in *Ignorance* is unmistakable, particularly for Irena, one of the two émigrés to Western Europe contemplating their possible Great Returns after 1989. She bases her decision whether to relocate back to Bohemia on a meeting with her former friends and colleagues in a restaurant. Remarkably, no men attend, and the women present are monsters, whose matronly, obese homeliness only imperfectly hides their genuine function: Irena’s invitation to death. Even more remarkably, once these fat, unkempt women get tipsy on pedestrian beer (as opposed to Irena’s sophisticated wine), they perfectly embody Irena’s eternally recurrent exilic nightmare. But more is at stake than the motherland calling its prodigal children back to the primitively natural, cyclical order of things, from which neither stylish Western clothes nor luxurious French wines will eventually redeem them. This scene forms merely a part of Kundera’s long-term struggle for liberation (or escape) from what Longinović perceived as his abject relation to “the Slavic soul.” With respect to *Life is Elsewhere*, Longinović posited “the ideological domination of Mother Russia” as the main ingredient in the cauldron in which Kundera’s “abjection [. . .] boils under the surface of his smart prose and his effortless elegance” (159).

17 Did the last Russian leaving the Czech territory exterminate this obsession? Not a chance. It finds its way not only into *Ignorance*, but also into the brand-new *Curtain*. Kundera has recently published an excerpt from this book of essays in the New Yorker. Its controversial nature consisted in his scathing attack on departments of national languages and literatures, a part of his forty-year battle against the traditional view of Central European literatures within the Slavic corpus. Since the late nineteen-sixties, says Kundera, “I [have] explained that while there is a linguistic unity among the Slavic nations, there is no Slavic culture, Slavic world; that the history of the Czechs [. . .] is entirely Western. Never anything to do with Russia, which was far off, another world” (44). Completely disregarding departments of comparative literature, Kundera singles out professors of foreign literatures as the ones particularly to blame. “In order to demonstrate their competence as experts, they make a great point of identifying with the small (national) context of the literatures they teach. [. . .] it is in foreign universities that a work of art is most intractably mired in its home province” (37).

18 Remarkably, according to Christian Moraru, Cărtărescu has recently expressed an almost identical sentiment with respect to current divisions within the “united” Europe: “Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans as one big freak show; former communist countries’ literature as a cultural safari in Europe’s irrevocable other – Cărtărescu’s texts decline to participate in such conventions” (Moraru). Yet, as we have observed, the affectionately evoked multiple Bucharests in *Nostalgia* are a far cry from Prague featured as the “city of evil” in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. 

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Another feature Cărtărescu shares with Kundera is a sense of irony. The irony in Nostalgia, however, lags far behind the amount generously provided by his Czecho-French colleague over the past forty years. In my opinion, irony in Cărtărescu’s novel features most prominently in the stark contrasts through which he undermines the lyricism and truthfulness of childhood evocations.

The ironic distance in “Mentardy,” for example, originates from an extremely brief section appended to the chapter’s main content. Here the authorial persona abruptly abandons his increasingly frenzied, ecstatic apocalyptic testimony, in which he prophesied the Second Coming of Mentardy. Furthermore, he undercuts the very truthfulness of this testimony. “The children are real, I retain their names, some of them I even see today, but the whole Mentardy story seems absurd. We never had such a wise child in our building” (59). With the human ability to recollect pelted with the clumps of doubt in this manner, we are not far from Kundera’s dictum that “man is separated from the past (even from the past only a few seconds old) by two forces that go instantly to work and cooperate: the force of forgetting (which erases) and the force of memory (which transforms)” (Curtain 148). What is more, this juxtaposition creates a type of effect we might expect if a grocery list should be appended to the Biblical Apocalypse, or if one among the four evangelists suddenly started to doubt the very existence of Jesus. In the mutual tension between the two sections of “Mentardy” we clearly observe what Eva LeGrand wrote apropos Kundera’s texts: “Kundera manages to remain on the fragile border where nostalgia and irony coexist thanks to the double exposure of time which he handles masterfully” (61).

Thus conditioned by the earlier chapter “Mentardy,” the reader is likely to adopt a more critical stance vis-à-vis the childhood recollections of Svetlana in “REM.” Once again, the idyll cannot reach perfection, since it becomes infiltrated with “the stain of blood, so pleasing to our despicable nature” (12). While the little boys in “Mentardy” reverted to the torture of animals and one another at the least opportunity, the little girls in “REM” stage a rather grisly torture and execution of a beloved doll. These children are, therefore, remarkably close to Kundera’s “dancing young Czechs, knowing that the day before, in the same city, a woman and a surrealist had been swinging from the end of ropes, [who] were dancing all the more frenetically, because their dance was a demonstration of their innocence” (The Book 92-93).

As we have seen in the course of this article, substantial convergences and divergences in the treatment of nostalgia exist between Mircea Cărtărescu’s Nostalgia, on the one hand, and Milan Kundera’s writings on the other. Cărtărescu’s prose, without doubt, leans considerably more towards lyricism. Rather than seeing childhood and youth as an obstacle to the art of the novel, Cărtărescu repeatedly celebrates them as the richest period in his characters’ lives. In his world, this time distinguishes itself by a heightened ability to penetrate into a deeper, often magical realm, rather than a span of self-centered myopia. Rather than a necessary evil in the human condition, which Kundera tolerates with more and more difficulty over time, Cărtărescu’s nostalgia provides a key incentive to create. On the other hand, both authors are well aware that our human memory is unreliable and our human nature rather despicable in its thirst for blood.
BIBLIOGRAPHIE


RÉSUMÉS

This article explores nostalgia in its creative/utopian as well as negative/pathological aspects, as reflected in novels by two contemporary authors: Milan Kundera and Mircea Cărtărescu. While nostalgia mostly perceived as a highly positive value clearly permeates Cărtărescu’s novel, in Kundera’s writing we observe a gradually developing violent rejection of this sentiment. Both Cărtărescu and Kundera display a need to return to their childhood/adolescent origins, albeit for
opposing reasons: what the first wishes to symbolically re-create (restorative nostalgia), the
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