

## **Criticism of the ostrich scenes from Milan Kundera**

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*Abstract.* This paper presents critical reactions to the use of the ostriches in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, focusing on the fact that he does not use their most striking quality. But, despite the demand, I struggle to find much to criticize, though I do flag a worry about Kundera's consistency regarding what is common knowledge.

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*Ostrich with head in the sand*

*Why hide your face in the land?*

What to make of the ostrich scenes from Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*? The first scene is like something from a dream. Two of his characters have gone to the zoo. Of the ostriches, we are told:

There were six of them. When they caught sight of Tamina and Hugo, they ran toward them. Now bunched up and pressing against the fence, they stretched out their long necks, stared, and opened their straight, broad bills. They opened and closed them feverishly, with unbelievable speed, as if they were trying to outtalk each other. But these bills were hopelessly mute, making not the slightest sound.

The ostriches were like messengers who had learned an important message by heart but whose vocal cords had been cut by an enemy on the way; so that when they reached their destination, they could do no more than move their

voiceless mouths. (1996: 129)

Tamina perceives an indecipherable warning (1996: 130). Later the ostriches actually appear in her dream, again mutely moving their bills (1996: 142). She does not know if they are warning her or threatening her or scolding her, etc. But Kundera (apparently) knows, and offers a commentary that seems mocking:

They did not come to warn her, scold her, or threaten her. They are not at all interested in her. Each one of them came to tell her about itself. (1996: 145)

They are interested in talking about events in their very ordinary lives, just like most of the people in the Western European place where this part of his book is set. I confess I much enjoyed this material when I was nineteen, but I am often “asked” whether I could write something critical about it. Like what?! This is a scene I devised, which is mistaken from the perspective of biology.

OSTRICH 1: What’s a parrot?

OSTRICH 2: A parrot?

OSTRICH 1: Yes, what’s a parrot? A parrot is a bird which speaks and its speech uses expressions from human beings. And so people speak of parroting. That’s a natural use of the parrot as a metaphor. And what’s our most striking feature?

OSTRICH 3: We bury our heads in the sand sometimes.

OSTRICH 1: And he doesn’t make use of it at all. What sort of writer is he to ignore that? He just treats us as standard members of France, I mean this anonymous Western European country where the fiction is set in – it’s surely France.

OSTRICH 2: But he’s playing us. The manager does not have to make use of a player’s

outstanding skill. He can play them out of position. It's his right.

OSTRICH 1: I suppose it's his right, but is it right?

OSTRICH 4: Literary writers want to avoid clichés, isn't it? "Don't be like an ostrich with your head in the sand": it's a common expression, isn't it?

OSTRICH 5: It's like being in a tribe. Imagine a tribe and everyone at age twelve has to have an ear cut off, a left ear, and you have really beautiful ears, or just a really beautiful left ear. You're still losing that ear. And we have to all talk like this in this country, and forget about putting our heads in the sand.<sup>1</sup>

OSTRICH 6: This is Europe. This is Europe for the ostrich! This is why France has to leave Europe!

Perhaps there is something perverse about Kundera's use of the ostrich, given its chief claim to fame, and the whole zoo where they appear, with its parrots, monkeys, and countryside château setting and gothic tower. *But apparently ostriches do not actually bury their heads in sand.* They merely look as if they do (Corney n.d.). Should he not be praised then for avoiding that trap?

Well, there is at least a consistency worry, given what Kundera says earlier:

Since there is not a single historical event we can count on being commonly known, I must speak of events that took place a few years ago as if they were a thousand years old: In 1939, the German army entered Bohemia, and the Czech state ceased to exist. In 1945, the Russian army entered Bohemia, and the country was once again called an independent republic. (1996: 10)

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<sup>1</sup> My text is ambiguous concerning whether Kundera's commentary is about the ostriches in the zoo as well as the dream.

If Kundera does not tell readers the ABCs of ostriches, such as opening a section with “An ostrich is a large flightless bird famous for...” there is a worry that he is assuming more common knowledge than he should. How can these two propositions be consistent?

- (a) We cannot count on a single historical event being commonly known.
- (b) We can count on there being some common knowledge about ostriches.

## **References**

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