

Title: Kundera's Reception in the West  
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The bulk of Kundera's Western criticism shows a tendency to cast him into four main stereotypes of a writer: political, erotic, philosophical, and the joker. The negative critical responses to the works of his pre-exilic period reveal a preoccupation with both biographical and extra-textual approaches. What strikes one at first sight is that most of Kundera's Western critics find it inevitable to include a lengthy autobiographical introduction of a writer whose works they attempt to analyze in the light of his life rather than his merit as a writer. It seems that this vein of Kundera's criticism is directed at the authorities, establishment, and the Party of Kundera's Czechoslovakia rather than at the writer's works in earnest. The limited political interpretation of Kundera's works results in a reductionist reading of a writer who made unique contributions to the genre of the novel. The review of Kundera's Western critical reception also poses the question of how Western critics deal with 'dissident' literature in general: should it be regarded merely as the political pamphlet of the day as the trendiness of the popularity of Kundera's works show in the 80's?

There is a discernable shift in Western critical expectations concerning earlier and later works, especially those of his French period. At the core of the less favorable critical reception of his later works is a deep dissatisfaction among critics with a Kundera that "went French" and also "bad," for he is harder to be recognized in terms of his earlier stereotypes. The change of themes in Kundera's work brought about a general confusion among Western critics who fail to recognize a Kundera who suddenly has more to say about the West to the West while defying his previous stereotypes.

Kundera and other Central European writers have appeared in America as part of the "writers from the Other Europe" series, under the general editorship of Philip Roth. This series provided access to a wider audience, but at the same time, it contributed to a one-sided interpretation of their works. The problematic of these writers' reception in the West is pertinently summed up by Fred Misurella ("Milan Kundera and the Central European Style." *Salgamundi* 73 (Winter 1987), p. 51.): the aesthetic and cultural significance of Central European writers' work exists in a tradition that has not been popularly explored in the West. In addition, the political dimension of Central European novels has often overshadowed their aesthetic interest, providing them with eager readers but not the kind of critical attitudes their author would prefer.