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The Intimate Jokes of “Partocentrism” in Milan Kundera’s *The Joke* and Anchee Min’s *Wild Ginger*

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INTRODUCTION TO *PARTOCENTRISM*

Partocentrism is a neologism following the pattern of such established terms as *theocentrism*, *anthropocentrism*, and *ethnocentrism*, and is meant to express the central role of the Party in social life and literature during the period of Communist totalitarianism.

Maksim Gorkii’s 1906 works, *Enemies* and *The Mother*, where for the first time, the struggle of the proletariat under the leadership of the party is shown, and Vladimir Maiakovskii’s poem, *V.I. Lenin* (1924), dedicated to the Russian Communist Party, became prototypes of the Communist *partocentric* literature. In the cult poem of *partocentrism*, the Soviet poet showed the two opposites of partisan existence: the collective anonymity of the masses, on the one hand,¹ and the Party individualism being identified with its leader, on the other hand.² From this point on, the Communist Party took center stage in the official, dissident, and emigrant Russian and Soviet literatures, and after World War II in the literatures of other socialist countries.

Socialist realism, which gained a “civil statute” and picked up steam after the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934), was not identical with *partocentrism* – it was merely a part of it. The Communist *partocentrism* was a time span dominated by a certain ideology, theme circles, and imagery, while socialist realism was among a multitude of methods for its artistic interpretation.³

In his verse *To the Party* (1929), the Bulgarian poet Hristo Radevski formulated the dogma for the Party’s infallibility (“I know, I do believe you’re [the Party is] right, even at times when you go wrong.”) This dogma attached an *indulgence*, a sacramental absolution to the Party, meaning that even if one or all party members did wrong, the Party should not be held accountable. The Communist ideologues, implying that the Party is a living organism, “of flesh and blood,” brought a zoomorphic profile to its organization. Meanwhile, as the Party was gradually taking the shape of a phoenix, its members resembled chameleons, changing their colors out of fear of their own Party.

1 “The Party/is a million-strong hand,/clenched in a crushing fist./The one is rubbish, the one is zero...” (Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh*, Vol. 2 [Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1953], p. 143).

2 “The Party and Lenin –/are twin brothers, [...] We say “Lenin,”/and we mean the Party,/we say “Party,”/ and we mean –/Lenin” (Maiakovskii, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, Vol. 2, p. 144).

3 F.D. Markov, *Genezis sotsialisticheskogo realizma* (Moskva, 1970); Edward Mozejko, *Realizm socjalistyczny* (Cracow, 2001), p. 11.

Created as a political organization, the Communist Party was becoming an institution of usurpation, absurdly combining the roles of legislator, prosecutor, and judge. From a legal standpoint, *Communist partocentrism* started with the liquidation of political pluralism, first with the establishment of an ideological monopoly, and then with the merger between the Party and state. The clause in socialist countries' constitutions about "the leading role of the Party in the state"⁴ legalized the existing party-state oligarchies and The Party, with a capital "P" and always with a definite article, started controlling the lives not only of its members but of all citizens within the country.⁵

Although *partocentrism* appeared among the Slavs at first, it is not a Slavic "patent." After World War II, with the establishment of Communist dictatorships in Albania, Romania, Hungary, East Germany, China, North Korea, Mongolia, North Vietnam, Cuba, and Nicaragua, *Communist partocentrism*, initially Slavic, went on to become a world phenomenon.

THE REAL AND ARTISTIC CHRONOTOPES OF THE WORLD *PARTOCENTRISM*

Despite the fact that it reflected the national specifics of the respective literatures, *world Communist partocentrism* was amazingly monolithic. The literary similarities were oftentimes consequences of the reproduction of established (mainly in Soviet literature) *partocentric archetypes*; however, those were essentially products of typology – the common ideological source, strictly defining the standards in a socialist society. Both the typical and the specific features of *Communist partocentrism* in different regions of the world are well demonstrated by the novels, *The Joke* (1965/7), by Milan Kundera and *Wild Ginger* (2002), by Anchee Min.

The starting points of comparison include both the works as such, along with the lives and creative paths of their authors. Despite the age difference and the vast distance between the birthplaces of Kundera (1930, Brno) and Min (1957, Shanghai), they share similar stories. Both, as youngsters, were actively (and, in their own way, sincerely) involved in Communist propaganda; however, later, disappointed by the regime's cynical demagoguery, they artistically denounced *partocentrism's* anti-human nature. Kundera has lived in France since 1975, and Min moved to the United States in 1984. Both successfully exploited socialism's material and spiritual paucity, making it a fertile leitmotif for their writings.

The artistic and historical times in the novels reviewed here are the same. The time period in *The Joke* is fifteen years; starting in 1949 when socialism was enforced in Czechoslovakia, going through the regime's partial and temporary liberalization after the death of Stalin (1953) and ending with the start of attempts in creating "socialism with a human face."

4 In the *Constitution of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic of 1960* this clause is contained in Article 4.

5 All bolds in text are added by the article's author.

From a chronological and ideological standpoint, *Wild Ginger* is a sequel to *The Joke*. Min situated the partisan and love passions of its characters at the apogee of the so-called Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Without being set apart as an epilogue of their own, the last parts of the book succinctly inform the reader about the renunciation of the Red Guards period and the ideological warming in China in the 1990s. Most of the story in this novel is synchronously and typologically similar to the period of the so-called "normalization" of socialism in Czechoslovakia (1969-1989). Even if the *Cultural Revolution* was a modification, "normalization" was a restoration of dogmatic socialism; they were both part of the partisan *Perpetuum Mobile* through which the Party, sacrificing its members, was being reborn for old/new life. This is why, regardless of the great distance between the small Central European Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the giant Asian People's Republic of China, the story in both books is set in the real and artistic *chronotope of world partocentrism*.

FROM A LOVE OF GOD, PARENTS, RELATIVES, AND TEACHERS TO A LOVE FOR THE PARTY

The *partocentric* society is based on collectivism and centralism. *Democratic centralism*, which is typical for the Communist Party, is an absurd attempt to combine the total dependence of the individual on the collective with the immense supremacy of the individual over the collective. This means that while the party members (and all the rest) depend on the Party, the Party obeys its secretary general. Communism rejects religion, and yet, mimicking church centralism, the Party and its leader are trying to replace the Church and God. Self-proclaimed as infallible, Communists strive for a reign not only of terror, but also of love.

Inasmuch as the love for parents, children and relatives is a consequence of the natural love between men and women, the basic form of love is sexual. It is love between equal individuals, and this is why we can describe it as a *horizontal love*. Love also has a non-corporeal *vertical* direction: down to the children, and up to the parents and God. Religious love also has vertical and horizontal dimensions: towards God and towards your fellow man. To these traditional manifestations of love, the era of socialism adds *the love for the Party and the Party leader*, which negates or subjugates the natural forms of human love.

Within the Communist totalitarian conventions, religious love and ideological love are incompatible. Just as religions do not allow worshipping other deities,⁶ *partocentrism* requires its subjects not to have any other graven images,

6 "...Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness [of any thing] that [is] in heaven above, or that [is] in the earth beneath, or that [is] in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them..." (*Torah/Old Testament, Ex. 20:3-5*).

neither in the country nor abroad. In both Kundera's and Min's novels, the love for God is shown in several varieties.

The only overt opponent of *partocentrism* in both novels is the mother of Wild Ginger, who calls upon God to straighten her daughter out, because she has been "brainwashed" by the Communists, "mad, like the rest of China."⁷ The opera singer, who had been removed from the scene for political reasons, believes that the cause for her child's "madness" is her name. Mrs. Pei and her late husband did not follow the suggestion to name their daughter Plain Water, but called her Wild Ginger instead, despite the fortuneteller's warning that there was too much fire in the newborn. This breach of tradition seemed to have caused their daughter to turn from the freedom-loving person of her parents' dreams into a zealous propagandist of totalitarianism.⁸

The other older characters in these novels are also looking for a connection between religion and Communism. However, while Jaroslav's father "sends all Communists to hell," and Maple's mother believes that the guilt lies with "the Communist party [which] had banned the worship of the Spirits. And this was how our ancestors showed their anger," the Protestant, Kostka, thinks that the guilt for the ensuing atheism also lies with the Church:

Of course the Communist movement is godless. Though only those Christians who refuse to cast out the beam in their own eye can blame Communism itself for that. [...] **The churches failed to realize that the working-class movement was the movement of the humiliated and oppressed supplicating for justice. [...] By siding with the oppressors, they deprived the working-class movement of God.**⁹

Forced to make a compromise between her sincere love for Buddha and the pretentious loyalty to Mao, Maple's mother, rather unwittingly than on purpose, mocks the Party leader. Shortly after assuring that "Chairman Mao's teachings will certainly strengthen" her to hold the enormous portrait, which is much too heavy for her, at the supreme moment of "artistically" expressed love for the Great Helmsman, she collapses with his portrait in her hands and with the words "Oh, Buddha Heaven!" on her lips.

The attempt to reconcile Christianity with Communism played an evil trick on Kostka, the representative of those among the believers who have been misled by the Communist demagoguery, who, stubbornly refuses to understand that the *partocentric* system had no place for God:

Until the February 1948 coup, my being a Christian suited the Communists quite well. They enjoyed hearing me expound on the social content of the Gospel, inveigh against the rot of the old world of property and war, and ar-

7 Anchee Min, *Wild Ginger* (New York, 2002), p. 25.

8 Ibid.

9 Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993 [Definitive version fully revised by author. Originally published in Czechoslovakia by Československý spisovatel, 1967, under the title *Žert*]), pp. 208-209.

gue the affinity between Christianity and Communism. Their concern, after all, was to attract all major levels of the populace, and they therefore tried to win over believers as well.¹⁰

Kostka's "absolute certainty," that the "line of the European spirit, which stems from the teachings of Jesus, leads far more naturally to social equality and socialism,"¹¹ and because of that, is it possible "to build a socialist society without faith in the supremacy of matter?"¹² resembles the illusions of leftist intellectuals in the period between the two World Wars that the progress of science and technology alone would be sufficient to lead to socialism. After the Communists came to power, Kostka and his *Samaritanism*, defending students being persecuted for their parents' beliefs, became grounds for the professor to be removed from the University.

In *the spirit of the times*, the religious pacifist Bedřich also makes a connection between the peace-loving nature of Christianity and socialism, writing sincere "letters he'd addressed to Truman and Stalin, passionately appealing for the disbanding of all armies in the name of socialist brotherhood."¹³ Despite the predictable outcome of his initiative, the pious Christian awaits the victory of good over evil, and in the naïve style of the good soldier, Švejk, becomes a subject and not an object of the specific army humor:

in their confusion they [the army authorities] let him to take part in drill, and though he was the only man without a weapon, he went through the manual of arms perfectly with empty hands. [...] But when on his own initiative he made a poster calling for total disarmament and hung it in the barracks, he was court-martialed for insubordination. The judges, disconcerted by his pacifist harangues, had ordered him examined by a team of psychiatrists...¹⁴

Following the Christian belief that love for God shall set them free, the faithful pacifist turns his sentence to the ideological labor camp into a source of religious content:

Bedřich was delighted: he was the only one who had deliberately earned his black insignia and took pleasure in wearing it. That was why he felt free – though unlike Honza, he expressed his independence by means of quiet discipline and contented industry.¹⁵

Of all the characters in the novels reviewed, only Bedřich manages to consistently preserve his freedom and his credo not only in public, but also in his private space. The obedient worshipper, in his own uncompromising way, reaches an intimate harmony with the Almighty, giving himself entirely to Him: "Bedřich resisted by withdrawing into his own depths to commune

10 Ibid., p. 210.

11 Ibid., p. 224.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 55.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

with his mystic God, the erotic complement to this religious turn inward being ritual masturbation."¹⁶

The religious beliefs of the characters do not reject, but rather stimulate, in different ways, the natural love and acts of humanity. The faith in God and love for fellow men, combined with the gift of forgiveness, becomes their effective self-defense against totalitarian repression and uniformity.

In order to denounce the traditional social status quo, and to replace the old ideological paradigm with a new one, the Communists efficiently used the achievements of religion. They realized that the Church was merging with the faithful through its participation in the most intimate human events, such as the baptisms of the newborn, the weddings of the beloved, and the burials of the departed. Much like theocentrism, the Communist Party aimed to replace the individual under its control, replacing the established Christian sacraments and rituals with socialist ones. However, the new rituals are so absurd, that they cannot be accepted even by Ludvik, who had voluntarily broken with the Church, and, for fifteen years, had been preaching the transformation of the traditional folklore into a socialist one. After preaching sincerely and actively "the new ways of life," back in those days, he is shocked by the result of his own actions. Witnessing the rite by the name of "greeting new citizens in life" – a collectivized socialist surrogate of the Holy Baptism – Ludvik seems to hear his own former voice coming through the mouth of his schoolmate Kovalik:

There were two great opposing institutions involved: the Catholic Church with its traditional thousand-year-old rites and the civil institutions that must supplant the thousand-year-old rites with their own. [...] **people would stop going to church, to have their children christened or to get married only when our civil ceremonies had as much dignity and beauty as the church ceremonies.**¹⁷

On the one hand, Communists tried to denounce the "devastating" influence of religion, while on the other hand, they adopted the techniques of religious empathy. While Kostka and Bedřich, isolated in the penal company, place their hopes on some convergence between Christianity and socialism, most rank Communists' conscience was overtaken by the dogma of the Party's infallibility. Ludvik retrospectively paralleled his former Party and religious self-conscience like this: "looking back on my state of mind at the time, I am reminded by analogy of the enormous power of Christianity to convince the believer of his fundamental and never-ending guilt; **I also stood (we all stood) before the Revolution and its Party with permanently bowed head.**"¹⁸

The narrator in *Wild Ginger*, whose youth passes in "reciting Mao quotes like the Buddhists whispering their sacred mantras," describes how:

16 Ibid., p. 63.

17 Ibid., p. 172.

18 Min, *Wild Ginger*, p. 46.

To become a Maoist for our generation was like attaining the state of Nirvana for a Buddhist. We might not yet understand the literature of Maoism, but since kindergarten we were taught that the process, the conversion – to enslave our body and soul, to sacrifice what was requested in order to “get there” – was itself the meaning of our lives.¹⁹

Communist propaganda was directed mainly towards youth, whose religious consciences were not fully formed, and thus were easily molded and remodeled. However, while the process of redirecting religion into ideology was understandable, fuelling the hatred towards parents and relatives was inexcusable:

The sacrifice meant learning not only to separate ourselves from, but to actually denounce, those we loved most when judgment called. We were also taught to manage the pain that came with such actions. It was called the “true tests.” The notion was so powerful that youths throughout the nation became caught up in it. From 1965 to 1969 **millions of young people stood out despite their pain and publicly denounced their family members, teachers, and mentors in order to show devotion toward Mao.** They were honored.²⁰

Based on Mao’s statement that it is impossible for a “member of one class to love someone belonging to the opposite class,” Wild Ginger is convinced that her father, being a French diplomat, married her mother not out of love, but in order to spy on China. *Partocentrism* multiplies the “example” of the Russian pupil Pavlik Morozov, who informed on his own father.²¹ For the first time in human history, children willingly denounced their parents, replacing the bond of blood with Party association. The future “Maoist star” denounces her late father as an enemy, burns the only picture of him, and threatens her mother that she would inform the authorities about her bourgeois views, while her Czech Party “fellow man,” Alexej, officially denounces his father, believing in his “guilt”:

“My father was arrested for espionage. Do you understand what that means? **How can the Party trust me? It is the Party’s duty not to trust me.**”²²

Still, however sad the denunciation of parents, even more comical is the transformation of their public image into something related to the image of their children. After Wild Ginger meets Chairman Mao, her deceased parents, formerly “reactionaries” and “French spies,” are cleared to become “revolutionary martyrs” and “international Communists.”²³

Wild Ginger’s vow is evidence of the seemingly impossible considering the convictions of today’s young people of intellectual predilection to become part of the Communist movement:

19 Ibid., p. 27.

20 Ibid.

21 The propagandist mythologization of the Pavlik Morozov case is tracked by Catriona Kelly in: *Comrade Pavlik* (London: Granta Press, 2005).

22 Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 98.

23 Min, *Wild Ginger*, pp. 92-94.

Someday, I will be a revolutionary. **A Maoist star.** I will prove that I am just as good and trustworthy as the bravest Maoist. I have made that a promise to myself. No one will stop me from being who I want to be. Not Hot Pepper, not my mother, not the ghost of my father.²⁴

FROM LOVE OF FOLKLORE TO PARTY GLORIFICATION THROUGH FOLKLORE

Jaroslav and Ludvik are the only characters in the novels discussed who have redirected their world views from God to the Party. With Jaroslav, obsessed with Moravian folklore, the change is not drastic. He has long since replaced his faith in God and the afterlife with his own concepts of them, and his joining the Communist Party has an overt competitive motivation. He does not strive to change the world, because “Nothing, not even the most promising success, could replace the joy of coming home,”²⁵ but to preserve it. For Jaroslav, the milieu of “home” is occupied by the homeland, family, and folklore, in the preservation of which he put all his soul. Jaroslav becomes a Party member out of his love of folklore. However, flirting with the socialist culture’s “going to the people,” he not only betrays the authentic folklore with his concepts of it, but also unwittingly contributes to its mimicry and agony. The “folkloristic” mythologizing of the Communist past and present has mercilessly devastated the patriotic musician’s intimate world, and the revealed deceit that despite riding the horse in the folklore role “he got with his father’s connections,” Jaroslav’s son both secretly and demonstratively prefers the modern motorcycle race, and turns the facetious teenage protest into patricide.

Unlike the inert Jaroslav, who is part of the faceless mass, paying for professional development with Party dues and loyalty to the regime, Ludvik and his ideological instigators actively use folklore for the artistic enforcement of *partocentrism*. To them, state control over songs and rituals is just as important as collectivization and nationalization, because the “collectively” created and disseminated folk art was destined to glorify and objectify the love for the Party and the leader, to strengthen collective anonymity, and to divert attention from socialism’s real problems. However, the absurd usage of folklore to redirect love towards the Party turns out to be a Trojan horse. The mass “folklore” events with the recitation of sayings by Julius Fučík, Mao Zedong, and other dead and living “titans of revolution” do not elevate the people to the proclaimed new level of spirituality, but instead degrade them further to even lower depths of bestiality, and the people cleverly renamed the Red Guard dance *Zhong*, meaning loyalty, to *Zoo*.²⁶

With an optimum dose of logic and demagoguery, the activist Ludvik presents the planned transformation of folklore ethnocentrism into class-party collectivism as follows:

²⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁵ Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 144.

²⁶ Min, *Wild Ginger*, pp. 115, 124.

The ancient countryside had lived a collective life. Communal rites marked off the village year. [...] but a folk song is born differently from a formal poem. Poets create in order to express themselves, to say what it is that makes them unique. In the folk song, one does not stand out from others but joins with them. [...] It was passed from generation to generation, and everyone who sang it added something new to it. Every song had many creators, and all of them modestly disappeared behind their creation. No folk song existed purely for its own sake. It had a function. [...] all (songs) were part of a collective rite in which song had its established place. **Capitalism had destroyed this old collective life. And so folk art had lost its foundations, its reason for being, its function.** [...] But socialism would liberate people from the yoke of their isolation. **They would live in a new collectivity.** United by a common interest, their private and public lives would merge.²⁷

Thanks to folklore, the young Communists Helena and Pavel merge their personal and public lives – their love is born in the Julius Fučík song and dance ensemble, it “explodes” spontaneously during a speech delivered by the Italian Communist Togliatti, at the Old Town square in Prague, and is promoted to a marriage, according to the plan set by the Party bureau. Unknowingly, this ideological family, created as if by some kind of joke, plays the greatest joke in Ludvik’s life.

A LOVE FOR THE PARTY AND PARTY “LOVE”

While Jaroslav is a typical passive Party member, using his affiliation with the organization as a form of *indulgence*, the 20-year old Ludvik is a staunch Communist, putting a lot of passion to his public and personal life, naively believing that they can exist separately. His roots are with the Catholic Church, which is traditionally strong in his homeland; however, he officially quits it.²⁸ In order to “make history,” Ludvik “had the look all Communists had at that time, as if he had made a secret pact with the future and had thereby acquired the right to act in its name.”²⁹ Even if Ludvik’s world view and his careerism are intertwined, he is representative of the majority of young people (including the authors of these two books), who sincerely believed that socialism is just and historically inevitable:

What had attracted me to the movement more than anything, dazzled me, was the **feeling** (real or apparent) **of standing near the wheel of history**. For in those days we actually did decide the fate of man and events [...] The intoxication we experienced is commonly known as the intoxication of power, [...] admittedly, in most cases the result was an ugly lust for power, but [...] there was still (and especially, perhaps, in us, the young), an altogether ideal-

27 Kundera, *The Joke*, pp. 140-141.

28 The Communist propaganda in Czechoslovakia used the fact that the popular proletarian poet Jiří Wollker (1900-1924) officially quit the church and joined the Party.

29 Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 139.

istic illusion that we were inaugurating a **human era in which man (all men) would be neither outside history, nor under the heel of history, but would create and direct it.**³⁰

The double renegade, Ludvik, is an ideological product of the transitional period between two eras. Initially a Christian, genetically belonging to the Church by virtue of the Sacred Communion, he consciously becomes a Communist apparatchik, but soon he is expelled from the Party for placing his individualism higher than his partisan loyalty. Ludvik's disassociation from these two radically different institutions is caused by his pride, equally unacceptable for both theocentrism and *partocentrism*. Both activists, Ludvik Jahn and Pavel Zemanek, are similar in their wit, their interest in women, and their applause; however, they differ in their expression of their individualism, which is characteristic for both of them. Ludvik openly expresses his innate need to subordinate others to him, while Pavel constantly subordinates his individualism to Communist collectivism. This allows the conformist Zemanek to be loved by women and his fellow Party members before, during, and after the denouncement of the cult of personality and the "deformations" of socialism. While Ludvik is too late to realize that the only individualism the Party tolerates is the one subordinated to it, Pavel subjugates even his personal life to the expectations of the collective. Therefore, quite naturally, Pavel's ideological flirt with Helena ends with a "Party-arranged" marriage, while the flirt of Ludvik with Marketa ends with Ludvik's being expelled from the Party and sent to a labor camp.

With its insolent intrusion into citizens' private lives, *partocentrism* reaches the peak of its anti-human nature. As an anonymous collective subject, most often materialized through "raised voting hands," the Party takes the professional future away from many innocent people, among whom are Kostka, Čenek, Ludvik, Alexej and his father; Wild Ginger's mother, Maple's father, and others, while the public outrage over the "enemies" of socialism – the "bourgeois" singer Mrs. Pei and the pious Communist Alexej – lead to their suicides. Party offices at various levels "recommend" Pavel to marry Helena,³¹ read Ludvik's, Marketa's and Alexej's letters, and break not only the ideological, but also the intimate relationship between Ludvik and Marketa, posthumously declaring the marriage of Wild Ginger's mother and the French diplomat "a mistake."

The omnipresence of the Party in society and its brutal intrusion into the lives of ordinary people is demonstrated by the confession of Helena:

One of my colleagues at the station, a married man, was having an affair with a girl in the technical department, single, irresponsible, and cynical, and in desperation his wife turned to our Party committee for help, we spent hours going over the case, we interviewed the wife, the girl, various witnesses from work, we tried to get a clear, well-rounded picture of things and be scrupulously fair, the man was given a reprimand by the Party, the girl a warning,

³⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

³¹ "We didn't marry for love, – Pavel told Helena years later – we married out of Party discipline..." (Ibid., p. 17).

and both had to promise the committee to stop seeing each other. Unfortunately, words are merely words, they agreed to split up only to keep us quiet and in fact went on seeing each other on the sly, but the truth will out, we soon found out about it, and I took a firm stand, I proposed that the man be expelled from the Party for having deliberately deceived and misled it, after all, what kind of Communist could he be if he lied to the Party, I hate lies, but my proposal was defeated, and the man got off with another reprimand, at least the girl had to leave the station.³²

Very often, the collective Party rights are delegated to specific apparatchiks. Hot Pepper, who is bullying her schoolmates, “represented the Red Guards” and was permitted by Chairman Mao to do “whatever was necessary to change the world,” while Helena and Wild Ginger unilaterally usurp the right to be legislators and stalwarts of Communist morality.³³ Meanwhile, in the transition between the 1940s and the 1950s, the secretary-conformist Pavel preserves the Party’s ideological purity by expelling Ludvik from its ranks, a decade later his wife Helena watches over Party morality, imposing her own double standards not only on the membership, but also on the rest of the people:

but they laid into me at a public meeting, called me a hypocrite, trying to pilory others for breaking up marriages, trying to expel, dismiss, destroy, when I myself was unfaithful to my husband at every opportunity, that was how they put it at the meeting, but behind my back they were even more vicious, they said I was a nun in public and a whore in private, as if they couldn’t see that the only reason I was so hard on others was that I knew what an unhappy marriage meant, it wasn’t hate that made me do what I did, it was love, love of love, love of their house and home, love of their children...³⁴

The peculiar Party attitude towards love is even more grotesquely manifested in Wild Ginger. Though her full, albeit false, commitment to the Party is to some extent similar to the Catholic *celibate*, the way, in which sex degenerates from a mutual reproductive act to means of self-satisfaction and its subsequent ban, is unique. Unlike the loving Helena, whose ideological values allow for sex, family, and children, her Chinese counterpart first incites her ideological partner to masturbate, while she accompanies by reciting Mao’s quotations, and then, to punish his lust, gives her virginity to him, and finally, realizing that it is impossible to keep Evergreen with the help of the Chairman, totally disgraces herself as a human being by organizing a crusade against “lust.” Wild Ginger is changed beyond recognition and not only “set laws for all the youth – anyone who was caught engaging in a sexual act would be considered a criminal,” but also “personally took charge of several raids where the Red Guards broke into people’s houses.”³⁵

32 Ibid., p. 20.

33 Min, *Wild Ginger*, p. 13.

34 Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 21.

35 Min, *Wild Ginger*, p. 158.

Helena uses the power of the Party to marry Ludvik, and later, to unite and divide Party members and non-members. However, while the Czech lady is “modestly” content with her influence over her subordinate Party office, Wild Ginger feels authorized to speak for the whole Party. She engages the Party and state apparatus to set her lover up with an indictment, to be able to save him after his arrest, to steal him away from Maple, and to get him back in a sinister way. The Party-state involvement in the intimate relationship however becomes a disaster for the Maoist gone berserk and a partial retaliation for the heartless Hot Pepper, who proves that sharing the love for Mao with a mortal person is far from harmless.

Despite their best efforts, Helena and Wild Ginger fail to commit themselves fully and selflessly to the Party, its leader, and the idea of socialist equality and fraternity. The intellectual levels of these Party apparatchiks significantly exceed the primitive lust for power and gains of the aggressive Hot Pepper, and yet the unnatural suppression of love and its reckless satisfaction activates in both of them jealousy, as well as a certain sense of impunity. Wild Ginger deludes herself that the ideas of the Great Helmsman will help her suppress the urges of the flesh, Helena is well aware that “a woman cannot live without feelings, or she will not be a woman” and that is why, after the love is gone from her family life, she starts looking for it elsewhere. Even if some colleagues and fellow Party members call Helena “fanatic,” “dogmatic,” “a loyal Party dog” etc., and Wild Ginger’s lover compares the self-denial and the denial of sexual life to those who once “bound the feet of their girls and castrated their boys,”³⁶ both Party comrades fail to realize that their actions spell doom for them and their Parties.

The love for the Party demands superhuman commitment. Even more monstrous than the dissolution of the existing bonds of blood is the voluntary or forced ban on creating new ones. An extremely grotesque form of *commitment* to the Leader and the Party is the abstinence from sexual contact, femininity, family life, and maternity. After the “audience” with Mao, Wild Ginger makes a written vow of loyalty to the chairman, and that “she would give up her personal life, including marriage, to be a people’s servant and a Maoist.”³⁷ The *publicity face* of the Red Guards signs a “contract to publish her diary of the next ten years. The text would be included in school textbooks and recited by students at all levels.”³⁸ While Wild Ginger’s attempts to suppress her feminine nature and beauty (dressing “Mao style” and wearing the smallest size bras) are successful to some extent, her efforts to resist natural human love and sexual attraction are a total failure.

36 Ibid., p. 134.

37 Ibid., p. 101.

38 Ibid.

"HUMANIZING" THE PARTY, DEIFYING THE LEADER

Without overrating his own morals, Ludvik acknowledges that, as a Party member, he did wear more than one face, and yet, as paradoxical as it may sound, he didn't feel like a hypocrite, because each of them was real. The same is true for the Party with its many faces, which, despite the aim of complete uniformity of its member mass, is a "unity of diversities," including the passive Jaroslav, the opportunist Pavel, the militant Helena, the belligerent boy commander, and even the wrongfully accused "enemies with a Party ticket" Ludvik and Alexej. The ideal Party member is embodied by Marketa, who, in tune with *the face of the times*, is a hard-line, lively, and serious optimist:

a new life had begun [...] and its features, as I remember them, were rigidly serious. The odd thing was that the seriousness took the form not of a frown but of a smile, yes, what those years said of themselves was that they were the most joyous of years, and anyone who failed to rejoice was immediately suspected of lamenting the victory of the working class. [...] **a grave joy that proudly called itself "the historical optimism of the victorious class."**³⁹

The collective persona of the times are, theoretically, all individuals; however, the Party is defined and expressed by its leaders and their verbal and visual images. The beginning of the Party-leader propaganda *duality* was set by V. Maiakovskii with the cult verse that "The Party and Lenin are twin brothers." This duality is the anthropomorphic object, which the Communists (and not only they) must love, obey, and follow. For this to happen, the Party has to be *humanized*, and the image of the leader – deified, objectified, and replicated.

The attempts to portray the Communist Party as a living organism of flesh and blood, having a body, head, and even heart, began immediately after the October Revolution in Russia, and later were further developed and modified according to the local specifics of the countries with socialist regimes. In Czechoslovakia, where Klement Gottwald's cult of personality was entirely overshadowed by Stalin, the Party became the object of praise and love.⁴⁰

Even with its skillful transformation of ethnocentrism into class collectivism, the Czechoslovak Communist Party failed to procure monumental paintings and sculptures such as those of the "Motherland," "Freedom," and "Revolution." In *The Joke* the Red Army "and its alliance with our working class and its role in the victory of socialism in February 1948" is depicted by the inmate painter Čenek alternatively as "a heroically posed, warmly clad Soviet soldier with a submachine gun slung over his shoulder, a shaggy fur cap pulled down over his ears, and about eight naked women crowding around him; he

39 Kundera, *The Joke*, pp. 31-32.

40 Gottwald (1896-1953) stayed in power for a relatively short time and was almost entirely in the shadow of Stalin.

had an arm around the shoulders of each and was laughing a jubilant laugh; the other women paid court to him, extending their arms to him or simply standing there (one was lying down), showing off their pretty figures."⁴¹ The eroticized praise of the *liberating army*, where the painter's skinny schoolmate symbolizes the February revolution, the plump rear of the officer's bride – "the bourgeoisie making its exit from the stage of history," while the other naked ladies of ill-repute – the working class, freedom, equality, etc., were warmly accepted by the soldiers, but the boy commander denounced it as "perfect for masturbators..."⁴²

The humanization of the Party in Czechoslovakia is primarily verbal. In order to establish the dynamic Party *corporeality*, the Communist propaganda, in a puritan manner, used other types of allegories, synonyms, and euphemisms, such as "the spirit, the face, and the genius of the times," "the movement," "the proletarian revolution," "the helm of history," etc. It was inculcated into all Party members that "a man either was a revolutionary, in which case he completely merged with the movement into a single collective entity, or he was not, and could only *want* to be one; in that case, he would always consider himself guilty of not being one,"⁴³ which is why all Communists, depicted in *The Joke*, identify themselves with the revolution and merge with the times. The hardliners Marketa and Alexej blindly believe that "existence determines the consciousness," while the astute Pavel and Ludvik promptly realize that, in socialism, the consciousness determines the existence, because "far from the wheel of history there was no life, only vegetation, boredom, exile, Siberia."⁴⁴ Helena combines both, and even if it is a marriage of convenience, Helena's relationship with the Party is a deep, mutual, and long-term one; her merger with its body and spirit – wholesome and sincere; and the animation of the Party – convincing:

they will never make me ashamed of **loving the Party and sacrificing all my spare time to it. [...] it's only the Party that's never done me any harm, and I've never harmed the Party**, not even in the days when almost everyone was ready to desert it [...] I just clung to the Party more tightly than ever, **the Party is almost like a living being, I can tell it all my most intimate thoughts.**⁴⁵

Unlike in Czechoslovakia, the cult of personality in the PRC was strong and lasting. Propaganda uncompromisingly convinces the Chinese since kindergarten age that "without Chairman Mao we would all be dead ... And we began to love him," and that "to believe in Mao was to believe in China's fu-

41 Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 84.

42 Ibid., p. 86.

43 Ibid., p. 46.

44 Ibid., p. 71.

45 Ibid., pp. 19-20.

ture.”⁴⁶ The love for the “savior” grows into beatification and deification, and his image is turned into a miraculous *socialist icon*.⁴⁷

I looked at the Mao portrait on the wall. The Chairman had kind-looking features. Smiling eyes,⁴⁸ glowing cheeks, a round nose, and a gentle mouth. It was a peaceful face. Hot Pepper once said that **if you stared at Mao’s portrait long enough, the Chairman would come alive**. His eyes would blink and his lips would open.⁴⁹

The cult of Mao trumps all other known cults in the history of *partocentrism*, and the statement that “Mao and China are one” surpasses Maiakovskii’s framework for equality between the Party and its leader. *The Savior* of the Chinese, much like a God pantheistically dissolved into the visible and invisible nature, is present in every facet of Chinese society. He is found in every school, army barracks, public building, and home, he is the visible-invisible member of each family, he is present even in Maple’s overcrowded house:

My brother’s Mao statue stood on top of the closet. The Mao portrait stared down from the wall. **We had Mao stuff in every corner of the house**. Portraits, nine of them. Mao’s image was printed on book covers, closets, blankets, windows, towels, plates, cups, containers, and bowls.⁵⁰

Going beyond every reasonable limit, the anthropomorphic fetishism and replication of Mao are devalued into an absurd kitsch. For the Communist propaganda, however, each form of visible presence of the Great Helmsman is proof of love and loyalty for him. Wild Ginger said that she spoke to the statue of the Leader “coming to life at night” at her home, and that the buttons pinned on each side of Hot Pepper’s chest from a distance “looked like two breasts with Mao heads as nipples.”⁵¹

POLITICIZED SEX

Ludvik’s excessive pride leads him to worsen and ultimately cut off all his relationships with most of his family and friends. His failure to recognize their thoughts and wishes turns his public and intimate life into a string of tragicomical absurdities. He is unable to sense that Lucie postpones giving herself to him not because she is ashamed of her virginity, but because she is

46 Min, *Wild Ginger*, p. 29.

47 In this, and not only this, there are quite similar motifs and scenes in *Wild Ginger* and Andrei Konchalovskii’s film *Inner Circle* (1991), which could have both a typological and a *contactological* explanation!

48 As a matter of fact, of all *socialist icons on the partocentric altar* (from Marx, to Lenin, to Gorbachev, from Ulbricht to Honecker, from Mao to Ho Chi Min and Kim Il Sung, from Gottwald to Husak, etc.), the only smiling faces are those of Stalin and Mao.

49 Min, *Wild Ginger*, p. 11.

50 Ibid., p. 59.

51 Ibid., p. 3.

not a virgin. He rejects the Ostrava whore, who whispers in his ear: "I only came along because of you, silly," for her desire to have sex with him without loving him, and Lucie – for her love for him and her unwillingness to go to bed with him. Despite the fulfillment of his labor camp dream: to be "served" by naked women, the stark naked Ludvik ends up on the lap of the fully dressed Lucie, just like "the naked Christ taken down from the cross and placed in the arms of compassionate Mary..."⁵²

Ludvik's attempts to mingle ideology with sex have a distinctly tragicomic outcome. Acting before himself and before the others, the virgin-young man strives to "capture" Marketa's body in some spectacular manner. However, the bait on his ideological fishing rod becomes a double trap for himself: instead of drawing Marketa to his bed, the joke-aphrodisiac⁵³ leads to him being expelled from the Party, after which the hard-line Communist girl will give herself to him with utmost abandon, if only the "prodigal son" will acknowledge his guilt and repent. Eventually, the youthful play with ideology neither helps Ludvik get Marketa into his bed, nor helps her bring the individualist joker back to the serious Party sheepfold.

While one could certainly judge more leniently Ludvik's youthful attempt to bring sex under the power of ideology within the romantic context of the times, the mature man's premeditated desire to humiliate ideology through sex is much harder to excuse. Many years after his naked body pushed Lucie away, the half-undressed Ludvik undresses Helena to let his eyes deface the wife of the Party secretary guilty for his own partisan downfall. However, the visual and sexual "desecration" of Helena does not dishonor or drive comrade Zemanek away from her. He, in his characteristic style, has long since turned his eyes (among other things) away from his forcefully acquired lascivious family partner.

Ludvik's next fiasco is as much a result of his mutilated pride, as it is of his sclerotic capability to forgive. Expelled from the Party, Ludvik (unlike Alexej) gradually starts to see himself as its enemy; however, the former Communist's aversion to God takes away the grace of being able to forgive. After a series of worldview meanderings, Ludvik finds himself closer to the Party "either you're with us, or against us," than to the biblical "turn the other cheek." He is obsessed with the thought of vengeance on his political tormentors; however, his replacement of forgiveness with a fleshy vendetta turns the joke on him. Replacing the joy of sex with vengeful orgasm, Ludvik does not desecrate the hated apparatchik's wife, but merely pleasures an ageing Party coquette, who has never been really loved by either Pavel or Ludvik. Having "screwed" Helena, he aims to "screw" her husband Pavel; however, he finds himself "screw-

52 Kundera, *The Joke*, pp. 109-110.

53 The joke-aphrodisiac is the postcard sent by him with the following text: "Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long Live Trotsky! Ludvik." (*Ibid.*, p. 34).

ing" a long-since dysfunctional marriage. Thus, after the postcard to Marketa turns from a joke into a political verdict, the sexual retribution mutates into a grotesque. Once again, the failure to realize that the Party is not a community of individuals, but an organization of members, whose morals are quite immoral, laughs at the egocentric Ludvik.

Wild Ginger invites Evergreen to her house to cram Mao quotations. She is aware of the young and attractive activist's feelings and passion, but she is more afraid of her own behavior. This is why, after the numerous portraits and "animated" sculpture of the beloved Chairman fail to neutralize her sexual desires, the immaculate icon of Maoism hides her best friend Maple in the closet, making her an invisible "big shining light bulb" between the craving bodies of the beloved. This idea, however, turns out to be flawed. Evergreen uses the momentary exhaustion of the napping apparatchik, who has just rejected him, makes love to the hidden voyeur in the closet, and later, in order to bring him back to her and Mao, Wild Ginger (without mentioning it in her diary) seduces, for correctional purposes, Evergreen, who had become aware of his humanity. Pointing out the ugliness of the genitalia, like "a worm" and "a bee's nest," and the bestiality of sexual intercourse, Wild Ginger visually and reflectively (i.e. through the reflection in the mirror) tries in desperation to prove the superiority of Mao's ideas over the flesh.

The eroticization of God and the Saints is a known literary technique, especially during the Baroque age. While Kundera sparingly, and yet accurately, depicts how Bedrich, by "masturbating with a ritual regularity" is merging with the Creator, Anchee Min relates masturbation to the "Savior" of the Chinese in two senses. Wishing both to preserve her virginity for her ideological idol and to satisfy her physical lover's sexual needs, Wild Ginger offers a biblical compromise: Evergreen to masturbate in her presence and she to stimulate his masturbation by reciting quotations by the Chairman. While for Wild Ginger this perverse act was a remote merger with both her lovers, for Evergreen, the *politicized jerk-off* is a clear protest metaphor against the demagoguery, anti-humanism, and fruitlessness of Maoism.

Evergreen uses love to exorcise the demon of Maoism from his soul, while Wild Ginger wants to free her body for Mao by flagellation. In the name of the Chairman (but secretly from him), she commits her only sexual intercourse, for which the male victim shares the following with Maple:

[Wild Ginger] stripped herself and said she would give me what I wanted. Even if it meant that she would have to lie to keep her position. [...] I tried to hold on to my clothes when she tried to strip me. ... She insisted on us going to bed. ... She said that she had put her shame in my hands. [...] She was underneath me, her eyes were shut, her legs apart, her jaws locked tightly, as if she were going through torture [...] but she wouldn't let me go. She cried, "You must finish me!" **In the meantime she wouldn't stop talking and reciting Mao quotations.** She yelled at me, "Prove that you are not a coward, admit that you are evil seduced. Show your shame, take out your sun instrument and look at it, spit on it..." [...] She said it was her turn. She must toss

herself in the pit of shame. She must see for herself how grotesque coupling was. She pulled over a mirror and demanded that I look at myself while taking her. The ugly members of our bodies. She said, "Don't you think they are the most disgusting organs? One is like a worm and the other like a bee's nest! One should be cut and the other scorched!" She made me hate my body. I really did at that moment. I could have thrown up. She said it was the right feeling. The disgust. Keep looking. I can still see her shouting in front of my eyes. "What are these? Animals! Animals!"

I was completely impotent [...] I begged her to quit, but she said that we must fix the problem. **It was only sex that blocked my eyes to see my own potential as a great Maoist.** She said I could be fixed if I let her help. She said, "You must get erect. I must go through this in order to get it out of your system. We must do this so there will be no myth between our bodies."⁵⁴

The partocentrism manages to collectivize and politicize even sex. The lack of freedom and sincerity leads to the replacement of the actual lover or enemy with the image of another. Even if the watchful eyes on Mao's portraits fail to block the sexual wishes of Evergreen, Wild Ginger and Maple, the images and the spirit of the participants are embedded traumatically into the memories of the victims, and it makes some of them want to turn into watching from being watched. Hidden in the closet, Maple "savors"⁵⁵ the ideologically doomed flirt between Evergreen and Wild Ginger, and was dying to be in her friend's place, and when this happens, she tries to be both things for her lover's divided mind: herself and Wild Ginger. From a supreme expression of love, a way to procreate, get pleasure, etc., sex is debased down to *voyeurism* and a means for ideological revenge on third parties, in which the synthetic psycho-physical sexual intercourse is maniacally dissolved.⁵⁶

54 Min, *Wild Ginger*, pp. 153-155.

55 This is how Maple remembers her "closet period": "I peeped through the hole one night and realized that I had been looking at Evergreen. I was examining him, in the most disgusting way: I memorized the number of pimples on his face, their location and size, how they changed day by day, and how his old skin flaked and grew new skin. I paid attention to the shape of his wide shoulders, big hands, and thick fingers. I indulged in the movement of his lips..." (Ibid., p. 110).

56 "My soul had seen a female body. It was indifferent to this body. It knew that the body had meaning for it only as a body that had been seen and loved in just the same way by someone who was not now present; that was why it tried to look at this body through the eyes of the third, the absent one; that was why it tried to become the third one's medium; it saw the naked female body, the bent leg, the curve of belly and breast, but it all took on meaning only when my eyes became the eyes of the absent one.

And not only did my soul become the medium of the absent third, but it ordered my body to become the medium of his body, and then stood back and watched the writhing struggle of two bodies, two connubial bodies. [...] my soul commanded me [...] to change her body's position so nothing should remain hidden or concealed from the glance of the absent third; [...] by which she is engraved in the memory of the absent third like a stamp, a seal, a cipher, a sign. And thus to steal the secret cipher! To steal the royal seal! To rob Pavel Zemanek's secret chamber; to ransack it, to make a shambles of it." (Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 195).

The spirit of partocentrism, with its specific attributes and manifestations, is omnipresent and becomes a panacea. One of its marginal, and yet important uses, is to serve as an *aphrodisiac* and *Viagra* in the politicized intimacy. Ludvik's joke postcard failed to convey its erotic message to Marketa; however, Pavel's gift – "his most treasured possession – a locket with the picture of the Kremlin" – convinces Helena about his true feelings, and years after that, she hopes that the miraculous socialist *relic* will help her win Ludvik's love. Helena summons Communism to underwrite her marriage by Party decree and during her wedding ceremony solemnly makes her husband vow that "if we ever betrayed each other it would be tantamount to betraying everyone at the wedding, betraying everyone at the demonstration in Old Square, betraying Togliatti..."⁵⁷

As a whole, Anchee Min's characters have a significantly stronger connection to the material and verbal expressions of *the spirit of the times*. It is mandatory for all young Maoists to bring "the three treasures" to school: a button with the face of Mao, a booklet with selected quotations by him, and a red band on their hand, while the grownups must put a portrait of the leader in their homes.

Eventually, the impressive ideological fetishes and idols in Kundera's book fail to effectively generate and maintain love. While in *The Joke*, heroes vainly try to use ideology to provoke sex and Ludvik's facetious postcard remains a failed politicized invitation to love, in *Wild Ginger*, sex truly depoliticizes the characters, and the card sent by Evergreen to Maple, saying "To me love is more important than Maoism," is a triumph of love over ideology.

SEX AS A LIBERATOR: LOVE AND SEX – *PARTOCENTRISM'S GRAVEDIGGER*

If the Marxist-Leninist theoreticians see the "working class as the gravedigger of Capitalism," in the novels reviewed the awareness of human love becomes the most tender and efficient "gravedigger" of *partocentrism*. It is the very intrusion into the most intimate human realm which causes the revision and denial of *partocentrism* and cultivates an anthropocentric worldview and behavior in Ludvik, Evergreen, and Maple. Once convinced of the correctness of the Party policy, Ludvik accepts the forced breakup with the Party and Marketa as his own fault, caused by his "intellectual individualism." The attitude of the boy commander before the soldiers in the "black battalion" of the black city of Ostrava (or rather the role *played* by the young officer) and the growing chasm between Party theory and practice, however, intersects his personal injustice with the social one, while the meeting with the totally apolitical Lucie brings back his authentic human emotions. Unlike Alexej, Ludvik stops *playing* the strenuous role of political righteousness. The spontaneous soldier's love becomes for Ludvik the ideologically decisive step:

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

suddenly I'd been liberated; Lucie had come to take me off to her gray paradise, and the step that such a short time before had seemed so formidable, the one I would take in getting out of history, was suddenly a step toward release.⁵⁸

If Wild Ginger is Helena's degenerate Chinese replica, Evergreen is Ludvik's evolved counterpart. Like Ludvik, the Shanghai activist realizes his human essence gradually, however, unlike the Czech (and to his merit), he "sees the light" at the peak of his affection for Mao, and not after he withdraws, and is later removed by the local Red Guards elite. The first natural love changes the eighteen-year old Maoist, who says:

The Chairman teaches us to be selfless. But I am discovering the self, myself really, as a human being. **For the first time I've started to see things through my own eyes instead of Chairman Mao's...** It's devastating. My whole world is upside down now...⁵⁹

Even with his deep proletarian roots, Evergreen has a broader horizon than his friends, who were born in intellectual families. Unlike Wild Ginger and Maple, who make tremendous efforts to become members of the Red Guards, he belongs to the movement "by right," but this does not prevent him from understanding first that it is more important to be a human being than a Maoist, and to reach the conclusion that, under conditions of *partocentrism*, love is the only form of personal freedom. He is blinded neither by his loyalty to Mao, nor by his love for Wild Ginger, which allows him to objectively realize that while the eyes of the hard-boiled Communist Wild Ginger see only the color red, Maple's eyes reflect the rainbow. Much like Ludvik, who "leaves history," in order to enter Lucie's *gray paradise*, Evergreen, entering the dark closet of sex, left "the lit world" of Mao's ideas forever. He does not want to be a "guardian eunuch" of Wild Ginger's maidenly and ideological chastity, and even after she forced her body onto him, he prefers to continue his life with Maple, who, on the wings of love, changes her worldview radically.

Love takes central place in Maple's teenage mind. Open to the world, she has an equally strong love for her parents, Mao, Wild Ginger, and Evergreen. In the course of her physiological maturation, however, the forms of love in the rectangle, formed between Mao-Wild Ginger-Evergreen-Maple, become more and more distinctly shaped and prioritized. Despite the complicated intimate and worldview turnarounds, Maple's love and loyalty towards Wild Ginger stays constant; however, with the deepening of her love for Evergreen, her feelings for Chairman Mao sharply fade. Sex, through which she and Evergreen "offered each other something we craved – human affection,"⁶⁰ becomes a watershed event in the re-evaluation of her existential values. Feeling "bound

58 Ibid., p. 72.

59 Min, *Wild Ginger*, p. 119.

60 Ibid., p. 147.

by guilt yet liberated," Maple realizes that she is "no longer virgin while Wild Ginger was" and "the idea of devoting one's entire life to Mao was not only dull but ridiculous."⁶¹

The achieved "female" superiority over Wild Ginger and the turning of her back on Maoism becomes a Pyrrhic victory for Maple. Not only because *the Maoist saint* soon also loses her virginity and starts persecuting the lovers, who secede from the ideological-intimate "quartet," but also because the bond of Maple and Evergreen to Mao and Wild Ginger turns out to be unexpectedly strong. Through Wild Ginger's charisma, her fanatic Maoism has invaded Maple and Evergreen's intimate world and will not be expelled.

While Mao's portrait is an external manifestation of the cult, the chairman's thoughts were everywhere. They were being spread by the media, recited daily in the schools and other public institutions, shared in interpersonal communication, and repeated mentally by fanatic Maoists. Wild Ginger even says the Great Helmsman's pieces of wisdom... Mao's quotations in her sleep and through them, the Chairman himself, finds his way even into the most intimate human field – sex.

Like the deformed love consciousness of Helena, who, in her sexual intercourse with Ludvik demonstrates "so much of [ideological] conviction in a situation where body, not conviction, is the real issue,"⁶² the spirit of Mao also occupies the erotic space of Evergreen and Maple. In their most intimate closeness, Evergreen whispers to his partner, "let's be reactionaries, let's burn down the house of Mao."⁶³ However, the recitation of the Leader's works, which starts as a joke, becomes a facetious *aphrodisiac*, a *Viagra*, necessary for erection and orgasm. With time, the chairman's thoughts begin to replace the missing Wild Ginger, with whom, in their own way, both Evergreen and Maple were still in love. For them, Wild Ginger and Mao are identical, and mentioning the one automatically activates the image of the other. The ideological travesty degenerates into a sexual deformation, and, in order to be able to gain pleasure from sex, Maple and (especially) Evergreen need the remote presence of their former friend. Released from the influence of Maoism, the lovers remain under the power of Maoists, and for a long time fail to experience the magic of the here and now. Evergreen is erotically aroused when thinking of Wild Ginger, while Maple is aroused when imagining the future without her. However, when she closes her eyes, Maple returns to the recent past:

One night things became unbearable for me. I asked him to call me by her name. Before he could react I started to talk like Wild Ginger. **I started to recite Mao quotations the way Wild Ginger would. I copied her tone and style. I recited the quotations as I unzipped his trousers.**

He took me as I continued to recite. It was Wild Ginger's favorite paragraph:

61 Ibid., p. 145.

62 Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 188.

63 Min, *Wild Ginger*, p. 149.

"Volume three, page thirty, 'Rectify the Party's Style of Work.' [...]"
 I rode him as he moved gently inside me. Through the sound of his breath
 I stared out into the night. I envisioned Wild Ginger. She stood in uniform
 with her front buttons open. Her breasts were two steaming buns.
 I took Evergreen's hands. I asked him to close his eyes. I asked him to touch
 me, to feel me, feel Wild Ginger. [...]
 And then I closed my own eyes and once again I was in Wild Ginger's
 closet.⁶⁴

ON *PARTOCENTRISM'S* GAMES, LAUGHTER, AND ABANDON

While the mature Ludvik wants to "devour" Helena with the eyes of *the other*, the young characters in *The Joke* and *Wild Ginger* aim to be noticed by the others, to impress their Party bosses and their intimate partners. This is why, in the politicized reality (and the love flirts influenced by it), all of them are more or less acting. In his youth, Kundera also joined the *ideological dance*, while Min (already to the sound of money and together with her daughter) kept dancing the *Zoo* and other Red Guards' "rondos" after her US emigration.⁶⁵ Kundera himself, about a decade after the publication of *The Joke*, euphemistically described his own *game* of youth:

I too once **danced in a ring**. It was in the spring of 1948. The Communists had just taken power in my country [...], and I took other Communist students by hand, I put my arms around their shoulders, and we took two steps in space, one step forward [...] and we did it just about every month, there being always something to celebrate [...] Then one day I said something I would better have left unsaid. I was expelled from the Party and had to leave the circle.
 That is when **I became aware of the magic qualities of the circle. Leave a row and you can always go back to it. The row is an open formation. But once a circle closes, there is no return.**⁶⁶

Apart from the authors, Ludvik and Evergreen, Pavel, Helena, Marketa, Alexej, the boy commander, Hot Pepper, Wild Ginger, and Maple also dance in the spirit (and to the drum) of the times. Some of them act seriously, others fake it, but all of them are moved by the hand of the visible and invisible dance leaders. Through their chosen or imposed roles, the young characters of Kundera and Min want to prove their maturity and manhood, and yet it is not the ideological transformations and loyalty, but the sexual love which helps Ludvik's, Evergreen's and Maple's coming of age. The intertwining of love with ideology has been a longtime obstacle in Evergreen's and Maple's path

64 Ibid., p. 168.

65 Min many times has presented "the culture" of the Cultural Revolution for American audiences, part of the spectacle being the Red Guards dances, performed by the US-born daughter of the author.

66 Milan Kundera. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1980 [Original title: *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*]), p. 65.

to find their own way and free themselves from the "third one." The outcome of the misuse of the natural purpose of love and sex for Ludvik and Helena is tragicomical, for Alexej and Wild Ginger – a tragic one, while for Evergreen and Maple it is an unexpected *happy ending*. Ludvik only deludes himself that he has defeated Pavel "in grotesque sexual combat."⁶⁷ He ransacks, and devastates not the intimate treasures of the Party secretary, but his own soul. Helena feels again that her only requited love is the one with the Party, while Alexej and the self-discredited Wild Ginger, wrongfully accused of being an enemy to the Party, fail to reach sexual maturity and continue their matter-of-life-and-death "love games" with ideology, hoping to confirm their fealty to the Party and its Leader with their suicides.

The observation of Ludvik about Alexej's immaturity is valid for all of the young characters of the novels.⁶⁸ The tragicomic outcomes of Helena's and Wild Ginger's suicide attempts, however, are a result of their inability to impose Party demagoguery over human intimacy.

After the numerous jokes, blunders, and tragicomedies of politicized love, which in the words of Kundera we would describe as "laughter – beyond joking, jeering, ridicule,"⁶⁹ at the end of their novels (in different form), the Czech-French and Chinese-American writers prophetically show that the domination of the Communist *partocentrism* over religion and the Party leader over God is only temporary. In her lifetime, Wild Ginger hopes to stay in the pantheon of Maoism; however, her absurd death sentences her to oblivion and anonymity. Ironically, her dead body is not placed in the mausoleum or the tomb of her dreams, but the urn with her ashes under the name of "Found Earth" is brought by Maple's mother to a Buddhist temple; without the Party's support, the intimate relations, and suicide attempt of Helena end up literally and metaphorically with looseness.

67 Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 277.

68 "And when I think of the immature, I think also of Alexej; he too played his great role, one that went beyond both his reason and his experience. He had something in common with our commander: he too looked younger than his age; but (in contrast with the commander) there was nothing attractive about his boyishness: he had a puny build, shortsighted eyes behind thick glasses, skin covered with the pimples of eternal puberty. [...] As soon as he found out I had been a Party member myself, he opened up to me a bit; [...]. Then he read me a poem he wrote. [...] It included this quatrain:

Do as you please, Comrades,
Make a dog of me, spit on me too.
But in my dog's mask, under your spittle, Comrades,
I'll remain faithfully in the ranks with you.

I understood what he meant, because I had felt just the same a year before. But now I felt it much less painfully: Lucie, my usherette into the everyday world, had removed me from the regions where the Alexeys live in desperate torment." (Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 88).

69 Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, p. 65.

Both Kostka, the believer, and Ludvik, the unforgiving atheist and former Communist, are right in their own way. Kostka sees how “this rationalist skepticism had been corroding Christianity for two millennia. Corroding it but not destroying it. But Communist theory, its own creation, it will destroy within a few decades,”⁷⁰ Ludvik, knowing that the Party is never wrong, predicts:

Most people deceive themselves with a pair of faiths: they believe in *eternal memory* and in *redressibility*. Both are wrong faiths. In reality the opposite is true: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be redressed. The task of obtaining redress (by vengeance or by forgiveness) will be taken over by forgetting. **No one will redress the wrongs that have been done, but all wrongs will be forgotten.**⁷¹

This comes sooner for some people and nations, and later for others – all in due course...

70 Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 224.

71 Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 294.