Chapter 5
Politics of Laughter

Now, by two-headed Janus,

Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time:

Some that will evermore peep through their eyes
And laugh like parrots at a bag-piper,
And other of such vinegar aspect
That they'll not show their teeth in way of smile.

Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable.

(Shakespeare, MV 1.1.50-56)

Discussing William, the principal character in The Name of the Rose, Anderson says in an article on the Web:

William exemplifies Eco's postmodern sensibility: the modern and the postmodern moment coexist within him as he rethinks the past with irony. His remonstration with Jorge about laughter demonstrates this coexistence. Jorge condemns laughter, as it threatens the divine order of the universe and opens the eyes of men to a topsy-turvy
world. William perceives laughter as liberation of the senses and the intellect from fear and in turn from ignorance, thus allowing the possibility for discovering truth.

So laughter, which at first sight appears to be so far removed from the concept of truth, now becomes the key for the "liberation of the senses and the intellect" which in turn makes the discovery of truth possible. The demonic and angelic laughter that one finds resonating in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is also a contestation for "truth" with the adherents of the Communist Paradise asserting the purity of their dream and the fallen comrades' sceptical laughter subverting their claim. Clamence, the self-exiled hero of Camus's The Fall, realises the "truth" of his existence only when he hears the mysterious, mocking laughter. The point is, contrary to appearances, the gulf between Laughter and Truth, two of the constructs chosen for study, may not so be so wide.
To foreground laughter, which is at best a behavioural reaction to comic stimuli, may appear like foregrounding the effect rather than the cause. Since laughter is a single manifestation of multiple sources of provocation -- comedy, parody, pastiche, irony, satire, mask, mime, mock-epic or even horseplay, to name only a few of the comic genres -- this is done more for the sake of convenience of designation than anything else. In fact, untangling the source of laughter is one part of the agenda of this chapter. The other part attempts to philosophise laughter by exposing the ideology linking laughter to postmodernist fiction in/to which it is a crucial, functioning part.

Commenting on the complex form of relationship existing between modernism and postmodernism, Tim Woods says in his Introduction to *Beginning Postmodernism*:

Postmodernism is a knowing modernism, a self-reflexive modernism, a modernism that does not agonise about itself. Postmodernism does what modernism does only in a celebratory rather than
repentant way. Thus, instead of lamenting the loss of the past, the fragmentation of existence and the collapse of selfhood, postmodernism embraces these characteristics as a new form of social existence and behaviour. (Woods 7-8)

The celebration in postmodernism vents itself in laughter, which can be comic or ironic, celebratory or mocking, or all at once, as the fictions of Eco, Kundera and Camus illustrate.

Against the modernist "purpose," Ihab Hassan, one of the earliest theorists of postmodernism, cites the postmodernist "play" and "irony" as forming the slippery configuration called postmodernism (399). So laughter becomes one of the ideological underpinnings of postmodernism, as it mocks the "purpose" of modernism, defining itself against the characteristics of modernism.

The other theorist who conceptualised laughter giving it the dignity of a subversive ideology is Mikhail Bakhtin in whose "carnivalisation" laughter resonates mocking the discourse of the dominant
regimes. As Bakhtin says in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*:

It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, two lives: one that was the official life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety; the other was the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything. Both these lives were legitimate, but separated by strict temporal boundaries. (129-30)

The activities of the carnival square include collective ridicule of officialdom, inversion of hierarchy, violations of decorum and proportion, celebration of bodily excess. The postmodern laughter of scepticism, with its heavy emphasis on
irony, may appear to be quite different from the
carnivalesque laughter of Bakhtin but in so far as
both interrogate the dominant ideology of the time,
and in so far as both mix up the high and the low,
they can be said to share common ground. The
agenda that laughter assigns to itself in Eco’s *The
Name of the Rose*, Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter
and Forgetting* and Camus’s *The Fall* shall now be
considered.

Clearly, even as William and Adso climbed the
misty slopes of a mountain in northern Italy on
their way to a remote abbey in Umberto Eco’s
novel, *The Name of the Rose*, various power
struggles were in progress. The period was the
High Middle Age and the year 1327 A.D. Emperor
Louis of Bavaria was locked in a conflict with Pope
John XXII as both tried to outmanoeuvre the other.
Half-hearted attempts were being made by their
envoys to bridge their irreconcilable differences.
Fear over their personal safety had made them
seek neutral grounds for negotiations. William of
Baskerville, a Franciscan and an imperial emissary,
was on his way to set up such a meeting in the remote abbey.

The struggle between the imperial and the papal forces was only one among the many ongoing struggles. The Church itself was rife with factions and many considered the Pope himself to be the villain of the piece. The picture that emerges of the Pope is hardly pleasing:

John XXII (1316-1334), elected after a dilatory, disgraceful conclave, was a rigid, harsh despot, an acute lawyer, a prudent financier, implacable and intolerant of opposition, not to be bent from his resolves. (Previté-Orton 836)

The opulence and self-indulgence of the Church had fostered many spiritual movements such as the Franciscan and Dominican order and the former was attracting severe persecution from none other than Mother Church herself (Koenigsberger 245). The call to voluntary poverty and a life of hardship given by Francis of Assisi had warmed the hearts of many Christians but it only made the Pope’s luxury seem all the more glaring.
These power struggles involved individuals representing great institutions, like the Empire and the Church, or different denominations within the Church itself. But there were other causes for unease: great winds of change were blowing ushering in new learning which revolutionised the fields of philosophy, theology and natural sciences. Acknowledging the many correspondences between the Middle Ages and our contemporary times, Eco says in *Faith in Fakes*:

All the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalistic economy (along with banks, checks, and prime rate) are inventions of medieval society. In the Middle Ages we witness the rise of modern armies, of the modern concept of the national state [.. .], the struggle between the poor and the rich, the concept of heresy or ideological deviation [.. .]. (64)
It was inevitable that an age of such sweeping changes must also contain an explosive dynamics of its own: along with optimism over the possibilities for betterment, it also inspired black despair at the crumbling old order.

Brother William of Baskerville, a “mendicant friar” in the Abbot’s dismissive description (*Name of the Rose* 448), stood at the intersection of such historical developments. William belonged to the Franciscan order and was entrusted by the Emperor’s order with the mission of holding parleys with the Pope’s men to explore possibilities for the reconciliation of the State and the Papacy.

To understand why the Emperor favoured William to carry out this mission it is necessary to understand the historical reason for the alliance between the Emperor and the Franciscans. The Franciscan movement was a response to the aspirations of the people to cleanse the Church of all sorts of corruption, especially its sordid drift towards materialism. This did not endear the Franciscans to the Pope who angrily reacted by condemning them in a papal bull. Acting on the
principle that his enemy's enemy could be, at least
temporarily, his friend, the Emperor had
requisitioned the services of a learned Franciscan
friar like Brother William. Besides, as
Koenigsberger observes, the virtues of the
Franciscan order could be used as the proverbial
stick to flog the papal horse:

The demand for a return to the poverty,
simplicity and spirituality of the early
Church had been among the most
effective propaganda weapons of the
imperialists against the papacy. (244)

But more than the struggle between the State
and the Clergy, what takes up most of the authorial
energy has been the reconstruction of the internal
strife among the various sects and factions of
Christianity. And if a single issue could be said to
dominate these clerical disputes, it was the poverty
of Christ, which the Franciscans had sworn to be
their guiding principle and which, equally
vehemently, Pope John XXII and his followers
opposed. No wonder then, that politics, power play
and intrigue are at the heart of The Name of the Rose.

To complicate William's mission further, the Abbot had asked him to investigate the mysterious death of a young monk called Adelmo, an engraver and illuminator of sacred texts. And in the week of William and Adso's stay in the abbey the mysterious deaths would multiply testing William's power of detection to the utmost.

Discussing why he opted on William as the focal character, Eco says, in his Reflections on The Name of the Rose: "I needed an investigator, English if possible [. . .] with a great gift of observation and a special sensitivity in interpreting evidence" (26). He must also be acquainted with the works of Roger Bacon and William of Occam. Eco thought of making Occam himself the investigator but gave up the idea, as Occam was not "attractive as human being" (27).

Roger Bacon and William of Occam were two of the most important men of medieval Europe. Roger Bacon [c.1220-1292] was an Englishman and a
Franciscan who “praised mathematics as the only discipline by which truth could be established without fear of error, and he visualized all sorts of inventions which were a kind science fiction” (Koenigsberger 276). William of Occam [d.c.1350] was a professor of logic and physics at the University of Paris, a Franciscan threatened by the Pope, an intellectual famous for his statement known as “Occam’s razor” which declared, “multiplicity ought not to be posited without necessity” (Kirchner 232). William also articulates this position in The Name of the Rose when he tells Adso “one should not multiply explanations and causes unless it is strictly necessary” (91).

What emerges from these sketches is that William of Baskerville was a highly learned Franciscan, a sensitive observer and an intelligent interpreter of data, with a mind open to impressions and stirred by reason, an intellectual and humanist, almost a Renaissance hero. He also held important offices as the Emperor’s trusted emissary and the Abbot’s favoured investigator with full powers to investigate the death of Adelmo
of Otranto with the sole proviso that he not visit the library (35). In the eyes of the Abbot, he had the additional merit of being an inquisitor who must, of necessity, be shrewd and skilled in conducting investigations.

For all his acumen, it is interesting to note, William failed in both the assignments. The attitude of the Pope's men was so hostile right from the beginning that William could not be blamed for the failure of talks. And the arrest of Remigio the cellarer and his follower Salvatore as members of a heretical sect hardly helped matters. Secondly, even in the task of apprehending the murderer or arresting the crimes, the discovery came too late for William to be of any use. And the burning down of the library was the ultimate blow to his reputation as an investigator and which aroused the strongest emotion in him: "'It is impossible, we will never do it, not even with all the monks of the abbey. The library is lost.' Unlike the angel, William wept" (487). With the abbey and the library destroyed by fire and everyone who mattered dead or dying, William's mission appeared
to be as much in a shambles as the very abbey he had come to visit. Did Eco set him up so high only to make his fall all the more ludicrous? Perhaps the key to this paradoxical situation lies in the necessity, even compulsion, to make William the laughing stock. As we shall see in the succeeding pages, quite a lot of stake is on laughter.

Since an important aspect of the novel hinges on laughter and even fear of laughter and also on Aristotle's purported remarks on comedy, it shall repay our study to consider William from this lighter, but not slighter, perspective.

Let us take three instances in which laughter is implied or which evoke outright laughter in *The Name of the Rose*. As Nicholas the glazier showed Adso and William the many sacred reliquaries of which the abbey was the proud repository, like, for instance "a portion of the crown of thorns" (433), Adso became transfixed under their spell. To break this spell, William told him of the cathedral of Cologne which housed "the skull of John the Baptist at the age of twelve" (425). When Adso said that
the saint was executed at a more advanced age,
William replied, with a tongue in cheek humour,
"The other skull must be in another treasury"
(425).

Ubertino, a Franciscan spiritual, whose sanctity and purity even the corrupt Pope was afraid to question, could at times become too impatient in his ardour. He counselled William to abjure intellectual pride and give up reading altogether for the sake of contemplation and meditation proper to a monk:

'Mortify your intelligence, learn to weep over the wounds of the Lord, throw away your books.'

'I will devote myself only to yours,'
William smiled. (63)

Jorge, announcing the arrival of the Antichrist, gave a description of him:

'These are the features that will mark him: his head will be of burning fire, his right eye will be bloodshot, his left eye a
feline green with two pupils, and his eyebrows will be white, his lower lip swollen, his ankle weak, his feet big, his thumb crushed and elongated!'

'It seems his own portrait,' William whispered, chuckling. (403)

This is solemnity breaking, counter-punching, postmodern humour. In a perceptive essay on postmodernism, Eco says, in Reflections on The Name of the Rose:

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. (67)

William revisited his past (which consisted of thorns and bones of martyred saints but bones nonetheless) with irony and humour. This forceful injection of levity was necessary as otherwise the occasion could become too serious and overwhelming as to appear downright comical.
If William could smile and make others also do so, the complete antithesis of humour, one who declared himself to be an opponent of it was Jorge of Burgos. Before enquiring into why Jorge not only set himself against it but also forbade it in others, in whose presence humour simply froze, it would be worthwhile to look at his character delineation. He was eighty, quite blind for nearly half of his lifetime, brother-confessor to most of the younger monks, erudite and completely humourless. Fittingly he made his appearance when the younger monks were laughing at the surreal figures drawn by Adelmo and whose entry was enough to erase the sound of laughter: "The speaker was a monk bent under the weight of his years, an old man white as snow, not only his skin but also his face and his pupils. I saw he was blind" (79).

On another occasion Adso said, admiring his intimate knowledge of books and the library, "He was [...] the library's memory and the soul of the scriptorium." (130)
Stern and implacable, privy to the confessions of the monks, Jorge of Burgos was the true power running the library. "For forty years you have been master of this abbey," William said in the final confrontation. The Abbot "never precisely understood the treasures and ends of the library" (464) and Malachi the librarian was "a faithful agent" (466), admitted Jorge to William. Jorge was instrumental in causing the death of everyone, and finally, including his own. In spite of all this, paradoxically, Jorge believed himself to be "the hand of God" (478).

Even as the murders kept multiplying following a pattern in the Apocalypse making William wonder if there was "a malignant mind brooding for a long time in darkness over a murderous plan" (265) a sub-plot chronicles the breakdown of talks between the imperial and papal delegates thanks to Bernard Gui.

On hearing that Bernard Gui was a member of the papal delegation, William let out an explosive expletive (210). He was "the scourge of heretics"
who had also authored a handbook on inquisition (210). And the leader of the legation was Cardinal Bertrand del Pogetto whose face was also set against heretics. William feared that their meeting would launch an "offensive [...] against the whole Franciscan movement" (212). The subsequent arrest of Remigio the cellarer and Salvatore and Ubertino's hasty departure from the abbey proved that William's suspicions were well grounded. Gui's presence in the novel is not fortuitous considering the many points of similarity between him and Jorge. They are complementary characters, one meant to throw light on the other.

Physically their appearance was disconcerting to their interlocutors, though for different reasons: Jorge's sightless eyes stared as if they possessed the power of vision and Bernard's gaze pierced and disoriented. Psychologically too their profiles were similar. Both lusted for power: whereas in Jorge's case it was pure intellectual power because of his mind's constant colloquy with texts ancient and modern, Bernard Gui's power was inquisitorial, the power of a fanatic consumed by a hatred of
deviation. One way or the other, both showed an indubitable alliance with, and affinity for, power. Commenting on Bernard Gui’s lust for power, William says: “Bernard Gui is lustful; his is a distorted lust for justice that becomes identified as a lust for power.” Jorge’s lust was different but only in kind: “Jorge did a diabolical thing because he loved his truth so lewdly that he dared anything in order to destroy falsehood” said William. (396). If Bernard Gui’s lust was for a perverted sense of justice, Jorge’s was for a perverted sense of truth. Both were monomaniacs, both knew no restraints. Both coveted power, Jorge covertly and Bernard Gui obscenely, publicly.

Jorge was never filled with any remorse or compunction for causing the deaths of so many lives, indeed he thought of himself as an instrument of God punishing the transgressors: “I know that this was the will of the Lord and I acted, interpreting it. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (479). Bernard Gui, after finding Remigio guilty of heresy, took a
frightening pleasure in telling what stood in store for him:

Ask the Abbot to provide a place where the instruments of torture can be installed. But do not proceed at once. For three days let him remain in a cell, with his hands and feet in irons. Then have the instruments shown him. Only shown. And then, on the fourth day, proceed. Justice is not inspired by haste, as the Pseudo-Apostles believe, and the justice of God has centuries at its disposal. Proceed slowly and by degrees. (385)

The unctuous words and reference to “the justice of God” hardly conceal the torturer’s delight over the power he wielded over his victims. The same sanctimonious tone and holier-than-thou attitude is in Jorge’s words too (479).

While even the withered lips of Malachi were capable of an autumnal smile (consider the ghost of a smile twisting his lips on seeing Adelmo’s fantastic figures [78]), Jorge and Bernard Gui
displayed a singular lack of humour, which they used as a badge of power to badger their opponents into submission. And, remarkably, it was the subject of laughter that formed the staple of angry dialogues between Jorge and William. Now we can understand why Christ’s laughter -- along with his poverty -- became the most vehemently contested issue. Enmeshed in these apparently innocuous details are questions of profound political significance.

Though an abbey was not a place for merry-making and laughter because they were held to be incompatible with the ideals of contemplation and devotion, laughter could not be entirely ruled out because of the youth of the novices. As Adso adds in parenthesis: “Novices, though young monks, are still boys, and the reproaches of their masters are of little avail in preventing them all from behaving like boys, as their tender age demands” (455). So an abbey was, at least at an unconscious level, a place of tension between the natural propensity of the young novices to laugh and the monastic “rule” which forbade not only laughter but also
superfluous speech. And it was precisely in the matter of compatibility of spirituality with laughter that the Franciscans differed from the Benedictine and Dominican monks. The Franciscan appeal (with its valorisation of poverty and simplicity) was to the "simple" (the common folk) and, unlike the other sects, it gave greater credence to "the wisdom" of the simple. William, a Franciscan, noted with approval a fellow- Franciscan's attitude towards the simple:

[Roger] Bacon believed in the strength, the needs, and the spiritual inventions of the simple. He wouldn't have been a good Franciscan if he hadn't thought that the poor, the outcast, the idiots and illiterate, often speak with the mouth of our Lord. (205)

And many of the incidents narrated by William involving Franciscan monks were those that evoke earthy laughter, not the laughter of the mind but of the belly. As William says:
[Friar Diotisalvi of Florence] went to the convent of the preachers and said he would not accept food if first they did not give him a piece of Brother John’s tunic to preserve as a relic, and when he was given it he wiped his behind and with a stick rolled it around in the dung, shouting: Alas, help me, brothers, because I dropped the saint’s relic in the latrine! (478)

When William’s narration of a similar incident evoked laughter all around, Jorge sharply reprimanded him saying he was farting through his mouth to curry “the crowd’s favour” in a manner typical to the Franciscans (134). So laughter became a Franciscan friar’s weapon to subvert the false solemnity of the clergy and the simple were drawn to them perhaps because the Franciscans did not think that laughter and religious solemnity were mutually exclusive.

Jorge of Burgos feared laughter more than anything else. Almost all his angry outbursts were
directed against it. The worst punishment that William could think of for Jorge was to make him appear like a clown:

I hate you, Jorge, and if I could, I would lead you downstairs, across the ground naked with fowl's feathers stuck in your asshole and your face painted like a juggler and a buffoon, so the whole monastery would laugh at you and be afraid no longer. (477)

Why did laughter raise the hackles of Jorge? For two reasons: it empowered the simple and destroyed fear, neither of which Jorge could stomach. Jorge stated it in precise terms:

The simple must not speak. This book [Aristotle's second book of *Poetics*] would have justified the idea that the tongue of the simple is the vehicle of wisdom. This had to be prevented, which I have done. (478)

As Harari says, "To speak is, above all, to possess the power to speak" (43). By denying this faculty
to the simple Jorge aimed to emphasize their spiritual dependence, and in a theocracy, this amounted to disempowerment. Secondly, since laughter destroyed fear, which Jorge believed to be "the most foresighted, the most loving of the divine gifts", this would result in a "diabolical reversal" (475) of the acceptance of the base. What Jorge meant by "diabolical reversal" was a complete transvaluation of values so that the difference between the central and the marginal would disappear, or, perhaps, they might change places. To a strict theologian and elitist like Jorge nothing could be greater anathema.

The conflict between the proponents and opponents of laughter is epitomised in the struggle for the possession of Aristotle's second book of Poetics, which dealt exclusively with laughter and comedy. This neatly dovetails with the revolutionary impact that the rediscovery of Aristotle's Politics had on contemporary statecraft:

The arguments of the monarchies received powerful intellectual and
emotional support from the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Politics*, in the late twelfth century, and their assimilation into orthodox Christian thought by St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth. For Aristotle had posited the origins and ends of the state quite independently of the divine will [...]. (Köenigsberger 242)

Just as *Politics* helped to legitimise the claim of the monarchy for independence from the Church, the second volume of *Poetics* could very well justify laughter as a legitimate rhetorical tool for the discovery of truth. By doing so, it could elevate laughter, which was till now carnivalesque, to the level of art. Jorge feared this and used the book as a bait to poison his victims whose deaths could be used to decipher a false apocalyptic pattern. This pattern of deaths would appear to be divine intervention against the subversive, unsettling, pagan notions.

If, in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, laughter is synonymous with postmodern "play" and irony,
with an element of the carnivalesque thrown in it, in Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting it mutates itself into two varieties: the laughter of the Angel and the laughter of the Devil, giving us a binary, meaning and meaninglessness:

The first time an angel heard the Devil's laughter, he was horrified [. . .]. The angel was all too aware the laughter was aimed against God and the wonder of His works. He knew he had to act fast, but felt weak and defenceless. And unable to fabricate anything of his own, he simply turned his enemy's tactics against him. He opened his mouth and let out a wobbly, breathy sound in the upper reaches of his vocal register [. . .] and endowed it with the opposite meaning. Whereas the Devil's laughter pointed up the meaninglessness of things, the angel's shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well conceived, beautiful, good, and sensible everything on earth was. (61-62)
With the metaphors of the fall and the expulsion from the (Communist) paradise firmly embedded in this novel, we can term these two types of laughter as "prelapsarian" (angelic) and "lapsarian" (demonic) with the prelapsarians still owing allegiance to the Communist God and the lapsarians believing that this God had failed. John Updike too supports this idea in his review of this book published on the Internet:

Kundera is an Adam driven from Eden again and again: first, from the socialist idyll of his youthful imagining, then from the national attempt to reclaim that idyll in the brief "Prague Spring" of 1968, and then from the Russian-dominated land itself, and lastly from the bare rolls of citizenship.

Given the political positioning of Kundera, who inscribes himself in this novel as an exile from the communist utopia, it is easy enough to see that his own laughter is more demonic than angelic though
Kundera's route to this eventual destination is not without hurdles.

To begin with, he says, in the interview to Philip Roth at the end of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting:

Someone's hat drops on the coffin in a freshly dug grave, the funeral loses its meaning and laughter is born. Two lovers race through the meadow, holding hands, laughing. Their laughter has nothing to do with jokes or humour, it is the serious laughter of angels expressing their joy of being. (232-33)

These two types of laughter are manifestations of the philosophical positions the Angel and the Devil occupy, with the former "signifying" fanaticism and the latter absolute scepticism (232-33). Kundera implies that his own position lies somewhere between these two extremes. But his fiction argues otherwise.

By attributing laughter to the Devil (because all laughter has an element of malice to it) Kundera
might seem to share, along with Jorge of Burgos, the view that laughter is "diabolical." As such he is apparently "closer" to Jorge than to William to whom laughter is a sign of health, postmodern play and irony. But *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* carries unmistakable evidence that Kundera's conception of laughter is sceptical rather than fanatical. For instance, he tells us of the efforts he took in giving a name to his heroine, Tamina:

According to my calculations there are two or three fictional characters baptized on earth every second. As a result, I am always unsure of myself when it comes time for me to enter that vast crowd of John the Baptists. But what can I do? I have to call my characters something, don't I? Well, this time, just to make it clear my heroine belongs to me and me alone (and means to me more than anyone ever has), I am giving her a name no woman has ever had before: Tamina. (79) (Emphasis added)
In addition to the declared proximity between Kundera and Tamina, both have many other points of similarity. Both are political exiles and if Tamina is hounded to her death by the "children" in Tamina's Island, Kundera is an exile on account of his perceived political deviation. If her mature sexuality and adult behaviour mark her out as a deviant from the metaphoric children (read prelapsarians), it is precisely Kundera's postmodern refusal to posit any faith in the communist grand narrative of progress that leads to his expulsion. Commenting on the literary influences that shaped his writing, Kundera says, in an interview published on the Net:

Kafka, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, Witold Gombrovicz. These novelists are marvellously distrustful of what Andre Malraux called the "lyric illusions." Distrustful of the illusions concerning progress, distrustful of the kitsch of hope. (Carlisle)
Kundera demonstrates this scepticism in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* through a number of fictional events but only three "representative" events shall be used in which, and by which, Kundera politicises laughter to destabilise the grand narratives of Art, Religion and Sex.

Michelle and Gabrielle, two American girls studying European literature under the tutelage of Madame Raphael conclude that the people in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* start sprouting horns because the author wanted to create "a comic effect" (56). Though a certain amount of laughter is inevitable to an audience watching the play, the underlying message is, among other things, a bitter satire against conformity, which is communicated, however, in the postmodern guise of humour and irony. Michelle and Gabrielle carry forward their naïve assumption by using paper cones tied to their noses to give them the appearance of the horns of rhinoceros while giving a reading of the play.

Sarah, a Jewish student, who had earlier been denied their meticulously prepared notes, feels that she should not let go this opportunity to pay them
back for their insolence. Even as the embarrassed class watch the two Americans making fools of themselves, Sarah deliberately goes behind each and plants a firm kick on their behind, which the whole class mistakes to be a well-rehearsed act forming part of the pantomime and breaks down into helpless laughter (72-73).

The whole chapter could as well be called "Sarah's kick" because of the double irony it contains: the class is deluded into thinking that it is a rehearsed act and the two hapless students realise they are trapped by their own mime which makes such an act permissible. The kick "deconstructs" literary criticism too because, by posing as an interpretive act (though in an extreme and physical form), it completely disguises its nihilistic/sceptical character. Though Sarah is a minor character, it becomes evident she forms the constellation of postmodern characters dear to Kundera when Kundera thinks longingly about her even as he falls amidst the din of angelic laughter: "Sarah is out there somewhere, I know she is, my
Jewish sister Sarah. But where can I find her?" (76).

Jan, the narrator of the concluding chapter of the novel entitled "The Border," is present in the funeral service of his friend Victor Passer and, even as the gravediggers make preparations to lower the coffin, is forced to listen to an effusive eulogy of the departed man. The weather is windy and Papa Clevis (another friend) finds his hat blown away from his head. He is torn between the desire to retrieve his hat and the need to stand still and observe the solemnity of the rites. Since the hat disturbs everyone's attention he decides to retrieve it but just at that moment the wind plays mischief and carries the hat into the grave. He tries to appear nonchalant but with all the attention focused on him, this proves to be rather difficult: "At that moment the entire assembly of mourners was racked by a silent wave of laughter" (221).

The laughter deconstructs the solemnity of the occasion and subverts the traditional privileging of the grand narrative of Religion. How
it does it is through the methodology of reversal by which the trivial is foregrounded, and that which is considered solemn and dignified pushed to the background. The fact that Kundera has decided to orchestrate the concluding pages of his novel with the sceptical laughter of the Devil must also make it clear that he is of the Devil’s party and knows it to be so.

The third instance in which the Devil’s laughter of “meaninglessness” is heard uproariously is in “Barbara’s party” (222-25). Barbara’s parties were quite famous to her circle of friends for they offered group sex and Jan decides to attend one of them. Instead of the frenzied lovemaking one would expect in such parties, what Jan finds there are desultory and half-hearted attempts at sex with the invitees showing more interest in talking to each other than in anything else.

Barbara, ever the attentive hostess, decides to take charge of the situation by directing them to make the necessary sexual moves to get the whole show running. Jan observes the proceedings with a
critical eye and comments to another young man that Barbara is acting more like “Major Barbara” to which the young man replies that Barbara is training them to take part in a sort of (sexual) “Olympics” (223).

Even after the young man is whisked off by Barbara to indulge in one of her fanciful sex acts, the young man and Jan keep communicating with each other through silent, non-verbal means and as each one understood what the other thought, this resulted in silent quakes of laughter which ultimately boils over and spills out. Commenting on how inappropriate laughter is in such moments, Kundera’s narrator says: “Laughter in this context was as much a sacrilege as laughter in church when the priest raises the host” (224). When Barbara detects that Jan is the source of this laughter, she tells him, indignantly, “Don’t think you can pull another Passer’s funeral on me!” (225) and asks him to leave.

The publication of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting so angered the Communist rulers of the
erstwhile Czechoslovakia that they retaliated by revoking Kundera's citizenship. What the novel does to merit this extreme punishment of exile is that it shows Communism as a grand narrative which cannot ironically, self-reflexively, contemplate itself and if the "paradise" of Communism is to exist it has to create imaginary enemies who can be incarcerated in penal institutions or exiled, or, worse, hanged. It forbade scepticism of any kind because it amounted to heresy. It feared laughter, ridicule and parody because they are manifestations of internal contradictions and Communism, as a grand narrative, brooked no contradictions. In the absolute faith it demanded from its disciples and punished the deviants, it is no different from the "ideology" of Jorge of Burgos who too poisoned his victims to stop them reading Aristotle's second volume of Poetics as it gave legitimacy to laughter.

Urging the readers "to comprehend the world as a question" rather than as answers because "there is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude," Kundera observes at the end of the novel: "The
totalitarian world, whether founded on Marx, Islam or anything else, is a world of answers rather than questions" (237). Similarly the world that Jorge inhabits in Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and wants others too to inhabit is such world of answers rather than questions, a world devoid of laughter and doubt. Accusing Jorge of possessing "faith without smile, truth that is never seized by doubt" (477), William shows him up as a dogmatic devil, who is, however, very different from the sceptical Devil of Kundera. A dogma is precisely a grand narrative, which William aptly describes as "truth that is never seized by doubt." Since questions are offshoots of doubt, disbelief and scepticism, a society that clamps down on doubt will also clamp down on laughter because both are potentially subversive to the existing system of thought and discourse. Kundera's laughter not only satirizes but also provides a vent without which life becomes unbearable. Commenting on this, Alan Taylor says, in an Internet article: "Laughter leads the reader, and Kundera, away from despair and toward [. . .] affirmation of life."
In *The Fall* by Albert Camus, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a successful lawyer, and an even more successful lover, one who feels on top of the world to such an extent that he looked down on the judges to whom he presented his cases (21), finds himself pursued by a mysterious, mocking laughter which "deconstructs" his life and exposes it for what it is: a huge sham, a seamless "double" in which the lawyer arguing for the "noble murderers" and "widows and orphans" (15), courteous, generous and accomplished, is shown, with the help of the mocking laughter, to be self-seeking, conceited and power-hungry. Thomas Hanna, in an article published on the Web, has this to say on Clamence in his prelapsarian days:

There was a time when Jean-Baptiste Clamence had "the look of success"—he was the architect of a thriving law practice in Paris, the city of salvation, light and hope. He championed the causes of the poor and the persecuted, always giving and asking nothing in
return, metaphorically sleeping with justice every night.

As Jean-Baptiste Clamence is as much an individual as he is a child of the times, which simply adores success, the deconstruction of Clamence is also a critique of the times. According to Clamence, the future historians would think of the modern man as someone who "read the papers and fornicated" (7).

Let us see how Clamence comes into possession of this insight which shows his Paris phase of life in such an altered light, but which, however, produces no corresponding "transformation," as in the case of, for instance, the characters of T.S. Eliot's The Cocktail Party. Since "changing for the better" implies a Christian or teleological goal and presupposes a metanarrative of spiritual progress, Camus, eschewing such teleology, declares himself to be proto-postmodern. Secondly, Jean- Baptiste Clamence revisits his past, not innocently, as Eco would say, but with irony, with time and space lending him the ironic perspective, which enables
to objectify him as well as the social and cultural milieu of which he is a construct.

The laughter that Clamence hears as he walks along Pont des Arts in The Fall (30) has been preceded by the suicide of a young woman jumping into the Seine from Pont Royal and her cries of help go unheeded by Clamence who exculpates himself saying, “Too far, too late...” (52). The two incidents may not have anything in common except perhaps having their existence in the mind of Clamence in whose musings the memory of the suicide becomes coexistent with, and concomitant to, the laughter (52). Just as the laughter becomes ever present, distinct and muted in turns, the girl's body too becomes a perpetual and ironic reminder to Clamence of his failings and shortcomings, not only deconstructing his past but also his present. For instance, the debris he sees floating on the sea gives him palpitations as it reminds him of the drowned girl in the Seine. As Camus says in his lyrical prose:

Then I realized, calmly, just as you resign yourself to an idea the truth of
which you have long known, that that cry which had sounded over the Seine behind me years before had never ceased, carried by the river to waters of the Channel, to travel throughout the world, across the limitless expanse of the Ocean, and that it had waited for me there until the day I encountered it. I realized likewise that it would continue to await me on seas and rivers, everywhere, in short, where lies the bitter water of my baptism. (80)

Jean-Baptiste Clamence does not "change," as the teleologists would have it, "for the better." His insight into his past only serves to make him "voluble" and to go about his indulgences with a clear conscience:

I haven't changed my way of life; I continue to love myself and to make use of others. Only, the confession of my crimes allows me to begin again lighter in heart and to taste a double enjoyment, first of my nature and
secondly of a charming repentance
(104).

The laughter, which has no identifiable source, startles Clamence when he hears it for the first time and to which he refuses to posit any "special" meaning: it is just a "good, hearty, almost friendly laugh, which put everything properly in its place" (30). Like a ratiocinating man, Clamence is busy explaining the laughter away, though it makes him "dazed" and he starts breathing "fast" (31). The effect of the laughter on him is to trip up his confident stride and the euphoric laughter that he till now shared with the world turns into ironic laughter directed at him:

For a long time I had lived in the illusion of a general agreement, whereas, from all sides, judgements, arrows, mockeries rained upon me, inattentive and smiling. The day I was alerted I became lucid; I received all the wounds at the same time and lost my strength all at once. The whole universe began to laugh at me.

(59-60)
From being a laughter heard on the bridge, Clamence elevates the laughter he hears to "universal" proportions, which may be a way of describing his huge fall, but which is, at the same time, symptomatic of the egotism of the character. Besides, the agenda of postmodernism is to show "the illusion of the general agreement," exposing the fault lines in consensual politics and to that extent the laughter in *The Fall* is postmodern. Like the laughter that William espouses against the "false" seriousness of Jorge of Burgos in *The Name of the Rose*, and the sceptical laughter of Kundera which makes the border between the rational and the irrational visible (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*), the laughter in *The Fall* problematises Clamence's life. If Clamence does not propose any "agenda for action," that may be due to his reluctance to posit any undue faith in any programmatic action. As he says at one stage, commenting on the Teutonic thoroughness in liquidating the Jews, "When one has no character one has to apply a method" (10).