

## ***The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* versus Tompkins' paradox**

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*Abstract.* This paper introduces an obvious interpretation of what Milan Kundera is “saying” about his characters the students Gabrielle and Michelle: don't be like this. It contrasts the satirical way of developing character with a Tompkins' paradox situation. I also raise a rather subtle question about the translation.

*Draft version:* Version 1 (13<sup>th</sup> November 2022).

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* presents itself as a novel by Milan Kundera. Within it is a part entitled *The Angels*. The first section of this part presents us with two characters, Gabrielle and Michelle, who are at a summer course and discussing a play in which rhinoceroses figure in a strange way. We are told:

They were the favourite students of Madame Raphael, their teacher, because they always gazed attentively at her and wrote down every one of her remarks. (1996: 77)

We are soon presented with dialogue, some of which I shall present using the conventions of a play.

GABRIELLE: I don't really get what it means that they all turn into rhinoceroses.

MICHELLE: You have to see it as a symbol.

GABRIELLE: That's right. Literature is made up of signs.

MICHELLE: Yes, but even if you assume they don't really turn into rhinoceroses, but on;y into signs, why do they become just that sign and not another one?

And here is some more from a little later (1996: 78):

MICHELLE: I've got an idea.

GABRIELLE: What is it?

MICHELLE: Besides, it's something Madame Raphael sort-of implied.

GABRIELLE: So, what is it? Tell me.

MICHELLE: The author wanted to create a comic effect.

(By the way, should it be "create comic effect"?) The first section ends with these words:

Pleased with their own boldness, the two girls looked at each other, and the corners of their mouths quivered with pride. Then all of a sudden, they emitted short, shrill, spasmodic sounds very difficult to describe in words. (1996: 78)

The obvious interpretation is that Kundera is encouraging readers not to be like this. It is satire aimed at character development. And the rest of the part supports this interpretation, though he himself might reject it. (A good question: how? On what grounds could he justify rejecting that interpretation?)

You might think this kind of satirical method of character development is cruel, but is it better than a Tompkins' paradox situation (see Edward 2022)? Imagine that Gabrielle and Michelle get the best grades in their course and get prizes and go on to become lecturers and professors and publish in leading journals – status symbols which give them great pride for a while – but they are left with a puzzle.

1. The system of awarding such status symbols is reliable and just.
2. We have lots of them.
3. We are not that good, and a lot of people notice craftsmanship weaknesses in our work which they would manage to avoid.

A solution to the puzzle is: “That is how, dear Gabrielle and Michelle, we develop your characters away from what it is, by giving you this puzzle to contemplate. Once you have contemplated it enough, you won’t place that much weight on these symbols. You will finally grow up!”



### **References**

Edward, T.R. 2022. Does Tompkins’ paradox affect women in analytic philosophy? Available at *PhilPapers*.

Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber.