



The Individual and the Political are ONE: A Parallactical Reading of Milan Kundera's *The Joke*

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ABSTRACT

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Milan Kundera believes that science and reason understand what we call 'being' through the binarism of subject/object and, in the process, have reduced the world into pure instrumentality. To him, novel is the genre that strives to explore 'being' beyond this binarism. His fiction investigates different modes of being like the personal and the political, body and soul, and the particular and the universal. This article analyses the antagonism of the personal and the political in his novel *The Joke* using Slavoj Žižek's idea of parallax view. Parallax is the change of the position of the observed with the change in the position of the observer. Žižek applies this concept on the social and political field to prove that these two antagonistic positions might seem two but, actually, are ONE. Žižek has used Hegelian/Marxist theoretical framework to prove this ONENESS. The article, using Žižekian insight, argues that the perceived difference between the personal and the political is parallactical and both are, in fact, ONE. But this ONENESS should not be understood as an imposition or coercion but a necessary condition for the social field to function. Moreover, the article posits that the one-sidedness on the part of the individual when it comes to antagonistic modes of being, gives birth to extremist positions that ought to be avoided. A Parallactical reading of the selected text offers a critique of social and political polarization that has gripped the world in recent decades.

Keywords: *Being, Parallax, The Individual, The Political, ONE,*

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In his fiction, Milan Kundera explores paradoxical relationships between different modes of being and, according to him, grand narratives, like history, progress, and reason, have obscured our connection with our own 'self.' Kundera believes that fiction should free 'being' from these chains. In his novels, we discern the tension between the ideological demands of the grand narratives that consider individual desire and hopes as insignificant compared to the teleology of history or spirit. The question is whether 'being' is a product of social and historical forces or does it have its own dimensions? These two aspects create a parallaxial gap or a perspectival antagonism that appears to be irreconcilable. Parallax is the shift in the position of an object when observed from two different points. The object is one but the change in the position of the observer makes it appear as two. Through an analysis of Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke*, this article contends that the antagonism between the individual and the political appears to be a contention between two warring positions but, in fact, this relationship is parallaxial and both are ONE. Slavoj Žižek's radical reading of Hegel can be applied to explore this parallax.

In his book, *The Parallax View* (2006), Žižek discusses parallax manifestations in three areas: philosophy, science and politics. In philosophy, parallax is between the subject and the object; in science, it is between the theoretical explanation and our own experience of reality; in politics, it is the irreconcilable gap between the individual perspective and political ideologies (Žižek, 2006, p.11). Žižek's argument is that, often, it is our parallaxial position that makes us see a phenomenon as Two but, in reality, it is ONE. His argument is derived from Lacan's theorization of 'objet a.' 'Objet a' is an element of 'I' that is perceived as an 'object' or in other words it is the objective part of the subject. For instance, why is it that the subject desires one object or person and not the other? Žižek argues that the subject cannot know why is it that he or she desires an object as the reason is unknown to the subject himself or herself. The desire of the subject is unknown and incomprehensible as it is not conscious but resides in the unconscious. The subject desires a person or thing but cannot explain why. This implies that when a subject desires some object or person, there is some unknown element that is the reason or object-cause of his or her desire, but this element actually does not reside in that object or person. It is his/her Unconscious or unknown part that makes him/her see that object in a different light and makes him/her desire it. Though the subject and object appear as two, they are, actually, One. It is the parallax that makes them appear as two. In the similar vein, Milan Kundera's fiction stages the contraries of being like the individual and political, the body and soul, the universal and particular. This article attempts to find the Žižekian parallaxial relation that might exist between one of these modes of being i.e., the political and individual.

The personal is political

Ludvik, one of the main characters of Kundera's *The Joke*, is a university student and a member of the Communist Party who aspires to be an academic after his graduation. He likes one of his fellow students Marketa and often pokes fun at her. Marketa, in a way, embodies the spirit of the age — intelligent but too serious. "Of course, fun went over badly with Marketa, and even worse with the spirit of the age" (Kundera, 1992, p.31). The age being referred in the novel is the reign of The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia which came into power in Feb 1948. The Party demands extreme seriousness but ironically this seriousness has to be expressed through a smile. "The odd thing was that the seriousness took the form not of a frown but of a smile", and "anyone who failed to rejoice was immediately suspected of lamenting the victory of the working class or (what was equally sinful) giving way individualistically to inner sorrows" (p.31). The joy arising out of one's inner self — or if we may call it one's individual being — is not allowed. The individual elements of existence ought to be submerged in the political. Marketa might not possess certain subtleties of character but she was the very embodiment of the Party spirit, a believer in the rise of the working class and she exudes this joy. On the other hand, Ludvik fancies himself far superior to her in every possible manner; he is more intelligent, well-informed and knows more about the philosophy of Marx and revolution. The problem is that Ludvik has this personal joviality and an ironical outlook that does not go well with the spirit of the age. The ideology of the age does not allow irony or humour and promotes a kind of bleak official optimism," a solemn and ascetic joy, in short, Joy with a capital J" (Kundera, 1992, p.31). Consequently, Ludvik comes face to face with "the social and political humourlessness inherent in systems that are sure of their truths and unwilling to tamper them with irony (Donahue, 1984, p.68).

The Party ideology would not permit the individual 'joy' that laughs at the ironies and paradoxes of the existence. The Party defines joy in collective terms, in the Communist ideal of the victory of the proletariat. Whosoever would pass a humorous or ironical comment upon this collective ideal is the enemy of the working class. This is the reason that when Ludvik writes postcard to Marketa, in which he pokes fun at the official ideology, it proves to be a disaster. The remark was just a cynical joke and nothing more. Marketa, being too serious an agent of official ideology, reports this to the student chapter of The Party. The Party holds a meeting, presided by none other than Ludvik's own close Friend Pavel, decides against Ludvik. He is expelled from the university, from the Party, and condemned to seven years hard labour at the mines. In a blink, Ludvik's whole life comes crumbling down before his eyes and that, too, over a cynical joke. The Party thinks that the individual irony, humour and joy are a challenge to the collective ideology and, on this account, such expressions cannot be allowed. Kundera thinks that humour and irony are the devices that can counter the totalitarian seriousness. In

an interview with Arther Holmberg (1985), he remarks: "In totalitarian regimes one quickly learns the importance of humour. You learn to trust or mistrust people because of the way they laugh. The modern world frightens me because it's rapidly losing its sense of the playfulness of play" (p.26). It comes as no surprise that humour, irony, paradox and play are the significant features of his narrative style. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980) Kundera comments:

I learned the value of humour during the time of Stalinist terror. I was twenty then. I could always recognize a person who was not a Stalinist, a person whom I needn't fear, by the way he smiled. A sense of humour was a trustworthy sign of recognition. Ever since, I have been terrified by a world that is losing its sense of humour. (p.232)

Here, we can see that Kundera is advocating the use of humour as a tool of resistance against the over-arching political structures which delimit the individual being. Mark Weeks (2005) sees a parallel between Kundera's concept of humour and Mikhael Bakhtin's term "heteroglossia" as both take humour as a strategy against political correctness and seriousness. Weeks also points out that both writers experienced life under totalitarian regimes and, as a consequence of their intellectual resistance to oppression, both were persecuted in their respective countries (p.131). Kundera believes that humour is linked with irony, play and multiplicity and, thus, it cannot be subjected to a holistic grand narrative. For him, humour is individualistic and relative and not political and absolute. Weeks (2005) observes that Kundera has created a binary between laughter and optimism and though this seems paradoxical at the surface level, it is based upon a valid argument. Laughter is something individual while optimism is a characteristic of totalitarian political regimes. The personal happiness of his characters always comes in conflict with the collective joy.

The intrusion of the political in the personal sphere is discernible even in those modes of existence that are usually considered private. Helena, the wife of Pavel Zemanek (the one who is responsible for Ludvik's expulsion and, consequently, the object of his hatred and revenge) in her early days of marriage, liked to think that her marriage with Pavel was a love marriage. Many years later, when their daughter was five, during an argument, Pavel exploded the bomb by saying "we didn't marry for love, we married out of Party discipline" (Kundera, 1992, p.17). This was so shocking for Helena. She admits this fact that she, too, used to believe that there is no line of demarcation between the public and the private. She would support Pavel in every possible way. They would not meet all day and Pavel would come home late at night and it seemed as if they were living like two passengers in a waiting room waiting for their respective buses. Helena always thought that her role was to help her husband, to look after him, to do everything for him, and to be always there whenever he needed her. He would always say "...that the new man differed from the old insofar as he had abolished the distinction between public and private life, and now, years later, he complains about how back then the Comrades never left his private life alone" (Kundera, 1992, p.17).

This implies that Helena and Pavel, initially, associated themselves with the official ideology of the Communist Party and did not believe in the separation between the public and the private. They even turned personal emotion of love into a public duty. We see that this does not last long for them. Pavel complains of this blurring of boundaries between the public and the private. This realization comes too late for him. By then, he has already destroyed his relationship with his wife and, also, destroyed the lives of many using his power as the Party official. As Donahue (1984) comments: "When the irrationality of history is rationalized or used to justify future actions, helpless individuals are crushed in its path" (p.70). Helena comes to realize this too. When she got disenchanted with her 'official marriage and love,' she starts to have affairs. It is ironical that she punishes her subordinates if they have such affairs, but she would allow it in her own case. The personal and the political blend again when, using her political power, she starts to meddle into the private lives of her subordinates. Kundera does not agree with this colonization of the personal by the political. Donahue observes: "Like a traditional Enlightenment humanist Kundera respects the dignity of human life and abhors any system or set of beliefs that endanger it" (p.74). This internalization is so powerful that Helena, despite her unhappy situation, still believes that the public and the private are one. She would justify her actions by saying that, for the Party, there is no line between the personal and the political: "I've always believed that man is one and indivisible and that only the petty bourgeois divides him hypocritically into public self and private self, such is my credo, I've always lived by it, and that time was no exception" (Kundera, 1992, p.21). Helena's unhappiness is caused by the forced merger of the personal and the political. Her marriage falls into disarray because of this and, finally, when she thinks that she has found love again with Ludvik, it proves to be a disaster too. Ludvik was never in love with her, and she was just a pawn in his scheme of revenge. The irony is that Ludvik's revenge also has its roots in the political.

The question is whether the personal and the political spheres are complete and unified in themselves? Even though both are conceived as unified, they are, in fact, split. The humanist idea of the self, rooted in Descartes' 'Cogito' was an attempt to veil this split but Poststructuralism has demonstrated that the 'subject' is not one but a site for multiple subject-positions provided by the social order:

Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (Davies and Hare, 1990, p. 44)

Through the mediation of language, human beings occupy these subject-positions but these subject-positions are often contradictory and at war with one another and this implies that the subject is always split, divided between warring positions. The

political and cultural ideologies seek to efface this split and divide and force individuals to identify themselves with one subject-position. In case of Ludvik and Helena, this position is being a member of The Communist Party. The Party expected them to shun every other position or personal outlook. Chris Weedon, in his book, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987), also refers to the same point: "Subjectivity is most obviously the site of the consensual regulation of individuals. This occurs through the identification by the individual with particular subject positions within discourses" (p.112). These subject positions, Weedon notes elsewhere, turn subjectivity "precarious, contradictory and in process" (p.33), but the ideological structures attempt to erase this split and pose the subject without contradictions. The enforced identification with one subject position at the cost of all others creates individuals who do not possess an authentic self as we observe in case of Marketa.

Coming back to the question of the inherent completeness of the personal or the political, it is quite evident that the individual mode of existence is not possible without the political, but this does not imply that the political is allowed to sacrifice the personal happiness. The function of the political sphere is to provide the conditions where the individual self can realize itself. Kundera does not negate the political as Peter Petro has commented: "On the one hand we have the intimate, personal, individual, on the other the collective, social, political. For Kundera these two spheres are connected..." (p.45). But Kundera does not believe in the forced reduction of the one into the other. The antagonism between the personal and the political ought not to be understood as a conflict between two binaries. A parallax reading of the novel reveals that the personal and the political are ONE and it is just the parallax that makes them appear as two. In order to validate this point, we ought to turn to Freud.

The personal and political are ONE

In his book, *Civilization and its Discontents* (2002), Freud discusses three sources that are the cause of our unhappiness: "...the superior power of nature, the frailty of our bodies, and the inadequacy of the institutions that regulate people's relations with one another in the family, the state and society" (p.24). He further states that the first two — the superior forces of nature and the frailty of the human body—are not in man's control but the management of social institutions is something that human beings think they can reform to maximize their happiness. A glance at the political history of mankind tells us that this has never been the case. In fact, the misery caused by nature and the frailty of human body are nothing as compared to the sufferings man has brought onto himself and this leads to the question: who is to be blamed? Freud says that, in this case too, nature is responsible for the suffering of mankind but not the external nature constituting elements rather the internal or psychic nature of man which Freud calls the id. The id is the storehouse of man's primal instincts and drives or his biological self that always follows the pleasure principle — or in other words, it demands instant

gratification of its desires. The primitive man lived as a free individual and, perhaps, was free to satisfy his desires as there were no social, moral or legal institutions. At some point in history, human beings, out of some necessity, decided to live in groups. This necessity might have arisen out of this realization that they could not face nature alone. Living in the group demanded certain regulatory principles and regulatory bodies. There must be certain prohibitions and whosoever violates them, ought to be punished. That is when the civilization came into existence.

The individual knew this fact that civilization was necessary, that he could not survive on his own but the entry into the civilization demanded a sacrifice — the sacrifice of id. The id must be controlled if one wants to be member of a group, but it was hard for the individual to accept this proposition. In his book, *The Future of an Illusion* (1962), Freud comments: “It is remarkable that, little as men are able to exist in isolation, they should nevertheless feel as a heavy burden the sacrifices which civilization expects of them in order to make a communal life possible” (p.6). The necessity of the survival forced the individual to live in a group. The group could only function if it regulated the id of the individual. For this, law and morality were introduced. The moment law and morality were institutionalized, it came in conflict with the individual id and the individuals started to show hostility towards moral and legal institutions. This aggressivity needed to be controlled through the external coercion and internalization of cultural ideals. Freud (1962) describes this process thus:

What happens to him to render his aggressivity harmless? Something very curious, which we would not have suspected, but which is plain to see. The aggression is introjected, internalized, actually sent back to where it came from; in other words, it is directed against the individual’s own ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego that sets itself up as the super-ego, in opposition to the rest, and is now prepared, as ‘conscience’, to exercise the same severe aggression against the ego that the latter would have liked to direct towards other individuals. (p.60)

Civilization, through its morality and laws, turns the individual against himself so that his aggression may not be used against the society. The Freudian analysis proves that the political is actually a split part of the individual, and it is the parallactical view that makes them appear as two. The political seems to be distinct from the individual because, as the social structures evolved and became more complex, the extent and hegemony of the political grew manifold. In the 20th century, the control of the political on the individual reached an extreme level in the form of Fascist and Communist dictatorships. The individuality of the people was completely erased and the individual was forced to subject himself/herself to the political. This is highly ironical that the political originated in the individual but, in time, it colonized the individual. The polarity between two modes of being

widened so much that now both appear to be completely distinct. But how can we deploy this idea to read the text in hand?

Political and other ideologies attempt to take over the subject completely and force him to look at the social sphere from just one subject position. Kundera's fiction, in more than one way, seeks to rescue the individual from the political ideologies as he shows how an individual never becomes an absolute subject but there is always a remainder that can disrupt this subjectivity. Belsey (2005), apropos Lacan, phrases it thus: "As the subjects we become by means of our subjection to the symbolic order, we gain access to social reality, but we leave behind the real of the human organism in its continuity with its surroundings" (p. 5)

In *The Joke*, official ideology of the state has transformed even the personal emotion of love into political and The Party propagates this idea that there is nothing personal and even if there is, it must be sacrificed at the altar of the political. The political ideology does not realize that the "subjective understanding of experience is a far cry from official Marxist dogma, in which history has one meaning and one meaning alone" (Sanders, 1991, p.105). Ludvik, Marketa, Pavel and Helena, initially seem to be total subjects who have surrendered their individuality to official ideology. This has injured their sense of 'self' and relationships and later in the narrative, after so many years, they are disillusioned with the official ideology and teleological necessities. These characters finally get back to their 'self' or 'individuality' again and they rediscover it through their own 'rites of passage.'

Helena used to think that her marriage was based on love and, after seven years, she comes to know that Pavel married her because of the Party. Helena, in those days, also thought that being in love meant to be dutiful and supportive towards one's husband. Her account of falling in love with Pavel also reveals that it was more a political emotion rather than personal. She fell in love with him during a political celebration. Everyone was singing a revolutionary song and, suddenly, Helena notices that Pavel was singing something else. It was a popular Italian revolutionary anthem. She was enthralled by this gesture of him, and she thought: "That was Pavel all over, he was never satisfied with reaching the mind alone, he had to get at the emotions, wasn't it wonderful" (Kundera, 1992, p.16). The account does not reveal any personal connection between her and Pavel. The vocabulary, the setting, the song, none of it was romantic or personal. Helena recalls: "And in the midst of all the enthusiasm and emotion, I don't know how it happened, I suddenly seized Pavel's hand, and he squeezed mine..." (Kundera, 1992, p.16). This is what The Party expected of the individuals. The personal mode of being must be in sync with the political. The personal emotion is a hinderance in the grand march of history. As Kundera (1993) comments:

Totalitarian society, especially in its more extreme versions, tends to abolish the boundary between the public and the private; power, as it grows ever more opaque, requires the lives of citizens to be entirely transparent. The ideal of life without secrets corresponds to the ideal of the exemplary

family: a citizen does not have the right to hide anything at all from the Party or the State, just as a child has no right to keep a secret from his father or his mother. In their propaganda, totalitarian societies project an idyllic smile: they want to be seen as "one big family." (p. 110)

This project of the totalitarian ideologies can never achieve its desired goal. The individual can never become a total ideological cog and there is always something in the 'self' that may disrupt this supposedly 'unified' subjective identification.

Soon after, the politically induced love of Helena and Pavel starts to wear off. Helena seeks solace in the arms of other men. Pavel also realizes this and he follows the same course. But Helena's quest for true love continues. She reflects: "I, a married woman, have had a few affairs, the difference is I was always looking for love, and if I made a mistake, if I didn't find it, I'd turn away in horror and look elsewhere, even though it would have been much simpler to forget my girlish dreams of love..." (Kundera, 1992, p.21). What is the nature of this girlish dream? It is the desire to have a personal connection with someone. This desire has nothing to do with The Party or grand march of history. When she meets Ludvik, Helena thinks that she has found this girlish dream. She states:

. . . so I keep looking for love, desperately looking for love, a love I can embrace just as I am, with all my old dreams and ideals, because I don't want my life to split down the middle, I want it to remain whole from beginning to end, which is why you took my breath away that day we met, Ludvik, dear, dear Ludvik. . . . (Kundera, 1992, p.22)

The noteworthy aspect of the above quote is Helena's desire to keep her life whole and avoid the split. What is the nature of this desired wholeness? She desires love, a love she can receive with her whole being. This points to a yearning of the 'self' to coincide with itself, to be whole in itself. It is a state in which the personal does not experience any lack and the ego does not turn against itself. The love between Pavel and her has not arisen out of her being but it is a kind of super-ego injunction — Thou shalt love for the Communist Party. This love is external, an intrusion and it has introduced a split in her being. Here we observe an exposition of "the isomorphism of ordinary human behaviour and the sadism of militaristic governments" (Restuccia, 1990, p.282). When she meets Ludvik, Helena thinks that he is the love she has always sought and her first date with him is whole lot different from that of her meeting with Pavel. While describing her date with Ludvik, Helena is using a personal vocabulary, embedded in feelings and emotions and not arising out of Party spirit:

. . . we stopped, my heart was pounding, there we stood face to face, and Ludvik bent over slightly and gave me a gentle kiss, I tore myself away from him, but then took him by the hand and started running again, I have a little trouble with my heart now and then, it starts beating wildly after the

slightest bit of exertion, all I have to do is run up a flight of stairs, so I slowed down a little and got back my breath, and suddenly I heard myself humming the opening two bars of my favourite song, Oh, brightly shines the sun on our garden . . ., and sensing he recognized it, I began to sing it out loud, without shame, and I felt years, cares, sorrows, thousands of gray scales peeling off me. . . . (Kundera, 1992, p.24)

Helena feels as if the whole atmosphere is enchanting and she feels young and alive. She acts like a teenage girl, silly and unrestrained. She starts to sing but the song is not a revolutionary song but a romantic one. While singing the song, she feels as if the layers of bitter memories are peeling off her. This is the moment she defies the political and re-enters her personal mode of being. Though, she does not know she is the victim of another tragic irony.

When Helena comes to know that Ludvik is not interested in her and his motive was revenge, she sinks into further distress. She has already told her husband about him and now, suddenly, Ludvik break up with her. She goes to District Committee building and swallows a lot of tablets thinking these are painkillers and when taken in excess, can kill someone. She thinks now that she is about to die, Ludvik would regret his decision. Even at this moment, she hopes that there might be some mistake and Ludvik would come back to her. She writes a suicidal note to him and he rushes there in a panicked state expecting the worst. Here, too, fate plays strange trick with Helena. The pills she took were not painkillers but laxatives and they did not serve any purpose other than humiliating her in the presence of Ludvik. Why does Ludvik do this to her?

Ludvik was deprived of the most prized ambition of his life — his status as a Party stalwart and his career in academia. To make it all worse, he was sentenced to serve in Black Insignia, a para military organization working in the coal mines. In a normal psychic development, he would have gone through the process of mourning and come to terms with his loss and moved on. But even after fifteen years, Ludvik holds grudge for Pavel Zemanek as he was the one who presided over that meeting in which he was sentenced. He plans to take revenge by seducing his wife, Helena. Ludvik's behaviour can be interpreted through the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia. Freud (1917) defines melancholia as: "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (p.242). Ludvik cannot move on with this loss. Clewell (2004) elaborates this Freudian insight in these words:

In contrast to the predominant feelings of love that he believed made the completion of mourning possible, the melancholic has ambivalent feelings of love and hate for the other. This ambivalence stems from "a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person" and renders it impossible for the melancholic to give up the attachment, at least until the grievance has been brought into consciousness and settled. (p.59)

The disillusionment of a conjugal love arising out of a political necessity forces Helena to find it at a more personal level. She thinks that she has found this love in the form of Ludvik. On the other hand, Ludvik's loss takes him on the path of hatred and revenge. Hatred is a personal emotion and even love, in some cases, turns into hatred quite easily. Ludvik plans to take revenge upon Pavel by seducing his wife, Helena. He admits: "Everything that had gone between Helena and myself was part of a precise and deliberate plan" (Kundera, 1992, p.175). He plans everything in detail. He arranges a flat to seduce Helena and makes love to her. Ludvik states: "From then on everything went exactly according to plan. The plan I'd dreamed up had fifteen years of hatred behind it, and I was confident, without quite knowing why, that it would come off without a hitch" (Kundera, 1992, p.178). Here, too, fate has planned something else for Ludvik.

After the sexual act, when Ludvik sees his face in the mirror, he laughs and this time it is a personal laughter. He is satisfied that he has accomplished his mission and wronged Zemanek. After the episode of Marketa's postcard, for the first time, he feels happy. This feeling does not last long for him. When he comes back to the room, Helena tells him that he is the second man she ever fell in love with. The first was her husband. When Ludvik manifests displeasure over him being compared to her husband, Helena assures him she does not love her husband anymore. In fact, the only reason their marriage is intact is because of their daughter. Ludvik is taken aback. His whole revenge plan was anchored on this belief that Pavel is in love with his wife and her infidelity would hurt him deeply: "Now that she stood before me bare, without a husband or any bonds to him, utterly herself, her physical unloveliness lost all its power to excite and it too became only itself: a simple unloveliness" (Kundera, 1992, p.200). The sense of satisfaction that he experienced a while ago was gone. All this consuming hatred, passion for revenge, and desire to get even with the person responsible for ruining his life, all proves to be nothing:

...the body was here, a body I had stolen from no one, in which I'd vanquished no one, destroyed no one, a body abandoned, deserted by its spouse, a body I had intended to use but which had used me and was now insolently enjoying its triumph, exulting, jumping for joy. (Kundera, 1992, p.201).

It was ironical and anticlimactical as Feintuch (1987) notes: "What he had taken for a joke was the truth; in much of his life up until then, the truth had turned out to be a joke" (p.32). Fate has something else in store for him too. His meeting with Pavel Zemanek is unexpected. He is in *The Ride of the King*, with one of his students Miss Broz. Miss Broz is young, beautiful and possesses all the charms that Helena has lost. It is obvious that she is not just a student for Pavel. What hit Ludvik like a bolt of lightning is the attitude of Pavel towards the Party. The Party, for which he used to be so passionate that he even did not hesitate to destroy the life of his close

friend for it, does not matter to him anymore. When Ludvik asks him about his job, he says that he teaches philosophy:

. . . his use of this word struck me as revealing; a few years ago he would still have said Marxism, but in recent years this subject had so declined in popularity, especially among the young, that Zemanek, for whom popularity had always been paramount importance, delicately concealed Marxism behind the more general term. (Kundera, 1992, p.270).

Miss Broz, suddenly, cuts in, "...teachers of Marxism had a political pamphlet in their skulls instead of a brain, but that Pavel was entirely different" (Kundera, 1992, p.270). Is this the same Zemanek who had destroyed Ludvik because of the Party ideology? Just because he had written a stupid postcard? Ludvik is even more flabbergasted when Miss Broz mentions the fact that Zemanek always defies the University authorities, and he is not in good books of the people in power. It is obvious that Pavel Zemanek has stopped identifying himself with the political mode of being and now has re-entered the field of the personal. What really disturbs Ludvik is the fact that, now, he and Zemanek hold the same point of view about the Party. It is hard for Ludvik to accept that Zemanek has changed as his whole plan was based upon this thought that he would be the same.: "But it was precisely in Zemanek that I had not expected this change; he was petrified in my memory in the form in which I'd seen him, and now I furiously denied him the right to be other than the man I'd known" (Kundera, 1992, p.271). How ironical all this is. To his displeasure, Ludvik learns this that nothing is permanent, everything transforms, and it is he who has not moved on. It is he who is at the receiving end again.

Through this parallactical reading of Kundera's *The Joke*, we find that the individuals are forced to repress their personal mode of being by the political ideology but, towards the end, they do come back to it. Despite being the ONE, the parallax is still there. Zemanek, a zealot political worker, ruins the life of his friend Ludvik for the Party but, over the years, he is transformed into a different man. He does not believe in the grand march of history anymore, rather, he is a critic of the Party policies. Miss Broz proudly asserts that Pavel is no more popular with the authorities as he questions the relevance of the curriculum. The most shocking revelation is: "how he'd saved a boy they were about to expel for some boyish prank (an altercation with a policeman) that the chancellor (Zemanek's enemy) had wished to present as a political misdemeanour..." (Kundera, 1992, p.271). Zemanek would now fight for a boy who was involved in a prank. Is not it what Ludvik had tried to assert in his hearing that the postcard was just a harmless prank? It is true that Zemanek does not believe in the same principles anymore; the political and the personal are reconciled in him. It is just that he believes in a different political ideology now. Perhaps, the only character who has accepted this parallax is Ludvik. Ludvik, through long rites of passage, comes to this realization that there is no resolution. He cannot have the closure he always sought. Though the personal and

the political are ONE, now, these would always be seen from a parallax angle. There can never be just the personal or just the political. They must be accepted with their antagonism. The paradox is that the acceptance of antagonism is reconciliation as Žižek (2012) brings this point home through the example of two lovers:

Recall the example of the revolutionary lovers living in a permanent state of emergency, totally dedicated to the Cause, ready to sacrifice all personal sexual fulfilment for it, but simultaneously totally dedicated to each other: the radical disjunction between sexual passion and social-revolutionary activity is fully recognized here, for the two dimensions are accepted as totally heterogeneous, each irreducible to the other, and it is this very acceptance of the gap which makes the relationship non-antagonistic. (p.950)

The parallax reading of the novel does not advocate going back to the mythical unity where the split between the individual and the political did not exist and there was only ONE. In fact, the opposite is true. It is this parallax between the two positions that keeps social field open and progressive. It is through this antagonism that the individual and the political realize themselves.

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