

More on the ostrich scenes from Milan Kundera: the perverse zoo interpretation

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Abstract. This paper presents an alternative interpretation of what Milan Kundera tells us about the contents of the ostriches' speech, which does not involve a satirical puncturing of the ominous atmosphere. Their talk sounds like human talk earlier in the book because they are being turned into parrots.

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This is the zoo of a wicked witch

And inside it six of the ostrich

In Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, two of his characters go on a date at a zoo. There is a vivid scene in which they encounter ostriches:

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)

Kundera builds up an ominous atmosphere. Later Tamina sees the ostriches in her dreams(1996: 142). She does not know what they are trying to communicate. But Kundera tells us, in a way that (seemingly) punctures the ominous atmosphere. This paper examines what he has to say.

Kundera writes:

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. Each one to tell her how it had eaten, how it had slept, how it had run up to the fence and seen her behind it. That it had spent its important child-hood in the important village of Rourou. That its important orgasm had lasted six hours. That it had seen a woman strolling behind the fence and she was wearing a shawl. That it had gone swimming, that it had fallen ill and then recovered. That when it was young it rode a bike and that today it had gobbled up a sack of grass. They are standing in front of Tamina and talking to her all at once, vehemently, insistently, aggressively, because there is nothing more important than what they want to tell her. (1996: 145)

Some of the talk attributed to the ostriches closely resembles talk by human beings earlier in this part of the novel. Kundera is naturally interpreted as satirizing the human talk as the sort of inane conversation that goes on in an affluent Western European country where nothing much happens (1996: 127). But what are we to make of the close resemblances between the ostrich talk, as conveyed by Kundera, and the human talk in the novel?

An obvious interpretation. Kundera is referring specifically to the ostriches in Tamina's dream and the resemblances are because this is how her mind processes the various events she has witnessed: the human talk and the ostrich behaviour.

The perverse zoo interpretation. On this interpretation, Kundera is not just referring to the ostriches in Tamina's dream but the ostriches in reality as well, or the reality of the book. Let us go back to the paragraph where they appear:

On the way, he stopped the car to visit a zoo set up on the grounds of a beautiful country chateau. They walked among monkeys and parrots in a setting of Gothic towers. They were all alone except for a rustic gardener sweeping fallen leaves from the broad paths. Passing a wolf, a beaver, and a tiger, they came to a wire fence surrounding a large field where the ostriches were. (1996: 129)

In this book, Kundera notably does not refer to what ostriches are most famous for, whether true or false: "burying" their heads in the sand (see Edward 2022). An interpretation is that this is a perverse zoo, with a project to slowly transform the ostriches into parrots. Hence they end up saying much the same things as the human beings. An advantage of this interpretation is that it fits with the ominous atmosphere earlier, in the zoo, and in Tamina's dream and her reaction, and also with what Kundera tells us about the contents of their claims later, rather than requiring the reader to reject the earlier material as misleading.

References

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