

Milan Kundera's *Ignorance* and the Limits of Nostalgia

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1 Introduction

When I return to Auckland, where I grew up, as I do every couple of years, like anyone I look for the places where momentous or highly anticipated events occurred in my life. And like most people I am often disappointed.

I go to the spot on Hobson Street, where my first lover's converted warehouse flat stood; I see instead the insistent space-age architecture of the TVNZ building which replaced it. I pass the corner of Aotea Square where, as a 14-year-old boy in school uniform, I backed away as rows of policemen stabbed their batons into the stomachs of a concert crowd shouting "Move! Move!" The last time I was there that piece of history seemed incongruently overrun by a new IMAX cinema complex, which has, itself, since given up the ghost.

I used to look forward to a renewal of the childhood memories of the long weekend drives in the country on the way north to Helensville, and the decadence of the thermal baths. The baths are still there, but the rolling meadows have been almost entirely submerged by rows of enormous identical suburban houses. Trees and hedges have been razed to facilitate the devouring of space and to satisfy the hunger for a view of the very countryside which is being erased.

A visit to the university often tempts me to swing by my childhood flat off Symonds Street. The tree I climbed every day is still hanging over the road, but now it looks across to the lofty Ministry of the Environment offices, and not my old white weatherboard house.

As a wag once remarked, nostalgia's not what it used to be. These days, everyone with a sense of their past can tell you a story like this. It seems as if nostalgia is an instinct suited only to a time when little changed, and then only slowly; when cities grew over centuries, not years.

Milan Kundera's writing has always demonstrated a preoccupation with the problems of memory, and ever since he began writing as an exile in France, the Great Return has been a familiar theme. Many of you will be familiar with the cinema version of his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* [3], in which the protagonist Tomas is compelled to return from exile in Switzerland to his beloved Tereza. That novel spoke of particular historic circumstances—the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the reprisals which followed. His latest novel, *Ignorance* [1], deals with the flow-on effects of the Russian withdrawal in 1989. The émigrés have been away for twenty years. The oppressors have gone—but has the reason for emigrating left with them?

New Zealanders are familiar with a similar problem of return, although history does not explain its persistence. It is taken for granted that the longing for return occupies the status of a rite of passage in our popular culture. Much has been made, therefore, of the gradual shift of the symbolic “mother country” from Britain to New Zealand itself for those who were born here. The net effect of this shift in consciousness, with increasing emigration of influential minds, has been of course, merely to continue the habit of constant longing for return. Where the affluent classes once longed for the civilization of “home”, now their grandchildren in foreign boardrooms regale their colleagues with nostalgic tales of natural plenty and wide open spaces.

2 Definition

Kundera's new work delves into the source of these feelings. He goes to the trouble of defining nostalgia for the reader (definition holds a special place in his conception of the novel), dissecting the etymology of the term, its equivalents in the various European languages, and thus shedding some light on the national psychologies at work.

The Greek word for “return” is *nostos*. *Algos* means “suffering.” So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return. (6)

There are therefore different levels of awareness of the nostalgic sensibility across the languages, from the rich Czech, in which language it is possible to use a single verb to say “I am nostalgic for you” (6), to the impoverished French with its “*je m'ennuie de toi*”, via the ambiguous German term “*Sehnsucht*”, which may refer to the imaginary as well as the past. The eponymous term “ignorance” is attached to this extended meaning via the Spanish *añorar*, from the Latin *ignorare*: “nostalgia seems like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. . . . My country is far away, and I don't know what is happening there” (6).

Taking advantage of the intricate semantic possibilities of the idea of return, against the background of Odysseus' twenty-year exile from Ithaca in *The Odyssey* [5], Kundera throws the characters of *Ignorance* into an exploration of their longing for return, and very often

the absence of their longing for it. The narrator wonders aloud, in the face of the changes caused by rapid development:

Would an *Odyssey* even be conceivable today? Is the epic of the return still pertinent in our time? When Odysseus woke on Ithaca's shore that morning, could he have listened in ecstasy to the music of the Great Return if the old olive tree had been felled and he recognized nothing around him? (54)

Kundera's *Ignorance* sets out methodically to answer this question.

3 Returning

Irena, a Czech émigré living in Paris, is convinced by her friend to return to her newly liberated country. Her lover Gustaf, a Swede, sets up a business office in Prague. She returns there and is surprised to find that her friends are not interested in the twenty years of her life in France; they seem only to want her to return and forget about those years. She wants to tell her French friend Sylvie:

I'd have to lay my whole life with you, with all of you, with the French, solemnly on the altar of the homeland and set fire to it. Twenty years of my life spent abroad would go up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony. . . . That's the price I'd have to pay to be pardoned. To be accepted. To become one of them again. (45)

Longing for the homeland is paramount. It is not permitted to be nostalgic for two places at once. This would be an infidelity.

But Irena's nostalgia has taken the form of terrifying dreams and imaginings. She has suffered from the classic émigré's nightmare of her plane landing unexpectedly at a Czech airport, and of coming across old friends in Paris and realizing she is home in Prague.

When she arrives in Prague she relives the sensations of the dreams. Her return has converted the "unappeased yearning" into a sense of *déjà vu*. She buys a summer dress in the old style of the country, and is shocked to see in the mirror a woman she does not recognize. It is the woman she might have been if she had stayed: "it was she but she living a different life" (31).

Irena meets Josef, another returning émigré, whom she recognizes from a distant gathering in a bar. He doesn't recognize her, however, and the reader begins to see just how important this etymology of nostalgia as the "ignorance" of the title will become. His growing desire for her is like the German "*Sehnsucht*"; only for Irena is their approaching encounter nostalgic in the classical sense. To him she is unknown—as he later characterizes her: the sister he never had (172, 192).

Many other "unknowns" enter the narrative, colouring our perception of the nostalgic sensibilities at work. Each character has only a narrow view of the plot. Irena has rekindled a friendship with Milada (39), a former colleague of Irena's (now dead) husband. This Milada also turns out to be Josef's old high-school girlfriend (84).

Milada had attempted suicide by sleeping in the snow when Josef rejected her (108). The ear she lost to frostbite is kept hidden by a clever cut of her hair, and she does not take the opportunity to make herself known to Josef when she learns Irena will be dining with him (165). Josef is reminded of Milada on rereading his old journal, but has no recollection of

the detail of her suicide attempt. Instead he vividly recalls the fact of having lied to her about leaving Prague (84). Nor does Josef recognize himself as the narrator of the journal, but is perturbed by the similarity of his current handwriting with that in the diary: “What common essence is it that makes a single person out of him and this little snot?” (83).

It becomes apparent that “not knowing” haunts each of the protagonists like a solid thing. Their lives are constructed in the narrow pathways which edge the unknown. Thus, a former stepdaughter of Josef’s tries to meet with him—he never finds out why. Irena, for her part, will never find out that her husband Gustaf is beginning an affair with her mother. And Gustaf will remain ignorant of Irena’s adventure.

4 Origins

The interplay of memory gaps and tricks of memory in the characters’ reconstruction of events in the novel recalls the preoccupations of Kundera’s first novel written in exile, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* [2]. Writing about the final part of that work, “The Border”, Banerjee describes a particular type of nostalgia, the “nostalgia of origins” [4, 191]. The passage she refers to evokes Longus’ ancient romance of the foundlings *Daphnis and Chloe* [7]:

They walked slowly along the beach, the sand burning beneath their feet, the bleating of a ram blending into the roaring of the sea, a dirty lamb browsing on the island’s withered grass under the branch of an olive tree. Jan thought of Daphnis. There he lies, spellbound by Chloe’s nakedness. Though aroused, he does not know what to do, and the feeling goes on—unlimited, unabated, endless, boundless. He felt an overpowering desire to go back to that boy, back to his own beginnings, to the beginnings of mankind, to the beginnings of love. He yearned for yearning. [2, 227]

As Banerjee interprets the episode: “Seized by the nostalgia of origins, yearning for his lost power of desire, Jan says aloud, “Daphnis!” [4, 191].

If we agree with Banerjee that this is “nostalgia for origins” at work, then Kundera in this early work defines nostalgia recursively: the desire for desire; the longing for longing, in reaction against the modern phenomenon of love as the prosaic fulfilment of biological need.

The novel *Ignorance* as we have seen, continues this Greek mythical motif. Before the sexual encounter between Josef and Irena (who is to remain unrecognized by him), the two discuss Homer’s *Odyssey*, which Josef is in the process of reading. Their discussion focuses on the difficulty of Odysseus’ and Penelope’s first night back together, and the discussion leads inevitably to the recreation of that event. It is an invention, in which the players assume roles which were never meant for them. The real nostalgic parallel with the *Odyssey* story is expressed through the self-conscious use of language. Irena switches modes to talk in the vulgar Czech slang from which she and Josef have been “in exile” for so long. Josef’s reaction is described:

How unexpected! How intoxicating! For the first time in twenty years, he hears those dirty Czech words and instantly is aroused to a degree he has never been since he left this country, because all those words—coarse, dirty, obscene—only have power over him in his native language (in the language of Ithaca), since it

is through that language, through its deep roots, that the arousal of generations and generations surges up in him. (178–79)

Note the metaphorical equivalence: “his native language . . . the language of Ithaca”. Kundera has defined obscenity in this connection in his *The Art of the Novel*. “An obscenity pronounced with an accent becomes comical. . . . Obscenity: the root that attaches us most deeply to our homeland” [6, 145]. The “deep roots” of the language have filled the void left by the national consciousness, so often altered that it has lost its meaning for these émigrés.

5 Desire

In *Terminal Paradox* [4], Maria Banerjee points out that Kundera has written: “the erotic scene is the focus where all the themes of the story converge and where its deepest secrets are located” [2, (Afterword) 236]. She comments that this

holds particularly true of [*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*] and its articulation of the master theme of memory. . . . at the vital center, it turns into an open-ended meditation on the endless play between memory and sexual desire. [4, 149–50]

In *Ignorance*, it is the desire for that which is unknown which is focused on in the erotic scene; it is memory negatively defined—memories that might have been which have been missed, inexplicably replaced by a life grafted on from foreign materials.

Behind this negative remembering is the spectre of loneliness: Josef reads in his diary the word loneliness used repeatedly as a threat to his high-school girlfriends to provoke emotion (72). Milada, in fact, has sacrificed intimacy in order to continue the myth of her beauty, to prevent the revelation of her mutilated ear (176), and she muses on the memory of Josef’s use of the word (174). The desire for the unknown someone is, of course, the flight from this loneliness.

The focus of all the unknowns I have mentioned is Josef’s crucial lack of recognition of Irena. Only after they have sex does she realize that he does not know her. This realization comes about through the mechanism of a talisman: his memory is not stirred by the presentation of the ashtray which he stole for her in the bar where they met (186). He has failed the test of Penelope: it is as if Odysseus does not know that his bed, wrought from the sturdy olive-tree, cannot be moved outside [5, Book 23, 226]. Irena attacks her Odysseus in this episode:

“Where did we meet? Who am I?”

He wants to calm her down, he takes her hand, she thrusts him away: “You don’t know who I am! You picked up a strange woman! You made love with a stranger who offered herself to you! You took advantage of a misunderstanding! You used me like a whore! . . .” (187)

Josef is guilty of the crime of using nostalgia to his own advantage—a nostalgia which he, moreover, does not share. For their nostalgias are different. Paradoxically (because Josef has forgotten the past), Josef finds in Irena his lost nostalgia for the homeland. Irena (who remembers her past), on the other hand, finds her nostalgia for her own potential other life, her lost past. In the text:

She wants to experience everything she ever imagined and never experienced . . .
 Josef knows (and he may even want it so) that this erotic session is his last . . .
 (179)

But at this point the reader asks herself: where is the seat of the protagonists' nostalgia? Is this their great return, or is this now the exile from which they must return? Irena says that Paris is her home now (24). We hear of her that: "She felt happy in Paris, happier than here, but only Prague held her by a secret bond of beauty" (134). Josef seems haunted by fleeting images of his house back in Denmark, where his wife has died. Perhaps it is closer to the truth to say that they are both now tourists in their own country. They have indulged in their return as if in an escape. No one will remember what they did there, just as no one is interested in what they did in their exile.

6 Conclusion

In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera wrote: "Forgetting: absolute injustice and absolute solace at the same time. The novelistic exploration of the theme of forgetting has no end and no conclusion" [6, 130].

Like me with the nostalgic investigations of my childhood in Auckland, these tourists of nostalgia will keep returning, to see what else they have forgotten, and what has forgotten them.

References

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