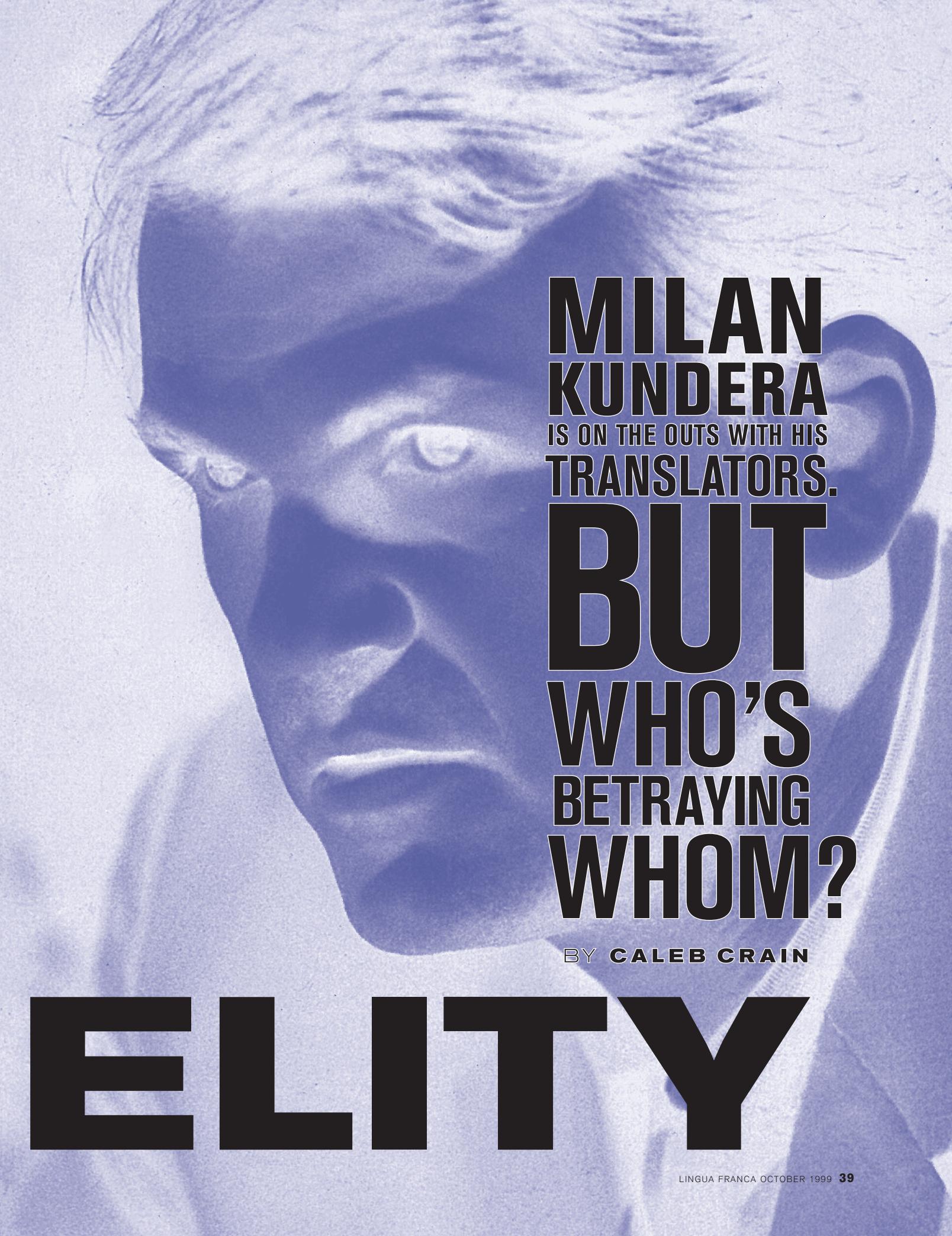


INFID



**MILAN
KUNDERA**
IS ON THE OUTS WITH HIS
TRANSLATORS.
BUT
WHO'S
BETRAYING
WHOM?

BY CALEB CRAIN

E L I T Y

IN *THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING*, the Czech-born novelist Milan Kundera neatly epitomized what makes translation impossible. His specimen was the Czech word *lítost*. On the one hand, he writes, *lítost* means too much: “It designates a feeling as infinite as an open accordion, a feeling that is the synthesis of many others: grief, sympathy, remorse, and an indefinable longing.” No word in any other language casts a semantic penumbra with the same range and chiaroscuro. But on the other hand, *lítost* means too little. “Under certain circumstances,” Kundera explains, *lítost* “can have a very narrow meaning, a meaning as definite, precise, and sharp as a well-honed cutting edge.” And no word in any other language leaves a semantic footprint exactly the same size and shape.

Among his fans, Kundera’s discussion of *lítost* is famous. However, if you buy *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* today, you won’t find the two sentences just quoted. They’ve been excised. They were in the Czech original and in the English translation by UCLA professor Michael Henry Heim that appeared in 1980. But in the recent translation by Aaron Asher, issued by HarperCollins in 1996, the sentences do not appear. Nor are they in the current French edition, which is the basis of Asher’s work. And you won’t find any Czech edition of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in print at all.

“To cross out what one has written is a highly creative act,” Kundera once told an interviewer. No doubt Kundera himself deleted the lines about *lítost*, perhaps because he no longer stands by them. For a decade and a half, Kundera has crusaded against unfaithful translations, and in the course of that campaign, his own generalizations about untranslatability may have begun to sound too much like a sloppy translator’s excuse. “He began to be obsessed,” explains Asher, Kundera’s long-time American editor and new French-to-English translator. “Maybe that’s too strong a word; maybe I shouldn’t use it; but there are good obsessions.”

The crusade has been effective, but at a cost. In America, Kundera’s most famous novels have been reappearing in brand-new translations, which follow his Czech originals more closely in vocabulary, syntax, and even punctuation. But oddly enough, these new versions—all authorized by Kundera—are translated from the French, rather than

directly from Czech. They sometimes read awkwardly; in the circuitous journey from Czech to French to English, flavor and details have been lost, and mistakes have been introduced. Furthermore, while retranslating his novels, Kundera has also been rewriting them—sometimes tailoring them to his audience. As Allison Stanger, a political science professor at Middlebury College, noted in an open letter to Kundera in the *New England Review*, “Your Czech audience now reads one version of [*The Joke*] while your French- and English-language audiences read quite another.”

Every author has the right to be finicky, even ornery, about his masterpieces. But a perfect translation may be a contradiction in terms. Is Kundera damaging his books and reputation for the sake of an unreachable ideal? Between Kundera and his translators, the air is thick with feelings of betrayal. *Lítost*, roughly speaking, is the Czech word for “regret,” and Kundera seems to be learning the hard way that you can’t have translation without it.

MILAN KUNDERA rose to the world’s attention hand-in-hand with the news of his homeland’s political hard luck. Westerners sympathetic to the Prague Spring—the brief thaw in totalitarian communism crushed in 1968—read Kundera all the more sympathetically because of it. The novelist seemed to be the world representative of “Czech Fate,” to borrow the title of a fatalistic essay he wrote shortly after the Russians invaded his country. That essay infuriated a young dissident named Václav Havel, and time proved Havel right: Kundera’s moody pessimism made for bad politics. But it made for good novels. In the 1980s, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* became international best-sellers thanks to the dark gifts that, in Kundera’s opinion, the Czechs’ political destiny had bestowed on them—a melancholy thoughtfulness, a taste for existential paradox, and a talent for sexual libertinage.

But despite the push that political history gave him, Kundera has always stoutly defended his novels from politics per se. During the Cold War, he even-handedly loathed both his communist censors and the Westerners who saw him as a dissident. “Spare me your Stalinism, please,” he snapped in 1980 at a TV panelist who suggested that his first novel was

a critique of Soviet totalitarianism. “*The Joke* is a love story.”

If nothing else, Kundera’s experience of communism taught him that literary stubbornness pays off. In December 1965 Kundera had submitted to his Prague publisher the manuscript of *The Joke*. In the novel, a young man mails his girlfriend a postcard containing ironic praise of Trotsky; failing to appreciate the young man’s sense of humor, the Stalinist authorities who intercept the postcard ruin his life.

Throughout the following year, censors summoned Kundera to their offices to request changes in the novel. As Kundera steadfastly refused, the censors became meeker and meeker, until finally their objections vanished altogether. In 1967 *The Joke* was published untouched, just as Kundera wanted it. Three editions quickly sold out—120,000 copies, in a country of only fifteen million people. Kundera launched his career as a novelist with a triumph over editorial meddling.

That triumph was short-lived. In August 1968 Russian military force ended the Czech experiment in “socialism with a human face.” Paradoxically, however, the capitalist West was first to insult the integrity of Kundera’s novels. In 1969, while still in Prague, Kundera received the British edition of *The Joke*. Chapters had been shortened, shuffled, and deleted altogether. “I was appalled,” Kundera later remembered. In a scorching letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, he denounced his British publisher for having “merely considered my text as a free basis for bizarre inventions of manipulators.”

Soon after, as Moscow directed the “normalization” of Czech culture, Kundera lost his job teaching at a film school, and his books were pulled from libraries and stores in Czechoslovakia. It would be a decade before Kundera was at liberty, economically as well as politically, to take his translations personally in hand. But the seeds had been sown: Kundera had won an early victory over editorial tampering, and witnessed outrageous infidelities in the translation of his first novel. When at last Kundera was able to examine his translations closely, he would not be inclined to compromise.

IN 1975 Kundera left his homeland and took up residence in France, where he has lived ever since. Four years later a shock revived Kundera’s anxiety about

translation. During an interview for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera*, Alain Finkielkraut asked Kundera why his recent novels had moved away from the “florid and baroque” style of *The Joke*.

Kundera had no idea what Finkielkraut was talking about. In Czech, Kundera has always been distinguished by his tempered, almost neutral prose style—a difficult achievement in that language. Thanks to the Counter Reformation, the gap between spoken and written Czech is wider than in most other languages. In 1621 the Czech-speaking nobles, largely Protestant, were decimated; the Catholic Church labeled almost all books in Czech heretical; and for two centuries, Czech survived as a language spoken mostly by peasants and the urban lower class. Rip van Winkle slept for only one generation; written Czech slept for six or seven. When it was self-consciously resuscitated, in the early nineteenth century, it sounded a bit medieval, and that formality has not yet mellowed. Writers like Jaroslav Hašek, Bohumil Hrabal, and Josef Škvorecky have taken literary advantage of the contrast between written and spoken Czech by reveling in dialect and slang. Kundera, however, has eschewed low and high for a careful middle path. His style is relaxed but always correct, somewhat like a medical manual for home use.

The night after his interview with Finkielkraut, Kundera read Marcel Aymonin’s French translation of *The Joke* for the first time. On top of Kundera’s deliberately restrained prose, Aymonin had layered *un beau style*, the way decadents used to drill jewels into living turtles’ shells for ornament. Where Kundera had written “The sky was blue,” Aymonin had translated “Under a sky of periwinkle, October hoisted its showy shield.” Kundera was furious. “Rage seized me,” he later recalled. Spurred by that rage, Kundera revised the French translation, with the help of author Claude Courtot. A more faithful French edition appeared in 1980. The rage also triggered a cascade of retranslations of *The Joke* in other languages—English (1982), Spanish (1984), Italian and Portuguese (1986), German (1987), and Dutch (1988)—as Kundera took advantage of his growing prestige to switch to more attentive publishers.

In the United States, meanwhile, Kundera seemed to be having better luck. The first American to translate a book of



MILAN KUNDERA, 1963

FOR A DECADE AND A HALF, KUNDERA HAS CRUSADED AGAINST UNFAITHFUL TRANSLATIONS. “HE BEGAN TO BE OBSESSED,” EXPLAINS HIS LONGTIME AMERICAN EDITOR.

Kundera’s was Peter Kussi. (I studied Czech with Kussi at Columbia.) Kundera himself had solicited Kussi’s help, through Antonín Liehm, a mutual friend who had edited the journal *Literární noviny* during the Prague Spring. Kussi’s 1974 translation

of Kundera’s novel *Life Is Elsewhere* was nominated for a National Book Award.

Pleased with Kussi’s work, Kundera requested that Kussi also translate his *Farewell Waltz*, which appeared under the title *The Farewell Party* in 1976. And in



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the late 1970s Kussi translated a couple of new short stories by Kundera. At the time, no one—not even Kundera—realized the stories would eventually fit together into the novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Kussi’s version of “The Cap of Clementis” appeared in *The New Yorker* in May 1979. Shortly thereafter, Knopf refused to allow Kussi to continue as Kundera’s translator. “This parting I ascribe to the machinations of editors,” Kussi says today. Kundera himself has written that Knopf’s “reasons [were] obscure to me” and that at the time Kussi “had all my confidence.” One gets the impression there was confusion on all sides but no hard feelings between translator and author.

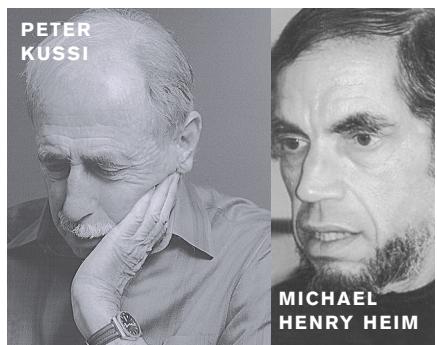
Luckily for Kundera, Knopf replaced Kussi with a translator just as devoted and skillful, UCLA’s Michael Henry Heim. Years earlier, Heim had translated for a scholarly journal a chapter from *The Joke* that had been gutted from the British translation. Kundera was “deeply touched by this noble gesture of solidarity with mistreated, humiliated literature,” and at first he thought as highly of his new translator as he had of Kussi. In Heim’s 1980 translation, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was a literary and commercial success. Heim’s clean, fluent style appeared to be the perfect vehicle for Kundera’s sparely told, interlocking stories of sexual and political disillusionment.

The concord would not last. By this point, a new figure had entered the story—a high-profile American editor named Aaron Asher. Perhaps Kundera would eventually have fallen out with Heim in any case. But, as Kundera’s editor, Asher was closely involved with their earliest disagreements. “He is the mystery man,” Smith College professor Maria Němcová Banerjee says when Asher’s name comes up. Asher commissioned Banerjee to write *Terminal Paradox* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), her study of Kundera’s novels, and he has done good turns for many of the other figures in the Kundera saga as well. But over the years, while Kundera has become more reclusive—he stopped talking to journalists in 1985—Asher has become more and more the author’s intimate.

Asher’s privileged access has aroused curiosity and suspicion, as has his metamorphosis from Kundera’s editor into his translator. He has become something of a lightning rod for anger about Kundera’s high-handedness. “I’m behind the eight ball,” says Asher. He insists his goal throughout has been to ensure more faithful translations for Kundera, and he is unhappy about “having to defend something that needs no defense.” To dispel some of the mystery surrounding his relationship with Kundera, Asher offers his own account.

Since the early 1970s Asher had been hearing about Kundera from Philip Roth, whose books Asher edited. Another Asher author, Carlos Fuentes, finally introduced him to Kundera in 1979. Kundera was eager for an American publisher who would accommodate his scrupulous attention to translations, and Asher soon lured him to Harper & Row. Heim was asked to continue as Kundera’s translator. “I admired Heim’s translation of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*,” Asher says now. He commissioned from Heim a brand-new translation of *The Joke*, as well as translations of a new manuscript (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) and an older play (*Jacques and His Master*). As Asher himself admits, these commissions would turn out to be something of an irony in light of later events.

Trouble started in the mid-1980s, when Kundera began to look over Heim’s



TOP: PHOTOFEST (2X); BOTTOM: FROM LEFT: COURTESY PETER KUSSI AND MICHAEL HENRY HEIM

working translation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. "Kundera's English had gotten good enough for him to express doubts to me," Asher says. According to Asher, Kundera flagged passages that struck him as problematic and asked for Asher's opinion. Revising the translation was "very difficult," Asher remembers, in part because fax machines were not yet common. But editor and author worked over the proofs for months—Kundera writing in French, Asher replying in English. "What irksome months they were!" Kundera told an interviewer shortly afterward.

It was Asher's first experience working so closely with Kundera's prose—a collaboration that would soon deepen. Nonetheless, Asher insists, the result "wasn't a retranslation by any means. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is Heim's translation; it has his signature on it."

Heim recalls the process of revising *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* somewhat differently. "I had quite an exchange of letters with Kundera," Heim explains, "but as the correspondence was in Czech, Asher was out of the loop." According to Heim, the back-and-forth between translator and author was "perfectly amiable." Some points Heim conceded, and on others he stood his ground.

At least publicly, there was, as yet, no sign of a rift.

EVEN KUNDERA has wondered: "An undue obsession with translations? I can't say." In his own defense, Kundera has pointed out that for nearly two decades, Czechs formed only a hundredth or a thousandth of his readership. "My books lived their lives as translations; as translations they were read, criticized, judged, accepted or rejected. I was unable not to care about translation."

Attentive, however, is not the same as implacable. In Kundera's case, an exile's natural concern has been aggravated by a philosophy of translation that is unusually hardline.

Traditionally, the translator has been caught, like the runner in a game of pickle, between fidelity and license. Neither base is safe. If he is strictly faithful to the original text's linguistic structure, the result may be choppy, if not incomprehensible. But if he freely recasts the original text's structure in order to convey its meaning clearly, he risks losing the linguistic details

KUNDERA IS ELSEWHERE

IN THE MID-1980S, WHEN MILAN KUNDERA CHOSE TO PUBLISH THE authorized edition of his works in French rather than Czech, he could have argued that history had forced his hand. While they held power, the Czech Communists were never going to let their most famous exile come home, and at the time no one knew the Velvet Revolution was less than five years away. But Kundera rubbed salt in the wounds of his fellow Czechs. He declared, "Even if I could go back I would never wish to!" And since the Velvet Revolution of 1989, with rare exceptions, he hasn't. When he does go, he travels incognito—a fact Czech journalists have twitted Kundera for, when they have detected his presence at all.

Kundera-twitting is something of a national sport. Any downturn in Kundera's post-Czech career is headline worthy—NEGATIVE REVIEWS OF KUNDERA'S NEW NOVEL and UNFAVORABLE RECEPTION OF KUNDERA'S BOOKS are two recent examples. A few years ago, the novelist Michal Viewegh satirized Kundera as returning home, like the hero of *The Joke*, for a "beautiful demolition"—the seduction of Mrs. Václav Havel. "Sadly I must devote most of my time to correcting the work of my translators," Viewegh's Kundera complained. "Whenever I think of it, rage seizes me. Instead of my original sentence 'I plunged my index finger into her glowing buttocks,' one Spanish translator shamelessly used a text of his own with the wording 'I kissed her chilly face.'" For Kundera's seventieth birthday, this past April, *Lidové noviny* printed an article tailor-made to grate on the author's nerves. The paper's editors baited Kundera on "the querulousness with which he intends to keep his work under his control." They wrote that his crystalline style today risks being "relegated to the level of kitsch." And they reprinted an unflattering observation from *Le Journal du Dimanche*: The more Kundera resembles the French, the less he interests them.

Why are the Czechs out to get Kundera's goat? In part, they are annoyed that he and his Czech publisher, Atlantis, have released his books so slowly. Kundera's writing was once available in Czech from 68 Publishers, run by the émigré authors Josef and Zdena Škvorecky in Toronto. But before the Velvet Revolution, it was dangerous to smuggle the books into Czechoslovakia, and soon after, the Škvoreckys closed up shop. As a result, some of Kundera's most famous Czech-written novels—*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and *Life Is Elsewhere*—have never been widely available in the Czech-speaking lands. (Kundera refuses to rerelease them until he has established definitive Czech texts—a task he may or may not choose to undertake.) Nor has Kundera yet announced any plans to translate into Czech the books he has written in French: *The Art of the Novel*, *Testaments Betrayed*, *Slowness*, and *Identity*.

Kundera has answered these reproaches with a mix of self-deprecation and self-importance. On the one hand, he has claimed to be "not at all sure that [the

continued on page 45



CZECH EDITIONS
OF KUNDERA'S NOVELS

that make it distinctive as a work of literature. As one Italian proverb puts it, “The pretty ones are never faithful, and the faithful ones are never pretty.”

In “The Task of the Translator,” the German critic Walter Benjamin famously resolves this conundrum with an extreme choice: fidelity, at the expense of elegance and meaning. Choppiness is good, Benjamin asserts, because it indicates that the translator has not smoothed away the details that distinguish the original from the target language—and from the pure language they both aspire to become. Benjamin’s theory of translation soars beautifully into the empyrean, but it’s not entirely practical. Though he advocates “a literal rendering of the syntax” of the original, Benjamin acknowledges that his strategy is “a direct threat to comprehensibility.”

Nonetheless, Kundera has adopted something like Benjamin’s radical fidelity (shorn, however, of the Romantic notion of “pure language”). “O ye translators, do not sodonymize us!” he writes in an essay that excoriates French translators of Kafka for showing off their synonymicons. Like Benjamin, Kundera eggs his translators even to solecism. “For a translator, the supreme authority should be the *author’s personal style*,” Kundera writes in *Testaments Betrayed* (1993). “But most translators obey another authority: that of the *conventional version* of ‘good French’ (or good German, good English, etc.).” It exasperates Kundera to hear a translation praised for its “flow.” He cherishes even the idiosyncrasies of his punctuation, and has boasted that he “once left a publisher for the sole reason that he tried to change my semicolons to periods.”

In less polemical moments, Kundera has conceded that no translation can be absolutely faithful. He insists, however, that a translator unafraid of odd-sounding language will not only render the author’s style and thinking more accurately but also enrich the target language.

This rigid fealty is not the norm—at least not according to translators and scholars of translation. “To be too close to the original, as Kundera wants his translators to be, undermines the English poetics of the text and works against, rather than in favor of, the translation,” says the University of British Columbia’s Peter Petro, who edited *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera* (G.K. Hall, 1999) and is himself



a Slovak-English translator. In the opinion of Robert Wechsler, whose publishing house, Catbird Press, has exposed American readers to lesser-known Czech authors such as Vladimír Páral and Jáchym Topol, Kundera “should be seen as an extremist.”

IN 1988 Daniel Day-Lewis and Juliette Binoche starred in Philip Kaufman’s movie version of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. “Not my film,” Kundera grumbled in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, complaining of the “doleful monotony of film orgasms.” But the movie pushed Kundera’s international reputation to its peak. That year, Kundera finished his seventh book of fiction, *Immortality*—the last he would write in Czech—and, thanks to his movie-enhanced clout, he was in a position to dictate terms. Returning to his earlier translator was one priority. “He wanted Kussi,” recalls Asher, who had moved from Harper

& Row to Grove Press. For the first time in his translation career, Kussi was well paid—“very well paid,” he admits. To ensure that the translation met Kundera’s standards, author and translator agreed that as soon as Kussi had finished his draft, he would bring it to Paris for consultation. Once the two men agreed on a final version, “that would pretty much be it,” says Kussi.

“But that *wasn’t* it,” Kussi continues. “I found myself in a very, very unpleasant situation.” Changes began to appear in the manuscript after Kundera had signed off on it, and Kussi could not figure out who was responsible. Concerned, he wrote repeatedly to Kundera but received no answer. He fought to restore as much of his translation as he could, but many changes appeared in the final, printed version without his approval or any word from Kundera. Despite this confusion, Kundera’s novel and Kussi’s translation

continued from page 43

jointly won a prize from the British newspaper *The Independent* in 1991.

Kussi's frustrations were minor compared to the blow that Kundera was about to deal Heim. In 1990 Asher returned to Harper & Row, which had been rechristened HarperCollins, and began acquiring the paperback rights to all of Kundera's earlier novels. When Asher suggested a paperback rerelease of Heim's earlier translation of *The Joke*, Kundera hesitated. In 1982 Kundera had trusted Heim's work—in fact, he had praised it as “the first valid and authentic version of a book that tells of rape and has itself so often been violated”—but now he was “gripped by suspicion.” Sure enough, upon scrutiny Heim's translation struck Kundera as “not my text.” Where he disapproved of Heim's rendering, Kundera laboriously patched in turns of phrase from the earlier, reviled British translation, or inserted his own “word-for-word translations either in English or in French.” Asher collated Kundera's changes to create a brand-new edition—the fifth in English—released under Aaron Asher's personal imprint at HarperCollins in 1992.

“I offered to send Heim the revised version,” Asher says today. “Most of it is still Heim's.” Trust, however, had broken down. Heim refused to allow his name on the book. “I had not been consulted about the changes,” Heim writes by email, “and therefore could not lend my name to them.” The book was published without any translator listed at all.

There was, however, an author's note. It told the story of an author betrayed by his translators over and over again. With a touch of melodrama, Kundera portrayed Heim as having earned Kundera's trust only because he was the most slippery kind of traitor: the kind who means well. “I was all the more unhappy,” Kundera wrote, “because I did not believe that it was a matter of incompetence on the translator's part, or of carelessness or ill will: no; in good conscience he produced the kind of translation that one might call *translation-adaptation*. Is this the current, normal practice? It's possible. But unacceptable. Unacceptable to me.”

As a personal attack on a translator admitted to be working in good faith, Kundera's note was virtually unprecedented. Heim is probably one of the few translators whose reputation could have

novels] are still worth the trouble of resuscitating.” But on the other, he has claimed to have better things to do. Editing is time consuming, Kundera argues, because he has to compare at least three versions of each of his novels: the original Czech manuscript, the book as printed by the Škvoreckys, and the corrected French edition. Rather than spend his remaining years in tedious, backward-glancing labor, he has chosen to “give radical priority to my fragile present, which for a long time now has not been lived in Bohemia.”

Kundera did, however, publish a Czech edition of *The Joke* in 1991, and the first person to take a close look at it has discovered something curious. For his new edition, observes Allison Stanger, Kundera did not combine his earlier texts; rather, he “inexplicably seems to have authorized the publication of the earlier unmodified 1967 Czech text.” As a result, in over fifty places, Kundera's new Czech edition doesn't match his authoritative English or French editions. “I stumbled onto this while trying to improve my Czech,” says Stanger, an associate professor of political science at Middlebury College, explaining why she read the 1991 Atlantis edition and the 1992 English edition of *The Joke* side by side.

Some of the passages, Stanger guesses, were deleted from the official French text because they would have been too cumbersome to explain to non-Czech readers. Other

changes, however, are more intriguing. In his vitriolic 1992 author's note, Kundera alleged that in Heim's hands, “Ludvík, that thoughtful, melancholy intellectual, became vulgar and cynical.” Ironically, Stanger has discovered “a coarser, more cynical Ludvík” in passages



JOSEF ŠKVORECKY ALLISON STANGER

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retained in the 1991 Czech edition but absent from the novel's 1982 and 1992 English editions. Even more provocatively, Stanger has found that in Czech, Kundera more often allows his characters to retain a political complexity—a warm regard for communism's promise, even after disappointment—that he has streamlined out of the English and French versions.

That last discovery no doubt resonates with Kundera's Czech detractors. In the mid-1980s, the dissident Milan Jungmann accused Kundera of having misled Westerners about the extent of his communist past—of having “turned his biography into kitsch for uninitiated foreign readers.” “Half of my life I spent as a relatively unknown Czech intellectual,” Kundera had told Philip Roth in 1984. Nonsense, Jungmann countered. In fact, Kundera's name was “a household word” in the 1950s and 1960s. “He was the best-known spokesman of a wave undermining the borders between socialist and world culture,” Jungmann wrote. Kundera's poetry, articles, speeches, and plays were eagerly anticipated and widely acclaimed. He won the Klement Gottwald State Prize in 1963 and taught for years in the tony Prague film school that launched the Czech New Wave. In *The Joke*, Kundera would mock the propaganda surrounding the Stalinist culture hero Julius Fučík, a

continued on page 47

CRITICAL IMAGES

The Face of Our Past

Images of Black Women from Colonial America to the Present

Edited by Kathleen Thompson and Hilary Mac Austin
With an Introduction by Darkene Clark Fine

The first comprehensive pictorial history of African American women.

"These historic photographs make it

survived it. His work has been recognized

by the American Literary Translators Association; his translations of Danilo Kiš and Bohumil Hrabal have been widely acclaimed; and he is currently at work on a new Günter Grass novel, *My Century*, due out from Harcourt Brace this fall. When Heim is asked today about his quarrel with Kundera, he warns that it is "not my favorite topic." He answers a reporter's questions about dates and facts, but politely declines to elaborate. "I stand by the work I did," he says. Last December, at a San Francisco Slavicists' conference where translations of Kundera were discussed, Heim said only that he was happy to have had the opportunity to translate the best of Kundera's novels.

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"He's consistently been raising his trans-

lators to the sky, then becoming disillu-

sioned with them," notes Kussi, whose

experience parallels Heim's. Over the years,

he recalls, "Kundera had treated me very

well." Kussi had been the author's guest

in Paris and on Belle-Île, off the Brittany

coast, and when Kussi wanted to write an

essay on the author, Kundera had cooper-

ated. Kundera and Kussi had worked

happily together updating Kussi's version

of *Life Is Elsewhere*; in the preface of the

resulting 1986 edition, Kundera had

dubbed Kussi "a true artist among trans-

lators." "I benefited on balance," Kussi

readily admits. But the late changes to his

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survived it. His work has been recognized by the American Literary Translators Association; his translations of Danilo Kiš and Bohumil Hrabal have been widely acclaimed; and he is currently at work on a new Günter Grass novel, *My Century*, due out from Harcourt Brace this fall. When Heim is asked today about his quarrel with Kundera, he warns that it is "not my favorite topic." He answers a reporter's questions about dates and facts, but politely declines to elaborate. "I stand by the work I did," he says. Last December, at a San Francisco Slavicists' conference where translations of Kundera were discussed, Heim said only that he was happy to have had the opportunity to translate the best of Kundera's novels.

In private, however, Heim has admitted that he was upset. "Heim said to me, 'I don't really want to talk about it; I was hurt,'" says Banerjee, who for her part has "always liked Heim's translations." The tight-knit world of translators is not happy about how Heim was treated. "I am with Michael Heim on this," says Petro. "An author can say whatever he wants, but he is rarely so strong in the target language as to be the judge himself. One has to have a respect for the translator, after all." Wechsler thinks Kundera has been "sort of a bully." Kussi calls it "questionable or outright wrongheaded" of Kundera to "attack his translators in public."

"He's consistently been raising his translators to the sky, then becoming disillusioned with them," notes Kussi, whose experience parallels Heim's. Over the years, he recalls, "Kundera had treated me very well." Kussi had been the author's guest in Paris and on Belle-Île, off the Brittany coast, and when Kussi wanted to write an essay on the author, Kundera had cooperated. Kundera and Kussi had worked happily together updating Kussi's version of *Life Is Elsewhere*; in the preface of the resulting 1986 edition, Kundera had dubbed Kussi "a true artist among translators." "I benefited on balance," Kussi readily admits. But the late changes to his

translation of *Immortality* had upset Kussi, and in the mid-1990s, it nonplussed him to receive a cool, businesslike letter from Kundera, asking if he would be willing to revise *Farewell Waltz*. "It was almost as if he was hoping I would say no," Kussi says. He did not revise his old translation. As it happens, Kundera found a way—a highly unusual way—to manage without him.

IN HIS 1986 book *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera recalls with horror meeting a translator who knew no Czech. When asked how he had translated Kundera's first novel, the man took a picture of Kundera out of his wallet and replied, "With my heart." As Kundera wryly observes, "Of course, it turned out to be much simpler: He had worked from the French rewrite."

But nowadays, Kundera is demanding that his novels be translated from the French rewrite, rather than from the Czech original. How did it come to this?

Part of the answer lies in Kundera's growing pride in his identity as a French citizen. The communists stripped Kundera of his Czech citizenship in 1979, and he was "moved and filled with gratitude" by France's gift of citizenship two years later. In 1984, his French improved by nearly a decade of living in France, Kundera began "the detailed revision of all my French translations." In the end, the revisions would cost Kundera more than two years and "as much energy as the writing of two new books." But at long last, in 1987, Kundera triumphantly instructed Gallimard to print at the back of each revised French volume a notice declaring that the new translations had "the same authenticity value as the Czech text" ("la même valeur d'authenticité que le texte tchèque"). In the mid-1980s, furthermore, Kundera began writing his nonfiction in French rather than Czech. Not Kundera's books but Kundera himself seemed to be undergoing translation. And why not? At the time, the Iron Curtain looked permanent.

In the early 1990s, HarperCollins pro-

Oct 18

Lesbian characters, stories, and images were bared from onscreen depiction in Hollywood films from the 1930s to the 1960s, together with all forms of "sex perversions." Looking at the lure of some of the great female stars and at the visual coding of supporting actresses, this sophisticated book identifies lesbian spectatorial strategies.

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posed paperback reissues of four of Kundera's Czech-written books. Suspicious of the old English translations, proud of his French editions, and estranged from both of his longtime Czech-to-English translators, the author considered an unorthodox alternative: Instead of correcting the old translations, why not commission brand-new translations from the French? "He asked me to take a look," says Asher, "and asked some other people to take a look. The upshot was that yes, according to his principles, if not everybody else's, these books would be closer to what he had originally written if they were retranslated." Asher's wife, Linda, had been elegantly and accurately translating Kundera's French nonfiction since 1984, but she was busy with Kundera's essay collection *Testaments Betrayed*. According to Asher, an impatient Kundera asked him, "Why don't you do it? Your French is good enough. You know exactly what I need." Asher, who had recently left HarperCollins to go freelance, accepted.

Today, the Ashers together hold the Kundera franchise. In addition to revising *The Joke*, Aaron has retranslated from the French *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1996), *Farewell Waltz* (1998), and *Life Is Elsewhere* (due out in 2000). A revised, but not retranslated, *Laughable Loves* will appear this fall. In addition to Kundera's essay collections *The Art of the Novel* and *Testaments Betrayed*, Linda has translated Kundera's new novels, *Slowness* (1996) and *Identity* (1998), both of which Kundera composed in French.

AS EVERY translator knows, it is easy to pick apart a translation. It is easy to find an awkward passage that never finished its journey through translatorese and into English, or a knotty passage that was furtively omitted, or a plain old-fashioned mistake. With that caveat in mind, one might still consider the question looming over this debate: Are the new translations of Kundera better?

The answer depends, in part, on what you are looking for. Asher stresses that a difference in philosophy is at the heart of Kundera's break with his American translators. "Heim and Kussi are very good translators," he says, but "they've allowed themselves some latitude. They didn't do bad translations; their intentions weren't wicked. But a translator is comparable to a performer, a pianist, not the composer. If

KUNDERA AT A
CZECHOSLOVAK WRITERS' UNION
MEETING IN PRAGUE, 1967



communist journalist executed by Nazis. But as Derek Sayer notes in his indispensable history *The Coasts of Bohemia* (Princeton, 1998), in 1955 Kundera was still so much a part of that culture that one of his own poems portrayed Fučík as a sort of Marxist Christ.

In Kundera's defense, the literary critic Jan Trefulka pointed out last summer in *Lidové noviny* that "The political loosening of the 1960s did not happen of its own accord." A longtime friend of Václav Havel's, Trefulka, too, was a communist before the Russian invasion turned him into an impeccably credentialed dissident. The Prague Spring owed much to intellectuals of Kundera and Trefulka's ilk, who laid the groundwork for liberalization inside the Party.

These fierce disputes about Kundera's artistic and political past have been little reported in the West, and here, too, one senses the power of translation's almost invisible hand. The Russian invasion forcibly changed Kundera from a Czech writer into an international writer, whose books were read mainly in foreign languages. Thanks to circumstance and copyright law, Kundera was given an opportunity that most mature artists can only dream about: He was able to decide which of his works he wanted the world to judge him by. Defensibly enough, he has quarantined his early, socialism-tinged work. Hard as it is for Czechs to read Kundera's late, capitalist novels, it is much harder for Westerners to read his early, communist poetry and essays. The Czechs, as a result, know a Kundera even more muddled, human, and self-contradictory than the rest of the world knows.

Younger Czech critics, uncompromised by the bad old days, have taken up Jungmann's indictment of Kundera's "strange creative schizophrenia." But older Slavs and older Slavicists tend to shrug it off. Says the critic Peter Petro, "I salute people brave enough to change their mind."

So does Kundera, apparently. In the original *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera harshly criticized an actual Czech singer named Karel Gott, who collaborated heavily with the Communist regime after the Russian crackdown. But in the new French and English editions, "the Idiot of Music," as Kundera once called him, is off the hook. As Deborah Garfinkle, a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, noted in an article earlier this year, Karel Gott has been renamed Karel Klos—a creature of pure fiction.—C.C.

a translator thinks he's a composer, he should get out of the concert hall.

"There are some passages in these translations that sound foreign," Asher admits of his own work. "I like the foreignness." Under a theory of translation like Kundera's, even stilted prose may be an asset.

Michelle Woods, a graduate student at Trinity College, Dublin, has studied the different editions of *The Joke*. In her opinion, the style of the 1992 Asher-Kundera edition conforms, for good or ill, to Kundera's rigorous translation philosophy; to Woods, the new *Joke* sounds "less familiar, less idiomatic" than Heim's 1982 version. My own impression is that with a few exceptions, the difference between the two is not dramatic. Paradoxically, the 1992 *Joke* may be an improvement because its improvements are so modest: It is largely Heim's text, with intermittent fixes.

Aaron Asher's translations of Kundera from the French, however, are something else entirely. As Benjamin wrote, "Translations...prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty, but because of the looseness with which

meaning attaches to them." Kundera has admired Leoš Janáček's attempt to capture the nuances of speech with musical notation, and he has appreciated Hemingway's delicate ear for the rhythms of dialogue. Since Kundera knows that such subtle achievements are fragile, it is hard to understand why he imagines that his own style can survive a double translation. Like the children's game of Telephone, the process amplifies garbling.

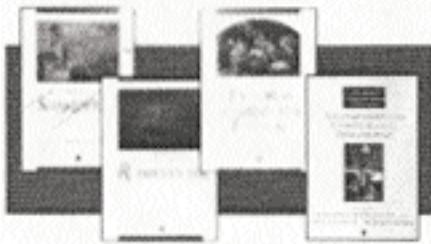
Asher's fidelity to the punctuation and arrangement of clauses in the original Czech is uncanny, given that he does not know that language; and at times, it is ingenious, attesting to Kundera's close involvement and Asher's hard labor. Furthermore, to Asher's credit, there are a number of spots in the new *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* where he has corrected Heim's literary "improvements." For example, Asher succeeds in restoring an unusual simile ("all the years of her marriage landed on her like a heavy sack") that Heim had flattened into a cliché ("like a ton of bricks"). Kussi is a more cautious translator than Heim. Asher, however, does

restore a maple that had turned into an alder in Kussi's *Farewell Waltz*.

But my own sense is that the flaws in the French-to-English retranslations far outweigh their merits. Take Asher and Kundera's disregard for "flow." It may be principled, but at times it's a serious impediment to the reader. "Why don't I go (and never will go) and inform on him?" Olga wonders to her own and the reader's bafflement in Asher's *Farewell Waltz*. Or, earlier in that book: "Olga thought him ridiculously theatrical, and she was delighted to see him go and that, finally, she would soon be alone with Jakub." These sentences may be faithful to Kundera's syntax, but they are hostile to the reader.

Furthermore, as an inexperienced translator, Aaron Asher makes outright mistakes. Asher needlessly creates verb-tense chaos by translating "Voici deux mois qu'ils avaient fait connaissance" as "It is two months since they met." Kussi's "They had met two months earlier" does the trick just fine. In the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, when a communist dictator writes a letter to the musician Karel Gott (renamed Karel Klos

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in the new edition), Asher mistranslates the dictator's reassuring "*nous ne vous en voulons pas*" as "we want nothing from you." In fact, the sentence contains a common French idiom meaning "we are not angry with you."

With misplaced loyalty, Asher has also reproduced awkward turns of phrase that were only translator's expedients in French and never appeared in the original Czech. For example, in Asher's *Farewell Waltz*, Růžena complains of her lover Klíma that after their one-night stand "he had shown no sign of life." That's a doggedly faithful rendering of the French "*il n'avait pas donné signe de vie*"; in English, the expression usually describes the comatose rather than the merely inattentive. The Czech text does not justify the blunder: "*se neohlásil ani slůvkem*" (literally, "he did not announce himself by even a small word"). Similarly, in Asher's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Edwige tells her lover "I'm making pee," because in French that's what one does—*on fait pipi*. In English and in Czech, however, urination takes place as a verb, and Heim's "I'm in here peeing" is much closer to the efficient Czech "*čurám*."



MILAN KUNDERA

"AN UNDUE OBSESSION WITH TRANSLATIONS?"
KUNDERA ASKS. "I CAN'T SAY. MY BOOKS LIVED
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In other spots, Asher has introduced non sequiturs, because he has separately translated two sentences with word-for-word fidelity, but failed to take into account that within their new English context, the sentences must accommodate each other. "I wonder...which of your distant ancestors had a big nose," a father muses to his wife in Asher's *Farewell Waltz*, while staring at their toddler son, and then adds, "Isn't that right?" In Kussi's version, the father asks, "Who knows? Maybe one of your distant ancestors sported a long schnozzle," and continues, more logically, "Isn't that possible?"

At the end of the day, I also miss Heim's and Kussi's greater command of literary style. "Everyone gave way to disheartenment" is no more accurate than Kussi's "Everyone suddenly felt very let down," but it is much less felicitous. Heim's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* compares the lonely, isolated Tamina to a walled-in "patch of grass," which is poignant. But Asher describes her as "a bit of lawn," which sounds like something that needs to be mowed. A man described in Kussi's English as a "courier of disaster" becomes in Asher's a "mailman of misfortune."

In *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera discussed Stravinsky's attempt late in life to make authorized recordings of himself playing and conducting his own music. The attempt is somewhat analogous to Kundera's intervention in his own translations, and in Kundera's case, as in Stravinsky's, "this wish to take on the role of performer himself often provoked an irritated response." A few irritated translators may be a small price to pay for artistic integrity. And in fact the translators in question have already dusted themselves off and moved on. But Kundera's tight control is not serving his work. Like a jealous husband trying to enforce his wife's love, Kundera faces an unpleasant realization: Commanding obedience may not bring his texts any closer to him.

Caleb Crain is a contributing writer for *LF*. His translations from the Czech have appeared in *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno: Czech Fiction from the Post-Kundera Generation* (Catbird, 1997) and *The Tenor Saxophonist's Story* by Josef Škvorecký (Ecco, 1996). Next fall, Yale University Press will publish *American Sympathy*, his study of men's friendships in early American literature.