Kundera’s Lesser Polyphonic Novels

Slowness

Bakhtin uses the term *word* for language in its concrete and living totality as opposed to language as the specific subject matter of linguistics, which, is detached from certain aspects of the concrete life of word. The dialogical relationships although they belong to the province of the word fall outside the province of linguistic study (*Problems* 150-51). The dialogic orientation of a word among other words creates new and significant artistic potential in discourse, creates the potential for a distinctive art of prose, which has found its fullest and deepest expression in the novel (*Dialogic Imagination* 275). All the last three novels of Kundera are worth examining from the dialogic orientation of words their titles are. Milan Kundera in his name has never appeared in his novels after *Immortality*. However in *Slowness* a fictional version of Kundera – “Milanku” (78) (or is it real?) appears. In *Slowness* “Milanku” (narrator’s name mentioned only once in the novel while wife reminds him of his mother’s address) and his wife Vera acts on a sudden urge to spend an evening and a night in a chateau and drives to one. On the way the speed with which vehicles runs acts upon their cogitation. “Speed is the form of ecstasy the technological revolution has bestowed on man,” “why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared?” asks the narrator (4). In our world, indolence has turned into having nothing to do, which is a completely different thing: a person with nothing to do is frustrated, bored, is constantly reaching for the activity he lacks.

Straightforward the narrator then says, “And I think of another journey from Paris out to a country château, which took place more than two hundred years ago, the journey of
Madame de T. and the young Chevalier who went with her” (5). An inexpressible atmosphere of sensuality springs from the slowness of the rhythm: rocked by the motion of the carriage their bodies touch first inadvertently and then advertently.

Kundera paraphrases the novella entitled Point de lendemain (No Tomorrow) first published in 1777 with the author’s name, to maintain secrecy, indicated by six enigmatic letters, M.D.G.O.D.R., which could be read as: Monsieur Denon, Gentilhomme Ordinaire du Roi (Monsieur Denon, Gentleman–in–waiting to the King). The story goes like this; a gentleman whom Kundera imagines as a Chevalier goes to theatre one evening where he finds a lady, Madame de T.. They, as part of a ploy by the lady, had to share a night together. They had a night of lovemaking in three stages: first, they walk in the park; next, they make love in a pavilion, last they continue their lovemaking in a secret chamber of the chateau.

In Vivant Denon’s lifetime probably a small group of people knew that he was the author of Point de lendemain and the mystery was unravelled long after his death. “The work’s own history thus bears an odd resemblance to the story it tells: it was veiled by the penumbra of secrecy, of discretion, of mystification, of anonymity” (35). “Not that he rejected fame, but fame meant something different in his time . . .” (35). The audience that he cared about was not the mass of strangers today’s writer covets but the little company of people he might know personally and respect.

The story then takes place in two different periods; the one that takes place in the eighteenth century in a chateau where the young Chevalier happens to spend a night with the femme du monde and that in the late twentieth century at an entomological conference in the same chateau as it appears live in the mind of the narrator. The hierarchical distance is
done away with as it happened in the transformation of epic to novel (Dialogic Imagination 38). The two periods are never conflated, for the distance between past and present, Kundera seems to be saying is not just a matter of two centuries; rather it is the difference between indolence and frenzy, contingency and art; between speed and slowness (Bell 376).

The novel has a discussion between Pontevin the “Ph.D historian” (17) and Vincent on the dancer concept. It is the great invention of Pontevin who does not like making his ideas public. All politicians for him have a bit of dancer in them and the dancer differs from the politician in that “he seeks not power but glory” (17). He wants to “take over the stage so as to beam forth his self” which requires keeping others of the stage (18). Pontevin calls the battle the dancer fights, “‘moral judo’” (18). When Vincent accuses him of being a dancer Pontevin agrees that there is some dancer in every one of us. They are joined in the Café Gascon by Machu, Goujard and other friends. Pontevin arranged Vincent for them to go there at the entomological conference and raise some hell. The entomological conference is attended by many French entomologists and a few from abroad. Among them is Cechoripsky, a Czech in his sixties “who people say is some prominent figure in the new regime – a minister perhaps or the President of the Academy of Sciences or at least a member of that academy” (emphasis added) (46). The Czech scientist is proud of the fact that he stepped on the stage of history. “. . . it was timorousness not courage, that got him driven from his position and his children driven from school” (52).

Prague in 1968, floodlit and observed by cameras, was a “Sublime Planetary Historic News Event” (sic). The Czech scientist has a “brief paper, which he knows in no great shakes” and is only a rehash of what he published twenty years back (54). When his turn came his presentation became an uncalled-for sentimental eloquence on his expulsion from job. “. . . he forgot to give his paper!” which led to muffled laugh when he left the podium.
“The Czech scientist is overcome, not by the real events of his life, but by his idea of them; by the kitsch version of his history” (Bell 378). “There was a kind of fame before the invention of photography, and other kind thereafter” (35-36). The Czech king Wenceslaus of the fourteenth century incognito visited inns and chatted with the common folk. He had power, liberty and fame. Prince Charles of Britain has no power, no freedom, but enormous fame. Neither in the virgin forest nor in his bathtub hidden away in a bunker seventeen stories underground can he escape the eyes that pursue and recognise him. Fame has devoured all his liberty.

Then the narrator addresses the reader, “You say that though the nature of fame changes, this still concerns only a few privileged persons” (36). Fame concerns everyone. “These days famous people are in magazines, on television screens, they invade everyone’s imagination. And everyone considers the possibility, be it only in dreams, of becoming the object of such fame . . .” (36). The above “possibility shadows every single person and changes the nature of his life . . .” and “. . . any new possibility that existence acquires, even the least likely, transforms everything about existence” (36).

Jacques Alain Berck, the politician who participates in the gathering of entomologists announces his proposal to establish a Franco-Czech Entomological Association in the name of nineteenth-century Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz. Berck does this under the impression that the poet was a Czech who later migrated to France. For him “‘The life of this poet stands as a lesson that will remind us that everything we do, be it poetry or science is a revolt’” (67). He adds “man is always in revolt” and the Czech scientist has proved this by his very life, by his very sacrifices and sufferings. He confirms his belief “‘. . . that any man worthy of the name is always in revolt, in revolt against oppression and if there is oppression no more . . . in revolt against the human condition we did not choose’” (67).
“Revolt against the human condition we did not choose” (68). This last line, the
flower of Berck’s improvisation surprises even him and puts him in communion with the
greatest minds of his land like Camus, Malraux or Sartre. Berck appeared to Vincent, who
watched him with contempt, as Pontevin had always described him, “a mass–media clown,
a ham, a show-off, a dancer Without [sic] a doubt, it was only because of his presence that a
television crew had deigned to take an interest in the entomologists!” (70-71).

Vincent watched Berck’s art of dancing attentively: the way he never lost sight of the
camera; his skill at always positioning himself in front of other people; his taking
Immaculata by the arm; and exclaims that the only thing he takes care is the television
camera. As reply to Vincent’s eloquence the elegant fellow in the three-piece suit says:

‘Dear Sir, we cannot choose the era we are born into. And we all of us live
under the gaze of the cameras. That is part of the human condition from now
on. Even when we fight a war, we’re fighting it under the eye of the camera.
And when we protest against anything, we can’t make ourselves heard without
 cameras. We are all dancers, as you say.’ (72)

For him there is no point in regretting: “ ‘How about to [sic] the twelfth century,
would you like that? But when you get there you’ll start protesting against the cathedrals, as
some modern barbarism! So go back further still! Go back to the apes!’ ” (72).

Vincent who could not retort to a slashing attack by the elegant fellow feebly
withdraws “amid jeering laughter” in “unspeakable embarrassment” with the image of the
man “stuck like a splinter in his soul” (73). Vincent gets introduced to Julie only half an
hour back and her presence removes him from defeat, for the real victory, the one that is
important “is the conquest of a woman picked up fast in the grimly unerotic milieu of the
entomologists” (74). Vincent the “young friend” of Milanku “adores” eighteenth century (9). He tells Julie of Marquis de Sade’s book La Philosophie dans le boudoir which is a conversation between two men and two women in the middle of an orgy which used to take place in olden times in these chateaux. They continue their stroll in the full moon alamode Vivant Denon’s story. “And suddenly, he [Vincent] cannot even tell how it happened, he imagines the hole of her ass” (76). He has an enormous desire to tell her of it but he cannot.

Chapter 28 is on Guillaume Apollinaire’s poem on the nine portals of woman’s body of which “. . . it is the ass hole, opening ‘between two pearly mountains’, that becomes the ninth portal . . . the ‘supreme portal’ ” (82). Displacingly he exclaims to Julie pointing to the moon “ ‘It looks like as [sic] ass hole drilled into the sky!’ ” (83). “A difficult situation when all you can talk about is one thing and you’re not in a position to talk about it: the unuttered ass hole is stuck in Vincent’s mouth like a gag” (83).

The narrator then makes a comment on it.

I cannot help making a small comment on Vincent’s improvisation: by his acknowledged obsession with the ass hole, he believes he is enacting his fondness for the eighteenth century . . . he is incapable of making his fine libertine obsessions by making them lyrical, by turning them into metaphors. Thus he sacrifices the spirit of libertinage to the spirit of poetry. (84)

Vincent tries to figure out his difference from the elegant fellow and Berck who “delight in the human conditions just as it is imposed on them: dancers happy to be dancers” (86). He proclaims his disagreement with that world. “Then he thinks of the answer he should have thrown in the elegant fellow’s face: ‘if living under cameras has become our condition, I revolt against it. I did not choose it!’ That’s the answer!” (86). He then tells
Julie: “‘The only thing left for us is to revolt against the human condition we did not choose!’”. She agrees with the word “‘Absolutely’” (86).

Comparing the existential situation of today and that of the eighteenth century, Kundera finds that the speed we love has beggared us of pleasure. “She (Madame de T.) possesses the wisdom of slowness and deploys the whole range of techniques for slowing things down” (32). In her love-making “Everything is composed, confected, artificial, everything is staged, nothing is straightforward or in other words everything is art; in this case the art of prolonging the suspense, better yet: the art of staying as long as possible in a state of arousal” (32). Vincent and Julie entered the swimming pool naked. He who has never dared breathe a single obscenity shouts “‘I’m going to bugger you!’” having risked being heard by everyone. “A word uttered in a small enclosed space has a different meaning from the same word resonating in a amphitheatre” (100). Vincent and Julie’s attempt to make love fails. “The penetration did not take place. It did not take place because Vincent’s member is as small as a wilted wild strawberry, as a great-grand mother’s thimble” (100). The text here as elsewhere is that “uninhibited person” that Roland Barthes speaks of (Pleasure of the Text 53).

Vincent later runs, in search of Julie who left in a huff, through the corridors where every one is asleep, to meet her in the privacy of her room, in vain. “He pictures her ass hole. Ah, her ass hole, which was naked right near him and which he missed, totally missed. Which he neither touched nor saw. Ah, that terrific image is back again, and his poor member awakes, rises up, oh, it rises up, uselessly, senselessly, and immensely” (116). Canonical literature itself was based on a system of taboos which in turn was based on an outmoded, simplistic concept of human mind and body, sharply divided into upper and lower. This system of prohibitions which Barthes ridiculed as “good taste” in Criticism and
Truth (7) is flouted here by Kundera.

Vincent and Julie are after all children of their age; they are products of speed; they are under the camera and finally dancers and practitioners of moral judo, for it is a road one can never turn from (Bell 379). Vincent is engaged in a self-deluding game assuming himself to be an internally integrated being, fighting the great metaphysical battle against time. Vincent finally has “only one desire: to forget this night speedily”; “he feels an unquenchable thirst for speed” (131). He “hastens towards his motor cycle” “on which he will forget everything, on which he will forget himself” (131). Because for Kundera,

There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. Consider this utterly commonplace situation: a man is walking down the street. At a certain moment, he tries to recall something, but the recollection escapes him. Automatically, he slows down. Meanwhile, a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has just lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if he were trying to distance himself from a thing still too close to him in time.

In existential mathematics, that experience takes the form of two basic equations: the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory, the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting. (34-35)

Therefore the novel at one level is on the relation between speed and forgetting, and slowness and memory and that is the “unknown aspect of existence” that Kundera explores here (The Art 144).

For Bakhtin novel in contrast to epic subverts the epic past which is absolute past.
The mentality is: “In the past, everything is good: all the really good thing (ie. the “first” thing) occur only [sic] in the past” (*Dialogic Imagination* 15). In contrast to what could superficially appear, Kundera never valorizes the eighteenth century in *Slowness*. “The story of the novella is told in the first person by the Chevalier. He has no idea what Madame de T. really thinks, and he is himself fairly frugal in speaking of his own feelings and thoughts. The inner world of the two characters remain hidden or half-hidden” (120). The last words of the novella are: “’I climbed into the chaise that stood waiting. I hunted for the moral of that whole adventure and . . . I found none’” (120). “Yet” for Kundera, “the moral is there; Madame de T. embodies it: she lied to her husband, she lied to her lover the Marquis, she lied to the young Chevalier. It is she who is the true disciple of Epicurus. Lovable lover of pleasure. Gentle protective liar. Guardian of happiness” (120).

The next morning however so many questions remain unanswered including, “Will he [the Chevalier] feel like the victor or the vanquished? Happy or unhappy?” (121). “In other words: is it possible to live in pleasure and for pleasure and be happy? Can the ideal of hedonism be realized? Does that hope exist? Or at least some feeble gleam of that hope?” (121). This is the conclusion or absence of conclusion of the novel which begins with a debate about the meaning of hedonism. For Epicurus, the first great theoretician of pleasure, “pleasure is the absence of suffering” (8). For Kundera “the Achilles’ heel of hedonism” is that it is “hopelessly utopian” and in the beginning he says he doubts that the hedonist ideal could ever be achieved because the sort of life it advocates for us may not be compatible with human nature (9). “Whatever the case, a resonating seashell – that’s not the world of Epicurus, who commanded his disciples: ‘You shall live hidden!’” (11) and that “The wise man seeks no activity related to struggle’ ” (10). “Resonating seashell” is Kundera’s phrase for open discourse which is not centripetal, which his novels are. Thus
the novel becomes a rereading of Vivant Denon’s novella *Point de lendemain* (*No Tomorrow*); a dialogue with Epicurus and also a dialogue with the simpleminded friend of the narrator, Vincent who blindly adores eighteenth century. Thus this is also the point at which the author’s field of vision intersects or collides dialogically with the hero’s field of vision and attitude which is a feature of polyphonic novel (*Problems* 58).

The novel also incorporates what Bakhtin calls autocriticism. In the middle of the novel a sleeping Vera woken up by the narrator has a discussion with him on the present novel. “What are you inventing? A novel? She asks in anguish.” She continues, “‘You’ve often told me you wanted to write a novel someday with not a single serious word in it. A Big Piece of Nonsense for Your Own Pleasure. I’m frightened the time may have come. I just want to warn you: be careful.’” She also reminds him of his mother’s warning to stop making jokes. Or else no one will understand him and he will offend everyone and everyone will end up hating him. Finally, Vera makes a “terrible prophecy” before going back to sleep: “‘I’m warning you. Seriousness kept you safe. The lack of seriousness will leave you naked to the wolves. And you know they’re waiting for you, the wolves are’” (78). Thus it appears that a reprimanded writer decides to write a serious novel in view of a belligerent response for a Big Piece of Nonsense. The narrator is conscious of the fact that the utterance his novel is will be followed by the responsive utterance of others.

**Identity**

*Identity* (1998) is a short novel (of 153 pages only) by Kundera written in French having locale in France and translated into English by Linda Asher. This story involving two lovers, Chantal and Jean-Marc, has by and large failed to become a polyphonic novel—a work with scrambled narrative, multiple authorial voices, and multiple themes that has typified his major works. Unlike other major polyphonic novels it tells a single story and
has only a single theme – identity as an unfinalized, unfinalizable, and slippery entity. No wonder the novel appeared simple and almost farce-like for Lehmann-Haupt. *Identity* offers no fresh insight on human self.

Chantal the heroine arrives at the Normandy Coast on a Friday to spend one day alone and will be joined by Jean-Marc, her lover the next day. When Jean-Marc arrives Chantal who slept badly the day before complains that “Men don’t look at me anymore” (21). Chantal’s phrase echoed in Jean-Marc’s head. He tries to reason out Chantal’s statement. His first reaction was jealousy. How could she complain that men no longer look at her when he himself is eagerly following her? Later he came around thinking “every woman measures how much she’s aged by the interest or uninterest men show on her body” (35). She is older than him by four years and he had already noted traces of slight ageing on her face. “From the start, he was the stronger one and she the weaker . . . she was weaker because she was older” (37). While a teenager “she used to cherish a certain metaphor”: “she wanted to be a rose fragrance” and move through all men and by this way, embrace the world. “But she was not by nature a woman born to run through lovers . . . ” (37). Chantal starts receiving a series of anonymous letters beginning with the one with a single sentence: “‘I follow you around like a spy – you are beautiful, very beautiful’” (40). The letter cheers up Chantal. The letters intrigue the reader as much as Chantal. Chantal flushed when she said that men no longer turned to look at her. “That is why, disguised as a stranger, he wrote to her: ‘I follow you around like a spy – you are beautiful, very beautiful’” (88). The narrator informs the reader of Jean-Marc’s authorship of the letter only at a very later stage in the text. The letters later backfire. Some misunderstanding occurs and the couple breaks up. Chantal leaves Jean-Marc for London.

‘Why London?’ he asked, and she answered: ‘You know very well why
London.’ That was a clear allusion to the departure he had announced in his last letter. That ‘you know very well’ meant: you know that letter. But that letter, which she had just taken out of the box downstairs, could only be known to its sender and to her. (117)

Chantal’s departure leaves Jean-Marc with so many questions: “But if she has guessed (my God, my God, how could she have guessed?) that he is the one who wrote the letters, why is she taking it so badly? . . . What does she suspect him of?” (118). But, “Behind all these questions, there is one thing he is sure of: he does not understand her” (118).

The novel closes with Chantal and Jean-Marc together in bed and he clasping her body saying “‘Wake up! It’s not real!’ ” and she repeating after him, “‘No, it isn’t real, it isn’t real’” (152). Then the authorial persona who has never before intervened intervenes, shifting the narrative abruptly from third-person account to that of first-person:

And I ask myself: who was dreaming? Who dreamed this story? Who imagined it? She? He? Both of them? Each one for the other? And starting when did their real life change into this treacherous fantasy? . . . When Jean-Marc sent her the first letter? But did he really send those letters? Or did he only imagine writing them? At what exact moment did the real turn into the unreal, reality into reverie? Where was the border? Where is the border? (152-53)

The novel thus has a completely polyphonic conclusion which will remain from the ordinary monological point of view uncompleted (Problems 34). As Čulík observes the dream-like nature certainly encourages ambiguous interpretation. Novel recognises the fact
that the value placed on clarity is ideologically based and disregards it purposefully.

“Meditative interrogation” is the basis on which this novel as all others of Kundera is constructed (The Art 31).

The story incorporates other genres and texts in its discussion in the following events. In Chantal and Jean Marc’s discussion on her assignment to do an advertisement campaign for the Lucien Duval Funeral Homes, Baudelaire’s lines come up – “O Death, old captain it’s time! Let’s weigh anchor/ This land bores us, O Death! Let’s cast off!” (sic) (28). The story of four friends in Three Musketeers by Alexander Dumas who find themselves on opposite sides and thus require to fight one another but without affecting their friendship supplements the couple’s discussion on friendship. “Little Boy” the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima also crops up in the discussion on life.

Ignorance

As Bill Robinson says Ignorance could have been easily called “The Book of Leaving and Forgetting” and this title would have been very similar to the earlier book The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. But even if some stretch of imagination can rename Ignorance almost like The Book it nowhere reaches the polyphonic structure and theme of the The Book. While The Book discusses the themes of laughter, forgetting and memory from many personal as well as social angles, as discussed earlier, Ignorance refuses or fails to do so. It just discusses the lives – together and separate – of Josef and Irena two émigrés from Prague. They undertake separate journeys, to their homeland: Josef for the first time, from Denmark, through Paris by “pure chance” (46) and Irena from France and runs into each other “at the Paris airport” (98).

The novel begins with Sylvie, Irena’s Parisian friend and Irena talking to each other
in Paris on Irena’s “return” to her motherland. Sylvie says to Irena, “Your great return,” (4)
that it will turn to. Irena drops her resistance and cherishes the “Great Return” (sic) (4).
The lost son home again with his aged mother, the family homestead that everyone carries
about, all these images mixed from books, films and her own personal experience wells up
in her. Thus it will be like “Odysseus sighting his island after years of wandering; the
return, the return, the great magic of the return” (5). The essayistic voice theorizes about the
etymology of the word “nostalgia” as James Wood states.

The already said or already known in *Ignorance* is the “Great Return” (4). Kundera
traces the etymological link between the words *return*, *nostalgia* and *ignorance*. The Greek
word for return is *nostos*. *Algos* means suffering. So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an
unappeased yearning to return. In Spanish *anoranza* the word for nostalgia comes from the
verb *anorar* (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 something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing.
You are far away, and I don’t know what has become of you. My country is far away, and I
don’t know what is happening there” (6). This becomes the central thesis upon which the
novel is built. The novel does not digress from this central theme and therefore fails to
become a polyphonic one. Bakhtin states that “A word is a bridge thrown between myself
and another” (Morris 58). Kundera throws the word *nostalgia* in between Josef and Irena
and others and between themselves in its peculiar etimological sense, denoting ignorance.
Hence it becomes an existential inquiry through the enquiry of a certain word in a
monological sense.

The dawn of ancient Greek culture brought the birth of *Odyssey*; the founding epic of
nostalgia. : “Odysseus lived a real *dolce vita* there in Calypso’s land, a life of ease, a life of
Ignorance is the story of “Irena’s Odyssey” and “that nobody is interested” in it (44). Odysseus’ story is “A far cry from the life of the poor émigré that Irena had been for a long while now” (8). Thus another possibility of an émigré status or emigration from a new angle is what Kundera is analysing. Besides, “Homer glorified nostalgia with a laurel wreath and thereby laid out a moral hierarchy of emotions. Penelope stands at its summit, very high above Calypso” (9). “Calypso, ah Calypso! I often think about her,” declares the narrator (9). She loved Odysseus and they lived together for seven years. “And yet we extol Penelope’s pain and swear at Calypso’s tears” (9). But James Wood says that Irena and Josef are not like Odysseus on his climatic way to Ithaca, despite the novel’s attempts to link them thus. Josef and Irena are returning only for brief stays, yet the novel seems to forget this and treats their dilemmas as crises.

“. . . in 1969, Irena and her husband emigrated to France” (11). She married Martin. “Then she bore a child, moved from Prague to France with a second daughter in her belly, and soon after that Martin was dead” (28). A Swede and Irena’s “companion” (22) in France, “Gustaf had come to know Martin by chance, over a business negotiation. He met Irena much later, when she was already widowed” and he started courting Martin’s “beautiful wife” (26). Irena has two grown-up daughters of which for one Gustaf bought a studio apartment and arranged to send the younger one to a boarding school in England (27).

Biographically, Gustaf is a replica of his predecessors Kostka in The Joke, and Tomas in Unbearable Lightness. “He tolerated (without pleasure) two grown daughters; he was fleeing his wife. He would very much have liked to divorce if it could be done amicably. Since that was impossible, he did his best to stay away from Sweden” (27).
The novel now discusses the various unpleasant experiences faced by Irena and Josef purely because of ignorance, of their condition while in exile, in their native country. Gustaf, the “rich man” (40) with his business in Prague coaxed his girlfriend back to her native city. The new Prague was a city of domination by English language. The narrator describes it as: “At an unhoped-for speed Prague forgot the Russian language . . . eager to applause . . . its new attire of English-language signs and labels. In Gustaf’s company offices the staff, the trading associates, the rich customers all addressed him in English . . .” (95). For Irena suddenly everything turned different “. . . after Martin died: she had nobody left to speak Czech with, her daughters refused to waste their time with such an obviously useless language . . .” (95-96). “Now Prague was reshaping” the language of Irena and Martin as a couple. Earlier they communicated in French and she with her far better knowledge of French led the talk within the couple. Now “Knowing little English, Irena understood only half of what he [Gustaf] said, and she did not feel like making much effort, she listened to him rather little and spoke to him still less” (95-96). Thus “Her Great Return took a very odd twist . . .” (97). In the streets Czech language made her happy while “back in the house, she would become a silent foreigner” (97). This communication gap led to discord in their relationship as a couple. Then “The mother was his best ally, ever quick to support him with smutty remarks that she would pronounce in some exaggerated, parodic manner and in her puerile English” (98).

“Having learned Prague’s history Gustaf would declaim at length about many things in the historic Prague city. Among these he would talk endlessly about Franz Kafka (who though miserable throughout his lifetime in this city had, thanks to the travel agencies, turned to its patron saint)” (95). Irena parodies this by presenting “a magnificently stupid T-shirt” showing the gloomy face of a tubercular with a line in English: “KAFKA WAS
The novel highlights some telltale discomfiting incidents that Irena and Josef face on their return to Prague. Irena invites her friends to a restaurant. In Bohemia people did not drink good wine so she bought old Bordeaux with all the greater pleasure to surprise her guests, to make a party for them, to regain their friendship. This was a gamble for them to accept her as the person she is now, coming back. “She left here as a naïve young woman, and she has come back mature, with a life behind her, a different life that she’s proud of” (37). After awkwardly eyeing the bottle of vintage wine the friends preferred beer. “Rejecting the wine was rejecting her” (37). But “that doesn’t faze her; what matters to her is choosing the topic of conversation herself and being heard” (37). “She tries delicately to take up topics they raise and lead them toward what she wants to tell them, but she fails: as soon as her remarks move away from their own concern, no one listens” (38). Later they aimed a barrage of questions at her; “questions to check whether she knows what they know, whether she remembers what they remember” (43).

Earlier, by their total uninterest in her experience abroad, they amputated twenty years from her life. Now, with this interrogation, they are trying to stitch her old past onto her present life. As if they were amputating her forearm and attaching the hand directly to the elbow; as if they were amputating her calves and joining her feet to her knees. (43)

Josef, the other émigré as James Wood suggests is a still more sympathetic creation. He feels more “the pain of ignorance, of not knowing” (6). Not knowing his marital status his brother hesitates, “‘You got married over there, I believe’” (57). Josef had allowed his brother to take his belonging when he left the country. Among them there was a picture: a
working-class suburb, poor, rendered in that bold welter of colours that recalled the Fauve artists from the turn of the century, gifted by the artist to Josef with a dedication with Josef’s name written alongside his signature by the artist himself. The painting now hangs on the wall of his brother’s house. In their conversation they (brother and his wife) cleverly sidestepped the issue of painting.

Immediately after this Josef sees his watch on his brother’s wrist and “seeing his watch on someone else’s wrist threw him into a strange unease” (70). This gave him the feeling of “coming back into the world as might a dead man emerging from his tomb after twenty years” (70). The total ignorance of his dead Danish wife in Prague also made Josef very restive and “He understood: if he stayed here, he would lose her. If he stayed here, she would vanish” (159).

The novel ends up in Irena and Gustaf sharing bed. Josef then leaves Irena, in sleep, in the hotel room in Czechoslovakia for Denmark. As James Wood says the novel ends with two sexual pairings: Josef and Irena and more usually, Gustaf and Irena’s sexy mother. For him this is a feeble closure. And it is formulaic; merely a way of combining all the available characters, like a group photograph for the novel’s last page. In this novel there is also a relapse to “The despotism of the ‘story’” which Kundera derided in The Curtain (11).

As in other novels of Kundera this novel is also presented in the way of addressing an absent other. Therefore the narration is polyphonic. The following sentences extracted from the text bear witness to the above fact:

“Let us emphasize: Odysseus, the greatest adventurer of all time, is also the greatest nostalgic” (7).
“Imagine! Five years after the Holocaust!” (9).

“For the sake of avoiding ideological argument, I propose that we adopt a more modest interpretation . . .” (30).

“If I were a doctor, I would diagnose his condition thus: ‘The patient is suffering from nostalgic insufficiency’ ” (74).

“For let’s look at Irena’s life after Martin died . . .” (95)

“What I have just said everyone knows . . .” (120-21)

The novel shows ignorance at another level. “When Irena saw Josef at the airport, she remembered every detail of their long-ago adventure; Josef remembered nothing. From the very first moment their encounter were based on an unjust and revolting inequality” (126). It is over the failed love with the boy, Josef that Irena tried to die by consuming sleeping pills.

That the dialogue is everything for Kundera is explicit from this novel too. “One voice alone concludes nothing and decides nothing” (Problems 213). Josef chose veterinary science as his profession. The novel offers a variety of reasons for it suggested by different characters: “‘I remember what you always used to say,’ N. Remarked. ‘That a person becomes a doctor because he’s interested in diseases; he becomes a veterinarian out of love for animals’ ” (152). “‘Did I really say that?’ Josef asked, amazed. He remembered that two days earlier he had told his sister-in-law that he’d chosen his profession as a rebellion against his family. So had he acted out of love, and not rebellion?’ ” (153). But the narrator has earlier said that it was the “taste for provocation that inspired him: healing sick people was his family’s great pride . . . and he enjoyed telling them all that he liked cows better that
humans” (65). “But . . . his choice was interpreted simply as a lack of ambition . . .” (65).

Before Josef’s leaving Prague, Irena and Josef meet in a hotel lobby. They share some concerns over their émigré status. Irena tells him “. . . Can you believe that not one person here has ever asked me a single question about my life abroad? . . . Never! I keep having the sense that they want to amputate twenty years of my life from me. Really, it does feel like an amputation. I feel shortened, diminished, like a dwarf” (167). A very sympathetic and understanding Josef asks about the condition in France. There also “They’re not interested in each other, but it’s completely innocent. They don’t realize it” (168). But for Josef this uninterest has a larger dimension: “That’s true. It’s only when you come back to the country after a long absence that you notice the obvious: People aren’t interested in one another, it’s normal” (168). Josef specifically meant the lack of interest of the French not in the person Irena but in her experience. For this Irena replies:

‘Oh, the French, you know – they have no need for experience. With them, judgements precede experience. When we got there, they didn’t need any information from us. They were already informed that Stalinism is an evil and emigration is a tragedy. They weren’t interested in what we thought, they were interested in us as living proof of what they thought. So they were generous to us and proud of it. When Communism collapsed all of a sudden, they looked hard at me, an investigator’s look. And after that something soured. I didn’t behave the way they expected’. (169)

Irena continues: “Then the time came for me to confirm that suffering by my joyous return to the homeland. And that confirmation didn’t happen. They felt duped. And so did I, because up till then I’d thought they loved me not for my suffering but for my self” ”
Kundera thus began to speak on the frustrations of émigrés, but ends with the frustrations of humans.

When compared with earlier novels heteroglossia enters the last three novels only in a faint way. Characters appear as simulation of living beings. All these novels appear less, as a game with invented characters which his novels are for Kundera (Theiner 155). In novels before *Slowness* Kundera constantly interrupts himself in order to give the slip to the totalitarian drive to literary fiction as already said; this is completely absent in the later novels. Simultaneous development of various themes or lines is not attempted by the novelist and therefore multiple meaning is not the basis of these texts. But, as usual, Kundera inscribes these texts too over a number of previous writing which resurface as a trace. Nonlinearity of narration is also maintained. Fundamental unfinalizability of the polyphonic novel is also there in these novels. In the circumstances the last three novels can only be considered as lesser polyphonic ones.