

# ***Slowness, Identity and Ignorance: Milan Kundera's French Variations***

**Tim Jones**

Thesis submitted 2012 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy:  
School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia

## Abstract

This thesis explores in detail three academically neglected novels by Milan Kundera: *Slowness* (1995), *Identity* (1998) and *Ignorance* (2002). Originally written in French, the author's second language, after six novels, a short-story collection and a play originally written in Czech, these texts are often bracketed off from the rest of his writing and seen as something of an inferior addendum. This is despite clear thematic similarities that cross the linguistic divide and that I demonstrate here are of central significance to the author's entire novelistic project.

This exploration not only reveals that these three French novels place in the foreground themes that have rippled in and out of focus across Kundera's earlier Czech work and so are of central importance to Kundera as a novelist. It also shows that the lateness of the variations on the themes of slowness, identity and ignorance within these three French novels does not hold everything in common with the lateness that Adorno locates in late Beethoven. It is true that like late Beethoven, Kundera's late variations on these themes demonstrate the manoeuvres of an oeuvre sensing its death across the horizon. But through the specific nature of the late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance, the oeuvre works hard to pull its readers down into the textual spaces of these three late novels with a fresh urgency, rather than truculently push them away, so that Kundera's audience might be adequately prepared to continue its own voyages once the oeuvre has played its final notes.

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## Introduction: Milan Kundera and Variation Form

Kundera's fourth novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, is the first and only novel to acknowledge directly the centrality of variation form to the author's novelistic aesthetic. For much of its length, the text resembles a series of discrete short-stories, each concerning separate characters who never encounter one another and occurring across reasonably diverse geographic locations. Part Six, however, reintroduces Tamina, previously the main character of Part Four, and then clarifies that the book is 'a novel in the form of variations.'<sup>1</sup> For the novel's extra-diegetic narrator, who has modelled his work explicitly upon the principles of Beethoven's own musical variations as discovered through the narrator's relationship with his musicologist father, this means that 'The various parts [of the novel] follow each other like the various stages of a voyage leading into the interior of a theme, the interior of a thought, the interior of a single, unique situation, the understanding of which recedes from [his] sight into the distance' (*LF*, 227). The innovations that this narrator locates in Beethoven's variations provide him with two key insights. Firstly, the concept of the infinite does not just apply to the endless space existing outside of and beyond the exterior contours of each physical object, but also to the secretive interior space 'lying hidden in all things', including those 'things' belonging to the more abstract world of concepts and themes (226). Secondly, through the particular style of variation form in which Beethoven excelled, this abstract interior infinity can not only be observed, but journeyed through and investigated as readily as the infinity of more physical spaces, as successive variations on a theme proceed from the simplicity and coherence of that theme's outside surface and proceed deeper and deeper into and through the interior that stretches boundlessly beneath it.

For its narrator, what makes *Laughter and Forgetting* a novel, rather than a series of short stories, is not a unity of narrative or character or place, but the seven sections' shared devotion to picking apart the same themes, which, as the variations upon them accrue, are approached from disparate, occasionally contradictory angles, which muddy rather than deepen any understanding of these themes as entities that can be readily grasped as a totality, or conceptually finalised.<sup>2</sup> The surface version of the theme of forgetting is provided in Part One by Mirek's naively black-and-white hypothesis that 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting', forgetting being here an imposition of those in charge against the people they are attempting to dominate, and memory the tool of the oppressed best suited to combating this practice (3). Successive sections of the novel then move through an unfolding sequence of variations upon the theme of forgetting that open this simplistic treatment to vigorous problematisations. Mirek himself, for example, soon demonstrates that forgetting can be a process deliberately effected in order to whitewash ungainly aspects of our own past, so that he himself is aligned with the very phenomenon that he envisages as inflicted upon him from above (30). The following section then

demonstrates that forgetting can be an entirely natural process arrived at through aging (59), while later sections show Tamina concertedly working to enshrine her memories against a potentially fatal forgetting advanced by not just a temporal distance, but an enforced geographical distance also (114-16). Investigating a theme via variation form can thus facilitate the very opposite of reaching a definitive conclusion regarding its essence, which potentially takes on additional levels of complexity and nuance for as long as the continuing voyage keeps the boundless interiority of the theme as the subject of its investigation.

Central to this thesis is the notion that the structural principles of *Laughter and Forgetting* apply not only to that novel, but to Kundera's oeuvre as a whole, which functions on a large scale much like *Laughter and Forgetting* in microcosm. What the narrator of that novel takes from Beethoven and applies to the structure of his single text, Kundera too applies to the structure of his oeuvre, each novel in which contains, to a greater or lesser extent, major or minor variations on the themes placed at the front and centre of each of his other novels. Just three pages before the above explanation of the nature of *Laughter and Forgetting*, for example, the text directly evokes the categories of 'lightness' and 'weight' that will be placed at the forefront of Kundera's next novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (224). As this thesis will spend much of its time demonstrating, this is just one of numerous possible examples of a common thematic overspill from novel to novel. The result is an oeuvre that can be envisaged as a cat's cradle of overlapping sequences of variations, together leading into and through the infinite interiors of each of the oeuvre's key themes.

This thesis too is a voyage, which sets out to explore three of the possible series of variations that run throughout Kundera's oeuvre, starting from the opening scene of his very first novel, *The Joke*, and proceeding into the interiors of what, at the time of writing, are his three latest: the critically neglected French novels *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*. It is a thesis about these three French novels, and whenever these three novels go offstage, it is a thesis for them. As this voyage progresses, it will chart three series of variations on the eponymous themes of these French novels from *The Joke* and across Kundera's Czech fiction. It will demonstrate how the prevailing trends and turns within these three series are then engaged with in the respective French novels that place these three themes in the foreground. It will consider also how each French novel builds too upon the nature of the previous French novel's engagement with the prior variations on its own theme, as these three texts carry the oeuvre ever further towards its eventual silence.

This thesis does not seek to establish a general rule about how variation form is deployed to a greater or lesser extent across postmodern fiction, but to use one author's heavy use of it, across an oeuvre dedicated to one particular novelist project, as a lens through which to examine the place in this oeuvre of the three late French novels *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*.

Having said this, Kundera's use of variation form as a structuring principle across his oeuvre does not make him anything like the only author to borrow from music. Calvin S. Brown's *Music*

*and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* is one of the earliest works to investigate the various formal similarities between music and literature and is a useful starting point for a consideration of the ways in which the latter has sometimes modelled itself upon borrowings from the former, including that of the principle of theme and variations that Brown argues has been prevalent in music since the sixteenth-century.<sup>3</sup> His investigation of this specific cross-over, in both the aforementioned book and a later essay “Theme and Variations as a Literary Form”, principally restricts itself to a small handful of poetic case-studies, such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, with only a fleeting and somewhat simplistic reference to *Don Quixote* as a novel ‘built on various episodes each of which is a different manifestation of the same general idea.’<sup>4</sup> It is worth pointing out that Cervantes’ text is not only understandable as a novel in the form of variations if we take each of Quixote and Sancho’s encounters with various objects and groups of people essentially to echo the same basic set-up. We can also see that *within* each of these encounters there resides a pair of variations, which play out simultaneously via Quixote and Sancho each attempting to apprehend what they see via completely divergent conceptual frameworks. It is not only that the ‘adventure of the inn’ is a variation on ‘the adventure of the windmills’, for within each of these variations on “the same general idea” lies a pair of variations on what exactly is being encountered. The novel is not composed of a series of variations following one behind the other, but a sequence of twin sets of variations each of which exists in an uneasy tandem.

Since Brown’s work, the field of interdisciplinary criticism between music and literature has developed considerably. Stephen Benson questions the dominant trend preceding his own *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* (2006) that has seen most investigations focussing on how literature has modelled itself upon music, rather than on why; or on charting formal similarities that demonstrate a borrowing from one art form by the other, without investigating what a novelist like Kundera has gained from such a borrowing and the motivation thus lying behind this manoeuvre.<sup>5</sup> A notable exception to this trend is Eric Prieto’s *Listening In: Music, Mind and the Modernist Narrative*. This work appears particularly useful here, despite mentioning Kundera only fleetingly, for focussing specifically on the drives behind what Prieto suggests is an intensification of the scale of musical borrowings by the twentieth-century novel. Prieto argues that novelists have been particularly driven to look for inspiration from musical forms following ‘the historic crisis in the mimetic function of literature’ and the ‘growing mistrust of the conventions of nineteenth-century realism’.<sup>6</sup> Once the modernist novel is no longer so invested in mimetically representing the world outside it or on telling stories, and moves towards exploring consciousness itself and dispensing with a strict reliance upon the requirements of plot, it desired a set of tools by which it could do more than tell a story and instead represent ‘psychological states and processes.’<sup>7</sup> The tools the novel located in music then continue to aid it during the move towards the ‘ironic realism’ characteristic of postmodern fiction. Prieto essentially argues that ‘twentieth-century novelists, when

they turn to music, tend to see in it a source of models for rethinking the plot-based forms that have traditionally governed the novel.’<sup>8</sup>

Kundera would almost certainly denounce Prieto for missing the point that strictly plot-based forms only ever really took over the novel in the nineteenth-century; from Kundera’s perspective, the ‘ironic realism’ Prieto hails as a hallmark of postmodernism was the novel’s main means of exploring the world long before what we might term *un-ironic realism’s* own precepts appeared on the scene. Prieto’s question still suggests an insight, however, regarding how borrowings from music can aid narrative-based means of exploring the world in avoiding a straightforward reliance on linear plot progression; the greater any particular author’s commitment to the novel form as a vehicle for *more* than conveying a plot or representing an external reality, the more explicitly he or she might turn to musical principles for a helpful set of tools. This argument suggests the question of how exactly Kundera himself conceives of the novel, the answering of which should reveal why his own novelistic aesthetic relies so overtly upon variation form as a motive principle. This will not be too hard to answer, thanks to Kundera’s extensive writing on the subject.

A particularly enthusiastic advocate of the novel, Kundera believes its purpose has never been that of merely telling a story, or of recreating the external world. It has, instead, always sought to explore existence itself via the particular lens of doubt rather than certainty. He locates the first stage of this mission as beginning with Cervantes’ account of Don Quixote’s wide-ranging adventure through a world that he can ‘no longer recognise’.<sup>9</sup> This mission is most successfully taken up in the eighteenth-century by Sterne and Diderot, before the nineteenth-century sees the novel mutate into a realist variant that for Kundera is somewhat alien to its original precepts; the early twentieth-century modernists Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, Kafka and Witold Gombrowicz then repeatedly appear within his non-fiction characterised as heroes for getting the novel back on track. In the non-fictional *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera argues that the novel form that developed from Cervantes through this trajectory takes as its ‘only certainty’ the ‘wisdom of uncertainty’, insisting that the world of the novel is one of ‘ambiguity’ and home to a ‘welter of contradictory truths.’<sup>10</sup> This is reaffirmed in *The Curtain* when he describes the ‘modern novel’ as ‘purposefully aphiosophic, even anti-philosophic’, for ‘it does not proclaim truths’ and only ‘questions’ them.<sup>11</sup>

This basic understanding of the novel’s purpose is not unique to Kundera.<sup>12</sup> Unlike many other writers *about* the novel, Kundera is almost uniquely committed as a practitioner too to this particular understanding of the novel’s accomplishments. And constructing not only an individual text but an entire oeuvre around the principle of variation form emerges as the means by which he seeks to stretch the novel form’s potential to further this agenda of doubt over certainty as far as he can. As Brown puts it, variation form, within both music and literature, involves ‘a theme given out first in its simplest version... and then repeated with as many different treatments as the ingenuity, patience, or interest of the composer may suggest.’<sup>13</sup> Variation form thus becomes what enables a

Kundera's exploration to investigate the interior infinity of diverse truths within themes such as laughter and forgetting, or slowness, or identity, or ignorance. It allows Kundera's novels to pick these themes apart from several distinct and sometimes directly contradictory angles, thereby facilitating his oeuvre to achieve its closeness in spirit to the aesthetic that he argues has developed from Cervantes.

A brief comparison between Kundera's own variation form and the variation form that I would argue is intrinsic to Austrian modernist Hermann Broch highlights the fact that a gathering of overtly contradictory truths is not necessarily intrinsic to the function of variation form itself. Variation form's different treatments of an incident or theme can help to shore up a particular thesis, rather than to present conflicting visions. The interior of this theme or thesis might still stretch into infinity, but the actual topography of this infinity might demonstrate more of an infinite similarity than an infinite difference.

Broch's novel *The Guiltless* is structurally almost an exact model for what Kundera achieves in *Laughter and Forgetting* decades later. Via several short-stories, with some characters recurring on non-consecutive occasions, like Tamina in Kundera's novel, while others feature only once, Broch explores from several distinct angles the notion of the apolitical 'guilty guiltlessness' that proliferated throughout German society following the First World War and so, for Broch, facilitated the rise of Nazism.<sup>14</sup> And much like *Laughter and Forgetting* works in microcosm how Kundera's entire oeuvre works in macrocosm, so too do the structural principles of *The Guiltless* apply to the rest of Broch's novelistic output. The notion of 'guilty guiltlessness' examined in *The Guiltless* is just one manifestation of a much larger argument that reoccurs across his oeuvre, which demonstrates that Broch is clearly part of the trajectory of modernism that conceives of a totality that absolutely did exist in the past having been irreparably lost by the start of the twentieth-century. He appears almost overpoweringly confident about his oft-stated central thesis, intrinsic not only to *The Guiltless*, but to *The Sleepwalkers* and *The Spell* too amongst others, that the switch from Catholicism to Protestantism relegated an experience of the divine that previously unified all aspects of society to a small, isolated niche that was only one aspect of a society now fragmented and, through so doing, allowed a welter of contradictory values and truths to emerge as seductive but false pretenders at re-unification.<sup>15</sup> In the words of Stephen S. Dowden, Broch imagined that 'the collapse of traditional religious beliefs and values had left modernity with no spiritual foundations capable of assuring finite man of his continuity with infinite divinity.'<sup>16</sup> Men like Huguenau from *The Sleepwalkers* are then able to commit murder with total moral impunity when this becomes the coldly logical result of following their own, isolated value system; and men like Hitler-surrogate Marius Ratti from *The Spell* then appear so seductive because they convincingly present themselves as able to restore the broken foundations through recreating, via a pseudo-spiritualism mistaken for actual spiritualism, the lost connection with the divine.



Towards this particularly lofty meta-narrative about the breakdown of a unified society and its various deleterious effects, Broch shows absolutely no scepticism or incredulity whatsoever. His experimentations with variation form never appear designed to muddy this central thesis, or present possible alternative pictures or counterpoints, but to gather the largest amount of evidence possible to support it. The variations comprise characters from divergent levels of society and geographic locations, for example, rather than thematic points and counter-points. True to the workings of a far more sceptical post-modernist, Kundera's own variations do not generally gather additional material to shore up a central thesis about the nature of laughter, or forgetting, or slowness, or ignorance, but, as already suggested, work far more often to cast ideas presented elsewhere in his oeuvre in further doubt and to demonstrate the impossibility of conceiving of any theme as a closed totality.

One further borrowing from music that often helps Kundera's novels and their sequences of variations cultivate such an effect also has a potential, though not-identical, predecessor in Broch – that of polyphony. Unlike Kundera's particular use of variation form, the author's use of polyphony has recently been explored in some detail by Stephen Benson, who acknowledges in his monograph's Introduction that despite not wanting to explore purely formal and structural crossings from music to literature as many previous texts somewhat reductively have done, in the chapter on Kundera this nonetheless will form the bedrock of his focus.<sup>17</sup> The suggestion is that formal borrowings from music are so intrinsic to Kundera's novelistic aesthetic that a critic can be led to approach the author's interdisciplinarity from this angle, even when he or she would generally rather be doing so from others, since it is directly through the formal borrowings themselves that emerge music's significance to Kundera on a much deeper than formal level.

The final section of Broch's tripartite *The Sleepwalkers*, *The Realist*, appears to rely upon a similar polyphony to that of Kundera's own aesthetic, featuring extremely similar techniques of switching between diegetic layers, from intra-diegetic narratives to authorial intrusions, and between forms and genres: in Broch's case, these include standard third-person narration, essayistic digressions, script and poetry. Kundera himself makes a thorough analysis of *The Realist* in *Testaments Betrayed*, describing it as 'a "polyphonic" stream composed of five voices, five entirely independent lines: neither a common action nor the same characters tie these lines together, and each has a completely different formal nature (A = novel, B = reportage, C = short story, D = poetry, E = essay).'<sup>18</sup> Broch himself describes the 'new Novel' that he is seeking to construct as displaying a 'rational-irrational polyphony', the poetic sections presumably demonstrating the latter value and the essayistic digressions the former, this fusion of two opposites necessary for a work to encapsulate the total form of existence and, through so doing, to recreate the unity that Broch considers lost.<sup>19</sup> The first two novels in the sequence that makes up *The Sleepwalkers* – *The Romantic* and *The Anarchist* – are not nearly so polyphonic as *The Realist*.<sup>20</sup> But in sections that read almost identically to passages from Kundera's own novels, Broch's extra-diegetic narrator of *The Realist* outlines in a strongly essayistic manner the intra-diegetic central character's relevance to the primary theme of the

novel: 'Huguenau is a man who acts with singleness of purpose... Behind all his purposefulness there lies a logic that is completely stripped of ornament.'<sup>21</sup> And in an interrogatory passage that will again seem extremely familiar to readers of Kundera, this narrator later asks 'Had [Huguenau] committed a murder? Had he done a revolutionary deed?'<sup>22</sup>

Benson suggests that Kundera's use of polyphony should be related back to Bakhtin's analysis of the narrative voice of Dostoevsky, arguing that 'although Kundera never mentions his predecessor by name', his and Bakhtin's 'respective ideas about musical polyphony as a model for narrative are strikingly similar.'<sup>23</sup> While this is true, it is worth dwelling also on their distinctions, especially considering that though Kundera indeed never mentions Bakhtin or Dostoevsky by name as an inspiration, he does openly assign the role of predecessor repeatedly to Broch and so is clearly willing to acknowledge his own debts where he imagines them to be due.

I would suggest that Kundera not overtly tracing the polyphonic qualities of his aesthetic back to Bakhtin and Dostoevsky for himself may well result from the fact that the polyphony that Kundera retrieves from Broch is not quite the same polyphony as Bakhtin locates in Dostoevsky. Bakhtin explores Dostoevsky's deployment of 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.... with equal rights and each with its own world', juxtaposed alongside each other within the same novelistic space but also remaining contrapuntally independent and so never 'merged in the unity of the event.'<sup>24</sup> As is made apparent by Kundera's aforementioned analysis of Broch, the polyphony *these* two writers both utilise emerges not so much through their novels' coordination of the voices of their characters, as much as through its deployment, within a single novelistic space, of various prose styles and modes of writing usually kept separate from one another and marshalled within distinct varieties of literature. This polyphony does not orchestrate a juxtaposition of the third-person voices of different characters, each embracing a different worldview and ideological stance, as much as it juxtaposes essayistic commentary, surrealist dream, poetry and conventional third-person narrative.<sup>25</sup> The closest Kundera's aesthetic comes to the vocal polyphony that Bakhtin locates in Dostoevsky is in his earliest novel, *The Joke*, which explores the same events via the points of view of four different first-person narrators. As soon as Kundera's subsequently trademark extra-diegetic first-person narrator, modelled on Broch's from *The Realist*, begins to make his presence felt from Kundera's second novel, *Life is Elsewhere*, this juxtaposition of first-person narrative voices fades in favour of a polyphony much closer to Broch's diversity of styles and forms.

Though this thesis is not interested in polyphony to the same extent as it is interested in variation form, some of the most striking variations on the themes of slowness, identity and ignorance with which this thesis is primarily concerned nonetheless emerge from possibilities created by Kundera's brand of novelistic polyphony. A criticism Kundera makes of Broch points towards one distinction in their respective uses of polyphony, which illuminates how Kundera's own variety aids his mission of exploring the world through doubt via the medium of a novelistic

variation form. That Kundera ironically cannot see quite how closely his style mirrors Broch's emerges from his critique of *The Realist* in his *The Art of the Novel*. Kundera complains that were the formally disparate elements of Broch's text blended into a truly polyphonic unity, then none would appear to hold legitimacy over the others, but the 'essay on the disintegration of values can readily be taken for the author's own thinking, for the novel's truth' and 'thus may damage the relativity that is indispensable to novelistic space.'<sup>26</sup> The articles and reviews that take lines made by Kundera's extra-diegetic narrators as the overriding truth of his novels and his own ideology suggest, however, that Kundera has not necessarily succeeded more than Broch in separating his own narrators' essayistic digressions from what appears as his own thinking.<sup>27</sup> Simpson agrees with Kundera's criticisms when he argues that because in Broch 'technical' and 'philosophical jargon' is 'suddenly thrown in between purely novelistic sections', the result is a 'jarring effect' that leaves Broch 'guilty of... breaking off bits of an unassimilated "crystal block" of philosophical truth to embellish the narrative, rather than integrating this truth in the narrative'; again, it would be hard not to forgive readers for applying such a criticism to Kundera's own novels, particularly non-academic readers, though they would likely not describe the novelist's essayistic digressions using quite the same lofty language as Simpson.<sup>28</sup>

The complaint Kundera makes about Broch's polyphony, but which could potentially apply to his own too if we take his weaker critics at face value, involves the essayistic sections essentially overpowering the others, rather than sitting alongside them in a process of mutual relativisation. A more attentive reading of Kundera, however, suggests that rather than his own essayistic digressions dominating the more traditionally novelistic sections, in many cases the reverse is true; an attempted domination is overturned by the novelistic sections' rebellion against both the truth-claims that the essayistic sections attempt to impose upon them and the rhetorical methodologies by which these truth-claims are advanced. The non-essayistic sections within his novels often refuse to be contained by the arguments being made about them by the extra-diegetic narrators, or even directly expose the fallacies in these narrators' ways of apprehending and appropriating the textual worlds surrounding them. If Broch's polyphony fails to achieve the true unity that Kundera wishes it would, then the same is ironically true of Kundera's own, only in a manner akin to a mirror image; the complete relativity that Broch loses through his essayistic sections overpowering the others is lost, in Kundera, through the very reverse.

I would argue, however, that Kundera's own failure to achieve a truly equal blend between his different polyphonic streams leads to some of the most interesting moments in his novels, particularly when focussing, like this thesis, on the variations on slowness, identity and ignorance that stretch throughout Kundera's Czech oeuvre before taking centre-stage in his three French novels. For the ways in which the extra-diegetic, essayistic narrator of these French novels are highly fallible interpreters of their own material and bad proponents of their own arguments directly lead their implied readers to the most personally affective insights about slowness, identity and ignorance to be

found throughout the oeuvre. In this way, polyphony and variation form merge and become mutually reinforcing, as the operation of the former becomes indispensable to the most striking instances of the latter. Key variations on the themes under examination directly arise *through* the interplay and interactions between the distinct formal layers or stylistic strands that Kundera's polyphony directly facilitates.

This thesis will take Kundera's wide-ranging use of a specific variety of variation form, distinct from Broch's, as a lens through which to examine the place and function in his oeuvre of his three particularly neglected French novels, *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*. Though indeed most marked in the case of these three French novels, this critical neglect is partially true for his oeuvre as a whole. The popularity and commercial success of, at the very least, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, his fifth Czech novel, has not been met with a corresponding academic focus on either Kundera's oeuvre generally, or even this single novel specifically.<sup>29</sup> This is despite his novels all revelling in a wide range of explicitly postmodern literary devices, and also engaging deeply with themes of particular interest to cultural theorists and philosophers, to no less an extent in the three additionally neglected French novels. Aside from a handful of disparately focussed edited collections, the author's career is explored in English-language criticism by the following notable monographs.

The earliest is Robert Porter's *Milan Kundera: A Voice From Central Europe* (1981).<sup>30</sup> Porter covers only the first three of Kundera's novels, though his book is useful for dating from before Kundera excised from his oeuvre a series of early poetry and plays, which it thus explores to an extent rarely seen elsewhere in English-language criticism. Maria Němcová Banerjee's *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera* (1990) and Fred Misurella's *Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs* (1993) both devote a chapter to each of the novels published at the time of writing and offer many important analyses of individual thematic moments and intertextualities with other works of fiction and philosophy, while lacking much of an overall developing argument about what the oeuvre is seeking to achieve.<sup>31</sup>

Far more specific and critically-focussed an engagement is John O'Brien's *Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections* (1995), which introduces the value of a 'soft-core' deconstructionist approach towards Kundera's novels by showing both how his representations of women might very readily be seen as problematic, and how these surface impressions are potentially undone by subversive elements of his textuality to leave a more complex picture that could, if warily, be described as feminist.<sup>32</sup> O'Brien is not as interested in reductively resolving these contradictory readings as much as he is in letting them simultaneously stand; of all the English-language monographs on Kundera, then, his is the work most directly aligned with the philosophy of the oeuvre it is exploring. Eva Le Grand's *Kundera or The Memory of Desire* (1999), a translation into English of a monograph first published in 1995 in French and then in 1998 in Czech, explores the juxtaposition throughout Kundera's oeuvre of two different presentations of sex. While one

approaches it as a grand adventure that has inherited the legacy of Don Juan, the other suggests that in a world stripped of any notions of shame, what was once erotic can now only be dehumanising and mechanical. *Slowness* is only briefly touched upon during a short epilogue.<sup>33</sup> Hana Píchová's *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera* (2002) supports my claim that Kundera's French novels in particular are neglected. Despite valuably comparing facets of Kundera's novelistic aesthetic that she argues derive from a life spent exiled from his homeland with that of another renowned writer with a similar biography, Píchová almost totally neglects the potential that might emerge from considering the function of the novels that show Kundera moving from the language of his former homeland to the language of the site of his so-called exile.<sup>34</sup>

Another particularly original monograph is Michelle Woods' *Translating Milan Kundera* (2006), which combines a fascinating narrative history of Kundera's quarrels with both his many English translators and his various national audiences, with more traditional literary-criticism that explores the themes of translation and rewriting as they reverberate throughout his oeuvre.<sup>35</sup> As a multi-lingual critic, Woods, like Porter, makes reasonably lengthy references to disowned early works barely mentioned elsewhere and never translated into a language other than their original Czech. She is also particularly valuable for a consideration of how Kundera's pre- and post-1989 novels have been differently received by Czech and British audiences and media. Her work is the only academic monograph to include sections, albeit brief ones, on all three of the French novels. Her analysis of them tends towards an investigation of how Kundera's French prose style preserves the deliberate oddities that he had already built into his Czech and so is not particularly relevant to a study where both Czech and French texts are being explored in English translation. She also draws out the trend that 'with each of the French-language novels, Kundera deliberately appropriates a part of the French or Western European literary discourse and interprets it thematically.'<sup>36</sup> This is true: *Slowness* engages with Vivant Denon's eighteenth-century novella *No Tomorrow* as part of its exploration of twentieth-century society's growing obsession with speed; *Identity* evokes Rostand's nineteenth-century play *Cyrano de Bergerac* during its examination of the dangers that result from the instability of identity; and Kundera's most recent novel at the time of writing, *Ignorance*, turns back towards the birth of European literature with Homer's *Odyssey* in order to unpick its own eponymous theme. As will become clear in Chapters Two, Four and Six of this thesis, however, the most dynamic effects of these borrowings involve the ways in which not Kundera himself but his French narrators and characters *misuse* these texts in ways that point towards, or directly enable, these novels' engagements with the sequences of variations on their themes that have preceded them. Exploring what Kundera is doing with them as a writer outside the text is less interesting than investigating what he has his narrators and characters do with them *within* the text.

Why Kundera's three French novels are generally neglected in English-language criticism, particularly by British critics, is worth considering. The shallowest answer is that they are simply too recent to have accrued much attention. More interesting are several points made by Woods

suggesting that before 1989, Kundera's English-language audience, including both general readers and critics, were interested in the extent to which his works reflected both the conditions of life in a Communist dictatorship and their author's status as dissident and then exile.<sup>37</sup> Following 1989, and with these aspects of far less public interest and relevance, the abiding impression of his work became instead a much lighter and more dismissive one of casually misogynistic and frivolous sex scenes and faux-academic intellectual pretensions.<sup>38</sup> By this model, the key distinction between his six Czech and three French novels is not that the former were originally written in Czech and the latter in French, but that the former were mostly written before 1989, in a climate where the works of a writer banned for political reasons in his country of birth would be intrinsically of interest to a Western European audience, and the latter after, when this was no longer the case. *Immortality* bucks this trend in being the only novel both published after 1989 and originally written in Czech, but also supports my distinction in being the first not set within a totalitarian world *and* the first to be overtly criticised for its sexism and intellectual posturing, when I would argue that these are no more apparent in *Immortality* than in the novels preceding it.<sup>39</sup> There is certainly nothing in its surface treatment of women more problematic than that of Lucie and Helena within *The Joke* or Ruzena within *Farewell Waltz*, to suggest just a few examples.

Kundera is arguably facing the same dilemma described by his contemporary Ivan Klima, who laments that he is 'often asked' what writers from formerly totalitarian countries 'will write now that the revolution is over.'<sup>40</sup> Klima's response closely parallels Kundera's own frustrations with his novels being regarded by his English-speaking readership as polemics against totalitarianism, rather than as wider explorations of the whole human condition, Klima arguing that 'such questions are often based on the false assumption that writers, especially banned writers, wrote mainly about... the cruel and bizarre practices of the communist regime.'<sup>41</sup> In a defence of his own oeuvre that Kundera might well use to vindicate his own recent novels, Klima rebuts that his writing 'does not rely on the existence of any particular regime' but is instead 'linked to our human existence, to our civilisation and its problems.'<sup>42</sup> Klima argues here that readers who wonder what he might write about post-1989 miss the point that the narrow field of the philosophical conditions imposed by political dictatorships was never really his subject matter to begin with. Kundera would agree with him and indeed makes a strikingly similar point in his foreword to the second English translation of *The Joke*, when he declares 'Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story!'<sup>43</sup> Totalitarian worlds offer a backdrop or context for examining specific instances and manifestations of certain universal themes, rather than comprising the prime subject of his novelistic investigations themselves.

Had Kundera's English-language readership been won over by such arguments that his earlier novels were about much more than the philosophical results of political travails in the first place, then the potential readers and critics of his later novels might not have been so put off by the absence of such material, since they would then be able and willing to enjoy them for exactly the same broader thematic concerns on which Kundera would have had them focus throughout previous

novels. And one of the effects of this thesis will be to demonstrate that *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance* do not show an author suddenly bereft of a subject matter reaching for new concerns that have nothing to do with what came before, but instead place for the first time in the foreground themes that have always been of importance to his oeuvre since as far back as *The Joke*.

My preceding survey of English-language monographs on Kundera neglected François Ricard's *Agnès Final Afternoon: An Essay on the Work of Milan Kundera* (2003), a text published not by an academic press but by the mainstream publisher of the English translations of Kundera's fiction, Faber and Faber.<sup>44</sup> It was both commissioned and translated into English, from the original French, by Aaron Asher, the same man who has produced what Kundera hails as the definitive translations into English of *The Joke*, *Life is Elsewhere*, *Farewell Waltz* and *Laughter and Forgetting* and who has also worked as his editor.<sup>45</sup> Ricard's approach to Kundera is superficially more similar to my own than the aforementioned critics. An understanding of the significance of variation form to Kundera's oeuvre appears central to his work, which starts from the final afternoon of *Immortality*'s central character and traces resemblances in theme and character from here both backwards and forwards across Kundera's fiction. When he very briefly mentions *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*, however, it tends to be in order to show how they engage with a blend of multiple themes each already placed explicitly in the foreground of earlier works; *Slowness*, for example, combines the 'satanic laughter' of *Laughable Loves* with the 'nostalgic lightness' of *Farewell Waltz*.<sup>46</sup> This is in danger of creating the sense that the French novels' relationship to these earlier works stands as something of an addendum or a greatest-hits compilation, rather than exploring their importance in a manner more interrogative towards their position within the oeuvre as a whole.

As a corollary of this criticism, through adopting an achronological approach to the oeuvre Ricard has denied himself the opportunity to develop many substantial arguments about the ongoing nature of Kundera's variations on any of his themes, an avenue of investigation that surely becomes particularly apt when considering the novels that come towards the close of a novelistic project with a very particular mission underlying its entirety. Unlike Ricard's text, then, each pair of chapters within this thesis will briefly set out the respective eponymous theme of *Slowness*, or *Identity*, or *Ignorance* as it manifests in the French novel under discussion, before showing how this particular manifestation follows, engages with and advances the prevalent trends and key moments in the series of variations on that theme within Kundera's earlier, Czech fiction. Overall, Kundera's Czech fiction will be shown to highlight the peculiar nature of three particularly affective encounters in these three French novels between the late variations upon these three themes and these novels' implied readers.

My interest in Kundera's late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance (and in the late novels of which these variations form the backbone) follows Adorno's own interest in 'the late works of important artists', which he argues are usually 'wrinkled, even fissured.'<sup>47</sup> They are, furthermore, 'apt to lack sweetness, fending off with a prickly tartness those interested in merely sampling them.'<sup>48</sup> Such arguments cast late works as fragmentary or even broken, in a manner that

garrulously drives away all but the most committed of their audience. The three French novels composed of Kundera's late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance may initially resemble fragments through their sheer slightness and their departure from the structural mores of his previous texts. And the noticeable lack of critical engagement with these texts further suggests that these novels indeed show an unfortunate proclivity for pushing potential readers away: witness, for example, George Steiner's demonstrably false comment that *Identity* is a text 'about which there is virtually nothing to say.'<sup>49</sup>

I would argue, however, that these novels otherwise represent a departure from Adorno's model and the 'prickliness' that leads to critics not engaging with them in the depth they warrant and deserve simply must originate within the critics. It is absolutely not inherent within the texts themselves, for the three French novels published at the time of writing overtly seek to draw their implied readers *in* through the very nature of the late engagements with the three eponymous themes. These three novels are, in turn, the text most crying out to be slowed down by its reader, the text that most requires its identity to be fixed by its reader, and the text that most loudly prompts its reader to worry over whether or not she should herself have remained ignorant of the newly discovered knowledge it has laid temptingly before her. Kundera's late variations upon these themes become the mechanism by which his late novels aim to draw the implied reader closely inside the text herself, so that her skills and her limitations are raised to the highest and subjected to the most rigorous challenges and questioning. The nature of the late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance sees them become the very force of gravity that pulls the implied (if unfortunately not the actual) readers of these three novels down into and through their textual centres. These novels are perhaps as fissured as Adorno argues is the average late style, but in a more seductive manner that shows an ardent desire that their readers not warily back off from these gaps, but plunge headlong in.

Focussing his analysis of late style on Beethoven specifically, Adorno argues that the late works of this one composer demonstrate 'the self-awareness of the insignificance of the individual', through which emerges a 'relationship' with 'death' itself.<sup>50</sup> Of Kundera's late variations, this is partly true, but partly false. These novels demonstrate a stage of the oeuvre that is indeed well aware that it is on its way to fading out and that sees its own death as a shadow across the horizon. And yet they are equally aware of and appreciative of the *significance* of the individuals who will survive beyond this death. Through the implied readership's own relationship with slowness, with identity and with ignorance being placed in the late variations on these themes most overtly in the spotlight, the novels formed around these late variations demonstrate the oeuvre trying on three distinct ways of preparing this readership for the moment when there are no new variations left to play out, when the novelistic project coveting doubt over certainty will have to be taken up by this readership and continue without the oeuvre's further guidance. As its own voyages prepare for their ceasing, the oeuvre seeks, through the specific nature of the late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance,



to pull its readership down into the textual spaces where it can be best prepared for all those upon which it will embark in the future.

This, then, is a thesis with three closely interrelated aims. The first is to provide the most complete and interrogative criticism of Kundera's three French novels, *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*. The second is to redeem these texts not only through looking at them in isolation, but to show that they do not demonstrate an author bereft of a subject matter and suddenly grasping for new themes that have little to do with preceding work that has been reductively taken by readers and critics to be more significant. On the contrary, what these three novels do instead is take themes that have already played out in variations across Kundera's oeuvre and place them, for the first time, in the foreground. This fact leads to the third aim, which is to investigate how these three French novels' engagement with the prevailing trends and main twists within the ongoing variations before them demonstrate an oeuvre growing keen to prepare its audience for an impending time when its investigation of the world has come to an end and when this audience must therefore continue this investigation on its own.

What this thesis necessarily is not is a charting of every single manifestation of the three French themes throughout the entirety of the oeuvre, for an exhaustive survey of every variation on any one of slowness, identity or ignorance could fill a text of this length all by itself. As part of my argument that variations on all Kundera's main themes appear to a greater or lesser extent across his fiction, his first novel *The Joke* already contains manifestations, in major or minor key, upon every theme to be examined in every work to follow. Chapters One, Three and Five will thus each follow a brief outlining of the relevant French theme's manifestations within its own novel by moving into a detailed analysis of *The Joke* and exploring how early variations on this theme play out within its own pages. From a pool of Kundera's five other Czech novels and his short stories, I will then explore the selection of texts that best demonstrate the prevailing trends and the significant shifts, counters, modulations or additions on the initial vision of this theme between *The Joke* and the respective French novel. My closing arguments depend not on every manifestation being listed, but on the ways in which the French novels move Kundera's variations further towards their silence through their responses to the main trends and dilemmas set up within the Czech texts' preceding variations on the three French themes, particularly in terms of how the French variations loudly turn up the volume on their implied readers' own affective encounters with the themes under investigation.

*Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance* ultimately use their late engagements with their eponymous themes to pull their implied readers towards a powerful success in *Slowness* and a powerful failure in *Identity*, before finding a thorny middle ground, lodged uncomfortably between success and failure, through provoking the implied reader of *Ignorance* to experience the loudest version of a quintessentially Kunderan dilemma about the ethical status of knowledge itself. The

three sequences of variations upon the themes of slowness, identity and ignorance thus move through these three French novels to work directly upon Kundera's audience to a personally affective extent never quite like that of the variations on these themes within previous texts, in order to ready this audience for a death that the oeuvre spies hovering over the horizon. As we shall see with *Slowness*, the late variations that comprise these novels arguably begin by their keenness in preparing their readership leading them unwittingly to betray the aesthetic governing the Czech oeuvre preceding them: firstly through resolving the doubt about this novel's themes that characterises the themes' manifestations within the majority of the oeuvre preceding it, and also through allowing the reader to place herself on something of a pedestal through becoming all too sure of her own abilities. Within *Identity* and *Ignorance*, however, the oeuvre recovers from this misstep and takes care to re-establish the notion of doubt that is key to Kundera's aesthetic strongly and lastingly – ultimately in a manner ironically directed at the ethicality and worth of the very process of exploration that sees the reader moving from one page of the oeuvre to the next.

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Trans Aaron Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996) 227. Further references will be cited within the text as *LF*.

<sup>2</sup> John Updike is truculently unwilling to believe the narrator's explanation of the book's structure, stating that it is 'more than a collection of seven stories' but 'certainly no novel.' John Updike. "Czech Angels." *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (London: André Deutsch Limited, 1984) 509.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin S. Brown. *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1948); Calvin S. Brown. "Theme and Variation as a Literary Form". *Musico-Poetics in Perspective: Calvin S. Brown in Memoriam*. Eds. Jean-Louis Cupers and Ulrich Weisstein (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000) 236.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, "Theme and Variation as a Literary Form", 238.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Benson. *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Prieto. *Listening In: Music, Mind, and the Modernist Narrative* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002) x.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Milan Kundera. *The Art of the Novel*. Trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1988) 6-8. Milan Kundera, "Introduction" in Miguel Cervantes. *Don Quixote*. Trans. Charles Jarvis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) v.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Milan Kundera. *The Curtain*. Trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2007) 71.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Ann Doody is one of a growing number of writers happy to synthesise the novel post-Cervantes with seven surviving Ancient Greek and Latin works. This has not proven an entirely uncontroversial move, but Doody argues persuasively that all the works across two millennia that can be classed as novels share a project focussed on 'the recognition of imperfection' and 'the mixed nature of experience.' She ends her exhaustive survey with the conclusion that the Novel (her capital) 'rejoices in a rich muddy messiness that is the ultimate despair of *Facismum*.' See Doody. *The True Story of the Novel* (London: Fontana Press, 1998) 485. Though Terry Eagleton expresses scepticism towards the historical breadth of Doody's claims about the novel, he argues similarly that it does not only seek to avoid strict definitions about the world and its workings, 'but actively undermines them.' See Eagleton, *The English Novel* (Oxford Publishing: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 1. For all Doody and Eagleton might disagree about during which historical moment the novel first emerges, their models of what it actually does once it has appeared demonstrate a shared appreciation of its ability to cultivate doubt towards orderings of the world that seek to reduce an intrinsic muddle into a more easily conceivable and comfortable, but entirely artificial, neatness.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin S. Brown. *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1948) 128.

<sup>14</sup> Hermann Broch. *The Guiltless*. Trans. Ralph Manheim (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 289.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Broch, *The Guiltless*, 9-10, 40-41; Hermann Broch. *The Sleepwalkers*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 46-48, 523; Hermann Broch. *The Spell*. Trans. H. F. Broch de Rothermann (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989) 75, 102, 246.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen D. Dowden. *Sympathy for the Abyss: A Study in the Novel of German Modernism: Kafka, Broch, Musil and Thomas Mann* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986) 36.

<sup>17</sup> Benson, *Literary Music*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Milan Kundera. *Testaments Betrayed*. Trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1995) 19-20. Kundera also outlines the alternating genres and forms of *The Realist* in *The Art of the Novel*. Here he describes them as 'novelistic narrative', 'short story', 'reportage', 'poetic narrative', and 'philosophical essay' (73).

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Dorrit Claire Cohn. *The Sleepwalkers: Elucidations of Hermann Broch's Trilogy* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1966) 14. Hannah Arendt agrees with my hypothesis in "The Achievement of Hermann Broch." *The Kenyon Review* Vol. XI, No. 1 (Winter, 1949) 481.

<sup>20</sup> Arendt suggests that this move in the final third is designed to stage, before the reader's eyes, the crisis through which the novel form itself was transitioning, from an 'accessible and popular' art to a modernist alternative more 'difficult and esoteric', *The Romantic* therefore mostly conforming to a stylistic imitation of nineteenth-century realism that is exploded by the experimentation of *The Realist*. See Arendt, "The Achievement of Hermann Broch", 476-77.

<sup>21</sup> Broch, *The Sleepwalkers*, 416.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 625.

<sup>23</sup> Benson, *Literary Music*, 71. Chapter Three of this text is the best exploration of the importance of musicology to Kundera's novelistic practice, though it focuses on polyphony without dwelling on the centrality of variation form itself.

<sup>24</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 6.

<sup>25</sup> See Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 76, where he outlines that Part Three of *Laughter and Forgetting* flits between '(1) the anecdote about the two schoolgirls and their levitation; (2) the autobiographical narrative; (3) the critical essay on a feminist book; (4) the fable of the angel and the devil; (5) the narrative about Éluard flying over Prague...'

<sup>26</sup> Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> See *Ibid.*, 129-30, where Kundera complains that the essayistic line 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting' is often taken as the 'message' of his own *Laughter and Forgetting*, when it clearly is not.

<sup>28</sup> Simpson, *The Novels of Hermann Broch*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> See Michelle Woods. *Topics in Translation: Translating Milan Kundera* (Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2006) *Lightness of Being* 'catapulted' Kundera into 'major international bestselling status' (38). Woods points out that Robert Porter's text from 1981, introduced below, is the single lengthy study of Kundera by a British academic. She also suggests that there have only been six British-authored journal articles. If she ever updates her book, she might like to include my own "Milan Kundera's *Slowness*: Making it Slow" from the *Review of European Studies* Vol.1 No.2 (2009). She also cites Kuhlitz's own analysis of the 'discrepancy between Kundera's position... as a bestselling author and the lack of scholarly and critical writing on his work' (162).

<sup>30</sup> Robert Porter. *Milan Kundera: A Voice From Central Europe* (Aarhus: Arkona Publishers, 1981)

<sup>31</sup> Maria Nĕmcová Banerjee. *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990); Fred Misurella. *Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993)

<sup>32</sup> John O'Brien. *Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995) 67.

<sup>33</sup> Eva Le Grand. *Kundera or The Memory of Desire*. Trans. Lin Burman (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999)

<sup>34</sup> Hana Píčová. *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera* (Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 2002)

<sup>35</sup> Woods, *Translating Milan Kundera*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-66.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-71.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 169. While other novels are described as having pretentious elements, *Immortality* is the first where 'pretentiousness' appears specifically levelled as a main charge. See also O'Brien, *Kundera and Feminism*, 123.

<sup>40</sup> Ivan Klima. *My Golden Trades*. Trans. Paul Wilson (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 284.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

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<sup>43</sup> Milan Kundera. *The Joke*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim (Middlesex: Penguin, 1984) v.

<sup>44</sup> François Ricard. *Agnès Final Afternoon*. Trans. Aaron Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2003)

<sup>45</sup> Woods argues that such closeness between Asher and Kundera has led in *Agnès Final Afternoon* to 'deliberate editorialising' and 'fundamental errors'. *Translating Milan Kundera*, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Ricard, *Agnès Final Afternoon*, 41-2.

<sup>47</sup> Theodor W Adorno. "The Late Style (I)" in *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 123.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>49</sup> George Steiner. "She's scared to blink in case her man turns into somebody else." *The Observer* (Sunday 19 April, 1998) 2. If he were correct, then Chapter Five of this thesis would evidently be much shorter.

<sup>50</sup> Theodor W Adorno. "The Late Style (II)" in *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 161.

## **Part One**

### *Slowness*

### **One: Variations on *Slowness***

François Ricard's postscript to the French 1998 edition of Milan Kundera's *Slowness* documents the 'two traits' that separate the work from the artistic norms of the six Czech novels that Kundera had written previously, namely its remarkable brevity and the simplicity of its structure.<sup>1</sup> Despite these obvious variations, to which we can add the use of a language that Kundera had previously reserved for his non-fiction, *Slowness* continues the familiar project affirmed in both *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and the theoretical *The Art of the Novel*, that of investigating 'the trap the world has become' (*ULB*, 215).<sup>2</sup>

This first French novel's main preoccupation is a dissection of the late twentieth-century's increasing obsession with speed and the malign effects of this on our existential situation. *Slowness* documents the events of a single night, split into two time-periods separated by over two hundred years. A character in his own right, as in earlier novels since *Life is Elsewhere*, Kundera's extradiegetic narrator compares our era unfavourably with the libertine France of the eighteenth-century, exemplified for him by Vivant Denon's novella *No Tomorrow*, first published in 1777. In this earlier, less hasty period, all actions, chiefly the erotic, are apparently performed with a slowness that gilds them with a grace and significance of which the narrator's contemporary characters can only dream.

The narrator's stance is initially convincing, particularly for a reader tricked by the novel's slightness into imagining that it requires less serious engagement than Kundera's previous work. An attentive reading, however, reveals the narrator's complicity with the trends he decries. *Slowness* can be approached most rewardingly as a novel about a poor reading of *No Tomorrow*, one infected by the contemporary trends Kundera's narrator condemns. Just as a longer look at *No Tomorrow* than the narrator of *Slowness* evidently has time for exposes his reading as flawed, a resistance towards the seductive masks worn by *Slowness* itself leads us beyond its flimsy surface and produces a longer, *slower* text than we at first imagine, which urges the implied reader – performatively as well as constatively – not to be deceived by the speedy, sound-bite arguments that are not only critiqued within the narrative, but simultaneously comprise it. Despite the faults of the narrator's rhetorical strategies, the novel ultimately succeeds by propounding a physical and mental way of being that it itself flouts: by persuasively glorifying the qualities of slowness but failing to demonstrate them through its own representational strategies, the novel encourages a transformation within its implied reader that facilitates her to rise above the problematic conceits of its narrator and make of his work a genuinely slow text.

Even a cursory examination of Kundera's Czech fiction reveals that these themes placed at the front and centre of *Slowness* are not new concerns, but reverberate throughout Kundera's oeuvre from the very opening of his earliest novel, *The Joke*. Here a very simple vision of the speed later decried by the first French narrator is placed before the reader. Variations on this tempo and on its opposite then

spread throughout not only the rest of that novel, but continue beyond *The Joke* throughout much of Kundera's Czech oeuvre as they build towards the extended examination of slowness and speed within *Slowness* itself.

### *The Joke*

Much of what Kundera's fiction has to say about speed and slowness is already present as early as the very opening set of variations within his debut novel, *The Joke*. These variations complicate an initially rather simplistic treatment of speed in two ways: by introducing further versions or types of speed and its opposite, slowness, and by counterpointing positive depictions of each of these types with negative alternatives.

In the first scene, Ludvik narrates that he 'walked as fast as [he] could' in search of his friend, Kostka.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the few paragraphs preceding this incident, Ludvik vividly conveys his bitterness towards the world around him, his speed thus appearing the physical representation of a personality defined largely by unease and hostility. Ludvik himself admits, on the very first page, that the goals that have brought him to the mining town of Ostrava are 'cynical and low', his unease directed therefore not only at his personal history and his environment, but also his own present self (*TJ*, 3). Ludvik's frantic search for Kostka might erroneously be interpreted as fuelled by the immediately pressing need to correct an unforeseen detail that could potentially see Ludvik's plan derailed. He seeks revenge against the man who destroyed his life many years ago by seducing this man's wife, Helena, but the hotel room he has hired contains a damaged bed unfit for purpose, necessitating the borrowing of his discreet friend's flat. Yet his rush to find Kostka is entirely unnecessary: Helena will not arrive in Ostrava until the next morning and Ludvik knows where Kostka lives and works, meaning that the solution to his problem is easily accomplishable. His physical speed of movement cannot be accounted for more generally by his distaste at his mission leading to a wish to complete it as quickly as possible, since its reliance on Helena's arrival ensures that its time of completion is beyond his direct control. His speed is instead expressive of a general unease that, in this instance, is fuelled further by his obvious self-knowledge of the darkness of his goal, displaced via projection onto problems at least partly concocted.

This very early image is almost immediately complicated. Soon afterwards, speed continues to suggest a character's unfavourable mentality, though not only as an external physical signifier of an inner mental anguish, but also within the form and tempo of a narrator's monologue. *The Joke* is immediately distinct from Kundera's other novels in featuring not a mostly omniscient first-person narrator who occasionally interrupts the narrative with digressions of his own, but four more traditional first-person narrators.<sup>4</sup> Lubomír Doležel describes *The Joke* as a 'multiperspective novel', in which 'different sets of narrated events are rendered in different narrative modes and/or perspectives.'<sup>5</sup> The narrative mode achieved via the monologue of Helena, who narrates Part Two and

small sections of Part Seven, is characterised almost wholly by long, run-on sentences, composed of many successive main clauses separated not by periods but by commas. The first paragraph begins by stating ‘Tonight I’m going to bed early, I may not fall asleep, but I’m going to bed early, Pavel left for Bratislava this afternoon, I’ll fly to Brno early tomorrow morning’, and continues through several more clauses before pausing at a question mark; as her narration continues, lengthy paragraphs are composed of just a single gushing sentence (15).

Helena’s monologue is breathless and frenetic, drawing the reader towards a complicity with her avalanche of mostly trite observations and declarations by demanding that the reading speed up in order to match the monologue’s unrelenting pace. An unresisting reader is left with as little time for careful and critical reflection about Helena’s subject matters as Helena appears willing to give these subjects herself. Helena’s declarations are often ones of blind faith: in Marxism, in the Communist Party, in the Czech martyr Julius Fucik, in the Fucik Song and Dance Ensemble, in her husband Pavel Zemanek and in the previous narrator, Ludvik, whom she describes variously as ‘nice’, ‘straightforward’, ‘gallant’ and ‘cheerful’ (15, 23). Helena is also obviously hypocritical, denouncing the ‘little bitches’ from her radio station who engage in extra-marital affairs while very easily excusing her own planned infidelities as part of her search for ‘love’ as a transcendental ideal (21). Helena’s monologue not only shows a complete lack of the slow reflection later recommended by the narrator of the first French novel, *Slowness*, but also an active distrust of it, denouncing as a fad the contemporary trend of communists reappraising the era of Stalin (19-20). John O’Brien suggests that Helena ‘actively encourages simplified perceptions of herself.’<sup>6</sup> This is true, but Helena in fact actively encourages simplified perceptions of everything.

This is a more complex variation on the theme of speed than we have seen conveyed via Ludvik. The speed with which Helena rushes from one subject to the next moves the theme of speed from the physical movements of characters within the narrated content of the novel, relocating it instead to the mode of the narrating act that is the producer of this content. Different variations on the concept of *representational* speed and slowness will become increasingly important as this voyage moves onwards towards its final port of call. Helena’s form of narrative speed is partly characterised by a great discrepancy between the actual duration of the events being narrated – as they were experienced several months or years prior to their narration as events in the past – and the length of each moment of Helena’s narrating act itself as it rushes through these events. Her speedy narrative recounts a large number of events that would not have passed in anything like the same blink of an eye as do the successive fragmentary clauses that comprise Helena’s narrating of these events.<sup>7</sup> The narrating act of Ludvik in Part One is, by contrast, fairly slow in terms of its own relationship between duration of narrated content and the length of narrating act. Ludvik’s pacing across the Town Square is likely to have taken less time than his future self’s recounting of it. His is a reasonably lengthy narration of speedy movement, rather than an almost incoherently brief narration of many events of a sizeable duration.



Speed of physical movement is thus joined by a moment that highlights instead the representational speed of a narrating act. Through her haste, Helena not only demonstrates the speedy characteristics of the entrenched uncritical thinking that has allowed her to retrieve from each of her reported experiences the various unproblematised faiths on display here, but potentially transmits that same reductive, uncritical way of apprehending these events onto the reader herself. But a detail of Helena's narration provides a means for the implied reader herself to contribute a further variation on speed and slowness to those encountered so far, one that effectively performs the unsettling of Helena's idealism for her. For the reader can resist the speed of Helena's outpourings and follow behind at a slower pace. This is an act of resistance taking place outside the novel that reflects an act of resistance within the novel subsequently made by one of the novel's other characters.

Later on, while Ludvik's second shift as narrator describes his experiences during military service, we see the characters themselves choosing a state of slowness as a direct form of resistance against the punishing regime. During a Sunday relay race designed by the officers as a physical punishment for the poor state of their barracks, the black insignias derail the officers' entertainment by running as slowly as possible, their slowness driving the officers into a rage while uniting the brigade in rare mirth at their expense (95-95). Helena's monologue allows the reader herself to take a similar stand against a compulsion towards speed, with Helena's aforementioned glowing appraisal of Ludvik the most suitable place for mounting this kind of opposition.

In the non-fictional *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera suggests that 'only a slow reading, twice and many times over, can bring out all the ironic connections inside a novel.'<sup>8</sup> Noticing the ironic connections between Helena's impression of Ludvik and the actual characteristics of Ludvik's mind is the result of just such a slow reading: a reading that breaks free from the relentlessly forward momentum of Helena's narration and looks, instead, backwards at a moment in the reader's own recent past, the moment during which Ludvik has clearly laid bare his cynicism and hostility. This moment of reflection enlightens the reader with an awareness of the more dangerous truths underlying Helena's capacity for self-deception and temporarily allows the reader the opportunity to become everything that Helena, at this point, is not – willing to slow down, to notice moments of contradiction between what she is being led to think in her present and what she has herself observed in her reading past, rather than taking Helena's representations at the same face value as Helena appears to do herself and rushing onwards.

The reader of *The Joke* thus acquires, through her own response to the speed of Helena's narration, an early look at a formulation on receptional slowness that will later become absolutely key to the experience of the implied reader of *Slowness* itself. The reductive results of representational speed are utterly reliant upon a contract between the person producing the speedy representation and the person who is targeted as this representation's audience. The more a narrator is willing to analyse the content of his or her narration before (or, at least, *as*) he or she narrates it, the more he or she will inevitably tend towards a narrative slowness. Speedy representations, on the other hand, potentially

facilitate in their audience the same dangerous idealism residing within the mind of the character making the representations, albeit one that can only survive being put to an audience if this audience agrees to receive these representations with an equal speed, which would see the audience demonstrate the same forsaking of analysis and review that has already been performed by the person producing these representations. The idealism produced by a *representational* speed is dependent, then, on a concomitant *receptional* speed. A deliberate gear-shift on the part of the reader towards a receptional slowness (much like Ludvik's gear-shift away from the speed towards which the camp authorities compel him during the relay race) here illuminates the ways in which the products of representational speed are reductive, through bringing to light the inaccuracies and greater nuance that the representational speed worked to perpetuate. Receptional slowness is thus illuminated here as the mode conducive to fact-checking and review, to the digging up of the very foundations upon which idealisms like Helena's in Ludvik are seen to rely.

So while the first variation charted suggests that speed is a signifier of a problematic mentality, the second confirms this general valuation of speed by showing that a different variety of speed is similarly troublesome. This second variation adds a further flourish that highlights the role the reader herself can play in slowing a speedy representation down. It is not only that speed is again depicted negatively – a move towards slowness becomes an antidote to its most deleterious effects.

Later in the novel, we see these effects confirmed when Ludvik himself refuses to inhabit a mode of receptional slowness. About to complete his long-planned revenge on Zemanek through cruelly manipulating Helena towards a deliberately degrading sexual encounter, Ludvik interrupts her just as she appears on the verge of explaining to him that she and Zemanek are in the process of separating, the ellipse at the end of her speech suggesting a hesitation fuelled by her discomfort at acknowledging this stain on her idealised life and marriage (186). This is a rare case of Helena actually working herself up towards taking the time to narrate an uncomfortable aspect of her life with accuracy and precision, rather than breezing past it in a way that allows the potential topic of discomfort to remain resolutely unscrutinised.

Helena's attempted move into slowness is one that Ludvik would have been better off giving the time it needed (186). Ludvik later spends much of Part Seven rallying against 'History' for playing 'jokes' at his expense, in this case leading him to believe that he has orchestrated the perfect revenge before revealing to him that the most basic foundation of his plan – Helena and her husband remaining in love – is fraudulent (288). But had he simply waited until her fear at continuing her speech had resolved itself, he would have discovered this in advance and known not to press ahead. While Helena attempts a move away from her earlier proclivity for representational speed, Ludvik does the opposite of what the implied reader has done in response to Helena's earlier haste. The reader previously slowed Helena's narrative down to draw out an inaccuracy in her representations; Ludvik misses absolutely key information by not allowing Helena to slow down herself.

In all the variations charted thus far, slowness appears an inevitably positive mode of being and speed a negative, much like will later be very neatly suggested by the narrator of *Slowness* itself. But an exploration of a theme in the style of variation form that Kundera locates in Beethoven is not supposed to leave such a neat dichotomy intact. Nor would such neatness suit Kundera's conception of the novel as a form uniquely conducive to exploring the world via the mode of doubt rather than certainty. And so further variations on speed and slowness build a portfolio of valid evidence to the contrary. From Part Three of *The Joke*, counterpoints to the variations charted already demonstrate both a physical speed and a mental speed to be advantageous over their slower equivalents.

Perhaps the loudest of the counterpoints relating to physical speed manifests via Ludvik's object of desire during his time with the black insignias. Suffering from a history of extreme sexual violence, Lucie is described as 'radiating a resigned consciousness... that it was useless to reach impatiently towards anything'; her physical slowness is akin to a depression with such a strong hold over its subject that Lucie 'seemed almost to be *sitting slowly*' (66). In contrast to the physical speed of Ludvik in the opening paragraphs of the novel, here a physical speed would suggest not discomfort at one's low motives, but an eagerness, or vitality for life, that Lucie completely lacks. With the Ludvik of the opening scene, a physical slowness might have suggested a comfort in one's own skin, or a body not beset with tensions emanating from a mind at war with itself. For Lucie, the opposite is true. Were she to become happier, her body might speed up.

This incident of physical slowness signifying anguish is far from singular. During the aforementioned relay race, Alexej tries to gain the officers' favour and show up his fellow black insignias by running fast. His slowness, unlike that of his fellows, is due not to choice but is the fault of his 'puny' frame (96). Fewer than twenty pages later, Alexej is about as slow as he could possibly be: completely 'immobile', or dead through exhaustion (114). And in Part Seven, Kostka's hand, during a heart attack, is seen 'slowly slipping down' his body, shortly before he has to be, in the novel's final sentence, 'slowly led' towards an ambulance (316-17). Kostka has recently described himself as walking 'slowly' and 'with fatigue'; his lack of speed no longer suggests mere tiredness, but is unveiled as a precursor of a condition that, for all the reader knows, is eventually fatal (266). With Lucie, a physical slowness is the result of mental depression. In these further variations on this theme, a physical slowness is a result of physical infirmity. Bodies might move quickly when the mind that controls them is anguished, but they might also move slowly when that mind has been worn away, or when the body itself is failing.

It is not only the early negative depictions of physical speed that are thus counterpointed. One variation acts as a stark counterpoint to the moment above where Ludvik's receptional speed in the face of Helena's halting admission appears productive of ignorance. His desire for revenge against Zemanek might actually have been readily achievable, but only had Ludvik acted much more swiftly, with much less slow reflection, considerably earlier in his life.

Once Ludvik has learnt that his long-plotted revenge against Zemanek could only ever have failed, he realises that during his original disciplinary hearing, many years ago, he ‘should have gone up to [Zemanek] and punched him in the face, then and only then’ (293). Ludvik now knows that ‘when it is postponed, vengeance is transformed into something deceptive, into a personal religion, into a myth...’, a myth towards which his previously unproblematised faith ironically renders him no less deceived than Helena’s faith in Ludvik or Marxism (293). Ludvik indeed spends much of Part Seven rallying against ‘History’ for playing ‘jokes’ at his expense and, as suggested above, his frustration is definitely not solely due to a metaphysical force that he posits as existing beyond his agency. But rather than this frustration resulting solely from his aforementioned failure to slow down and give Helena’s explanations the time they need, it is equally due to Ludvik’s much earlier failure to act speedily when the situation most warranted it and fulfil his understandable lust for revenge the moment it first manifested. The move he now wishes he had made would have demonstrated a speed of thought and a speed of action working in harmony: a quick mental acceptance of the urge to strike Zemanek – rather than subjecting this urge to a slower scrutiny – followed by the swift transition of this urge from the realm of thought to the realm of action. A sudden and brief moment of physical violence could well have saved Ludvik from a lifetime of slow-burning reflection and resentment.

Having produced an aporia between the values of slowness and speed through playing several variations that suggest the positive and negative potentials of both tempos, *The Joke* then works to consolidate this aporia within its closing sequences through bringing to the fore aspects of both slowness and speed in a manner that allows problematic associations of each to be highlighted in very quick succession.

By the middle of Part Seven, Helena has taken a handful of tablets and written Ludvik a suicide letter, which, upon delivery, Ludvik delays reading due to his unwillingness to confront the shame provoked by what he imagines will be words castigating his treatment of her (290-91, 295). When Ludvik ‘finally’ reads the letter, the frustration of the reader will likely become relief, as Ludvik realises the need for physical speed (296-97). The value of Ludvik’s speed seems proven when he reaches Helena in good time. But upon seeing that Helena has mistakenly taken not poison but laxatives, a potential tragedy and triumphant rescue both collapse abruptly into farce (302). Ludvik’s haste no longer signifies a noble desperation to save Helena’s life, and, consequent to this, a sign that the nihilism he demonstrates throughout the novel has finally been usurped by his recognition of a positive cause deserving his urgent attention. It becomes, instead, yet another indicator of the ignorance that has dogged him throughout, while also being rendered completely unnecessary, since Helen would have survived either with his intervention or without it. Yet slowness in the shape of procrastination is not vindicated, for his initial delay in opening Helena’s letter remains a signifier of moral cowardice, albeit one that would never have proven fatal as the reader imagined.

A full comprehension of the situation thus suggests that neither tempo is particularly useful. First slowness and then speed both appear to be key factors within a sequence that ultimately mocks the outcome that either would engender. In an ironic counterpoint to the moments in Ludvik's life when he has twice made the wrong choice between slowness and speed, here the choice between slowness and speed is brought to the fore and then shown to be irrelevant, as what seems to be the correct choice is reframed as a sign of Ludvik's incomprehension of what is actually happening. This scene's place very near the close of the novel ensures that any certainty the reader has reductively acquired regarding the worth of either slowness or speed over its opposite is unsettled as she moves towards the novel's close. The final mood of the explorer of this first port of call on Kundera's voyage is, towards the respective values of slowness and speed, likely to be one of aporia.

Kundera's first novel is clearly itself 'a novel in the form of variations' much like his later *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and, just as this thesis will demonstrate, his other novels are also. But *The Joke* is not only constructed around the series of variations on the theme of humour that would be charted by a concretization of the text in line with the suggestions of its title. It is also, long before the first French novel, a text composed of variations on the themes that later preoccupy the narrator of *Slowness*. After a fairly simple variation on the theme is given, which sees a fast physical movement result from mental distress, successive variations complicate matters by building up an increasingly multi-faceted picture of what exactly speed and slowness can represent or demonstrate. Physical varieties of speed and slowness are joined by their representational equivalents – still related to movement, but that of a narrator and her narrating act as they move quickly or slowly through their various materials. Related to this is the receptional speed or slowness of the audience of these acts. A receptional slowness is not necessarily determined by the speed of the narrating act that is being received, for an intended audience can elect to slow down or speed up its reception. This choosing by the reader of a different tempo to that of the narrator is a form of resistance, first experienced at the very start of the voyage, that will later prove of the utmost importance to the implied reader of the first French novel.

### ***Farewell Waltz***

A wariness of prizing either slowness or speed above its alternative might well run aground by the close of *Farewell Waltz*, which more than any of Kundera's other works invites being read as an extended manifesto against the stance later displayed in *Slowness*, by standing unambiguously on the side of speed.

More than one hundred pages before *Farewell Waltz*'s tragic finale, the former political dissident Jakub has, through a mixture of cowardice and clumsiness, given the nurse Ruzena a fatal tablet that looks almost identical to her own anti-anxiety medication.<sup>9</sup> Jakub is emigrating from Communist Czechoslovakia for good, but visiting his old friend Dr. Skreta en route to the border in

order to return the poison that Jakub demanded from him fifteen years previously; the young Jakub had then recently survived a year in prison, which created a desire that he always be able to guarantee that his moment of death would be one of his choosing (*FW*, 75, 97). Ruzena, meanwhile, is being hassled by her one-time lover, Klima, to save his marriage by aborting their illicit child – a protracted situation that causes her frequently to reach for her pills. The inevitability of the novel's conclusion pervades much of its second half.

As it moves towards the coming tragedy, the novel features a handful of moments that work to pin the blame for Ruzena's eventual death on speed. Reflecting upon the mix-up of the tablets, Jakub thinks 'that it had happened so quickly that he had not even had time to become aware of it' (169). Much earlier in the novel, Bertleff, a fellow patient at the spa town who is depicted almost throughout as something of a modern-day sage, decries how alarm clocks 'violently' awaken people and force them to 'surrender themselves to deadly haste', before wondering 'what kind of day can follow a beginning of such violence?' (26). It would seem that the later event answers Bertleff's rhetorical question by suggesting that the frenzied way in which days begin establishes a tempo of speedy unawareness that traps us in its rhythms and culminates with Jakub inadvertently giving Ruzena his poison, by somehow robbing him of the abilities of both conscious awareness and physical intervention.

But Jakub's excuse is a blatant lie and so his attempt to pin the blame on speed is doomed to failure. The reader has just observed Jakub aware of exactly what is happening, moment by moment, as Ruzena retrieves her tablets with his own left amongst them. Jakub himself realises this and, a paragraph after disowning his awareness, acknowledges that he was in fact cognisant of the disaster all along (169). This new self-awareness, however, does little to compel him towards solving the problem, despite the fact that nearly twenty-four hours of story-time pass between the switch and Ruzena's demise.

Over the following chapters, Jakub has numerous opportunities to retrieve his pill, each of which he shamefully squanders. Almost immediately after the switch, Jakub is aware that 'every second of hesitation increased the danger threatening the nurse', yet he fails to chase after her (170). This paralysis is fuelled by his belief that his initial moments of 'doing nothing' ensure that anyone to whom he confesses the truth of the situation will consider that he gave Ruzena the pill deliberately and so think him a 'murderer', an initial slowness in reacting appropriately to the emergent situation thus snowballing into a continuing paralysis (170). Later on in the day, when Jakub is sitting in the same row as Ruzena during a concert, his immobility in the face of a huge opportunity to save her life becomes to him 'a horrifying image' (196). The following morning, Jakub hears that Ruzena is still alive and so comes to the erroneous conclusion that she has taken the tablet and been spared by Skreta having originally given him a fake (224). This is not the case: while on the previous day Jakub was aware of the need for speedy physical intervention but unwilling to actually intervene, he is now

unaware of this need's continuing existence. The extreme slowness in physical reaction that condemns Ruzena results first from Jakub's cowardice and then from his ignorance.

An extended variation, then, that sees a male character knowing that a female character is at imminent risk of death from swallowing poison but who, through his own cowardice, delays the swift intervention that could readily save her. A variation not only on the themes of speed and slowness themselves, but, more precisely, on the specific variation that plays throughout the final sequence of *The Joke*, with Ludvik and Helena replaced by Jakub and Ruzena. Only this time the need for speed, though raised just as urgently, is never ironically neutered as it is in the earlier novel by the realisation that Helena is never actually in danger. This variation's muting of the earlier counterpoint demonstrates most clearly a move from aporia to definite manifesto. The consolidation at the close of *The Joke* of a thematic ambiguity is, in *Farewell Waltz*, thoroughly dismantled through a recontextualised replay of the very same scene.

And it is not just Jakub's slowness in informing Ruzena of the switch that has doomed her. Jakub arrives at the spa town at the very start of the third of the novel's five days and immediately informs Dr. Skreta that he is only staying for 'one day' (72). Skreta dismisses Jakub's planned visit as 'absurdly brief'; Olga, a patient at the spa and Jakub's ward, also chides him for being in 'such a hurry' and urges him to 'stay longer' (72, 100). By the close of the third day, Jakub knows that he will 'let himself be persuaded' (138). The following morning, Jakub's procrastination is described negatively as an 'indecisive lethargy' that seems to grip him 'exactly when circumstances demanded energetic and resolute behaviour', even before he has given Ruzena his pill (156). Near the beginning of the fifth and final day, Jakub explicitly states that he 'should have left yesterday' and only remains at the spa 'through [his] own delay' (231).

His hesitation in the face of disaster, then, would not have even become an issue had he not slowed down his leave-taking. Ruzena's death is therefore caused by two separate examples of slowness conspiring against her, both of which take the form of a mental indecision that leads to a delay in physical action. The first act of mental indecision and the physical delay it engenders is initially fairly innocuous, since it is unlikely to affect the fortunes of anyone other than Jakub himself. But this first case of physical delay is directly responsible for the situation rendered needlessly fatal by the second case of mental vacillation and the physical vacillation to which it in turn also leads. There is little way for the reader of this novel to see beyond a tangle of different slownesses in which mental and physical varieties intertwine, each of which engenders the next and each of which could easily be prevented from leading to Ruzena's death by a sudden burst of speed.

The closing scenes of *Farewell Waltz* do not trouble themselves to provide variations that would ensure this novel ends on a restored sense of aporia. Both Jakub and Kamila – the wife of the aforementioned Klima – are driving separately away from the spa town in and around which the majority of the novel is situated. Jakub is described as driving 'slowly, now and then interrupting his

reflections to look at the landscape' (257). His reflections concern Raskolnikov from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who allegedly knew that as he was committing murder he was 'crossing a horrifying threshold' and 'transgressing divine law' (256-57). In contrast to Raskolnikov, Jakub imagines that the intrinsic lack of tragedy in the modern world means that had he "really killed Ruzena", rather than given her fake poison, he would feel absolutely no remorse. But the reader knows that Jakub *has* indeed really killed her and is indeed experiencing no remorse, making his very lengthy musings during his slow drive irrelevant to the genuinely tragic events of the scene he has created and is abandoning.

Kamila, meanwhile, drives away 'at great speed' and has realised 'that somewhere ahead on the road of her life a line indicating the breakup with [Klima] had already been traced' (262). Her epiphany, unlike Jakub's, is a hugely worthwhile one, since the husband she now feels she can live without and has clung to only through insecurity has spent the entirety of the novel manipulating another woman to abort their child. Kamila's inhabitation of the tempo of speed appears a genuine companion to liberation and insight.

While Ludvik's physical speed at the start of *The Joke* results *from* mental burdening, Kamila's here is paralleled with mental clarity. One appears a consequence of something negative, the other a cause, or at least a corollary, of something positive. The obvious difference is that Ludvik's physical speed was one created by his own limbs, while Kamila's is aided by technology. As a driver, Kamila is both moving at a great speed – in that her body is very quickly crossing through physical space – and not actually moving that much, or that quickly, at all. Breaking physical laws through simultaneously moving and being at rest is perhaps enough of a feat to make anything appear possible. And, more specifically, that the breaking of physical laws in this case concerns moving at great speed with little physical effort suggests that any life situation is easily escapable and can be readily departed. When such magic exists, what real problem is a troublesome husband? It appears little wonder that the sort of mechanically assisted speed enjoyed by Kamila is conducive to such a sense of empowerment.

It should be borne in mind that Klima is in the car alongside Kamila (and therefore also moving from point to point through physical space, at the same speed) and vowing to devote his life 'solely to [pleasing] her, his only and dearest woman' (260). This objective is comically ignorant of Kamila's new determination to leave him. It might therefore suggest that moving at speed is not actually any more likely to facilitate epiphany than it is to facilitate the opposite. Such a point would go part way towards restoring the sense of aporia that *Farewell Waltz* has been dismantling. But Klima is a passenger rather than the driver, and so the link between speed and personal empowerment is, if anything, strengthened. It is the person in control of the vehicle, who is marshalling this speed, who is liberated, while the passive hanger-on of her speed is left in ignorance about his impending marital abandonment. The person in control of the vehicle is in control of her own life direction. The hanger-on is forever vulnerable to being left alone by the roadside as his companion rushes on without



him, the potential for a restoral of aporia that this novel seemed, just for an instant, to be cultivating, tossed out with him like a discarded cigarette end. The relationship between speed and empowerment seems unlikely to end in the same divorce as Klima and Kamila's.

### *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Kundera's fourth Czech novel eventually plays a series of reminders of the variations on speed and slowness that, throughout *The Joke*, characterised mental and physical speed as both potentially problematic and advantageous. The aporia absent from *Farewell Waltz* thus makes, by the end of the text, a fairly unambiguous reappearance, as the oeuvre's variations upon this theme recover from a potential early misstep for a novelistic project seeking to cultivate doubt rather than certainty respective to its key themes.

It is also a not entirely unexpected reappearance, considering that the novel is explicitly interested in interrogating an eternal battle between two opposing forces by suggesting that neither side is better than the other. The reader is introduced in Part Three to a continual war between the angels and the devil. The former represents the order and harmony of 'divine creation' and the latter a refusal to 'grant any rational meaning' to the world (*LF*, 86). One insists upon imbuing every aspect of life with too much totalitarian meaning, the other insists that nothing means anything at all. The 'good of the world' requires not the supremacy of one over the other, but that the two retain an equilibrium, staving off the twin threats of either 'too much uncontested meaning' or a total nihilistic meaninglessness (86). Successive parts of the novel travel to narrative realms presided over by both parties, be they the Czech Communist party or the orchestrator of a depressingly mechanical orgy, neither of whom seem able to rule their respective domains in a manner conducive to lasting happiness.

It would be fitting, then, that the novel around which this conflict is structured refuses to value speed or slowness over its opposite. But early variations within *Laughter and Forgetting* seem just as certain as *Farewell Waltz* that one mode is positive and the other negative, only in this case the valuation is reversed. The novel seems initially to demonstrate clearly that speed signifies mental uncertainty and that a move into slowness creates an empowering surety. In the first section, "Lost Letters", Mirek's ex-girlfriend, Zdena, is described during a tense confrontation as talking 'rapidly' and without eye-contact, 'not because she has a set trap in hand, but because she is empty-handed' (21). Fast speech is a sign of vulnerability, or even desperation. And the moment that Zdena begins to assume a position of power in her confrontation, she starts to speak 'not rapidly or with any kind of haste but slowly and reflectively, as though she were aiming at a target she did not want to miss, not taking her eyes off it, making sure she hit the bull's-eye' (23). The narrator's slow succession of sub-clauses here parallels the precision of the newly empowered speech they are describing, as though he is carefully honing in on the exact characteristics of Zdena's new empowerment in the same manner

as she herself is honing in on a winning argument. This is a narrating act characterised by enough of an admiration of its subject matter that it is inspired to take on the same qualities while describing it, rather than misrepresent it via a tempo of speed.

So Zdena's move from speed to slowness is a move from rhetorical weakness to rhetorical strength. This negative valuation of speed is not confined to the novel's opening sections. In the second section, "Mama", while waiting for her mother-in-law to fall asleep so she can enjoy a threesome with her husband Karel and her girlfriend Eva, Marketa has 'her clear-sightedness clouded by impatience' (57-58). Because of her haste, Marketa does not realise, as the reader learns in the very next sentence, that Mama is still awake and reflecting endlessly about her youth, her own thoughts turning more 'rapidly in her mind' as she grows more 'agitated' (58). As with *The Joke*'s Ludvik when he interrupts Helena's confession that she has split from her husband, hastiness in pursuing a plan leads for Eva to the ignorance of important information. For both Ludvik and Eva, speed leads to an embarrassing disempowerment. And much like within this novel's first section, the adjacent description of Mama's own disordered thought processes ensure that the variations here work in tandem to confirm a single-sided evaluation. While in Part One a negative impression of speed is followed by a positive impression of slowness, in Part Two a further negative impression of speed is followed in the very next sentence by yet more of the same.

This bombardment of variations criticising speed runs into Part Four, also entitled "Lost Letters". There the Czech émigré Tamina dreams of a group of ostriches opening and closing their bills 'with unbelievable speed, as if they were trying to outtalk one other', despite being 'hopelessly mute' (129). Later on in the chapter, with Tamina still unsure about what the ostriches are trying to tell her or otherwise accomplish, the narrator links their motions with the trend of 'graphomania' that Tamina has experienced epitomised by her friend Bibi, which refers to people's growing obsession with writing books despite having nothing of note to discuss (111, 127). This link suggests that the speed of the ostriches' speech signifies a desperation in the face of mental emptiness and irrelevance. We speak quickly because there is a silence that urgently needs filling, before it can remind us of our vacuous nature. The less of import that we have to say, the greater the spiritual void that yawns before us and so the more quickly we have to speak if we are to fill it. Slowness of speech might in such cases suggest the luxury of having the time to choose words carefully and because they are the very best for the task at hand, rather than the result of being driven to say the first things that come to mind.

But lest this rather one-sided array of variations lead to slowness becoming all too self-assured, the reader will also begin to see from Part Four a number of counterpoints. The novel thus starts to resemble the series of variations both for and against both slowness and speed that were charted throughout *The Joke*. Realising that Tamina merely sees him as a tool by which to reclaim letters to and from her deceased husband, which she left behind in Czechoslovakia before emigrating, Hugo finds his words to her becoming 'heavier and heavier' as his delivery becomes 'slower and slower' (157). This is a realisation of a partner's unsuitability that counterpoints Kamila's realisation

regarding Klima in *Farewell Waltz*. But while the easy euphoria that follows Kamila's realisation seems a result of the miracle of technologically-assisted speed, Hugo's slowness shows that his realisation has led to despondence. He does not have the same advantage as Kamila of having reached this realisation at a point during which even breaking the laws of physics seems a trifle, and so rather than leading his thoughts to expand outwards to imagine the possible alternative roads down which his life could go, it causes them instead to clam up. In one novel, moving at great speed sees an important and potentially difficult realisation met very optimistically; in the very next in the oeuvre, a similar realisation while not moving at speed *produces* slowness as a sign of unease. On its own, this later variation would merely depict slowness negatively. Viewed as a counterpoint to the finale of *Farewell Waltz*, it additionally suggests the worth of speed too, for the main difference between the two moments of realisation suggests the possibility that had Hugo been in the same empowered state as Kamila when mentally broaching the same realisation, he might have likewise been inspired to view it not with sadness, but as demonstrating the beginnings of new opportunities.

Elsewhere are variations that confirm those already encountered in *The Joke* depicting slowness as a signifier of physical weakness or distress. The status of a 'student' as 'a very poor swimmer' manifests via him 'swimming slowly, his head held tensely high above the surface' (166). This is in stark contrast to his 'athletic' girlfriend, whose 'fast' performance leads to the student experiencing the 'litost' that is the eponymous focus of Part Five of the novel (166-7). Elsewhere, physical slowness is a sign of conditions more serious. The narrator's father, on his death bed, begins speaking 'slowly and with difficulty', while in the same section Tamina's slow movements are the result of her 'bleeding head' (248, 253). These latter two variations negatively portraying slowness follow in a similarly close succession to the two separate pairs of variations negatively portraying speed in Parts One and Two. An insistent succession of variations against one tempo in the novel's first two sections is mirrored by an insistent succession of variations against the opposite tempo in the penultimate.

This, then, is a novel that hears the certainty produced towards speed in the previous novel and desires to correct it, first by suggesting that the opposite tempo is the more valuable of the two, and then realising that by *only* doing this, it will repeat the same error from the other direction, leaving a text no less reductive towards these themes than its predecessor, through valuing slowness over speed. Seeing its mistake, the novel then moves to correct the problem of *Farewell Waltz* in a manner more genuinely supportive of its author's mores, challenging the certainty of *Farewell Waltz* not by replacing it with the opposite certainty, but by restoring the true aporia of *The Joke*. Much like the conflict between the devils and the angels on which this novel focuses, then, the conflict between speed and slowness ultimately shows both as potentially bad as each other. The aporia seen within *The Joke* is awakened from its siesta by their quarrelling. Though this voyage into the interior of *Slowness* is intent on continually moving onwards towards new textual destinations, through its

treatment of its themes it is simultaneously unafraid of doubling back on itself when it needs to do so in order to revitalise its author's cherished aesthetic of doubt.

### *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

The reader of Kundera's most famous and commercially successful novel will observe a further array of call backs to the variations charted throughout previous texts, which produce a further consolidation of the general aporia towards speed and slowness charted in *The Joke* and *Laughter and Forgetting*. Amongst many possible examples is a refrain of the very opening variation from *The Joke*, which here sees the physical speed of Sabina signify an inner distress. While she is 'walking fast' away from a meeting of fellow Czechoslovakian exiles, she is 'disturbed' by her realisation that she and her supposed kin share nothing in common.<sup>10</sup> Mental distress once again leads to a physical speed. Elsewhere, Tereza awakens with 'great reluctance', while her dog, Karenin, is impatient for each day to begin (*ULB*, 127). Karenin's desire for a speedier start than Tereza is expressive of her love for life, while Tereza's lethargy expresses her growing existential weariness. Mental distress once again leads to a physical slowness. Both tempos can equally be external signs of inner trouble and so neither can stand as a reliable indicator of an individual's state of mind.

But a strong testament to the value of both a representational and a receptional slowness is loudly demonstrated by *Lightness of Being's* love of repeating itself. The opening sequence provides an image of Tereza lying in her new lover Tomas' bed, struck down by flu. Tomas feels that it is his responsibility to nurse her back to health, since she has been delivered to him by fate, 'like a child... in a bulrush basket' (6). This exact image is reiterated by the narrator on at least three occasions (169, 203, 213). But while Hana Píchová suggests that each repetition of this particular image adds new possible meanings for the reader to contrast against the image's previous connotations, I would argue that the image's importance lies instead in it providing a consistency that stabilises the fluctuating context of Tomas and Tereza's lives.<sup>11</sup> The image is repeated to provide their love-story with a foundation that circumstances in their present cannot erode. No matter in what location they end up, or in what area of employment they find themselves, or with whom else either of them consider sleeping, these narrative refrains restore to the foreground the romantic circumstances of their original getting together. These repetitions surround an increasingly fraught relationship with the solidity it otherwise lacks and, through so doing, remind the reader of what exactly the lovers' relationship is worth. A narrator willing to slow down, to look backwards, not only gives Tomas and Tereza's love a secure footing, but demonstrates to the reader too the importance of taking the time to pause her own forward momentum and likewise look backwards, especially to the romantic roots of a relationship on the rocks. A representational slowness thus encourages the reader towards a receptional slowness that takes the time to note the importance of the reoccurring image. Through so doing, this receptional

slowness consolidates in turn the value of the representational slowness that kept bringing the image back to the reader's attention.

But elsewhere the reader will observe a different sort of representational slowness that counterpoints the above. Tomas' estranged son Simon is described as having a 'stammer... slowing down the flow of speech, stressing or highlighting every word... whether he wanted to or not' (207). This resembles the narrative's own aesthetic, which pauses its own flow in order to stress or highlight the circumstances that brought Tereza and Tomas together, albeit the slowness here is beyond its speaker's agency.

Simon's own stammering presents *unwilling* representational repetition as less a provider of romantic security than a source of awkward paralysis, especially when he actively seeks to establish himself as authoritative in front of Tomas (207). This discrepancy suggests that whether a representational slowness proves empowering or disempowering rests upon the speaker selecting this tempo for a reason of his or her own or, conversely, being afflicted with it beyond his or her agency. While the reader experiences the aesthetic benefits of the narrative's occasional stammering each time she is cast back to the opening image and reminded of how Tomas and Tereza got together, she can see equally how, for Simon, empowerment and security would result from the ability to speak quickly and smoothly, without any repetitions. Neither slowness nor speed can provide definite security as much as the ability that the narrator enjoys but Simon lacks. This is the ability freely to choose between slowness and speed in order to produce the desired effect beneficial to a particular context or purpose: to remind two wayward lovers and the reader enjoying their story of the value of their relationship, or to appear confident and assertive in front of one's estranged father. Through these two variations, then, a potential *aporia* within this novel between representational speed or representational slowness is somewhat modulated by the focus being firmly placed upon the question of the speaker or narrator's agency. This novel ultimately sounds a reminder, then, that if we have the agency freely to choose between a mode of speed or slowness for ourselves, either might potentially be used to worthwhile effect.

### ***Immortality***

Kundera's final Czech novel contrasts the inability of one of its intra-diegetic characters ever to pick the correct tempo with its narrator's laudable ability to get this choice powerfully right.

At various stages of his romantic life, Rubens selects between slowness and speed and always gets it wrong. He begins by wondering 'what tempo should sensuous adventure follow?' (318). Unlike Alexej in *The Joke, Laughter and Forgetting's* unnamed student, or *Lightness of Being's* Simon, there appears nothing stopping Rubens from selecting either option, beyond his own good judgement. With his 'young wife', Rubens starts off slow, postponing 'for future years' the most intense methods of lovemaking – only for the couple to break up with a 'sudden, quick and easy'

disappearance of feeling (318). A choice to be slow leads, in the blink of an eye, to a speedy divorce. Seeing his wife again over the following years, Rubens decides to utilise the techniques he previously held in reserve, only for the speed with which he does so to be interpreted as ‘cynicism and lack of love’, thereby spelling the end of their extra-marital encounters (319). Again, Rubens enjoys a free choice; again, he gets it wrong. The fact that in each case he should have chosen the opposite tempo stresses again that neither is unconditionally or inevitably more useful than the alternative, nor more important than the selection process itself. Rubens’ dilemma sounds as a simple refrain of Ludvik’s own failure to make the correct choice at different stages of his life in *The Joke*, when he too appeared perfectly able to do so. The road towards *Slowness* itself is never neatly linear, even as *Slowness* begins to come into view over the horizon.

Ruben’s double failure is counterpointed by the main decision made by the novel’s narrator, who powerfully gets it right. O’Brien is correct in arguing that though all Kundera’s novels critique representational strategies, *Immortality* is the text where this process is placed most overtly and continuously under the microscope.<sup>12</sup> It follows that a reader sensitive to this critique might turn the tables on the narrator and investigate the representational strategies that he himself uses to advance his arguments. This narrator intrinsically encourages the formation of a contract between a representational slowness on his part and a receptional slowness on the part of his reader, both of whom thereby transcend the particular trap that this novel is intent on dissecting.

*Immortality* analyses the rise of what its narrator refers to as ‘imagology’, or the replacement of what was once ‘a logical system of ideas’ with a ‘series of suggestive images and slogans’ (127). Stephen Ross argues that through the notion of ‘imagology’, the novel explores a society devoted ‘to the constructed image in denial of the possibility of substance’ and in which ‘the image is confused with that which it purports to represent.’<sup>13</sup> *Immortality* is particularly intent on exploring how this trend manifests via ‘a blurred distinction between advertising and campaigning’ that engenders ‘an aestheticization of politics that appears to empty it of any ideological content.’<sup>14</sup> The divestment of ideological substance from arenas such as the political has transformed them into a dance of imagology that would previously be restricted to the realm of advertising. Kundera’s narrator provides the example of Marxism – once an ideology, but now stripped down to imagology, its former content displaced by the image of ‘a smiling worker with a hammer [along with] black, white and yellow men fraternally holding hands’ – and the politician Bertrand, who conducts his campaigns according to the breezy slogan ‘life is good’ (127, 116).

As Misurella suggests, *Immortality* shows how this ‘reduction of ideas from logical systems to isolated slogans and suggestive images’ has ‘increased the importance of those who publicize and manage public opinion – ad agencies, campaign managers, fashion designers, in short those who specialise in images rather than ideas.’<sup>15</sup> In this world of imagology, then, the people content with and already adept at dealing with surface images, rather than complex arguments, find themselves in the ascendant. And while it would be tempting for the novel’s narrator hypocritically to court success by

becoming an imagologue himself, he crucially adopts a representational slowness that sees him skilfully eschew the very trends he seeks to decry. It will soon be seen that not all of Kundera's narrators make their choices with such unimpeachably good judgement.

Much like other fast representations such as Helena's monologue in *The Joke*, imagology is a form of representational brevity that requires a contract between itself and a receptional speed on behalf of its intended audience. Most advertising campaigns elide any difficulty or complexity that might lead to the central idea of the campaign requiring a long time to convey, or that will lead the audience to be resistant towards the message it is being encouraged to receive, to feel unsettled and so driven to question the message put forward, or pick it apart. Advertisers seek the transmission of a message that can be conveyed quickly and that will likewise be received without a struggle. An argument of complexity and which is difficult for the intended audience to hear, or will take a long time for it to get its head around, is completely at odds with the internal logic of imagology and the motivations of those who wield it.

*Immortality* is the longest of Kundera's novels and so is not itself imagology. That this status makes it, from one perspective, also the slowest means here that the length of its narrating act ensures that the duration of its concretization will occupy more actual clock-time than Kundera's other novels.<sup>16</sup> It is the result of a slow narrating act that demands a receptional slowness on behalf of its audience and so necessarily implies a reader who is not in the rush in which the narrator of *Slowness* will very soon suggest we are all caught. The contract he forges with his implied reader is the opposite of the contract that an imagologue would seek to forge with his or her own audience. This voyage has already observed another sort of narrative speed, resulting from the relationship between the duration of the incidents being narrated and the length of the narrating act that describes these events. The main novelistic value of this particular slowness here is that it allows this novel's narrator to convey a longer, more nuanced argument, through a thorough juxtaposition of two historical periods, that escapes the urge towards a simple reduction that would provide a temptingly easy, but false, nostalgia for a simpler time when the problems identified in Agnes' present had not yet taken root.

Lengthy digressions from the story of Agnes and her contemporaries trace the particular traps that this novel is intent on exploring back to the early nineteenth-century Weimar of Goethe and his real-life young admirer, Bettina Brentano. A comparison of these sections suggests that the past and the present are more similar than distinct. Agnes decries the speedy pace of her city, where on the pavement it is 'impossible to stop for more than three seconds', the roads are marked by 'the incessant movement of traffic' and pleasant restaurants are being 'replaced by modern establishments selling what is sadly known as fast food' (21, 25, 43). Though the corresponding image of 1811 is far from this intense, a single chapter describes an art exhibition, Bettina's ingratiating with a group of university graduates and an evocation of the 'salons' Bettina frequents, which together suggest that her society is somewhat defined by these busy places acting as hubs of rumour and gossip (53). The

already heavily urbanised past in *Immortality* suggests that the trends Agnes finds so problematic are at least partially rooted in societal developments occurring nearly two centuries previously.

And Bettina herself is a perfect imagologue of the kind epitomised in the late twentieth-century by Bertrand. Her character demonstrates a singular desperation to ingratiate herself with Goethe and to control his immortality by seizing sole custodianship of the image of him that will remain after his death. The narrator uses the metaphor of a ‘trampoline’ to explain how she uses other people to launch forth her own self-image, which again directly equates her with Bertrand (184). She is not a sole exception: upon being invited to meet Napoleon, Goethe himself realises that ‘he had to accept’, due to Napoleon being ‘an immortal’, suggesting that for a man like Goethe who knows his own ‘death is approaching’, the Emperor appears a similar kind of trampoline as Goethe himself does to Bettina (58-59). The past is again prevented from reductively being constructed as an easy site of imaginative escape from modernity. The narrator who warns against trends from advertising infecting other arenas refuses to allow his concerns about his present to lead him to become an advertiser for a false image of the past.

Perhaps most importantly for demonstrating *Immortality*’s worth as a slow novel to an author wishing to encourage doubt over uncertainty, it also does not allow the rise of a further generalisation that *everyone* has always behaved the same. This potentially universalising trend is undercut by two characters, one from each of its time periods: Goethe’s wife, Christiane, and the modern-day Agnes. Both desire not a beaming forth of the self via a hapless third party, as do Bettina or Bertrand, but a retreat from the ubiquity of such practice. Rather than attempting to enter ‘the great stage of history’, Christiane ‘preferred to lie on her back in the grass and watch the clouds float by’ (237). Agnes, meanwhile, fantasises about herself executing the chess manoeuvre known as ‘castling’, by which the king ‘suddenly disappears before [the enemy’s] eyes’ (261). The longest of Kundera’s novels, then, undermines any hint of nostalgia towards the past as an antidote to the present, but does not allow any other breezy generalisation to stand in its stead. The focus is always on the potential complexity of all the situations examined, rather than on perpetuating the fake tidiness of imagology.

While the past of *Immortality* hints at all the problems of its present, the narrator utilises the large cast of characters allowed by the sheer length of his narrating act to avoid an equally reductive thesis that humanity is, in any given historical context, unproblematically self-identical. O’Brien describes the novel’s interest as lying in the processes ‘by which individuals are bombarded with... reductive representations’.<sup>17</sup> The narrator uses the full length available to him here to curtail this bombardment, before further reductive representations can crash down around the reader. Length and the concomitant representational slowness thus see the reductive representations discussed by the narrator displaced by the greater complexity and nuance allowed by the novel’s own representational strategies. *Immortality* thus presents a further case, between Rubens and the narrator, that testifies to the value of being able correctly to choose one tempo over the other and of making the right choice at



the right time. The right choice on display here is ultimately that of a narrator selecting a representational slowness for critiquing a practice reliant on representational and receptional speed.

### **Variations on *Slowness***

The narrator of *Laughter and Forgetting* describes an exploration in ‘variation form’ as leaving a clear understanding of the ‘theme’ or ‘situation’ that is its subject receding ‘into the distance’ (*LF*, 227). His account suggests that variation form, in the manner utilised within Kundera’s oeuvre, leads not to clarification, but to a greater uncertainty and relativity about any reductively neat truths regarding the essence of the theme under investigation. This chapter’s charting of the oeuvre’s variations on speed and slowness as they build towards *Slowness* itself should demonstrate exactly why.

Kundera’s first novel, *The Joke*, lays bare a number of different varieties of speed and slowness, so that, from the very start, neither tempo is understood to be conceptually self-identical. Through the unfolding sequence of variations, the reader encounters physical and mental varieties of speed and slowness, which are soon joined by representational and receptional versions too. Speed and slowness can each manifest as symptoms of distress, cowardice or weakness, *or* as symptoms of confidence and empowerment; they can, alternatively, be ways of thinking or being that are strategically chosen, by speakers or by audiences. These variations can manifest within the represented narrative content, or via the representational strategies of the narrative discourse itself. In one key early moment, the reader of *The Joke* is able to experience the value of choosing a receptional slowness in order to counter the deleterious effects of a representational speed.

As the sequence of variations continues throughout *The Joke*, neither speed nor slowness is entirely fixed as positive or negative. And this entrenchment of an aporia between the fluctuating values of either tempo is usually consolidated as the sequence of variations continues beyond Kundera’s first novel and flows through those that follow it. *Farewell Waltz* appears to stand firmly on the side of speed, before this move towards certainty is abruptly curtailed as the next novel again shows both tempos as potentially positive or negative. There is no linear move towards a stance on either tempo that becomes privileged over those that have gone before, or that can be seen as definitive. When one novel clears up the ambiguity that preceded it, this surety is muted as the next novel works to restore the uncertainty from which the oeuvre appeared to be moving away.

Yet it is not entirely impossible for this voyage towards the interior of *Slowness* to chart any definitely emerging trajectory at all. *Lightness of Being* and *Immortality* see the oeuvre deploying various strategies in consecutive novels to highlight the value of a receptional slowness on the part of its readers. Both of these novels deploy, through their own narrative strategies, varieties of representational slowness that guide the reader towards experiencing for herself the value of a receptional slowness. The romantic bedrock of Tomas and Tereza’s fraught relationship is repeatedly

re-inscribed as the narrator's pauses in *Lightness of Being's* forward momentum encourage the delay of the reader's own advancement by often casting her backwards. And a potentially reductive argument, that would see the narrator of *Immortality's* critique of imagology devolve into an advertisement for a glorified past, is avoided through his readiness to ask his reader to spend a long time concretizing a lengthy novel, which can therefore display to her the nuance and complexity that imagology eschews.

This is not to say that the general aporia between slowness and speed carefully established in *The Joke* and re-established in *Laughter and Forgetting* is completely replaced in either of these later texts by an utter certainty in the greater value of one tempo over the other, as it soon will be in the first French novel: the narrators' positive uses of representational slowness, in order to guide their readers towards a receptional slowness, are contextualised or counterpointed each time, by Simon wishing to speak quickly and a situation where Rubens needed to be fast. Each tempo remains depicted within both of these novels as potentially positive *and* negative, so that the loss of aporia seen in *Farewell Waltz* never wholly returns to trouble the oeuvre's aesthetic of doubt. Yet this series of variations moves in *Lightness of Being* and *Immortality* definitely towards consistently demonstrating the value of slowness' receptional variety.

It must be stressed, however, that these testaments are both guided by the narrators moving slowly themselves and so are distinct from the minor moment, back in the very earliest stages of this voyage, when the implied reader of *The Joke* herself becomes responsible for slowing down Helena's narratorial hurry. There is a luxury for the reader of these later Czech texts that arises from the value of receptional slowness being twice demonstrated via narrators choosing to be slow themselves. These guided demonstrations of the value of receptional slowness in *Lightness of Being* and *Immortality* still stand as well and good. But they potentially have the more insidious effect of blunting their readers' skills, by showing the worth of a reading pace guided by the representational pace of the narrator, rather than cultivating the reader's ability to choose a receptional tempo on her own terms without growing too used to inhabiting the tempo towards which she is encouraged. *Slowness* itself, however, is a novel that provokes the implied reader to follow its narrator at a very different pace than the one his own narrative strategies set themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera. *La Lenteur* (Editions Gallimard, 1998) 185 (The translation is my own)

<sup>2</sup> Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Milan Kundera. *The Joke*. Trans. Aaron Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1992) 5. Further reference will be cited within the text itself as *TJ*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Traditional' means for me here that these narrators exist at the same diegetic level as the events being described and as the novel's other characters (including each other), rather than mostly occupying a diegetic level removed from them.

<sup>5</sup> Lubomír Doležel. *Narrative Modes in Czech Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) 113-114.

<sup>6</sup> O'Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism*, 77.

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<sup>7</sup> It is similar to the variety of narrative speed that Genette describes as ‘the relationship between a duration (that of the story, measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years) and a length (that of the text, measured in lines and in pages)’. Gérard Genette. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983) 87-88. It is telling that though the chapter in which this formula is provided is called “Duration”, in his later revision of these ideas Genette accepts that he should have called the chapter ‘not “Duration” but “Speed”.’ See Genette. *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988) 34.

<sup>8</sup> Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 201.

<sup>9</sup> Milan Kundera. *Farewell Waltz*. Trans. Aaron Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1998) 91, 165. Further references will be cited within the text itself as *FW*.

<sup>10</sup> Milan Kundera. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1995) 93. Further references will be cited within the text itself as *ULB*.

<sup>11</sup> Píchová, *The Art of Memory in Exile*, 113.

<sup>12</sup> O’Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism*, 124.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Ross. “The Abdication of Culture: The Ideology of Imagology in Milan Kundera’s *Immortality*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol. 46, No.2 (Summer, 2000) 333.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>15</sup> Misurella, *Understanding Milan Kundera*, 144.

<sup>16</sup> A. A. Mendilow and Mark Currie both sensibly remind us that exactly the same text will be read at different speeds and over longer or shorter periods of time, so my formulation regarding *Immortality* being the slowest novel can never be entirely watertight. It is helped considerably by the fact that a much quicker reader who finishes *Immortality*, say, a third sooner than a slower reader, will presumably also finish Kundera’s others novels sooner by the same margin. See: Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972) 65; Currie, *About Time: Narrative Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 21.

<sup>17</sup> O’Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism*, 124.

## Two: *Slowness*

*“When things happen too fast, nobody can be certain about anything, anything at all, not even about himself.”<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. The speediness of *Slowness*

One key difference between Kundera’s first French novel and the many variations on its theme that have preceded it is that, for the particular extra-diegetic narrator in control here, the struggle between these tempos is now of prime concern. For the first time in the oeuvre, the narrator himself provides extended commentary on contemporary society’s tumultuous relationship with speed and the potential antidote of slowness, the certainty of his argument for slowness as a way of being leaving little room here for the aporia between speed and slowness that has persisted in most of Kundera’s Czech novels. The majority of these earlier novels have featured extra-diegetic narrators advancing essayistic observations of their own, which usually function through interpreting the intra-diegetic portions of the novel in a manner that hopes to draw from them key insights upon the themes indicated by that novel’s title. This novel’s title is evidently *Slowness* and so this narrator’s extra-diegetic commentary is the one of most direct relevance to the themes under investigation during this particular third of this thesis’ voyage.

The facet of the aforementioned “trap” examined within the narrator’s commentary is far from a recent or unique concern; the narrator’s essayistic digressions slot alongside a rich critical trajectory. Walter Benjamin’s analysis of Baudelaire is the key starting point for a historicization of the rising anxieties regarding the changing pace of life upon which the narrator fixates. For the nineteenth-century writer, Benjamin argues, ‘no subject’ demands more attention than ‘the crowd’ that dominates the rapidly expanding European cities.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin cites a wide range of authors, including Poe, Engels and Valéry, and collates their reactions as ones of ‘fear, revulsion and horror’ at the speed, the bustle and the anonymity that characterises the city streets, which deliver to their inhabitants a constant bombardment of new stimuli that seizes the nervous system like a perpetual electric shock.<sup>3</sup> Writing in the early twentieth-century, Georg Simmel documents the city space’s ‘rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions’, which contrasts vividly with the slower, more even rhythm of small-town and rural existence and engenders a simplifying uniformity that blots out difference and distinction.<sup>4</sup>

Two of the most influential postmodern cultural theorists, Frederic Jameson and David Harvey, cite the worries of Benjamin and Simmel respectively, but both in a similarly dismissive manner suggesting that no matter how worried were the modernists, their descendants were to face far worse. For Jameson, Benjamin’s account of modernism emerging from the new bodily experiences

forced upon us by the city is ‘singularly antiquated’ by the emergence of technologies vastly beyond what Benjamin could have envisaged.<sup>5</sup> For Harvey, Simmel’s concerns can only ‘pale into insignificance’ beside the sensory overload delivered by rampant consumerism, though he accepts that the psychological consequences of a blasé attitude and excessive simplification are similar.<sup>6</sup> These concerns all manifest within Kundera’s first French novel, though not only within the arguments his narrator makes, but also via the manner in which he makes them, causing a rhetorical short-circuit marked by a worrying collusion with the trends he decries that leaves a seductively promising thesis shot through with holes. My argument throughout this chapter hinges on the ways in which the essayistic narrator is novelistically challenged by Kundera’s text working as a complete entity of which he is only one component part, which reveals this narrator to be a disappointing advocate whose choice of representational strategies would perhaps leave fellow members of this critical trajectory shaking their heads, rather than clapping him on the back.

The two primary narratives of *Slowness* compare and contrast the speed of the modern era with the sweet languor of the eighteenth-century, via the erotic adventures of their respective characters. Before and during the entomology conference that comprises the bulk of the contemporary narrative, hosted at the same hotel at which the extra-diegetic narrator and his wife Véra are spending the night, we are introduced to a heavily flawed cast. Chief among the entomologists is Cechoripsky, a former Czechoslovakian scientist expelled from his post by the Communist regime and forced into manual labour.<sup>7</sup> Also present is the intellectual Berck, ‘the martyr-king of the dancers’, who epitomises the modern trend of performing as though permanently in front of a camera and excels at transforming complex phenomena into totalised (or perhaps even imagological) soundbites (*Slowness*, 17). We also meet the historian Pontevin, who prefers to dance not for the benefit of invisible millions, but for a small audience at the trendy Café Gascon. Pontevin’s young disciple, Vincent, an admirer of the eighteenth-century and especially the Marquis de Sade, is ordered to attend the conference in order to disrupt Berck’s ambitions and ‘raise some hell’ (27). Following the conference, Vincent attempts a seduction of the typist Julie that quickly descends into farce, literally alongside the plunge into chaos of the relationship between the television producer Immaculata and her cameraman boyfriend.

Against this madness, the narrator’s vision of the eighteenth-century indeed appears an idyll, one starkly distinct from the less valorising portrayal of the nineteenth-century in *Immortality*. This second narrative, juxtaposed with the beginning and closing sections of the above, but absent during the novel’s middle portion, recounts the plot of Vivant Denon’s *No Tomorrow*. A ‘gentleman of twenty’ meets at the theatre with the enigmatic Madame de T and is transported by coach back to her chateau for a night of erotic enchantment (6). After strolling and exchanging kisses on the lawn outside, the young man, labelled by Kundera’s narrator as a Chevalier, is taken by Madame de T first to a pavilion and then subsequently to a secret chamber in the chateau itself, where slow lovemaking passes the time until morning. The next day, the Chevalier learns that he has been used: Madame de T

is attempting to mask the identity of her true, long-term paramour, the Marquis, by displaying the Chevalier to her husband. The Chevalier is instructed to enjoy the night for what it was and return to his true love, the better partner for having both gained sexual experience and learnt a valuable life-lesson.

The closing chapters of *Slowness* carry the Chevalier beyond the final pages of *No Tomorrow* and directly compare his attitudes towards his experience with those of Vincent towards his own. Vincent is unconcerned by his failure and excited about reciting to Pontevin and his followers a heavily edited version of events that depicts him as a glorious libertine. The Chevalier, though unsettled by having been duped by Madame de T and her lover, realises that the beauty of the previous night remains unaltered by the morning's revelations. As the two time periods collapse into one another, with the extra-diegetic narrator, Vincent and the Chevalier all present outside the chateau in the same moment, the Chevalier grows disturbed by Vincent's obsession with talking about the previous night and 'instantly loses his taste for saying anything at all' (129). While Vincent now epitomises a modern "dancer" no less than Berck, the Chevalier decides to eschew both the dangers and the rewards of public confession. Earlier in the novel, the narrator tells us that 'there is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting' (34). The final chapters consolidate this bond by suggesting that the slowness of the Chevalier's experiences has preserved them within a solid form less susceptible to desecration. Vincent's memories, so hastily created, become infinitely mutable, granting him a certain freedom but also leaving him exposed to the caprices of "dancers" more skilled than he. The link between speed, "dancing" and sound-biting is stressed further in the novel's final paragraphs, where the narrator watches sadly as Vincent roars away on his motorcycle, presumably towards the Café Gascon, impatient to give the performance of his lifetime; the Chevalier, meanwhile, departs sedately in his chaise, no audience waiting, no performance required. The narrator concludes that on the Chevalier's 'capacity to be happy' with these existential choices 'hangs our only hope' (132).

It does not take a remarkable astuteness to notice this narrator's complicity with the trends he decries. The narrator pours scorn upon the speedy, sound-biting tendencies of Berck and Vincent, within a text that hosts a large cast of characters and discusses a wide range of subject matters spanning two centuries, yet is no more than 35,000 words itself, denying its own representations the opportunity to become more than one-dimensional. A. A. Mendilow suggests that 'the time people are prepared to devote to novel-reading does in no small measure determine the length of novels'.<sup>8</sup> That *Slowness* is so short implies that its narrator considers his audience thoroughly attention-deficit. Whilst Kundera's first French narrator's reactionary stand is well-intentioned and though he might genuinely despise sound-biting, his arguments, on the other hand, are so rapidly outlined that the representations upon which they rely perfectly encapsulate the trend themselves.

The clearest showcase of Berck's "dancing" occurs in Chapter 21, where he reduces the complexity of Cechoripsky and his national culture to a series of speedy observations designed to

showcase his gargantuan sensitivity. While waxing lyrically about the plight of Cechoripsky and his countrymen, Berck confuses Prague for Budapest and Eastern Europe for Western Europe, mistakes the Polish Romantic poet Mickiewicz for a Czech and describes Communist Czechoslovakia extremely reductively as ‘an enormous concentration camp’ (*Slowness*, 64). Most important for Berck is not the factual content of his utterances, but the fact of his stating them and their passionate sincerity, given flight by their sheer pace. The narrative documents the scientist’s objections and so the reader of *Slowness* is, importantly, aware that Berck’s representations are incorrect. Cechoripsky’s final objection, however, is interrupted by the arrival of Immaculata and her camera and so the reader never learns from where Mickiewicz actually originates. The speed of the narrative, like the speed of Berck’s discourse, refuses to be restrained by the time-consuming delivery of facts and marches inexorably on to the next chapter, in which Berck’s interpretation of Cechoripsky is consummated by Immaculata’s recording process and Cechoripsky becomes mute and irrelevant. Because the reader is privy to Cechoripsky’s internal monologue and so knows him better than Berck does, she is aware of the gulf separating the entomologist from the representation born from Berck’s performance. This fact reveals the most rewarding way of reading *Slowness*. Just as Berck performs for the camera wielded by Immaculata, the narrator performs for his own audience, doing to his various subject matters what Berck does to Cechoripsky. The task of the reader is to mount a more successful resistance than the entomologist and not allow these representations to pass for reality. Cechoripsky’s resistance demonstrates a subject defying its own objectifying representation, while my reading here demonstrates the intended audience of such representations destabilizing the practice itself by rupturing the chain of supply and demand.

*Slowness* has received little academic attention in English, though more so than the two novels that follow it, *Identity* and *Ignorance*. The body of academic writing on this novel comprises a small selection of articles and a very brief epilogue to Eva Le Grand’s monograph, none of which engage in close or concerted enough a reading to be anything like comprehensive. Karen von Kunes’ essay focuses too greatly on the representations made by the novel, holding them as sacrosanct without realising that the novel’s questioning of Berck and his fellow “dancers” affects the novel’s own representations like a backfiring gun. Kunes’ argument that Cechoripsky illustrates ‘the didactic, narrow-minded “Czechism” of a nonadapting provincial mentality’ is spectacularly indecorous, blaming the entomologist for refusing to reflect Berck’s erroneous representation, rather than vice versa.<sup>9</sup> Maria Němcová Banerjee’s piece is more convincing, noting the compromised nature of the novel’s arguments via its observation that its ‘accelerated narrative pace... works at cross purposes with the lead theme of slowness’, though it lacks a detailed evaluation of the aesthetic and rhetorical consequences of this contradiction.<sup>10</sup> The narrator’s hypocrisy is made apparent when Banerjee describes the naming of his wife, Véra – the name of Kundera’s wife too – as ‘a sudden flash of magnesium, exposing the travelling couple to the unnatural glare of celebrity’, illuminating the correlation between the potential viewers of Berck’s representational liberties and the potential

readers of the narrator's own, who become spectators of the narrator's self-exposed personal life.<sup>11</sup> Banerjee ultimately falls prey to the allure of the narrator's representations, however, describing *Slowness* as 'a homage to Denon's novella', which is akin to calling Berck's performance a "homage" to Cechoripsky, rather than a blatant manipulation.<sup>12</sup> Le Grand too fails to interrogate the narrator's representations of either libertinism or *No Tomorrow*.<sup>13</sup>

Most relevant to this chapter is Nataša Kovačević's essay, which focuses on *Slowness*' 'fetishized imagery' and so more deeply questions it on a representational level.<sup>14</sup> Kovačević laments of the narrator's idealised eighteenth-century that 'the hungry, overworked, and diseased multitudes remain absent from the pastoral landscape' and so *Slowness* 'overlooks vast historical complexities and plays into the reductivist logic it denounces'.<sup>15</sup> Kovačević focuses, however, on the political and historical clichés forged via this mentality, while I agree with Fred Misurella that Kundera's aesthetic system gives 'art, especially ironic art... primacy over politics, and the novel... primacy over history, psychology and philosophy'.<sup>16</sup> While crediting Kovačević's observation that the soundbites decried by the narrator are matched by those emerging *from* him as superficially resembling my own approach, I am more concerned here with the ramifications of the "trap" of speed not on history or politics, but on art and textuality and their resultant potentials to probe and illuminate. Kovačević also strongly equates the narrator of *Slowness* with Milan Kundera himself, a link that the narrative's blurring of the transparency between representation and original constantly belittles.

The arguments and representations made by *Slowness*' narrator, then, are not to be passively accepted, but actively challenged, even deconstructed, hopefully with more success than Cechoripsky's silenced challenge of Berck. Many critics of Kundera agree that a deconstructive approach to his work is not only the best way of elucidating its meaning, but one encouraged from within the texts themselves. Nina Pelikan Straus thus goes against the grain when she argues that Kundera's work demonstrates that 'the circular discourses of... structuralism and deconstructionism are murderous... [and] not only enable the vaporization of cultural ideas but of human beings who live by these ideas'.<sup>17</sup> John O'Brien, in an article that specifically refutes Straus' thesis, states that Kundera's frequent authorial intrusions – which Straus contends work to fetter wild interpretations and so make the text un-deconstructable – actually 'add a sense of *play* by admitting that characters are not real, questioning motivations... and so on', encouraging the reader's imagination to take flight.<sup>18</sup> The gulf between Straus and O'Brien's interpretations perhaps stems from their different understandings of deconstruction. Straus portrays the discipline as an orthodoxy no less homogenizing towards its victims than Soviet imperialism towards the cultures it demolished.<sup>19</sup> O'Brien, on the other hand, suggests Kundera's critics apply the 'soft-core' deconstruction envisaged by David Lehman in *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man*, which 'does not deny a text its basic reference points or interpretive contexts – only the idea that there is only *one* reference point or context'.<sup>20</sup> A deconstructive reading of *Slowness*, then, does not involve becoming an embittered textual nihilist, but simply questions the specific "interpretive context" provided by its narrator and



raises the possibility that the extreme speed with which he makes his arguments means that the representations generated in support of them go beyond and against his intentions. His interpretation of his material is not the most instructive or beneficial way of extracting meaning from it.

Questioning Kundera's first French narrator in this manner is an approach that would rescue critic Arthur Phillips from his confusion. In his discussion of *The Curtain*, Phillips states, quite correctly, that Kundera strives to investigate the world 'by expressing only doubt, never certainty'.<sup>21</sup> Phillips is then strangely bewildered by confronting within Kundera's fiction a 'haughty, brilliant, moody narrator' who continually confuses gross generalisations for obvious and objective truths.<sup>22</sup> Phillips' bafflement at the modus operandi of Kundera's narrators often standing in opposition to Kundera's stated novelistic ambitions is needless if we consider the likely possibility that Kundera is neither blind to how his novels function nor grossly hypocritical, but instead achieves his goals by expecting an active reader to challenge his narrators for herself. Stanislaw Barańczak thus raises the bar for critics interested in misreading *Slowness* when he witheringly describes its 'overbearing and pontificating' narrator, who 'leaves no doubt whatsoever that he represents the author' and 'relieves us of the tiresome task of guessing [his] message'.<sup>23</sup> In *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera states with force that he has 'always deeply, violently, detested those who look for a position... in a work of art'.<sup>24</sup> The particular narrator of the work of art in question here, however, outlines a number of clear positions in only its opening chapter, regarding twentieth-century society having turned 'indolence... into having nothing to do' and the sensuality between Chevalier and Madame de T arising from the gentle pace of their journey, which is starkly championed over the speed of the narrator's contemporaries (*Slowness*, 4-6). It is no great leap of faith to hypothesize that the elements of the subsequent narratives that unsettle the narrator's theses – which he would perhaps notice if only he had the time to re-examine them – are intended to shroud the reader in the doubt so cherished by Kundera himself. Since the essayistic narrator continually contradicts the author's stated novelistic ambitions, it is little surprise that the novel of which he is only one component part frequently demonstrates his limitations and flaws as thinker and interpreter.

*Slowness* itself is filled with clues that a deconstruction of its narrator's theses is a highly suitable approach, even beyond the novel's demonstration via Cechoripsky that a speedy representation may only survive by stampeding over its subject's objections. One primary clue stems from the ramifications of the novel's choice of tense. *Slowness* is the only novel by Kundera written predominantly in the present tense. Genette suggests that it is almost impossible to tell a story without locating it 'in time with respect to the narrating act, since [a narrator] must necessarily tell the story in a present, past or future tense'.<sup>25</sup> While all of Kundera's novels bar *The Joke* slip into the present tense during the extra-diegetic sections in which their narrators address us directly or question their characters, the intra-diegetic layers of *Slowness* themselves appear simultaneous to the narrating act. What Genette describes as the 'time of the narrating' does not occur months, weeks or even days after the story being narrated, but concurrently.<sup>26</sup> Mark Currie warns that 'the form of the present tense in

the English verb... does not guarantee that the time reference will be in the present' and so 'a narrative which is written in the present tense should not be thought of as being tensed... differently from one written in a past tense'.<sup>27</sup> The verb tense does not *necessarily* illuminate anything important about the temporality of a story's narration. Jonathan Harvey agrees that 'present-tense narratives cannot easily escape from having a "pastness"'.<sup>28</sup> *Slowness*, however, establishes clearly in both the opening and closing chapters that the narrator both arrives and departs from the chateau simultaneously to Vincent, consolidating the impression that the contemporary narrative is indeed unfolding simultaneously to its narrating act. Genette states that 'the narrating *place* is very rarely specified, and is almost never relevant'.<sup>29</sup> In *Slowness*, this place is specified repeatedly as the same as that of the "story place", consolidating this sense of immediacy, with the story and its narrating process cohabiting not only temporally, but geographically also.

The narrator is concerned that 'when things happen too fast, no one can be certain about anything, about anything at all, not even himself' (*Slowness*, 114). But this applies not only to his contemporary characters but also to himself, for his narrative being produced so close to its subject matter robs him of reflective time and so he cannot himself claim any certainty. One of the many cultural analysts in the previous decade to make the same lamentations as the narrator of *Slowness*, Carl Honoré, argues that 'in the land of speed, the man with the instant response is king' and suggests that 'electronic media is dominated by what one French sociologist dubbed 'le fast thinker' – a person who can, without skipping a beat, summon up a glib answer to any question'.<sup>30</sup> These observations apply most obviously to Berck's speedy euthanasia of Cechoripsky's objections, but equally to the narrator, who, through his immediate transformation of story into narrative, is perhaps le fastest thinker of all. Monika Fludernik suggests that analysis of the temporal duration of an 'act of narration by a narrator' is necessarily compromised because the 'minutes and hours of speaking or writing time... are usually not determinable from the text'.<sup>31</sup> *Slowness* clearly suggests that the temporal duration of its narrating process is identical to that of its story, beginning as the narrator and his wife approach the hotel and ending as they leave the next morning, the act of narration occupying, like its subject matter, only one night. If only the narrator had given himself geographical distance between the "story place" and the "narrating place"; if only he had given himself temporal distance, likewise, and enjoyed time for reflection; if only the temporal duration of the narrating act had stretched to more than a few hours. With these caveats, the narrator's arguments may have formed less vulnerable to deconstruction. Or perhaps not: the opening line itself, 'We *suddenly* had the urge to spend the evening and night in a chateau', clearly defines the following narratives as the result of an impulse, and so the one sentence written in the past tense, providing space for reflection between the urge and its reporting, sees the narrator fail to notice that his narratives' hurried genesis leaves them born compromised (*Slowness*, 3 [my italics]).

But it can be argued that the narrator's choice of the present tense is, given his ambitions, a logical one, or even a choice made through his own agency that is misguided, rather than entirely

without purpose. Much like the narrator of *Immortality*, he selects the mode of narration he personally considers most conducive towards furthering his critique of the particular aspect of the ‘trap the world has become’ currently under examination. For we can view *Slowness* through Derrida’s argument that an archiving process ‘produces as much as it records the event’.<sup>32</sup> The cause-and-effect sequence by which an event occurs prior to its recording or its subsequent representation is ruptured; individuals no longer perform actions and then subsequently relate them, but the potential for relation is what births the temporally prior, but consequentially successive, original, this trend growing ever more frenzied thanks to the archiving opportunities offered by advanced technology. This model of a present structured and formed ‘in anticipation of its recollection’ perfectly describes Berck, whose grand displays of sentiment are engendered by the possibility of their dissemination by the cameras controlled by journalists such as Immaculata.<sup>33</sup> Vincent fails to perform the perfect libertine orgy, but welcomes the possibility of reciting a revised account the next day, with this version the one “archived” via the memories of his audience. Future representations both determine Berck’s present and encourage Vincent’s revision of his recent past. The idealized counterpoint to both is the Chevalier, for whom ‘no tomorrow’ exists and so his experiences remain unpolluted (*Slowness*, 132).

As we have seen, narrative theory posits that any narrative written in the past tense evokes the future time of the narrating act, in relation to which the narrative content is *past*. Narrating Vincent’s exploits via the past tense would necessarily evoke the moments in-between the story and the narrating act, during which Vincent dazzles the Café Gascon with his doctored orgy, or Berck’s interview is broadcast to rapturous acclaim; relative to the temporal position from which the narrator was telling the story, these events would already have happened. The narrator’s use of the present tense, then, seeks to disempower the dancers by removing from the novel’s temporality the spaces in which the spoils of their dancing are enjoyed. The motivation behind his choice is an entirely worthwhile one.

In seeking to cut the dancers off from their sustenance, however, the narrator chooses a mode of offensive that simultaneously damages his own position by contradicting his call for slow reflection, and so unlike his counterpart from *Immortality*, his choice of mode ultimately backfires, ill-judged since it furthers just *one* of his objectives in a manner that fatally undermines the entirety of the rest of his project. He is more like *Immortality*’s Rubens than *Immortality*’s narrator, making the wrong choice at the wrong time. And since his choice is the one choice between slowness and speed got badly wrong by one of Kundera’s main narrators, it is also the one adversely to affect the entirety of one of Kundera’s novels.

Through his severely compromised nature, the narrator reflects his fellow characters, most notably Vincent. The nobly intentioned gestures of its cast being frequently undercut is a common phenomenon within *Slowness* and a further call that its extra-diegetic gestures require an undercutting of their own. No stance is allowed to stand unquestioned and no character achieves a position that escapes compromise. Early in the novel, for example, Pontevin’s criticism of Berck and his fellow

dancers is immediately countered by Vincent's suggestion that Pontevin is 'a great dancer' himself (24). The resultant debate is described almost in script-form, devoid of much narrative commentary surrounding the exchange of ideas, so that each man states his position without the narrative granting either a degree of agency that empowers one enough to subsume the other. Later in the novel, Vincent's denunciation of dancing becomes even more compromised than Pontevin's. While describing Vincent's passionate description of 'the dancers and the deal they have struck with the Angel', which strongly evokes the links established between angelic purity and totalitarian zeal in *Laughter and Forgetting*, the narrator states that Vincent 'climbs his hyperboles as one climbs the steps of a stairway to *heaven*', blurring any distinction between the young man and his enemy (71 [my italics]). Vincent's speech deconstructs itself via the clash between its constative and performative elements, much like the narrator's own lightening-fast denunciation of speed. The narrator's primary attack on modernity is itself challenged, by a young man who fatalistically describes the 'gaze of the cameras' as 'part of the human condition from now on' and suggests to Vincent that if he lived in any of the past eras he and the narrator idealize, he would arbitrarily rail against other novelties, such as the new cathedrals of the twelfth-century (72). This nameless character's dismissal of Vincent and, by extension, the narrator as embittered reactionaries appears logical and stands uncontested. Indeed, Vincent is portrayed as pathetic for being unable to summon a suitable riposte.

Most damagingly, by the novel's close the thematic scaffolding the narrator constructs in the opening chapters has been buffeted to near-collapse. On the first page we are told that the addictive ecstasy of speed results from the driver being able to focus 'only on the present moment', which frees him or her from the future and so leaves 'nothing to fear' (3). Speed, then, leaves us in a timeless present. But the associations made between speed, the dancers and the cameras are soon compromised when we realise that the dancers live not in the present but anticipating the future, from which they are therefore far from free. And the idea of a timeless present is soon reframed not as the dangerous product of driving at speed, but as the luxurious mode of being resulting from the slowness and anonymity enjoyed by the Chevalier. By the novel's close, the phrase 'No Tomorrow' is clearly positively loaded, yet on the opening page, applied to a contradictory situation, it represents what the narrator finds most problematic. Similarly, the speed of the motorcyclist comes by the final pages to evoke not a timeless present but a race towards the future. We cannot say that the narrator's argument changes organically with these shifting conceptions, because by the novel's close the basic stance propounded at the start still stands and the Chevalier's slowness remains fetishized. In his world of constant motion, however, the narrator cannot realise that his argument is a web of hypocrisies and contradictions. Harvey suggests that one major consequence of the postmodern world's 'speedup in the turnover times of capital' is the accentuation of the 'volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products... *ideas* and ideologies, *values* and established practices'.<sup>34</sup> For the narrator's argument to have a chance of success, he requires access to ideas and values that remain stable enough to provide firm rhetorical foundations. *Slowness* suggests that the pervasiveness of the postmodern condition lies

in its very cultural mechanics rendering unviable any stance that seeks to destabilize it from within; the rhetorical fixity from which we could build a counter-argument is irreparably effaced.

The narrator's representations of his material move in a way that mimics the movement of the vehicles from the novel's opening chapter. Successive chapters abandon the extra-diegetic narrative and perform a swift succession of introductions, rushing past Vivant Denon's various careers and the novella *No Tomorrow*, Epicurean notions of hedonism, an absurdly truncated definition of libertinism, a summary of Choderlos de Laclos' four-hundred page *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, a brief return to the narrator and Véra, Berck and his battles with the politician Duberques and, finally, Pontevin and the Café Gascon, all in just the first twenty pages. With Pontevin, the narrative finally settles down for a few brief chapters, before returning to a fuller discussion of *No Tomorrow*, where the brakes are applied with more force and the subject matter remains in focus for an entire ten pages. The narrative constantly generates new ideas but refuses to dwell on any at length, rushing exhaustingly onwards and letting each new diegetic layer make only a brief impression before falling back towards the horizon, the minute chapters encouraging the reader onwards and so increasing this bewildering momentum. The sections where the narrative settles for the longest time are ironically during the entomologist conference, which is reported uninterrupted from Chapters 16 to 25 and from Chapters 29 to 42, again compromising their progenitor's argument, for the slowest sections of the novel document *our* era and it is the eighteenth-century represented most disruptively as a rush of surface images.

This particular bad choice between slowness and speed is not only the first and greatest to be made by one of Kundera's main narrators. The manifestation of its consequences throughout virtually the entirety of the narrative means that it is also the bad choice that allows the most dramatic recuperative response by the reader. For the reader of a novel is a passenger of sorts, born along by the motion of the narrative, yet one in a safer position than a traveler in a recklessly speeding vehicle, for she can break her restraints and force the driver to slow down without risking a fatal collision. We can hijack control of the narrative vehicle ourselves and force the voyage to maintain a sensible speed, much like the reader of *The Joke* has done considerably earlier, only this time on a vaster scale.

Mendilow argues that 'different novels lend themselves to being read at different speeds'.<sup>35</sup> The clue is in the title and *Slowness* is a book begging to be read slowly. Currie describes the unique temporality of a novel by explaining that though 'in written texts, the future lies there to the right, awaiting its actualization by the reading', the presents of various readings of the same book 'will all differ from each other, so that some will finish, and so know the future, before others'.<sup>36</sup> We can combat the dancers via a similar technique as that the narrator attempts with his use of the present tense, avoiding the rush for the future epitomized by Vincent in the closing chapter, neutering his and Berck's "future orientation" by reading *Slowness* slowly and so deferring the arrival of its future. Our stand can succeed where the narrator's fails, because his narration, through his choice in remaining contemporaneous with its subjects, is forced to match their heady speed, while we have the completed

narrative preserved in front of us and so can afford to take time out for the reflection that reveals the aforementioned inconsistencies. We can also use the future, once it arrives and *Slowness* is finished, for a more valuable cause than Berck and Vincent. While for them the future is an appropriated space in which their sound-biting representations will be delivered and the rewards enjoyed, for us it can be reclaimed as a space in which we challenge such practice.

It is very possible to agree with the narrator's denunciation of speedy, soundbite representations but be disappointed with its execution. The reader can redeem the narrator by doing his job for him and truly questioning such representations wherever encountered, by realizing that this is the key moment in the oeuvre for the reader to choose to be slow for herself. Here, then, an extreme representational speed can be countered by a receptional slowness performed, on this occasion, purely under the aegis of a reader working oppositely to the narrator's own example. On the closing page of *Slowness* we encounter the phrase 'no tomorrow', given increased significance through occupying a paragraph of its own (*Slowness*, 132). A reader bewitched by the narrator will feel, evoked by this phrase, both wonder at the Chevalier's nonchalance and nostalgia for the century he supposedly epitomizes. For a reader who considers the narrator's aims worthy but wonders just how deeply his complicity with the trends he decries is ingrained, the phrase becomes a call to put the brakes on the narrator's breathless onward momentum and read Denon's *No Tomorrow* for herself, an activity that extends the concretization of *Slowness* by continually inviting comparison with its own interpretation. The truly resistant reader will then re-read *Slowness* itself with the potential to use her own receptional slowness to become what the narrator wishes he were but is not: a true advocate of the cause against hasty, falsifying representations.

## **2. Making *Slowness* Slow**

The narrator of *Slowness* states that the most 'interesting' aspect about an African famine is 'that it cut down only children', alluding to the media's decision to leave adult suffering away from the cameras (*Slowness*, 12-13). The famine killing only children is clearly an illusion generated by its representation, but one that achieves a degree of concrete actuality through its ability to produce real-world consequences of increased charitable support. Media representations are shaped by manipulation behind the scenes that encourages its audience to support causes that otherwise would not provoke the same degree of interest. Throughout *Slowness*, characters perform similar manipulations, designed to encourage support not for worthy causes but for the public images of Berck and Vincent. We are unlikely to be swayed by these manipulations because the narrator lays the mechanics behind them bare and we observe them from a distance as they unfold. Support is constantly encouraged, however, for another arguably still less deserving cause. The narrator clearly disapproves of Berck and Vincent, which explains why their own machinations are made visible, while his love of the eighteenth-century phenomenon known as libertinism means the manipulations

executed in its favour occur at an extra-diegetic level and so remain veiled. By researching libertinism and bringing our findings to a re-reading of *Slowness*, we can reach a mode of receptional slowness that unravels the narrator's propaganda and determine for ourselves whether or not the cause is as worthy as insinuated.

A slower look at the narrator's own representations proves him to be no better than the "martyr-king of the dancers" himself. Jameson suggests that the process by which 'the history of aesthetic styles displaces real history' woos its audience via features that 'program the spectator to the appropriate "nostalgia" mode of reception'.<sup>37</sup> This "mode of reception" is pushed onto the reader of *Slowness* during the opening chapter, where the narrator waxes lyrically about 'loafing heroes of folk song, those vagabonds who roam from one mill to another and bed down under the stars' (*Slowness*, 5). 'Have they vanished', the narrator asks, 'along with footpaths, with grassland and clearings, with nature?', demonstrating a performance of kitsch that would give his counterpart from Part Six of *Lightness of Being* major cause for concern (5).<sup>38</sup> The opening sentence of this chapter's final paragraph narrows the target of the narrator's lyrical nostalgia down to eighteenth-century France, his use of the luxuriant noun phrase 'the inexpressible atmosphere of sensuality' focussing the positive impressions made by his earlier descriptions of a generic past onto this specific case-study (5). The narrator begins his narration already convinced of the period's superiority to his own and is desperate to ensure that his audience works from the same interpretive context. The final pages work to certify that the reader remains "programmed" to the "nostalgia mode of reception" long after closing the book, so that any further meaning-fulfilment is unlikely to destabilise the narrator's portrayal of libertinism. The happiness and comfort of the Chevalier is stressed as his chaise departs, whilst phrases such as 'he will be trying to stay as close as he can to the night as it melts inexorably into the light' and, starting the final sentence itself, 'the chaise has vanished in the mist', lend these luxuries a poetic fragility that suggests we should work to preserve them or, this proving impossible, cherish them before they fade for good (132). Any interrogation of the Chevalier's era is thus made to appear less a perfectly valid inquiry and more an undue cruelty.

And so the past in this speedy novel is the opposite of the past in *Immortality*, the slower novel that preceded *Slowness* and that avoided such a naive advertisement for a reductively posited site of escape. Both novels compare past and present, only the narrator explicitly on the side of slowness fails to make this comparison with the very slowness needed to avoid the imagological representations avoided by the much slower strategies of his predecessor. The first French narrator has unwittingly upheld his side of the contract imagology requires between representational speed and receptional speed, and so if a reductive image of the past is to be eschewed, this task will fall instead to a reader moving into a mode of receptional slowness against the tempo of the narrator by stamping on the brakes herself. It might be tempting to do this fairly swiftly, purely by challenging the narrator's quick reading of *No Tomorrow*. But the receptionally slowest countering of the narrator's representational speed will recognise that *No Tomorrow* is not just being misread in isolation from its

cultural surroundings, but is being marshalled as one supporting example of the narrator's mis-characterisation of the eighteenth-century and libertinism in general: *No Tomorrow* is allegedly 'among the literary works that seem best to represent the art and spirit of the eighteenth-century' (8). A slightly longer look at the spirit of the eighteenth-century than the narrator himself has time for reveals that it does not necessarily deserve the plaudits the narrator attaches, since it is far from offering the lovely yet defenceless counterpoint to the ills of our era he hastily strives to make it appear.

Libertinism posits that the natural process of desire faces derailment by the artificial morality enforced by the social state, which mostly functions through its policing of women, the supposed vanity of whom is shrewdly manipulated so that they feel admirable when they uphold the arbitrary virtues of modesty and constancy.<sup>39</sup> The problem this causes for libertine men – one conveniently ignored by Kundera's narrator, for it contradicts his main argument – is that the 'delays imposed on lovers [by the social state] – that is... the unreasonable extension of the interval between the emergence of a fantasy and the sexual act that both fulfils and dissipates it' provoke a dangerous idealisation that springs the fatal trap of love.<sup>40</sup> Slowness may be an important component of a libertine sexual encounter, but libertinism is better characterised by the intense desire to conquer a fantasy's object as swiftly as possible, before the reason that illuminates love's perversity is eroded. Catherine Cusset goes as far as arguing that 'the opposite of libertinage is love, as a deep, *long-lasting* sentiment', which suggests that the antidote to modern culture that the narrator of *Slowness* seeks lies in an emotion that any true libertine would shun, rather than in libertinism.<sup>41</sup>

And libertine men are actually little different from the contemporary characters by whom the narrator of *Slowness* is so troubled. Across libertine literature, two types of male libertine can be discerned: the *petit-maitre* and the dangerous man.<sup>42</sup> The former delights in clever wordplay and the skilful seizing of opportune moments during which the vanity of a targeted woman becomes compromised, leaving her susceptible to the libertine's advance. The *petit-maitre* must end the following liaison in a timely manner, for the successful functioning of a community of such relations depends on the constant flow of short but satisfying affairs; these adventures are 'all the more intense when they are new' and so a conquered woman must be "returned" to society so that she can become the quarry of another man.<sup>43</sup> The dangerous man takes the objectification of women a step further. For him, the modest libertinism of the *petit-maitre* is contemptible. The dangerous man's "grand libertinism" begins with the similar goal of encouraging a woman to depart from the principles she professes to cherish, but his ultimate victory stems from exposing this departure to the largest audience possible and so laying bare women's status as 'the most faithful guardians of worldly hypocrisy'.<sup>44</sup> Just as Laclos' Valmont targets the famously unimpeachable Madame de Tourvel, the 'attraction that a dangerous man finds in a woman is directly proportional to the complexity of the plan' her conquest requires, for the subsequent revelation of his victory will then attract maximum admiration.<sup>45</sup> And so while the *petit-maitre* and dangerous man alike must be experts at detecting the



moments during which a woman's virtue becomes vulnerable, the dangerous man must be additionally what Feher describes as a 'skilful propagandist'.<sup>46</sup> Cusset confirms that libertinism emphasises 'the social image of man' and that 'seducing women [thus] serves one purpose: social success'.<sup>47</sup> Here also the rhetorical use to which libertinism is put by the narrator of *Slowness* fails his argument: the dangerous man at least is entirely "future orientated", his actions determined by the possibility of his representing them to a future audience, and so he is no less a dancer than Berck or Vincent.

Libertinism, then, is neither especially slow nor especially private. Many critics would disagree with the narrator of *Slowness* arguing that *No Tomorrow* is representative of this century and with good reason, suggesting that not only has the narrator misrepresented the nature of libertinism in positing it as the antidote to the problems of his contemporary era, he has also mistakenly taken *No Tomorrow* to be a typical example of libertine literature that it is not. For Feher, *No Tomorrow* 'gives a rare example of duplicity's joyful triumph' and comprises 'a unique manifesto in favour of libertine politeness'.<sup>48</sup> Nancy K. Miller is particularly keen to stress that the sexual freedom supporters of libertinism cite as its main strength is primarily androcentric and relegates women to the role of 'launching' the careers of young men, who ultimately become sexual oppressors and, biologically and socially, will never face the negative consequences of promiscuity that threaten the women they subordinate.<sup>49</sup> Miller specifically cites *No Tomorrow* as the only libertine text that allows a woman to perform a libertine seduction of her own and 'escape the rule of consequence'.<sup>50</sup> James A. Steintrager argues that *No Tomorrow* does not reiterate contemporary discourses but sees 'the semantics of the libertine novel and of the literary female orgasm undergo important modifications'.<sup>51</sup> While eighteenth-century representations of sexuality typically constructed female pleasure as clearly discernible via obvious signs, which a libertine would need to read in order to identify his own sexual capability, *No Tomorrow* frames Madame de T's sexuality as undecipherable, via the suggestion of her true paramour, the Marquis, that she is anorgasmic, which Steintrager argues leaves the narrator unsure of whether or not she was "faking it" during their night together. Earlier libertine fiction presumes a transparency between the sign and the signified of female pleasure as 'a relatively unproblematic given'.<sup>52</sup> The process of canon formation, which selects particular texts as intrinsically representative of their eras, is often unrelated to a text's actual commonality with the dominant mood of a period and more the product of a particular social group selecting the texts that posit their own interests as universal values.<sup>53</sup> We can discern a similar agenda behind the narrator of *Slowness*' selection of *No Tomorrow*. He begins convinced of libertinism's superiority to his own era and so is forced to select an entirely unrepresentative text that elides most of its problematic conceits. A counterattack against the trend towards generalisation decried by Simmel, Harvey and Jameson and unfortunately epitomised by Kundera's narrator can be launched through the reader exposing the fallacies of the latter's argument and, through so doing, restoring *No Tomorrow*'s atypicality.

The narrator's manipulation does not stop at the process of textual selection and affects his representation itself. Selecting as brief a text as *No Tomorrow* to propound the slowness of its era of origin over the speed of our own is clearly not the wisest of rhetorical manoeuvres. If the typical length of fictional texts from a given era parallels that era's experience of consciousness or availability of leisure time, as has been posited by texts such as Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, then positioning *No Tomorrow* as typical of the eighteenth-century suggests an era even flightier than our own.<sup>54</sup> But despite my criticism of his methodology, I believe that the narrator's commitment to slowness is relatively pure, as is demonstrated by his most obvious interference with Denon's story, which transforms it from a continuous piece of prose into an account punctuated and fragmented by numerous digressions, chiefly those of the twentieth-century narrative. Ingarden argues that 'every concretization of a literary work is a temporally extended formulation. The time span occupied by a given concretization may be greater or smaller according to circumstances.'<sup>55</sup> *Slowness*' narrator successfully produces a slower version of *No Tomorrow*, in which the reader's concretization of Denon's story occurs over a longer period of reading time – unless she becomes so absorbed by the narrator's version that she skips ahead to discover its outcome sooner – but again a nobly intentioned act backfires. Because of what occurs during the gaps between each instance of relation a different *No Tomorrow* emerges, one the reader is very unlikely to concretize in the same way she would its original. Assuming her reading of *No Tomorrow* is uninterrupted by other literature – which its brevity makes unlikely – its concretization will be far purer than that made possible by the narrator's version, where each section of his variation will be unavoidably coloured by its juxtaposition with the intervening material. It becomes an effort for the reader's interpretation of *No Tomorrow* to avoid paralleling the narrator's own inability to concretize the story from any perspective other than that of a facile comparison with our own era. Every act of Denon's characters is given an unconditional positive framing by its opposition to the farcical nature of Vincent and his contemporaries, beyond the horizons of the original text. The reader is impelled against forming her own, impartial judgements regarding the Chevalier or Madame de T's behaviour, since the narrator's value system hovers over the fragments of Denon's text and constantly threatens the displacement of her own. A successful retrieval of a pure *No Tomorrow* that allows the reader her own opinions, which necessitates retrieving the original text, thus becomes akin to avoiding an attempted seduction on the part of Kundera's first French narrator, one mirroring those performed by the libertine characters he evidently idolises.

Further interferences with Denon's text are relatively inconsequential, such as the 'bench' on which *Slowness*' Chevalier and his mistress sit being, in the original, 'a grassy bank [that] appeared' before them (*Slowness*, 28).<sup>56</sup> While the bench is merely found, implying that it has been placed there and sat statically awaiting discovery, the verb 'appeared' implies that the original's 'bank' has arrived spontaneously in order to facilitate the evening's events, better evoking an unfolding conspiracy to which even the natural landscape is privy.<sup>57</sup> A further modification occurs during the interruption of

the lovers' first exchange of kisses: in *Slowness*, Madame de T realises that her seduction is proceeding too speedily and so 'stands and decides to turn back' (*Slowness*, 29). Denon's narrator, however, reports that 'silence fell all around us. We heard it... and we were frightened. We stood up without saying another word and began to walk again', which portrays the break as jointly instigated.<sup>58</sup> We could argue that Denon's narrator fails to notice Madame de T's manipulation of the event and assumes that he enjoyed equal agency, but given that ideologically-driven misrepresentation is a dominant theme in *Slowness*, it is safe to assume that the narrator's valorisation of Madame de T as 'lover of pleasure' and 'guardian of happiness' leads him to provide her with the greatest degree of agency in shaping the night's course as is possible (*Slowness*, 120). More damaging than these minor misrepresentations is one that unseats the logic that causes *Slowness*' narrator to cite *No Tomorrow* in the first place. The Chevalier's journey from the theatre to the château is described as a 'smooth and pleasant' opposite to the speed of the narrator's contemporaries (6). In Denon's original, however, the pair change horses twice, while phrases such as 'lightning speed', 'the lurching of the carriage' and 'an unexpected jolt' create a sense of hurried momentum leading almost to chaos.<sup>59</sup> At the start of Chapter 11, *Slowness*' narrator admits that his description of Madame de T's 'bodily roundness' is his own invention; elsewhere, he discloses that Denon's narrator is never actually labelled as a Chevalier (32, 6). Drawing attention to these interpellations serves to veil those *not* directly acknowledged, for the reader may trustingly assume that all similar manipulations are likewise laid bare, when the alterations that most forcefully prostitute *No Tomorrow* to the narrator's argument are those uncovered only by a direct comparison of both texts.

We must also consider how the changes in *No Tomorrow*'s form and perspective between original and representation affect its meaning. The former is told in the first-person past tense, the latter summarised in the third-person present. This shift in narrative voice transforms the story from confessional to exposé and robs the original narrator of the agency to describe his own experiences, paralleling him with Cechoripsky, whose life-story is similarly appropriated for the motives of another and who is likewise unable to prevent the usurper's trail of misrepresentations. More important is the shift in tense. At the close of *No Tomorrow*, the narrator states 'I looked hard for the moral of this whole adventure... and found none'.<sup>60</sup> As explained, use of the past tense evokes the future space of the discourse itself, in relation to which the story being reported is *past*. The title of the novella itself suggests this future space, with Cusset arguing correctly that 'a title that contains the word "tomorrow", even if only to deny this word, is obviously not ignorant of tomorrow'.<sup>61</sup> The form of the aforementioned verbs 'looked' and 'found' anchor them to the mentality of the narrator as he is leaving the chateau, not of his reporting future self. He is not saying that the story has no moral, or that he has not discovered a moral *since*, but merely that he was unable to divine it so near – temporally and geographically – to the night's events. Placing this statement at the very close of his narration leaves it lingering in the reader's mind and arguably encourages the reader to deduce a moral that the narrator wishes he had discerned sooner.

Few texts suggest how large or small is the temporal gap between the time of the story and the time of the narration. *No Tomorrow* makes no explicit statement, but the beseeching ‘I beg the reader to remember that I was twenty years old’ suggests the narrator is embarrassed by his youthful naivety and so implies a gap of many years.<sup>62</sup> There has thus been plenty of time for the moral to be discovered. *Slowness*’ narrator writes a moral into the novella, but this relates to the actions of Madame de T within the time of the story and does not explore the possible consequences of these actions on the Chevalier, which would become apparent only some time between the story and the narrating act, a time that Kundera’s narrator effaces. Feher’s description of the “dangerous man” brand of libertine experiencing ‘a strange nostalgia for the time of his own innocence, that former time when he was in love with the woman who so brutally introduced him into society’ suggests a probable fate for *No Tomorrow*’s narrator, whose arguable humiliation and abandonment by Madame de T – combined with his realisation that her sensitivity is merely a front for her sexual pursuits – may well turn him into a “dangerous man” himself.<sup>63</sup>

Viewing *No Tomorrow* as a utopian manifesto for libertinism is only possible if we, like Kundera’s narrator, take its title at face value. But the state of “no tomorrow” valorised on *Slowness*’ final page is not only a counterpoint to the future orientation of Berck and Vincent, but a mode of existence that robs us of the time needed to illuminate both the morals and the consequences that will prove certain courses of action are less fruitful than they initially appear. The narrator’s use of the present tense to remove from *Slowness*’ temporality the future space in which Berck and Vincent will enjoy the spoils of their dancing is perhaps most misguided because it places too much emphasis on the likelihood of their dancing succeeding, demonstrating the narrator’s strong internalisation of his era’s mentality. The broadcast of Berck’s interview with Cechoripsky may be critically panned; Vincent may fail in his performance at the Café Gascon and become a laughing stock. The future space that the narrator denies these characters would then become one of consequence and, perhaps, of realising that forging a reputation through misrepresentation is unviable.

*Slowness* tellingly dodges the question of Madame de T’s possible anorgasmia. In *No Tomorrow*, once the narrator has been told that Madame de T ‘herself feels nothing [and] is made of stone’, he nonchalantly replies ‘I wouldn’t have guessed...’ and his lengthy conversation with the Marquis continues.<sup>64</sup> Either the lack of direct commentary on the remark implies that the narrator wishes to rush past it, embarrassed by having been deceived by a performance suggesting the opposite, or, conversely, the ellipsis suggests a smug satisfaction at having given his partner what the unskilled Marquis evidently cannot. We could also presume that the Marquis is lying in order to unsettle the narrator’s confidence. It is impossible to resolve from the narrative whether or not Madame de T is anorgasmic, or, extrapolating from this, whether or not a representation can be said to hold true to its suggestions. In the sound-biting present day, however, there is no room for the narrator’s reading of *No Tomorrow* to preserve this ambiguity. After describing the aforementioned conversation, he informs us that ‘the Chevalier could laugh up his sleeve, because [Madame de T] had just proven the

opposite to him' (*Slowness*, 120). The narrator does not state that it is correct for the Chevalier to presume this, but the show of confidence is entirely his invention and the Chevalier's counterpart in *No Tomorrow* demonstrates no such surety. *Slowness'* narrator reads into *No Tomorrow* a much stronger link between representation and reality than the text supports, which subtly mirrors an overly trusting reader's conclusion that the representation of *No Tomorrow* within *Slowness* is faithful to its original. By comparing the two texts and discovering the differences outlined here, the reader ceases to be *Slowness'* Chevalier and becomes his counterpart from Denon's original, in a much stronger position to combat the manipulations of Berck and Vincent because disabused of the faith that speedy representations can claim sovereignty.

Reader-response theory provides a model useful for consolidating my reading of *Slowness* as a dissection of how the speedy culture decried by its narrator derails our ability to unpack and learn from ambiguous texts like *No Tomorrow*, or even *Slowness* itself. Iser argues that 'communication in literature... is a process set in motion... by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is *concealed* spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is *revealed*; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to life.'<sup>65</sup> If we can describe a reader who follows this model as what the thematic concerns of *Slowness* would position as a good reader, then the narrator of *Slowness* is a bad reader of *No Tomorrow*. To make of *Slowness* a truly novelistic experience, we must be the opposite sort of reader to its narrator, one with far more time on our hands. What is concealed about libertinism will spur the implied reader into a process of revealing, one simultaneously inspired by the gulf within the contemporary narrative separating what Berck reveals about Cechoripsky to the camera – and what Vincent plans to reveal to Pontevin about his night with Julie – from what the reader can see these revealings veil. Likewise, the reader's unveiling of libertinism's true colours will be guided by what the narrator reveals about *No Tomorrow*, which provides its original as a logical starting-point. And what is made explicit within *Slowness* about both *No Tomorrow* and libertinism will be transformed by the knowledge brought by a re-reading, from a fair argument that offers libertinism as a viable alternative to our contemporary era, into just another symptom of this era's conversion of difference and complexity into happy but manipulated soundbites.

*Slowness* becomes an effective antidote to the trends it criticizes precisely because of the contradictory situation of it proposing a promising set of values that it consistently fails to put into practice. Iser and Jauss both agree that the value of a work of literature is directly proportional to its refutation of a reader's expectations.<sup>66</sup> An initial expectation is set up and then demolished as soon as the reader first spots the novel on a bookshop shelf, the promises of its title at odds with its slimness. This trend continues throughout the reading process, as the novel's performative and constative elements continue to be at war with one another. If *Slowness* were already slow, out of the box, the reader would finish without being compelled to perform the future meaning-fulfilment that makes a genuinely slow text of both Kundera's work and *No Tomorrow*. The latter text becomes especially

valuable via its metamorphosis into a site in which the expectations of it conceived through the narrator's representation are demolished, so that the ambiguities *No Tomorrow* already establishes within its own universe are joined by those it casts upon the text that seeks to manipulate it. *Slowness* thus encourages a transformation within the reader, one that lifts her above the problems of her era, as she is not just told by the narrator but experiences for herself both the deficiencies of speed and the truths illuminated via a slower way of reading the textual worlds spread before her.

Few of the individual points that *Slowness* makes about speed or slowness are entirely new. The distinction in this extended variation on the theme from the variations seen throughout the preceding novels is the appearance of a narrator aligning himself specifically against speed, while unwittingly betraying his own project by aligning his own representational strategies clearly on speed's side. The reader here is not in the company of a narrator who takes the time to combat speedy, reductive representations via a representational slowness of his own. She is, instead, in the company of the character who makes the bad choice between slowness and speed that most pervasively affects the entirety of one of Kundera's novels. And because the consequences of this choice manifest not only on the level of the narrative itself, but throughout the narrative itself, it is the bad choice that most dramatically allows the novel's reader to step up and correct its effects. The key distinction in this novel from the variations upon its theme that precede it, then, is its mobilisation of this theme in order to provoke a particularly affective and challenging experience within the reader herself.

This is not to say that this is the first text in Kundera's oeuvre to see its reader experiencing the value of a receptional slowness. But slowing down *Slowness* is a more challenging proposition for two key reasons. Firstly, the two immediately prior texts, *Lightness of Being* and *Immortality*, allow their readers to get comfortably used to the narrators moving slowly themselves and so making the responsibility for electing to do so considerably easier; the readers of these texts are guided towards slowness by the momentum of the narrative, rather than challenged to stamp down on the brakes for themselves. Secondly, slowing down Helena's monologue in *The Joke* required engaging with relatively brief sections of text and a reductive image of Ludvik that could be countered by making a not particularly arduous choice to turn backwards a few pages in the same novel. To effectively slow down *Slowness*, its reader has to make an extended journey outside this novel, even outside Kundera's oeuvre to Denon's *No Tomorrow*, in order actively to challenge the rush onwards of not just a brief section of text, but much of the narrative created by the very quickest narrator.

*Slowness* thus sees its reader directly encouraged by the narrator's arguments to become mutineer, replace him as captain and take sole control of the vessel and responsibility for its course herself, ultimately turning aside a series of reductive images entirely through her own burgeoning interpretive thoroughness. As a relatively late novel, then, *Slowness* has the clear value, for an author constructing an oeuvre based around the privileging of doubt over certainty, not only in demonstrating to his readership the dangers of placing too much faith in the speedy representations made by his

narrator, but in also stoking this readership's ability to use a slowness of its own in order to dismantle them. This is an ability for which the novel itself is a perfect site of practice, but which the reader can continue to use whenever suspicious representations are encountered in the world around her, both beyond this particular novel and beyond the oeuvre that is moving into its closing phases.

Yet two potential problems emerge from the oeuvre's provision of such a training ground, which compromise the fitness of this novel for arriving within the later stages of a novelistic project intent on an agenda of doubt over certainty. Firstly, the oeuvre's mobilisation of a narrator whose sheer speed drives his reader to slow his text down for herself necessarily compromises the wider project of which this narrator is a part, through producing a novel so brief that it simply lacks the space or time for the variations necessarily to cast any doubt upon the worth of the eponymous theme itself. Though previous novels such as *The Joke*, *Lightness of Being* and *Immortality* have variously demonstrated the values of a receptional slowness, then, these positive depictions of receptional slowness have always been contextualised amongst instances of slowness that prove much less fit for purpose than a heady dose of speed. The very idea of slowness, even alongside the increasingly common positive appraisal of its receptional variety, itself remained multi-faceted and with qualities not only positive, but negative too.

The narrator of *Slowness*' praise is directed towards slowness itself as a guiding principle of one's very means of living and being. And so the lack of textual space within the novel for variations that might contextualise a valuable receptional slowness alongside other varieties – which could suggest the narrator is misguidedly reductive for praising the tempo so conclusively – runs the risk of leading the reader's victory in quashing his speedy representations to appear more than just a confirmation of the worth of receptional slowness for such a task, but instead proof of the narrator's arguments regarding the essence of slowness itself. The reader of the two previous novels, then, while never moved towards such an independent act of slowing down as is the implied reader of *Slowness*, should nevertheless retain more of a nuanced view of slowness itself than the reader of the very novel that centres on it. Through its mobilisation of such a fast narrator in order to cultivate the reader's own independent skills, the oeuvre might unwittingly lead the reader towards the same entrenched certainty as this narrator. The novel is thus in danger of accidentally compromising the oeuvre's manifesto of doubt at a relatively late moment, when it might wish instead to be bolstering it, returning instead to the certainty of *Farewell Waltz* (though regarding the opposite tempo) and undoing the good work of the following three novels in restoring the sense of aporia that *Farewell Waltz* unfortunately dismantled.

Secondly, through enabling such a powerful coming into being of its reader's own skills, there is the danger of *Slowness* also flouting its author's stated manifesto through leaving its reader with little if any vestigial doubt in another arena – that of her own abilities. This raises the question of whether or not an oeuvre coveting an aesthetic of doubt should, towards its close, leave the reader of a late novel feeling so supremely sure of herself, lest a scepticism towards speedy and false

representations be overshadowed by her own awakened sense of certainty in her ability as a crusader against such representations. A more slyly Kunderan irony might emerge from his later texts moving their readers to doubt not only the nature of the themes within the text, but also their own abilities to concretize or work with the very novel in front of them. These later texts might place their own themes on display in a manner similar to *Slowness*, maintaining the first French novel's affective pull of the implied reader down into the textual space itself, but without allowing their own readers such a comprehensive victory over these novels' own rhetorical and representational dilemmas.

Kundera's second and third French novels, *Identity* and *Ignorance*, see the oeuvre move further towards its close by testing two potential means of resolving this twin problem at the heart of *Slowness*' affective response upon its own reader, while sticking with the first French novel's general means of engaging with themes that have played out within previous Czech texts. For *Identity* and *Ignorance* will likewise engage with themes that have sounded in more minor variations throughout the Czech novels preceding them, and again through intensifying the affective ramifications of these particular themes as they play out through the relationship between text and reader. On these later two occasions, however, this affective pull plays out in a manner that leaves their own implied readers far more doubtful not only of flaky representations, but of their own powers of analysis and interpretation also. These next two novels will use their mobilisations of the themes of identity and ignorance to ensure that a powerful doubt is cast into this one particular arena that *Slowness* leaves completely untroubled. And *Identity* will answer this second problem generated by *Slowness* in a manner that also avoids the first problem discussed earlier, too. For rather than reductively clearing up an aporia towards its eponymous theme that sounds throughout this theme's variations within the Czech novels, in *Identity* the opposite occurs. The failure towards which *Identity* pulls its own implied reader becomes the very instrument through which loudly resounds a counterpoint missing not only from *Identity* itself, but which is almost continually minimised throughout the variations upon identity within the Czech novels preceding it.

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera. *Slowness*. Trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996) 114. Future references will be provided within the text.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992) 162.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Simmel. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." Trans. Hans Gerth. Eds. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone. *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997) 175.

<sup>5</sup> Frederic Jameson. *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 45.

<sup>6</sup> David Harvey. *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992) 286.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this thesis, my use of accents and circumflexes is consistent with how the characters within novels appear within these novels, and with how the names of non-English authors appear on the covers of their books or articles. 'Agnes' in the English translation of *Immortality* is not accented, but her name is accented on the front cover of the English translation of *Agnès Final Afternoon*, so when discussing Agnes in *Immortality* I eschew the accent, but preserve it when providing the title of Ricard's book. In *Slowness*, the name of the narrator's wife is given as 'Véra'. Cechoripsky is usually referred to via a description such as 'the Czech



scientist' and his name is only printed within the text of the novel once, without the inverted circumflexes. Admittedly he immediately complains that his name has not been printed correctly, but since I aim for consistency and his name never appears within the text properly accented, I am unable to indulge him.

<sup>8</sup> Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Karen von Kunes. "The Art of Buffoonery: The Czech Joke a la Commedia Dell'Arte Style in Kundera's French Novel *Slowness*." Peter Petro (ed.) *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera* (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1999) 259.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Němcová Banerjee. "Nostalgia con Brio: Kundera's *Slowness*." Peter Petro (ed.) *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera* (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1999) 265.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>13</sup> See Le Grand, *Kundera or The Memory of Desire*, 123-28.

<sup>14</sup> Nataša Kovačević. "History on Speed: Media and the Politics of Forgetting in Milan Kundera's *Slowness*." *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol.52, No.3 (Autumn, 2006) 639.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 644.

<sup>16</sup> Misurella, *Understanding Milan Kundera*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Nina Pelikan Straus. "Erasing History and Deconstructing the Text: Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*." *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 1987) 75.

<sup>18</sup> John O'Brien. "Milan Kundera: Meaning, Play and the Role of the Author." *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Fall, 1992) 6.

<sup>19</sup> Straus, "Erasing History and Deconstructing the Text", 69, 74.

<sup>20</sup> O'Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism*, 67. (Italics have been added for emphasis)

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Philips. "The Disillusionist: In Praise of Kundera's Hypocrisies." *Harper's Magazine* (March, 2007) 89.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>23</sup> Stanislaw Barańczak. "The Incredible Lightness." *The New Republic* (September 9, 1996) 42-3.

<sup>24</sup> Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 89.

<sup>25</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 215.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>27</sup> Currie. *About Time*, 139.

<sup>28</sup> John Harvey. "Fiction in the Present Tense." *Textual Practice* Vol. 20, No. 1 (2006) 82.

<sup>29</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 215. (Italics have been added for emphasis)

<sup>30</sup> Carl Honoré. *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 2005) 10.

<sup>31</sup> Monika Fludernik. "Chronology, Time, Tense and Experientiality in Narrative." *Language and Literature* Vol. 12, No. 2 (2003) 119.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 17.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 285. (Italics have been added for emphasis)

<sup>35</sup> Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, 65.

<sup>36</sup> Currie, *About Time*, 18, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> For a thorough denunciation of the kitsch performed here, see Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 245-48.

<sup>39</sup> Libertinism has enjoyed increased critical attention in recent years, with fresh publications of key libertine texts and an entire issue of *Yale French Studies* devoted to it in 1998. Michael Feher's lengthy introduction to *The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth Century France* (New York: Zone Books, 1997) offers the most accessible outline.

<sup>40</sup> Feher, *The Libertine Reader*, 17. (Italics have been added for emphasis)

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Cusset. "The Lesson of Libertinage." *Yale French Studies* No. 94 (1998) 2. (Italics have been added for emphasis)

<sup>42</sup> Fehler, *The Libertine Reader*, 20-31.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>47</sup> Cusset, "The Lesson of Libertinage", 8.

<sup>48</sup> Feher, *The Libertine Reader*, 43. (Italics have been added for emphasis)

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- <sup>49</sup> Nancy K. Miller. *French Dressing: Women, Men and Ancien Régime Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995) 9; Nancy K. Miller. "Libertinism and Feminism." *Yale French Studies* No. 94 (1998) 18-19.
- <sup>50</sup> Miller, "Libertinism and Feminism", 18.
- <sup>51</sup> James Steintrager. "Are You There Yet?: Libertinage and the Semantics of the Orgasm". *Differences* Vol. 11 (1999) 33.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>53</sup> See Currie, *About Time*, 25-6.
- <sup>54</sup> Italo Calvino. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Trans. William Weaver (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 8.
- <sup>55</sup> Roman Ingarden. *The Literary Work of Art*. Trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 343.
- <sup>56</sup> Vivant Denon. "No Tomorrow." Trans. Lydia Davis. *The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth Century France* (New York: Zone Books, 1997) 735. (In the respective French originals, we find 'un banc' and 'un banc de gascon', or 'a bench' and 'a grassy bank')
- <sup>57</sup> Denon, "No Tomorrow", 735.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 735.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 733.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 747.
- <sup>61</sup> Catherine Cussett. "A Lesson of Decency: Pleasure and Reality in Vivant Denon's *No Tomorrow*." *The Libertine Reader: Eroticism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth Century France* (New York: Zone Books, 1997) 723.
- <sup>62</sup> Denon, "No Tomorrow", 740.
- <sup>63</sup> Feher, *The Libertine Reader*, 30.
- <sup>64</sup> Denon, "No Tomorrow", 745.
- <sup>65</sup> Wolfgang Iser. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge, 1978) 168-9. (Italics have been added for emphasis)
- <sup>66</sup> Wolfgang Iser. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 278; Hans Robert Jauss. *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 25.

## **Part Two**

### ***Identity***

### Three: Variations on *Identity*

If one of the ideas explored by Kundera's second French novel is correct and it is the gazes of our fellow human beings that fill in and so delineate our identities, then within the English-speaking academic community at least, *Identity* itself has yet to achieve much of a persona of its own. George Steiner's comment that *Identity* is 'a novella about which there is virtually nothing to say' has apparently become received wisdom and remains, until now, uncontested.<sup>1</sup> *Identity* becomes by its final lines, however, a complex text as deserving of an extended engagement as any of Kundera's others.

The book's two protagonists, Chantal and Jean-Marc, are a couple in crisis, as the latter worries that his lover's identity is growing increasingly mutable and eventually completely amorphous. The chain of events, set in motion by Jean-Marc's realisation that Chantal becomes a different woman depending on a multitude of contexts over which he has no control, speeds towards a twist ending that casts the identity of the novel itself into doubt, manoeuvring the reader into the same position as that of its main characters, the relationship between reader and text suddenly mimicking that between Jean-Marc and Chantal. The novel thus functions much like its predecessor, which stirs a longing for slowness that demands its reader herself apply the brakes and so transcend what the narrative demonstrates, both performatively and constatively, is problematic about our society.

*Identity*, however, does not allow such an easy victory. The aspect of the 'trap the world has become' that Kundera examines here is not as straightforwardly escaped as that of speedily reductive representations, involving as it does the splintering of our very selves, and so the more the reader parallels Jean-Marc in his desperation for a coherent lover, the more the identity of *Identity* will thwart her attempts and become unstuck. *Identity* thus facilitates less the counter-attack prompted by *Slowness* and more a capitulation. While its characters fight for an impossible constancy, its reader can only accept that instability is here to stay.

Even a cursory examination of Kundera's Czech fiction reveals that these themes, like those of *Slowness*, are not new concerns, but reverberate throughout much of his oeuvre from an early incident in his very first novel, *The Joke*. Variations on the consequences of this incident spread throughout not only the rest of that novel, but continue beyond *The Joke* throughout Kundera's Czech fiction on their way towards *Identity* itself.

These variations chiefly hinge on exploring the ramifications of what, from very near the start of *The Joke*, is almost continually posited as identity's intrinsic instability. Identity is extremely rarely set or stable, and this fact leaves us open to various degrees of reshaping. There is considerably less likelihood of an aporia resembling that generally seen between slowness and speed appearing here, for this mutability much more frequently leads to dangers than to victories. The particular irony revealed here is that individuals can very rarely activate or control their own potential for mutability with the

same efficacy or reliability as can third-parties who seek to shape them for their own ends. Even characters adept at shaping the identities of others appear less able to control their *own* identity than the people or organisations who in turn seek to shape them. If any set of Kundera variations fits the model we have seen Simpson locate within Cervantes' own variations within *Don Quixote*, which he describes as comprised of repetitions of 'the same general idea', then it is the Czech variations on the theme of identity explored below.<sup>2</sup> The almost constant illustrations of the dangers of identity's mutability, and the minimisation (or outright muting) of the very small number of variations that seem to promise a respite from such a process, see the variations on identity lack the obvious series of points and counterpoints already demonstrated within the Czech variations on speed and slowness. The Czech novels instead depict a variety of situations that, far more often than not, sound the same warning about what might sadly come to seem posited by the oeuvre as approaching a basic truth.

### *The Joke*

The chronologically earliest major event within the narrated story-time of Kundera's first novel sets into motion a series of consequences that offer a number of early key insights about the nature of identity within Kundera's oeuvre, which will continue to reverberate throughout this novel and those that follow.

Ludvik's exile by the communist authorities amongst the black insignias is precipitated by him mailing a postcard on which he has written 'Optimism is the opium of the people!... Long live Trotsky!' (*TJ*, 34). Ludvik is self-admittedly an extremely cynical young man, who struggles to attach himself to any cause or to take matters seriously, not least the politically-charged atmosphere surrounding him at University in the newly Communist Czechoslovakia. Instead, he has a predilection for 'silly jokes' at the expense of those who revel in such a climate, such as his overly serious girlfriend Marketa (31). Ludvik here resembles Kundera himself, in that a written text that might seem on the surface to be a denouncement of Stalinism is, going by authorial intent, nothing of the sort.<sup>3</sup> As *The Joke* itself has been misread and appropriated, so too has this much smaller text written by a character within *The Joke*. The authority of Ludvik's interpretation of his own writing is swept aside as his private joke lands him in front of a 'plenary meeting', during which he is expelled from Party and University (46). Without holding a single serious thought that actively wishes harm against the regime, Ludvik nonetheless is shaped, by the accusations of those that hold all the power in his country, into a dangerous political dissident.

Ludvik's identity is neither static nor under his own control; he appears to enjoy less agency over it than do his persecutors. It is impossible to dismiss the regime's image of him as simply false, for Ludvik soon understands that the image constructed of him is 'more real than [his] actual self' (50). His 'non-resemblance' to their construction is 'perceptible' only to him, so that even if he does possess a solid self beyond it and in contradiction to it, this is, in effect, completely irrelevant, for this

self is denied any agency over his actual identity in terms of both his appearance to those around him and the resultant options made available to him (51). The mutability of our identity at the hands of people holding power over us is further stressed via Ludvik's description of the black insignia camp as 'a production line designed to turn us into soldiers', the same mutability that allowed the regime to fashion Ludvik into a dissident also facilitating the further transformation of both him and his fellows into a fixed identity useful to the communist cause (48).<sup>4</sup> While the first manipulation of Ludvik's mutability facilitates his removal from Czechoslovak society and his confinement outside it, the second manipulation then allows him to be moulded into a labourer that will prove useful to the regime's ends. And this is not a mutability intrinsic only to Ludvik that could be envisaged as a result of his cynical lack of belief in solid causes; through the number of dissidents confined alongside him, it is posited as dangerously commonplace.

But in a moment of optimism, the very mutability that is taken advantage of by outside forces perhaps also allows possibilities for control to be taken back by the people these forces seek to shape. Ludvik is able to navigate the world outside the mining camp by donning 'a dark suit' (108). He has recently observed that his new love interest, Lucie, is 'completely transformed' by the 'modern cut' of a new outfit and looks 'completely different' in each of the dresses he encourages her to try on (79-80). This epiphany has revealed to him that clothing does not merely sit on top of a static identity belonging to the person beneath it that exists prior to the clothing being put on, but instead holds the power more actively to construct the identity that it purports only to signify. By manipulating this process, Ludvik is able temporarily to shed his own identity as dissident, a construction perpetuated by the mining uniform he is forced to wear, and replace it with that of civilian. That the identity written onto him by his enemies endures, after his sentencing, not via a permanent branding, but via the apparently brittle significations of objects that can be removed and replaced, means that this constructed identity and his enemies' power to enforce it are both unstable, since access to different uniforms allows it to be overwritten. This variation seems to present a key modulation on Ludvik's earlier experience: no identity is permanent, for the very mutability that allows others to shape us may simultaneously open up our potential to wrest back control and mould ourselves in a way that allows an escape from their power.

The promise introduced by this optimistic variation is soon muted before it can stand as a genuine counterpoint, much like the optimism produced by further variations across the Czech oeuvre. Ludvik's escape from the camp is only a brief respite, for a man whose identity has indeed become fixed in a manner more long-term than is initially apparent. The fixity of his dissident status is suggested by Ludvik having no option after his discharge from the black insignias other than continuing for a further 'three years' as a miner, the taint attached to an identity first shaped through identity's mutability then apparently working to limit any *further* mutability that might see Ludvik reclaiming a lasting agency over his selfhood (117). As well as manipulating Ludvik's mutability, the regime also holds a stronger power than is at first apparent to calcify it once it has served its purpose.

Any deviances from the new identity provided by those in power now appear only temporary, as the suggestion we can take back control is here dramatically minimised.

By the time that Helena first meets Ludvik for a radio interview, however, his fortunes do appear markedly improved and so this modulation of his seeming success seems itself modulated. He enjoys his own 'office' (23) and works in 'research' at an institute (175). The role of manual labourer is clearly far behind him and so he could perhaps be described as having refashioned his identity quite effectively. But the fact that he has escaped the role assigned him is neutered by the fact that he has absolutely not escaped the dark mentality created by his earlier experiences. Fifteen years after his expulsion from University, his actions are still governed by the bitterness and thirst for revenge it caused (3, 175). His successful climb up the employment ladder over the previous twelve years only throws into a sharper relief the fact that, though his outward circumstances have improved, the actual core of his selfhood remains that forged by the authorities fifteen years ago.

That Ludvik has been unable to transcend the resentful identity fashioned by his expulsion explains the cynical tone he takes towards the Ride of Kings cultural rite that he observes during the novel's seventh part. The ritual suggests to Ludvik 'some old pagan superstition according to which transvestism offers protection from evil spirits' (262). This might seem an inaptly dismissive conclusion for Ludvik to reach, since his earlier escape from the black insignia camp by donning a disguise has demonstrated this supposed superstition in practice, the exchange of clothing and the play of clothing's significations allowing a temporary relief from his persecution. But the later exchange of a miner's uniform for that of a scientific researcher has absolutely not allowed him to exorcise his own evil spirits – those implanted inside him fifteen years ago and which still compel him towards revenge. His upward mobility having done absolutely nothing to alleviate his intense inner darkness shows that the identity that initially resulted from the communists' fashioning has grown so fixed that the very notion of lastingly changing it by putting on a different outfit now seems, despite his earlier moderate success at playing with such a potential, faintly ridiculous. The identities written onto us by those in power appear absolute and branding to the core, while those that we can write in a counterattack are fragile and ultimately unable to penetrate far beneath the skin. Identity is most definitely mutable, but others seem to have much more success at taking advantage of the emergent possibilities than we do ourselves.

That our identity is so open to being shaped by others proves still more threatening to Lucie. Lucie is first encountered via Ludvik's narration, in which she is described repeatedly as his sole source of joy during his time as a black insignia. She is reported variously to be 'a gift from heaven', a 'supernatural force' and 'not a corporeal woman but only a transparent pillar of warmth striding through a land of never-ending frost' (77, 111, 115). Rather than having a solid identity written onto her and then fixed, she appears as a series of often wild, fluctuating abstractions whose sole purpose appears that of facilitating Ludvik's salvation. During Ludvik's third stint as narrator, and following

her departure from his life, she is described as having ‘returned to her former abstract state’, as though this reported abstractness is her default mode of being, prior to a meaning or purpose being assigned by her value to the narrator, but demonstrating Ludvik’s apparent ignorance that the identities he has previously granted her are any less incorporeal (163). Kostka’s own narration describes Lucie variously as possessing a ‘saintlike simplicity’, as a ‘little lamb’ and as a ‘dove’ (227, 244).

Lucie’s malleability – and particularly its gendered nature – has been well explored by both Frances Restuccia and John O’Brien. Their works both oversimplify matters by limiting their focus on malleability to Kundera’s female characters, since we have already seen how the same mutability that leaves Lucie prey to problematic constructions of identity by Ludvik and Kostka has done the same to Ludvik himself and his fellow dissidents. Between them, Restuccia and O’Brien nonetheless achieve one of the few actual debates that can be charted amongst the relative scarcity of English-language literary criticism on Kundera.

Restuccia compares the male characters’ various framings of Lucie with the two contradictory readings of the post-card that starts Ludvik’s downfall. Restuccia argues that ‘just as the indeterminate text is apt to have a meaning imposed on it (or gets “raped”), the ‘nebulous’ and ‘malleable’ Lucie is also, it seems, ‘inevitably abused.’<sup>5</sup> She concludes that though Kundera means ‘to grant [women] certain strength in their resistance to totalitarianism’ through their very indefiniteness, with Lucie in particular this indefiniteness backfires and leaves her open to an often abusive shaping by male characters.<sup>6</sup> O’Brien, meanwhile, argues that Lucie, while perhaps the most abused of all Kundera’s female characters, is actually the one ‘most responsible for subverting or exceeding the narrow male conceptions of women.’<sup>7</sup> That O’Brien finds something more unambiguously empowering in Lucie’s transience than Restuccia perhaps points, very generally, towards how the identities of critics influences their readings of the identities of Kundera’s characters, since the female critic is far more tentative than the male in ascribing Lucie’s transience with any unambiguous strength.

If O’Brien’s stance regarding Lucie were the one better supported by the text, then Lucie would present a powerful counterpoint to Ludvik, who as we have seen is coerced into an identity that at first he does not recognise, but that soon becomes harmfully fixed despite a handful of promising signs to the contrary. If Restuccia’s counter-stance is better supported, then Lucie would represent a further variation that consolidates the portrayal of identity’s mutability as threatening. The best case-study for testing O’Brien’s view against Restuccia’s emerges from Lucie’s vacillating occupation, between her various framings by Ludvik and Kostka, of the two contradictory poles of one of the binary oppositions most critiqued by contemporary feminism: that women are both perceived to be and represented as ‘either Madonnas or whores.’<sup>8</sup>

After trying to sleep with her and failing, Ludvik attributes Lucie’s frustrating sexual reticence to her ‘virginity’, with the goddess-like qualities attached to her by him strongly dependent on her perceived purity (111). Kostka’s later narration reveals that in her younger days, Lucie was regularly gang-raped (221). While her identity as virgin is entirely a fictive construction, her identity



as rape-survivor appears, to at least a partially greater extent, real, since it is rooted in factual events that actually happened, even though the events that grant Lucie this solid identity result from a horrific act of violence against her body that has the power to shift it, against her will, from one position within the patriarchal binary to the other.

Yet Kostka's view of Lucie after discovering this information is ultimately no more realistic or munificent than Ludvik's. The manner in which Kostka goes on to describe her shows that his conception of her identity is almost as much an abstract construction as is Ludvik's. The attributes and characteristics attached to her identity as rape-survivor, by Kostka, have more to do with this identity's rooting in a patriarchal cultural framing than with the factual reality of her past. Firstly, Kostka regards her sexual history as making up her 'very essence' and so his understanding of her identity is no less rooted than Ludvik's in an obsession with her sexual status (221). More insidiously, Kostka imagines that Lucie requires a 'total forgiveness' that alone holds the power of 'divesting a sin of its validity, undoing it, erasing it out of time', her having been raped leaving her in need of a spiritual redemption that Kostka's faith in God means that only he can provide (234). Kostka compares himself favourably to Ludvik, who, because he does not know God, cannot forgive the sins of those who cast him from the Party with the same supposed benevolence that Kostka can forgive Lucie's past, Kostka thereby bizarrely equating her status as "fallen" woman with the Communist zealots who caused Ludvik's own fall. The horror that has been inflicted upon Lucie is not only posited as something she has brought about herself, but has additionally transformed her into a tool by which Kostka can prove his spiritual superiority to the novel's main narrator. His suggestion that Lucie 'humbly give herself up to God's order' even frames her supposed cure as mirroring the act of subordination to patriarchal authority that caused this cure's necessity – virtually a corrective rape itself (236).

O'Brien repeatedly insists that Kostka views Lucie as even more of a Madonna than Ludvik does, but the evidence above strongly suggests the opposite.<sup>9</sup> And even though Lucie's identity to Ludvik as virginal is factually inaccurate, while her identity to Kostka as rape-survivor seems not, the latter identity too still sees Lucie's identity as a harmful construction. Despite the gang-rape being an actual event, the notion that it leaves Lucie in need of forgiveness and spiritual redemption, while simultaneously rendering her a source of sexual temptation, demonstrates that Lucie's identity before Kostka is still less real than authored, for these attributes are the product of a specific cultural – and patriarchal – framing of rape, rather than deriving intrinsically from the crime itself.

Though the narrators are indeed shown to construct multiple falsifying accounts of her identity for their own personal conveniences and needs, O'Brien's optimistic reading of Lucie's malleability is hard to justify without some serious reservations. She herself does not seem to draw any noticeable empowerment from their mistakes. In fact, the reverse appears true: Ludvik's framing of Lucie as virginal and Kostka's as "fallen" woman in need of redemption both actively facilitate her further mistreatment at their hands. Since Ludvik overbearingly pressures her for sex without at all

understanding why she is reticent, the later trauma she experiences at his hands directly results from the identity he has imposed upon her being ignorant of the first. And these accounts both equally accentuate her perceived sexual status in order to frame her as an appendage of both male narrators' own situations: her supposed virginity alleviates the bleakness of Ludvik's time with the black insignias, and Kostka's beliefs regarding her status as rape-survivor provide him with a misguided opportunity to redeem his own spiritual identity. These constructions may well relativise each other, but Lucie suffers no less from their results and so the mutability of identity proves no less dangerous to her than it has to Ludvik. To focus on her ability to demonstrate the fragility of imposed identity constructions arguably sees a critical reading of the novel repeating the same appropriative gesture made by Kostka and Ludvik, as Lucie's own consistently miserable experiences *of* these identity constructions become of secondary importance to insights that other people can gain via them. Her power to destabilise identity constructions may be of interest to us as readers, but is of no obvious use to her as a female character. This power assigns her a role that she did not appear to ask for and that sees her deriving not a single benefit for herself, for we only experience her suffering as a result of the identities written onto her and never actually transcending them to enjoy a life free from their influence.

Though I would therefore side less with O'Brien and more with Restuccia, this is not to say that Lucie's example only reiterates the point already made, via Ludvik, that the ease with which others can write identities onto us is almost uniformly harmful to those who are thus reshaped. One important distinction is that Lucie's various identities, unlike Ludvik's, result not from a political regime, but through pernicious gender stereotypes. Lucie thus reminds us that the shaping of identities is not always at the hands of those overtly in political power, but can result through everyday interactions in which less visible exercises of power and privilege remain unchallenged. Ludvik's experiences taken in isolation are in danger of suggesting that were the particular regime that persecutes him to fall, then such examples of mutability being taken advantage of would likewise cease. For Ludvik they may well do, but Lucie's experiences suggest that more insidious manifestations of power will continue to shape those at the lower scales of more deeply ingrained hierarchies. The communists' fashioning of Ludvik is thus relativised as merely one variety of an exercise of power that worked via other avenues long before their existence and so will likely long outlive them. We cannot, therefore, pin the blame on one particular regime and imagine that after its overthrow people will be free from being malignly fashioned. Ludvik has perhaps even unconsciously learnt the true power of shaping people according to his own needs from his own refashioning at the hands of the communist authorities into a dissident miner who will meet *their* needs. The practice of manipulating the mutability of others thus survives through perpetuating itself between one hierarchy and the next, as people shaped due to their low position in one hierarchy in turn attempt to shape those occupying a lower position than them in others.

By the close of the first stage of the voyage into the interior of slowness, *The Joke* had established a clear aporia between the conflicting worths of various forms of both slowness and speed, an aporia that its final sequences worked hard to consolidate. By this same stage of the voyage into the interior of identity, an aporia appears far less likely, since the malleability of identity has been portrayed with an almost overwhelming cynicism. If the final sequence therefore produces a sign of doubt regarding the ubiquity of such a trend, it will be fresh, rather than supportive of the material prior to it.

Ludvik is contrasted in Part Seven against Zemanek, whom he finally meets face-to-face for the first time after his expulsion and exile from University. Zemanek was a guiding force behind the shaping of Ludvik's ironically intended postcard into a signifier of outright dissidence and the shaping of Ludvik into a bitter man obsessed with revenge. And Zemanek's own mutability counterpoints Ludvik's by appearing advantageous to him personally, rather than dangerously opening him up to reshaping by third parties.

For Zemanek has successfully changed from the man who expelled Ludvik for a jocular remark about Trotsky to his former's self's very opposite: a man who has recently 'saved a student from expulsion' following a later political 'prank' (271). Ludvik realises that Zemanek has 'completely abandoned his former views', to the extent that if he and Ludvik 'were now to frequent the same circles', Ludvik would always find himself taking Zemanek's side (271). Ludvik suddenly sees the time he spent planning any form of revenge against him as completely wasted, since the man against whom he has plotted essentially no longer exists. Zemanek's mutability is empowering – rendering completely futile Ludvik's long-term hopes of resolving his inner darkness through somehow hurting him – because, unlike Ludvik or Lucie, he appears to remain in control of it. As the political fashions change and regimes begin to move against their earlier architects and stalwarts, so too can Zemanek, ensuring that however society shifts, he can always remain on top and untouched by either the people who suffered through his actions during previous years, or those who want to displace the old guard. Mutability is here reframed as a sign not of vulnerability but of endurance, a process of resistance that facilitates survival across various political epochs with often wildly varying agendas. So for one rare resident of *The Joke*, the possibilities created by the intrinsic mutability of identity are personally valuable. These possibilities are not taken advantage of by a third party who seeks to shape Zemanek, but by Zemanek himself.

But Ludvik is a focal character throughout *The Joke*, while Zemanek never is, and so it is Ludvik's reactions to Zemanek's successful marshalling of his own mutability that are heavily emphasised, rather than Zemanek's own perspective. This lack of any narration from Zemanek's perspective strongly minimises the potential volume of the variation arising from his personal experiences, onto which the reader has no direct window, allowing Ludvik's anguish to override the potential for Zemanek's success to play out as a true counterpoint to Ludvik's previous failures to overcome his status as wronged dissident. Denied now of all future capacity for a revenge dependent

on Zemanek's identity remaining 'petrified', Ludvik experiences Zemanek's changeability as 'horrible' (271). For the more an individual becomes personally invested in an identity other than his or her own remaining stable, the more distressing he or she will find its fluctuations.

Kundera's first novel thus ends with a variation that sounds a further warning to the reader by moving her to consider the value to her own mental health of goals that require the stability of a third-party, the maintenance of which can never be guaranteed. For when our own goals are utterly reliant on a vanished third-party stability, our only option for avoiding Ludvik's despair is to take advantage of our own mutability in a way he has never meaningfully been able to do, through allowing these goals of ours to change likewise, to adapt alongside the changing situation that has highlighted these goal's impossibility. The novel avoids informing its reader of whether or not Ludvik *will* be able to change his own goals, or whether or not he will continue experiencing the hate locked within him for the past fifteen years by the communists' shaping of him, even though Ludvik now knows for sure that this hate can never defuse itself through revenge and so the need for him to take advantage of his already proven mutability for himself sounds louder than it ever has before.

The immediate aftermath of his discovery suggests that Ludvik will not be able to adapt alongside Zemanek, but the deeply introspective, self-evaluative nature of the closing chapter offers a very fragile promise that change might be possible.<sup>10</sup> The apparent variation provided by Zemanek is not entirely muted, for it still sounds as a rare example of someone lastingly able to take advantage of his mutability for himself. But the novel's denial of Zemanek a stint as narrator ensures that the closing emphasis is not so harmoniously on the definite countering of Ludvik's inability to take advantage of his own mutability against Zemanek's triumph. *The Joke* instead ends by emphasising a note of indefiniteness regarding whether Ludvik can finally seize for himself the mutability that previously has only been taken advantage of by others, and by stoking the hope of a sympathetic reader that he will. The closing focus is less on an unusual example of a character who has successfully changed, and more on one who urgently needs to but may well remain stuck in the mould imposed upon him by his enemies long ago.

### **"The Hitchhiking Game"<sup>11</sup>**

A hope that individuals such as Ludvik might learn to take the lasting advantage of their mutability that they desperately require is not encouraged by this short-story. The very possibility that our mutability might be beneficially activated for ourselves is reframed here as laughably naive in the face of the possible dangers.

This does not immediately appear to be the case. The anonymous 'girl' of the story, fearing that her boyfriend is put off by her bodily insecurities and so finds other women 'more attractive and more seductive', pretends to be a lascivious hitch-hiker.<sup>12</sup> The couple are beginning a two week 'vacation', which functions here as a seemingly apt metaphor for the girl's hopes of enjoying a

temporary respite from an identity of shame and anxiety, since a vacation is a supposedly pleasurable, temporary suspension of a more mundane life waiting to be resumed once the break is over (*LL*, 87). That the identity she chooses is that of a hitchhiker also serves an aptly metaphorical function, which reveals her own state of mind regarding her new found mutability: a newly fashioned identity is something she can hail at a moment of her choosing, safely inhabit while it takes her where she wants to go, and then easily depart. At first, the role she plays appears shaky as ‘a touch of the old anxiety’ mars her performance (84). These initial nerves dissipate and soon she is acting ‘with an ease that astonished her’ (88). To assume a new identity is not entirely effortless, but practice quickly makes perfect. Furthermore, there appear no obvious dangers to taking advantage of one’s mutability in this way: the girl is easily able to throw off her role once alone (92). It might be wondered what exactly Ludvik was finding so difficult. The identity of the text itself also appears a happy fit with the girl’s optimism, for as a short-story it might be a similarly light, breezy interlude in any reading schedule.

But vacations are not always the happy affairs suggested by the brochures and hitchhikers might alternatively be seen as rather reckless regarding the dangers to which their actions expose them. At the start of the story, both characters understand what is unfolding as merely a ‘game’ (82). What eventually unfolds throughout that evening’s dinner and the following dehumanising sexual encounter rapidly becomes more of a nightmare. After sex, the girl is ‘glad’ that ‘they would again be the two people they had been before’ (104). But the narrative shortly ends on the suggestion that returning to her previous identity might be far harder than was at first apparent.

The interpretations of this story by Misurella, O’Brien and Banerjee all ably explore the dangers of the couple’s game, but without really dwelling upon the key producer of the woman’s distress.<sup>13</sup> I would argue that the problems directly result from this identity template’s fictional nature. The identity that the girl wishes to fully assume for the duration of the game is modelled on a pre-existent fictional norm or stereotype that she chooses to imitate: that of a female character ‘out of trashy literature’ (88). Unlike the roles of bitter dissident and whore in need of redemption forced onto Ludvik and Lucie respectively within *The Joke*, this role is not directly imposed upon the girl from an external source, but follows her own selection of a prefabricated template. This might seem a fantastic idea, from which an individual like Ludvik might readily learn the ability to select a model that displays the wished for characteristics that he lacks and slip easily into a new identity, which is already crafted and merely waiting to be inhabited.

But trashy literature is designed as escapist fantasy, not for psychological nuance or realism, and so offers a poor mirror for an individual to imagine how its situations might be genuinely experienced. If such literature represents a sort of travel brochure itself, for alternative identities, then it is one that fails to represent the destination with a particular care for accuracy. The girl thus chooses this template unaware of just how dehumanisingly she will experience the events that result from her selection, which are perceived by her as the direct opposite to the idealised, ‘romantic’ nature she initially attributes to the role (88). She becomes rapidly unhappy as her boyfriend becomes ‘vulgar

and lascivious', orders her to pose naked across a piano and gloats during sex that he only kisses women he loves (104). This is clearly not to say that no one finds this sort of sex fun, but the fact that this girl is repeatedly described as 'sobbing' suggests that she is very clearly not doing so herself. The importance of the fictional nature of the template is further stressed when the boyfriend, too, is revealed to know the 'literature' from which her identity is being emulated (103). And while knowing the role only through fiction leads to her taking it on without a real consideration of how she personally will experience it, it correspondingly leads to her boyfriend having observed only how fictional women react to such treatment and so being completely unable to read obvious signs that the real woman in front of him is getting little to no pleasure from a situation *she* is evidently finding distressing. Her experiences might counterpoint any wish to see Ludvik able to marshal his mutability for himself, by warning that even self-activated mutability should come with a health warning. The reader is warned not to wish for an identity purely because it seems the enjoyable opposite to an identity currently causing problems. Fictional models, more specifically, are dangerous because they provide very little insight into how they will be experienced in reality. The mutability that has booked the girl into such a situation is then unable to help her check out with the same ease. What appeared a vacation becomes a one-way trip into a situation no longer wanted.

The final chapters of this story see the girl not simply trapped in a fantasy role that has become a horrifying reality, but apparently stuck between a prior self terrified of being thus dominated, and a new self who relishes it and which has almost, though not quite, usurped the prior self. This juxtaposition of two contradictory selves is evidenced by a sense that the resultant sex appears described from two contradictory viewpoints, each taking control for a moment before falling to the other. That she remembers having crossed a 'forbidden boundary', into sex divorced from love, 'without objections and as a full participant' flies in the face of both her 'loud sobs' only a moment before and an attempt to kiss her partner that is roughly turned away (104-105). The persona that exists willingly on one side of this boundary does not seem to remember the protestations literally just advanced by what appears a separate persona making clear objections to this move.

Despite the ostensible victory of the self entirely comfortable with the situation, there is no entirely neat progression that sees an old persona totally swamped by a new one. Immediately after the apparent victory of a self described as completely comfortable with what is happening, this victory appears reduced by the girl feeling 'horror at the thought that she had never known such pleasure' (105). The hitch-hiker of trashy literature whom she initially wanted to become is a woman who would feel only the pleasure of such a humiliation; the girl from the start of the story would feel only the horror. That both these emotions now co-exist suggests not a complete usurpation of one self by the other, or a collapse into an amorphous mess of every possible self, but a simultaneous experiencing of the situation from the perspective of the old self and the perspective of the new. Her mutability here proves so distressing not because it leads to a total fragmentation, but because it is only a *partial* mutability and thus results in an uncomfortable overlay of two opposing identities. She

does not so much finish the story completely amorphous, as much as she becomes simultaneously two different people, with contradictory stances towards the sexual practices in which her body has become immersed, each existing bound to the other. What is ultimately most distressing is perhaps not the memory of the sexual humiliation itself, but the fact that as the awkward girl she possesses the memory of enjoying it as the fictional hitchhiker, and as the fictional hitchhiker she possesses the memory of having felt only distressingly degraded.

The very fictionality of the hitchhiker identity is perhaps to blame for this final distress as well as the distress earlier experienced through the sexual humiliation itself. Fictional identities are portrayed here as too flaky to take a solid hold; had this particular fictional identity done so, the girl in question might feel only the pleasure of the situation and no longer the horror. So while the new identity's fictionality is at first problematic because it gives the girl no insight into how she will experience the results, it is ultimately problematic because its overwriting of her previous identity can never be thorough enough. Once she cannot escape it, she might wish it would instead go all the way, since this would equally alleviate the horror of being caught between both. She thus ends up unable to complete either of the manoeuvres that, at the start of the story, both seemed so easily feasible: she can neither go all of the way into bringing a previously fictional identity into the realm of the real, nor cast it aside so that she can return to the old.

This story thus appears less hopeful regarding the mutability of identity even than *The Joke*, which suggested, if only through Zemanek as a minimised counterpoint, that it can be an advantage when seized for ourselves. Mutability here is not only dangerous when other people marshal it to shape us for their own ends. Modelling new identities on pre-existent templates initially appears a wonderful and safe idea, but a failure to consider the precise nature of these templates means mutability can be equally dangerous when used by ourselves. This story warns of jumping into a role that *appears* to offer everything needed to escape aspects an individual might wish were otherwise, but which is better off left as fantasy. It also warns that mutability modelled on fictional templates may never be powerful enough to overwrite prior identities and so is in danger of leaving a hybridity of selves old and new, each distraught at experiential aspects of the other.

The boyfriend is ultimately horrified at what the girl has become and turns off the light so that he can avoid looking at her (105). The identity of this text as short-story is revealed here not to be a parallel to the girl's ambitions for a brief dalliance with the identity of hitch-hiker. It is instead the result of a narrator who mirrors the boyfriend within the text by switching off his own illumination of the couple. The 'thirteen days' of vacation that the boyfriend unhappily knows lie ahead of them directly conjure, for the reader, the potential sections of story, occurring over a precisely delineated time-frame, that the narrator flees from having to tell (106). It is not inevitably a short-story at all, but a potential novel cut short in its youth, by a narrator whose shrinking away only further turns up the volume on the dangers of taking advantage of personal mutability, through depicting these dangers as too traumatic for him to continue observing and reporting. Through taking advantage of his power to

control the nature of the text's identity, then, this narrator gives both himself and the reader the freedom to leave behind the situation in which the couple themselves are glued, leaping out of a vehicle in which his characters remain stuck with the doors firmly locked. Through his power over the text, the narrator is advantageously able to utilise the mutability of a third-party, exactly alongside the main character within the text appearing completely unable to achieve what she wishes with her own.

### *Life is Elsewhere*

Kundera's second novel does not provide particularly loud a counterpoint to prevailing trends. It continues the critique of the manoeuvre that *The Joke* ultimately suggests is urgently needed by Ludvik: that of marshalling control of one's own mutability. More specifically, it advances this critique by furthering the focus from "The Hitchhiking Game" on utilising this mutability through the following of fictional templates. But unlike the girl from that story, who does not realise the dangers of shaping herself around such templates until too late, *Life is Elsewhere* sees the young poet Jaromil attempt a refashioning of his identity that might initially appear much more likely to function as expected. For his refashioning differs from hers by following a template of the character's own authoring.

Throughout Part One, Jaromil is bullied by his peers and awkwardly virginal. The embarrassing imprint upon both his brow and his clothing of his mother's overbearing love, which dogs him throughout his childhood, leads him to be beaten up 'several times' by his classmates.<sup>14</sup> Part Two of the novel abandons the characters and tone of Part One in favour of the strongly magic-realist story of Xavier, for whom 'sleep is life and life is but a dream' and who 'goes from dream to dream as if he were going from one life to another' (62). Xavier is everything that Jaromil is not, enjoying a dashing physical prowess and an effortless way with women. In stark contrast to Jaromil's vacillation outside a bathroom, inside which he knows a naked woman is sitting ripe for his predatory observation, Xavier leaps straight into an unknown woman's bedroom through an open window, saves her from an abusive partner and wins a promise from her to run away with him (55-62). He also rescues a series of revolutionaries from imminent execution (75). Misurella vividly describes Xavier as 'a man of action and success, leaping boundaries, seducing women, winning fame and affection while destroying authority figures.'<sup>15</sup> The relationship of this story to Jaromil's is kept unclear, though Xavier's dislike of 'the pettiness' that makes 'men semi-men' might cause the reader to wonder what opinion the latter might hold of the former, were they ever to meet (69-70).

By the end of Part Four, however, Jaromil's situation appears to have changed for the better: he has successfully seduced a woman and feels, for the first time, a proper adult (154). It is revealed very soon afterward that the poet Jaromil and the dreamer Xavier are not so distinct as Keats' dream guide within his "The Fall of Hyperion" imagines: Xavier is a character in 'a fantastic story' authored by Jaromil (166).<sup>16</sup> As Cristina Şandru argues, the poet 'imaginatively creates' Xavier as someone



‘who possesses all the attributes that Jaromil wishes to have but does not.’<sup>17</sup> He thus resembles the template of the hitchhiker adopted by the girl who longs to rid herself of her bodily insecurities, only this template is one of Jaromil’s own authoring. When Jaromil’s first girlfriend flirtingly calls him ‘Xavier’ herself, his successful taking on of Xavier’s identity appears confirmed (167). Through carefully creating his own template, rather than jumping into one prepared by others, he seems to have successfully refashioned himself, achieving a feat at which the main characters from the two previous texts explored here have failed.

A link soon appears forged between taking advantage of one’s own mutability and taking advantage of other people’s: Jaromil’s sketching of ‘an entirely new self-portrait’ is followed by a realisation that his lover now ‘belongs to him more than ever’ and ‘is his creation’ (222, 226). He has just denounced her to the police for failing to inform them herself of her brother’s imminent flight from the young communist country, an action that irrevocably alters his girlfriend’s destiny by leaving her languishing in a police cell. Any residual jealousy at her independence is gone, replaced by the same sense of grandeur at having sacrificed a beautiful love to revolutionary ideals as enjoyed by Xavier. Jaromil is now in control of reshaping not just his own destiny, but that of others too. Taking control of one’s own mutability appears just the first step towards taking control of mutability in general.

But the sense that Jaromil’s assumption of Xavier’s personality is watertight is soon rendered ambiguous. Xavier’s betrayal of his own lover was not prompted by jealousy in the first place, but by an ardent desire to rush towards the ‘rattling gunfire’ that sounds in the distance like ‘a nightingale’s thrill’ (75). He is obviously on the way to placing himself in some considerable danger, since the revolution he is intent on assisting is still unfolding. That the revolutionary forces Jaromil wants to aid have already seized power means that his own supposedly revolutionary act can be accomplished within the comfort of a police station. And after his intervention, Jaromil winds up back at home with his mother and compares himself to Keats, a further example of the disempowered poetic precedents who have been haunting him throughout the novel, yet from whom he appeared to have torn himself away (226). While Jaromil now feels ‘manly’, he has perhaps become more of a parody of Xavier than Xavier himself (226).

Yet Jaromil is clearly not the same man of the earlier sections, since he has at the very least found a woman devoted to him and stuck up for his revolutionary ideals. Rather than remaining stuck as his old self or completely taking on the new, then, he resembles the state of the girl at the close of “The Hitchhiking Game” through being something of an overlay between two selves. Unlike her, that his control over his own mutability has not gone all the way causes him no discernible distress. There appears no experiential clash between the two selves’ impressions of his situation. He experiences only the joyous grandiosity of a Jaromil who knows that his actions at least halfway resemble Xavier’s, and none of Xavier’s annoyance that these actions have not entirely avoided being coloured by Jaromil’s trademark pettiness. If his transformation into the alternative identity has indeed got

stuck like that of the hitchhiking girl, it appears to have got stuck at the exact ratio most conducive to him feeling all of the triumph and none of the despair.

This status of relative comfort is not to outlast the close of the novel. Part Six abandons Jaromil at the above point and features the very earliest direct interruption by one of Kundera's extra-diegetic narrators. His role here is apparently to hypothesise a model of textual indeterminacy that he opposes to Jaromil's inability to assume completely a new identity of his devising. The narrator tells us that 'a novel has much more freedom' than a person and demonstrates this by jumping forward several years, to the time of Jaromil's now ex-girlfriend's release from prison (230).

The identity of the novel itself, though, is far from as free as this particular narrator insists. It enjoys a mere image of freedom, one marshalled by a narrator working according to his own motives. That this narrator is really in control, rather than the novel itself, is attested to almost immediately after he speaks glowingly of the novel's freedom: it can only move to a different time because the narrator himself knocks down the 'observatory' from which he was viewing Jaromil and his contemporaries and erects a new one (230). He even considers several possible sites, which he successively dismisses as 'not important' to his own interests, and candidly admits that the novel has previously discussed Jaromil's youth because it was his choice that it do so. His valorising of the novel form's intrinsic 'freedom' is thus strongly minimised by the fact that his novel, for one, is not free. It might well be mutable, but as the oeuvre has already often shown, mutability in no way equals freedom when it is so ripe for seizure by a third party. A novel that was as free as this narrator suggests would go where *it* wanted, rather than working to its narrator's bidding. This particular novel is free to go only exactly where a strongly self-interested narrator commands it to go.

It quickly becomes clear that Jaromil is not this narrator's favourite person: he somewhat gleefully denounces him as 'foolish Jaromil, a man who never knew anything about anyone!' (229). Considering that he has made these feelings clear, it is perhaps no coincidence that the events seen from the newly erected observatory happen to depict Jaromil's ex-girlfriend revealing that when she claimed to be visiting her brother in order to dissuade him from fleeing the country, she was actually visiting an older lover (236). Her brother was never planning to emigrate and so Jaromil's grandiose sense of having uncovered a traitor is based upon a cover-story designed to mask the fact that his first lover was cheating on him. And his grand love-story was, to the girl in question, only a vignette in her own life. His two supposedly most magnificent acts actually only further reveal the extent of his petty self-delusions. Xavier, then, he most definitely is not.

Part Seven sees Jaromil arriving at a party of artists and members of the media, where he starts a fight with a painter. Jaromil is carried 'like a tender, desperate fish' out onto a high balcony and trapped outdoors, where he falls back into the old ways of impotent ranting (254). As a result of a failed physical confrontation that Xavier would effortlessly have won, the poet eventually dies at 'not yet twenty years old' of 'pneumonia' (259). Without the narrator's manipulation of the novel's

freedom through his digression to the future, then, the reader would *still* see the Xavier identity fail under the reassertion of Jaromil's old weakness. But she might also maintain the illusion that through both his denunciation of a traitor and his having had a woman fawn over him exclusively Jaromil had moved a substantial part of the way there, rather than only ever having been Jaromil. The narrator's temporal intervention leaves Jaromil not just dead after an at least partially successful stint as Xavier, but stresses that he was deluded in ever imagining himself to have come close to being Xavier in the first place.

Şandru's conclusion that the alternative models of identity constructed by imaginative possibilities like Xavier are 'subversive' because they represent selves 'that could be' is thus revealed, through the achronological intervention of Part Six, to miss the point that Xavier represents a model that, despite being one of Jaromil's own authoring, can never convincingly actualise.<sup>18</sup> Were Part Five to be followed immediately by the events of Part Seven, Şandru might have a stronger case, since the evidence would then better support an interpretation that the template's partial success indeed suggests that Xavier is someone Jaromil *could* be. Part Six's revelation sees the narrator stressing that what appears a subversive potential is ultimately more of a reactionary kick in the teeth. This is not to suggest conclusively that an individual can never take advantage of his or her mutability, but that even self-authored models are very much restricted in what they can achieve. They perhaps even allow less mutability than the externally-authored template adopted by the girl of "The Hitchhiking Game", since even the double-image of Jaromil and Xavier apparent at the close of Part Five is exposed as illusory. He was never really a hybrid of the two that collapsed back into the former, but only ever just Jaromil.

I would charge the narrator, then, with manipulating the supposedly free novel to assume its new perspective in Part Six specifically so the reader cannot miss the proof that the narrator knows will be revealed, in its new location, of the extent of Jaromil's failure to be anything other than Jaromil. He cannot just leave Jaromil dead, but wants any impression that he was ever successfully Xavier to be buried alongside him. The inability revealed here of Jaromil to take advantage of his personal mutability and become Xavier to any meaningful degree at all is thus counterpointed with a textual mutability of which the narrator *is* successfully able to take advantage. The notion that people in positions of authority or power can shape the identities of others with more efficiency than people can shape themselves should by now be familiar. But this is the loudest variation yet where the indeterminacy taken advantage of by another is specifically textual, manipulated by a visible narrator who seems to possess an ulterior motive and has little qualms in stepping into the foreground and reconstructing his novel's architecture in order to bring this motive to fruition.

As Jaromil lies dying, the identity that his mother has previously hoped to fix upon him throughout his life is reinscribed as she calls him a 'beautiful little boy' with the 'hair of an angel' (260). This novel ends by reminding its reader that the total failure of Jaromil's own attempted manipulation of his mutability is not to be taken as a suggestion that we are simply host to inevitably

core characteristics that will resist any refashioning. The closing emphasis stresses that Jaromil only ever constructed Xavier as a fantasised opposite to an identity that was written onto him by an overbearing external influence, working according to its own self-interests. Our identities, once again, are vividly susceptible to shaping, but just very rarely in a way that we will ever be able to utilise positively or safely by our own hands.

### ***The Book of Laughter and Forgetting***

Kundera's fourth novel continues to demonstrate the same dangers already seen in the texts preceding it. Mirek, for example, attempts to rework his own identity in the eyes of those around him through the seizure of letters that attest to feelings towards an ex-girlfriend of whom he is now 'horribly ashamed' (*LF*, 15). The émigré Tamina, meanwhile, seeks to retrieve her own lost letters not to manipulate her identity, but to safeguard it from an erasure enforced by distances both geographic and temporal. Since 'her entire being contains' only what she can keep in sight from her past, as her memories fade so too do the very 'contours' of her identity (119). While Mirek attempts to take advantage of his mutability for himself, Tamina attempts to lock a decaying identity that already exists into place. Both attempts predictably fail. Similarly to Ludvik and Jaromil, Mirek cannot activate his own mutability for his own ends; similarly to the girl from "The Hitchhiking Game", Tamina cannot turn off her own and prevent a formerly stable self falling away from her reach.

The experiences of Marketa in Part Two, however, may suggest a rare counterpoint advanced through a focal character achieving what Mirek cannot. From the start of her marriage to Karel, Marketa has lived under the weight of being 'the better of the two', her identity within the pairing strictly delineated as such during the 'contract' made during the start of 'every love relationship' (51). This role is contrary to a former 'untameable, rebellious' persona with which she appeared to be happy (52). By the end of her portion of the novel, however, Marketa is on the verge of winning back this prior identity by cheating on her husband with his mistress. That she will successfully break out of her imposed mould is not entirely certain, though it seems that with the encouragement of her friend Eva, she will indeed be able to shed the identity written onto her and return to the prior identity submerged by the gendered codes that suggest a man may cheat on his wife, but not a woman on her husband (71). Taken on its own, this is a promising moment within a sympathetic character arc.

And yet the narrator's authority over the vivid textual amorphousness suggested by the very form of the novel works to counteract any true independence that Marketa might be able to achieve. As suggested at the very start of the thesis, Part Six sees the novel that formerly appeared rather disparate framed instead as one 'in the form of variations', (227). Furthermore, each of the characters from the prior sections of the novel are defined by the narrator here as existing 'for Tamina', whose novel this therefore most definitely is, even when, as during the majority of it, she is entirely off-stage (227). The textual identity of this novel partially evokes *Life is Elsewhere*, in which the seemingly

distinct story of Xavier is later revealed to be a story-within-a-story written by Jaromil. But the digression in *Life is Elsewhere* appears as a lone aberration in a text that, up to this revelation, has otherwise followed a single character and a single plot-line. Xavier is then revealed to be the fictional creation of this single character, so that even this disparity originates from a creative act performed within the same diegetic space as the rest of the action. And the subsequent departure to a future space in Part Six of *Life is Elsewhere* is still bridged by the presence within both time-zones of Jaromil's ex-girlfriend. The set-up of *Life is Elsewhere* is thus a far cry from the series of five separate stories that Part Six of *Laughter and Forgetting* then suggests is one primary story, Tamina's, and a set of variations upon her experiences, the unity of character that one would expect from a novel provided by Tamina being placed at the top of a hierarchy that subordinates all others to her. While Jaromil effectively creates his own variation existing at a fictional remove from himself, the narrator of *Laughter and Forgetting* gathers a series of stories existing at the same diegetic level as each other and marshals them around the cause of a single character who, within the fictional space of the novel, is objectively no less legitimately real (or unreal) than they. The potential textual amorphousness of this novel is thus by far the greatest encountered in the oeuvre so far, and yet, like the lesser textual amorphousness of *Life is Elsewhere*, the mutability resulting from this amorphousness is also easily marshalled around a narrator's specific goals.

These are goals with which it is easy to feel more sympathy than with the effective though somewhat cruel underlining of Jaromil's complete failure to become Xavier. Nor are these goals born of the fear of what is unfolding that motivates the narrator of "The Hitchhiking Game" towards taking advantage of the textual mutability there, through cutting his story short. O'Brien fairly suggests that the 'intrusive narrator' is 'invoking authorial fiat' in the hope to ensure that, 'in this novel in which erasure is shown to be an inescapable feature of both politics and sexual politics', it becomes 'impossible to erase Tamina', since she becomes 'present even in her absence.'<sup>19</sup> It could alternatively be suggested that the narrator is providing her, as a lonely exile, with a community of individuals who have experienced similar events, so that she no longer ever has to be alone. Both of these motivations would suggest a textual mutability being taken advantage of for perhaps the most nobly intentioned reasons behind any manipulation of another body's mutability in the oeuvre.

By framing the text in this way, however, rather than letting each of the stories he has gathered and the characters who inhabit them remain in their disparate state, the narrator stamps down hard upon the potential Marketa previously appeared to enjoy to use her own mutability for her own ends. Marketa's efforts to take control back over her identity become insignificant, as her life is suddenly rendered redundant on its own terms, as the regained agency she formerly lost to her relationship with Karel is again lost to a spiritual relationship with Tamina. This is a relationship where the very contract describing its terms, over which Marketa has no say since she is not even aware of its being drawn up, can only ever relegate her to a status of secondary importance, since every other character exists only 'for' Tamina and never Tamina for any of the other characters (227).

Tamina is the woman the narrator places in front of the mirror, while everyone else must be happy to remain merely her reflection. While O'Brien's reading is definitely correct regarding the potential alleviation of Tamina's own erasure, he misses the irony that a woman on the verge of escaping the erasure of her own agency has her burgeoning reclamation of this agency itself erased, through the operation of the very structural device that O'Brien envisages as coming to Tamina's aid. A potential counterpoint to prevailing trends, then, ultimately switches to become a further confirmation of the trends both within this novel and in those preceding it.

### *Immortality*

The final Czech novel again continues to highlight the common dangers that result from our mutability. Two important moments, however, very tentatively counterpoint this trend with extremely fragile notes of optimism.

*Immortality* suggests several ways in which characters' agency over their mutability is, familiarly, less than that of third parties who brand them with a particular identity and then limit any further capacity for shaping. Faces, for example, can never be unique, but are instead akin to the 'serial number' of a car, stamped by a 'Creator' onto each bare model to provide it with a fixed identity, (*I*, 13). Once we exist within this world, stuck with the face our Creator has chosen, a misdirected form of our own personal agency can limit us further: a youth, who sounds much like Jaromil, joins the Communist party in the belief that he is gallantly distinguishing himself, when he is in fact condensing himself into a mere 'revolutionary image' (237). And once we have returned to our Creator, the machinations of other people still living in this world will control our lasting image after our deaths (83). Together, these three examples demonstrate a moment before birth during which we are cast into a particular shape beyond our choosing, a moment within life during which an attempt to take back control leads us only into inhabiting a ready-made script that is all style and no substance, and an ongoing lack of freedom after death that sees our immortal identity left at the mercy of those who remain behind. Our lack of full, fruitful control over our identities appears across these examples to be enduringly eternal.

After his death, however, Goethe personally activates his mutability in order to thwart the goals of his admirer, Bettina. Throughout his life, Goethe attempts to resist the efforts of Bettina to guarantee her own immortal image by wielding it irrevocably to the eternal reputation of the artist. Though she appears to succeed through publishing their private correspondence as *Goethe's Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*, in the afterlife he is able to get his own back (83). Bettina has not anticipated that denizens of the afterlife can 'choose to look the way they did at any time in their lives' (96). Goethe takes advantage of this mutability and assumes the visage of an old man, heightening its decrepitude via a deliberate 'scare-crow get up', so that Bettina's carefully constructed immortality is damaged through its close association with such a foolish-seeming figure (96). Not only can he safely

select from a number of templates, unlike the vast majority of the characters so far, but he can also modify them to his specification once chosen, in order best to serve his purpose. A figure attempting to control Goethe's mutability for her own ends is thus defeated by him taking it back for himself in a victorious counter-attack.

This success story is modulated not only by being limited by the visages that Goethe has already worn, but by the very fact of it occurring in the afterlife. It thus leaves only a slim hope that such a manoeuvre might be possible in the real world, without the powers we are only granted once we have departed from it for good. Belief in the possibility that our mutability can be advantageously used for ourselves could even be described as portrayed here, rather cynically, as a faith as groundless as a faith in Heaven. And either way, Goethe's seizure of his own mutability in Heaven does little to assuage the image that will forever remain of him on Earth thanks to Bettina's manipulations.

The second moment that offers a potential counterpoint to the oeuvre's prevailing trends arises via the sequence before Agnes' untimely death in a car-crash, when Agnes achieves a moment of contact with a supposed prior state that exists before any identity is written onto a body. A dichotomy is drawn here between 'self' and 'being'; the former is the construction written onto the latter (287). That this is a *natural* state is exaggerated by the natural landscape that then surrounds Agnes and aids her regeneration, as though selves are to being what a sprawling cityscape is to the countryside, or an imposition that unavoidably destroys the purity of what it touches through transforming it irrevocably into its opposite. But being can apparently throw off the self imposed upon it, in an act of rebellion experienced by Agnes as a 'special, unforgettable' moment of 'happiness (287).

A couple of major caveats ratchet down the volume of this potentially powerful counterpoint to the majority of the variations charted thus far. Agnes is very soon killed and so the reader never learns how much strength Agnes' being actually holds to ward off the seemingly inevitable future attempts to enforce any particular self back upon it. It might well be able to survive back in the middle of a city, or it might alternatively prove too fragile to endure when separated from the landscape that inspired its rebirth. The second caveat results from her very thrall, in this sequence, to the natural environment, which has been interpreted by Ricard as akin to a possession by the landscape.<sup>20</sup> Agnes' belief that she is re-engaging with pure being might itself be a mere product of this bewitchment, the landscape attempting to lure her to remain in its bowers by providing a facsimile of an experience that Kundera characters before her have found unrealisable. Nature might only be constructing a new self for her, one in thrall to a different sort of environment and that imagines it is free, rather than returning her to the purity of being.

Between Goethe and Agnes, then, two potentially promising new options emerge for dealing with the difficulties that result from our mutability. These largely arrive from opposite directions, since one involves all the physical appearances an individual has ever enjoyed becoming a set of templates that can be selected from at will, while the other potentially involves the shedding of all

identity templates and a return to a purity that lies beneath them. The potential success stories about harnessing mutability from texts such as *The Joke*, “The Hitchhiking Game”, *Life is Elsewhere* and *Laughter and Forgetting* mostly lead to failure, or to greater danger; the only clear example that leads to neither, that of Zemanek in *The Joke*, is modulated by the construction of that novel so that his success story is drowned out by the vividly narrated horror of Ludvik. The aforementioned modulations of these twin victories in *Immortality* are more akin to strong caveats than total minimisations, especially in Goethe’s case, since he is at least a focal character who does inarguably manage what the girl from “The Hitchhiking Game” and Jaromil do not. Agnes’ victory is more questionable, yet still introduces a possibility never before seen and which, however strong the caveats, is only arguably rather than definitively unrealised, since whether or not the environment has aided her or bewitched and deluded her is left ambiguous. These incidents depart from the majority of previous variations through providing a pair of clear examples that allow some optimism to remain, rather than none at all, even if this optimism remains ever minimised.

### **Variations on *Identity***

The Czech variations on the theme of identity do not go nearly as far towards establishing the sort of aporia documented throughout Chapter One, for the texts explored here show that both personal and textual identities are usually ripe for shaping by third parties with agendas of their own. And when individuals attempt to take control of their own mutability for themselves, this process either fails or runs dangerously awry. In only a small number of questionable or muted cases are Kundera’s Czech characters able to maintain control of the mutability that results from the instability of their identities and utilise it to their own advantage

The closing scenes of *The Joke* place Ludvik in a situation where he needs to take control of his identity and change, through reshaping or even shedding the bitter persona written onto him long ago by his expulsion from University. His goals up to that point have required the long-term stability of another character, Zemanek, the only character in that novel (and virtually the whole oeuvre) able safely to control his mutability for himself, and so who is no longer the man Ludvik needs him to be in order for his planned revenge to function. The reader is left in a state of doubt regarding whether or not Ludvik’s goals will be able to adapt alongside the third-party whose own fluctuations these goals failed to predict.

“The Hitchhiking Game” and *Life is Elsewhere* present two possible means by which a character like Ludvik might achieve such a requirement. Both of these involve the modelling of a new self upon fictional templates and both are initially portrayed with enough optimism to seem empowering ways out of an impasse like Ludvik’s. One fictional template is borrowed from a pre-existent source; the other is authored by the individual himself, in a concerted attempt to craft a new



identity that throws off the qualities written onto him throughout his childhood by his overbearing mother.

Neither option works. The girl of “The Hitchhiking Game” is left stuck as a nightmarish overlay of two different selves with diametrically opposite experiences of the situation in which they find themselves, while Jaromil appears fixed in a similar state between his old persona and the idealisation of Xavier, before the extra-diegetic narrator’s manipulation of the novel’s textual identity impresses upon the reader that he was, actually, only ever Jaromil. Neither sort of template, self-authored or otherwise, offers a safe way of harnessing the mutability that still far more often places characters under the thrall of others. That both characters seemed so confident of their success only makes their ultimate failures sound the louder.

Later Czech novels continue to present confirmations that the mutability of our identity only leaves us dangerously open to shaping by third parties, while minimising any examples that might begin to emerge as potential counterpoints. The narrator of *Laughter and Forgetting* erases Marketa’s burgeoning ability to shape her own roles and significations for herself, while in *Immortality* Goethe’s ability to harness his own mutability at will, in order to thwart Bettina’s efforts to manipulate it herself, is possible only in the afterlife and holds little power over the artificial image of him that remains down below. Agnes, meanwhile, apparently returns to a state of pure being that exists independently of any identity template at all, yet her newfound status can readily be interpreted as confirming Ricard’s sense of her falling under the thrall of the environment itself. If these two examples from *Immortality* do suggest a greater proportion within a single text of more optimistic notes than generally heard in the texts preceding it, it is through demonstrating the very tentative beginnings of a changing trend, rather than a promise arrived at.

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<sup>1</sup> Steiner, “She’s scared to blink in case her man turns into somebody else”, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, “Theme and Variation as a Literary Form”, 238.

<sup>3</sup> See Kundera’s Preface to the second English translation of *The Joke*, in which he describes a panel discussion during which he interrupted a critic with ‘Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story!’. Milan Kundera. *The Joke*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Penguin Books, 1984) v.

<sup>4</sup> Ludvik’s observations strongly resemble Foucault’s in *Discipline and Punish*, published nearly ten years later, when he talks of soldiers as identities that can be ‘made’ or ‘constructed’. See Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977) 135. This is a particularly good case-study for proving Kundera’s observation in *The Curtain* that the wisdom of the novel can pre-date or predict wisdom that comes from outside the novel.

<sup>5</sup> Frances L. Restuccia. “Homo Homini Lupus: Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*.” *Contemporary Literature* Vol.31, No.3 (Autumn, 1990) 298.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 297-298.

<sup>7</sup> O’Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism*, 71, 73.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Banerjee is more optimistic than I that Ludvik definitely will be able to change. For her, ‘Ludvik’s mind, purged of all venom, leans towards an understanding that has the poignantly personal quality of generational sympathy’. See Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox*, 50. The passages that Banerjee is reading here, however, are followed by Ludvik’s stern refusal to ‘detach himself’ from his previous experiences and his direct assertion that

if Zemanek asked for forgiveness, he would refuse him (*TJ*, 278). The ‘venom’ is, at the point on which Banerjee focuses, clearly still quite virulent.

<sup>11</sup> In placing “The Hitchhiking Game” after *The Joke*, I follow the critical precedent of O’Brien and Banerjee, both of whom analyse Kundera’s oeuvre as a text-by-text sequence and move from *The Joke*, to individual stories within *Laughable Loves*, to *Life is Elsewhere*. It was originally published in its Czech form in 1965 as part of the second of three separate short-story anthologies that between them totalled ten stories, two years before the original Czech publication of *The Joke*, and so its analysis could potentially come at the very start of Chapter Three. See Woods, *Translating Milan Kundera*, 73. My decision is true also to the author’s own retrospective shaping of his oeuvre. Kundera has followed the precedents of composers by assigning each of the latest versions of his texts an ‘Opus’ number: *The Joke* is ‘Opus one’, *Laughable Loves* ‘Opus two’ and *Life is Elsewhere* ‘Opus three’. See an interview with Kundera quoted at length in Misurella, *Understanding Milan Kundera*, 164.

<sup>12</sup> Milan Kundera. “The Hitchhiking Game.” *Laughable Loves*. Trans. Suzanne Rappaport (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991) 82. Further references will be cited within the text as *LL*.

<sup>13</sup> See Misurella, *Understanding Milan Kundera*, 172-74; O’Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism*, 9-10, 82-85; Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox*, 55-56.

<sup>14</sup> Milan Kundera. *Life is Elsewhere*. Trans. Aaron Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2000) 17. Further references to *Life is Elsewhere* will be cited within the text as *LE*.

<sup>15</sup> Misurella, *Understanding Milan Kundera*, 70.

<sup>16</sup> “The poet and the dreamer are distinct / Diverse, sheer opposites, antipodes.” See John Keats “The Fall of Hyperion” in *The Complete Poems*. Ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin, 1988) 440.

<sup>17</sup> Cristina Şandru. “A Bakhtinian Poetics of Subversion: The Magical Realist Fiction of the 1980s in East-Central Europe.” *Critique* Vol.50, No.1 (Autumn, 2008) 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> O’Brien, *Milan Kundera and Feminism*, 100.

<sup>20</sup> Ricard, *Agnes Final Afternoon*, 2.

## **Four: *Identity***

*“If he had known her only with the face she shows her colleagues, her bosses, her subordinates, would that face have moved and enchanted him?”<sup>1</sup>*

### **1. *Identity under fire***

The problems that plague Chantal and Jean-Marc throughout Kundera’s second French novel begin during a rendezvous at a small town on the Normandy coast. Jean-Marc mistakes a distant stranger for his partner and so becomes worried that the latter’s identity cannot be as vivid or coherent as he had previously imagined. Chantal, meanwhile, after musing over the increasing feminisation of men and the consequence that they will ‘never turn to look at her again’, has an experience in a local café that cruelly demonstrates the opposite, with two hyper-masculine figures leaving her feeling severely threatened (*Identity*, 13). The couple reunites in Chantal’s hotel room, where a typically Kunderan misunderstanding provides the catalyst for the remainder of the narrative. A shaken Chantal attempts to lighten the mood by discussing with Jean-Marc the sights that prompted her conclusions regarding masculinity, but can only repeat ‘Men don’t turn to look at me anymore’ in a tone that suggests to Jean-Marc that this fact has left her severely wounded (22). Jean-Marc and Chantal later discuss her job in advertising, a vocation that excels at the infusion of objects with identities often wildly at odds with their practical purpose, such as the infantilised nuclear weapon ‘Little Boy’ that ended over 100,000 lives in a single afternoon (29). Jean-Marc’s realisation that Chantal excels at an occupation that bores her and so is intrinsically two-faced further stokes his impression that the woman he loves is splintering into a collection of jumbled identities, each as remote from the person he imagined her to be as they are from each other.

The largest portion of the narrative concerns Chantal’s reception of a series of letters from a secret admirer, whom she eventually realises is Jean-Marc. Still misinterpreting her earlier comment, he wishes to return to her the joy of being admired, without realising that her strongest desire is now for the absence of such attention. Chantal arrives at the mistaken conclusion that Jean-Marc is attempting to end their relationship through the convoluted means of proving her willingness to have an affair; he, meanwhile, is torn between happiness at imagining that his attempt to ‘rid her of the depressing sense that men no longer turned to look at her’ is succeeding and jealousy that she is hiding the letters, rather than informing him of her admirer’s existence (88). Jean-Marc decides to bring the situation to a close via a letter informing Chantal that its author is permanently moving to London. Anticipating the failure of their relationship and deciding to punish Jean-Marc for his perceived motivation, Chantal announces her own departure for England.

The final third of the novel sees Chantal journey to London with Jean-Marc in pursuit, neither character particularly prescient of what they expect to result. As the events in the narrative grow increasingly unlikely, Chantal meets a group of workmates en route to an advertising conference, but leaves them behind on departing the train. After losing sight of her on the crowded London platform, Jean-Marc assumes a surveillance position on a bench opposite a seemingly random house; Chantal, by complete coincidence, is inside, about to partake in an orgy. She has wavered, prior to this, between viewing the mutability epitomised by her two faces as positive or negative, between embracing her proclivity for conforming with her immediate surroundings, or discarding it. The orgy appears a test for the former position in either dichotomy, Chantal's individuality melting in a mass of flesh, though the results of this test quickly become unambiguously negative. Here, a burgeoning propensity for being shaped by the attitudes and ideologies of those around her means that ultimately she is left with no identity of her own at all. She realises that 'the beginning' of her self 'is her name', but cannot remember even this (88). Longing for the presence of her lover, who would offer a vital anchor for her identity by reminding her of this most basic component, yet inextricably separated from him, Chantal eventually loses her memories and even the power of articulate speech, all of which are nothing without the basic building block of her identity on which they depend for a firm foundation. She is eventually assigned the name of 'Anne' by one of the men in the room and appears completely unable to shake off this imposed identity, the wrongness of which fills her with 'icy horror' (149). Her initial two-facedness has ultimately led to her being as open to shaping into a fixed form, by another person and of his or her choosing, as the vast majority of the characters in the Czech texts.

Chantal's perspective occupies a weightier proportion of the narrative than Jean-Marc's and so the struggles faced by her own identity appear the more vividly. She is earlier established as transgressing one of society's most omnipresent codes of behaviour by feeling happy at the potentials established by the death of her young child; she thus appears to have held a strong ability to experience her own feelings, unfettered by a mutability that would see her fall in line with prevailing moralities. But her inability to reveal to Jean-Marc this intrinsic aspect of her identity, because she 'was not confident of his reaction', is a stark example of her fear of these codes causing her individuality to instead become repressed (39). A presentation made by the advertising executive Leroy, Chantal's employer, contextualises this fear of other people's reactions as a shaping force upon Chantal by demonstrating its pervasiveness throughout society: Leroy hypothesises that the majority of individuals dislike the erotic as 'the source of their troubles... their complexes [and] their sufferings', yet will always, even if the interrogator is invisible at the other end of a phone, affirm the opposite (48). Chantal's inability to speak her own mind is only one instance of an epidemic of such behaviour.

Yet she has not always been so easily shapeable by the opinions of third-parties, resisting the efforts of her former sister-in-law to enmesh her in a large and close-knit family group and refusing her then-husband sex in order to avoid immersing herself further via another child (30). Chantal's

agency over her self is at that point particularly strong, the clearly demonstrated demands of the group of which she is a member prompting not compliance but defiance. This individuality survives the start of her subsequent relationship with Jean-Marc: the phrase ‘dismissing any notion of marriage’, surfacing within the context of her decision to move into a new apartment with him, makes it clear that this decision is at odds with what the mores of society would demand of her (32). Furthermore Chantal and Jean-Marc’s relationship readily subverts codes of gender normativity, since he earns ‘a fifth of what she earns’ and is essentially a kept man (113). Again, this is the continuation of a strong, unshapeable individuality that was present in her marriage: her ex-husband is physically smaller than she, which the rest of the family unit, including this man’s own sister, finds hard to understand.

Somehow, by the segments of the narrative that Genette would label its ‘zero degree’ – against which segments taking place chronologically earlier than this default temporal location can be identified as flashbacks – Chantal has lost this previously established strong, individual identity and become almost chameleonicly shapeable, eventually even into another woman altogether.<sup>2</sup> This has always been a potential danger: her sister-in-law expresses surprise that during the years in which Chantal has been bolstering her financial position so that she can leave her husband, she managed to keep her plans so well masked (32). Chantal has always been conflicted between flaunting the most individual aspects of her identity and suppressing them, but, during the course of the novel, the latter option gradually smothers the former, until the logical culmination of this trend places her at the epicentre of a cruelly dehumanising orgy and the imposition of a whole new identity that she cannot escape.

Why Chantal undergoes this damaging transition can be explained by the environment in which she works. Just as Foucault has suggested that prisons not only house but *produce* prisoners, advertising companies like Chantal’s place of employment produce advertisers, whose job relies upon the almost infinite mutability of objects and people and the power of the advertiser to harness this.<sup>3</sup> This specific environment takes these ramifications to a higher plateau than in the sort of environment described by Foucault, because in these mutability is merely a means to an end – that of producing agricultural workers, or soldiers, or prisoners, who once formed presumably must remain stable so that they can continue to do the jobs or otherwise serve the purposes that they were shaped for in the first place – rather than, as mutability is for advertising, both simultaneously a means to an end *and* an end in itself. Leroy’s world is dependent on the production of individuals themselves invested with the ability to manipulate indeterminacy and mutability, even in ideas or experiences that should remain inviolate: a world in which the difference between a mother kissing her baby and two lovers locked in an erotic embrace is nothing sacred but merely a trick of perspective (34). An exchange between Leroy and Chantal on the train to London demonstrates that her inhabitation of this world has rendered her as multi-faced as the objects she works upon, relishing the epiphany that ‘all statements and positions carry the same value, can rub against one another, nestle, snuggle, fondle, mingle, cuddle, couple’ (129). The narrative stressing that Chantal was formerly ‘infuriated’ by such a denial

of the concrete distinctions between things highlights how it is the presence of her employer who has cultivated in her this attitude (129). Chantal's career, which is based on taking advantage of mutability, has foisted upon Chantal herself an excess of personal mutability, so that an unchecked plasticity is now all of which she is capable. A rare example of a character who seemed relatively closed to being shaped by third-parties has unfortunately been infected by her choice of occupation, so that she has become as open to shaping as the majority of the Czech characters who have preceded her.

Jean-Marc's portions of the narrative demonstrate many intertwined concerns. He has dabbled with a multitude of career paths but is unable to find one that satisfies. The sole person he identifies with, other than Chantal, is a beggar who lives in a nearby park, for Jean-Marc imagines that his lack of ambition places him similarly at 'the margin of the world' (79). Also dominating are worries – stoked by his early flirtation with a career in medicine – that the actuality of the body and its imperfections is ineradicably dehumanizing (63). While the eye is supposedly the window to the soul, where resides all that is most individual, it is bordered by a windscreen-wiper like mechanism over which we have little control and therefore is, simultaneously, the starkest sign that we are little more than factory-produced automatons (11). His primary fear, however, hinges upon the unravelling of Chantal's identity, since his failure to stake a place for himself in the outside world means that she is his primary means of feeling and experiencing. Jean-Marc also imagines the very stability of the self to be dependent upon maintaining close personal relationships, which function as a 'mirror' in which an individual can contemplate memories from the past that would otherwise vanish (11). Jean-Marc's mostly lonely past and present are both therefore dependent on Chantal's identity remaining constant, similarly to how Ludvik all the way back in *The Joke* depends upon the stability of the changeable Zemanek, and so crucial to Jean-Marc's angst is the notion that Chantal is transforming from 'a beloved woman into the simulacrum of a beloved woman', the collapse of her identity robbing his own of its cement (96). Jean-Marc evidently conceives of a "real" self that possesses a totalized coherence, in spite of his experiences with Chantal suggesting that it is the coherence that he imagines lost that is now the unreal simulacra and not the fractured series of selves that she is becoming.

Jean-Marc's confusion between reality and simulacrum is not confined to Chantal. Each of Jean-Marc's letters to Chantal, except for the first, is signed C. D. B (56). Chantal makes several erroneous guesses as to the initials' meaning before the narrative reveals that her lover has donned the mask of Cyrano de Bergerac: the seventeenth-century libertine of the intellectual (rather than sexual) variety, a poet, a playwright and the proto science-fiction author of *Other Worlds: The Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon and the Sun*.<sup>4</sup> Had Jean-Marc read Kundera's Czech fiction first, he might have become aware enough of the potential dangers of modelling an identity upon an external template to eschew such a course of action. Much like the girl from "The Hitchhiking Game", his misunderstanding of the template's specific nature causes his plan wildly to backfire.

The name commandeered by Jean-Marc is most commonly associated not with the real Cyrano, but with the fictionalised image of him who was the central character of a hugely successful play by Edmond Rostand, first performed at the Porte-Saint-Martin theatre on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1897, which in the following year broke all records for theatre takings and soon toured across Europe and America.<sup>5</sup> The plot of Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* provides a direct template for Jean-Marc's actions in *Identity*, involving its eponymous hero attempting to seduce Roxanne by-proxy, through writing eloquent love-letters that he passes to her via a man to whom she is physically attracted, hoping that once she has become besotted with his linguistic prowess, Cyrano can reveal himself as the letters' true author without fearing that his physical inadequacies will any longer count against him. Jean-Marc's assertion that he is 'becoming Cyrano... the man who declares himself to the woman he loves from behind the mask of another man' therefore clarifies to which Cyrano *Identity* is referring and establishes that for Jean-Marc the identity of the real man from the seventeenth-century is invisible behind that of his fictive namesake (56).<sup>6</sup> The Cyrano that he is becoming is Rostand's, rather than Cyrano's.

Jean-Marc's attachment to the fictional Cyrano deserves some scrutiny. Firstly, Jean-Marc's appropriation of an earlier appropriation threatens to undo the historical specificity the novel's arguments are provided via their focus on the late twentieth-century advertising industry, by evoking a similarly-pervasive manipulation of identity that has occurred at Rostand's hands over a century before. No further reasons for Jean-Marc's appropriation of Cyrano, beyond their shared propensity for seduction via the epistolary, are provided by the narrative, but many are discernible: Cyrano's grand denunciation in Act Two of Rostand's play of both artistic patronage and subordination to dominant mores for the sake of prestige, for example, presumably bolsters his attractiveness to the similarly self-isolating Jean-Marc.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Cyrano's noble declaration that for the sake of his friend's happiness he would 'destroy [his] own' mimics the motivation behind Jean-Marc's correspondence, for in seeking to return to Chantal the myriad potentials for erotic adventure that were rendered singular by her relationship with him, he is likewise attempting to bolster her happiness at the potential cost of his own.<sup>8</sup> And Jean-Marc's antipathy towards the physicality of the human body does not make his ready identification with a man defined by the size of his nose as anomalous as it may appear, for this feature distinguishes Cyrano from those around him and so provides Jean-Marc with a consoling counter-argument to his despondency over our bodies demonstrating commonality rather than individuality.

While the previously strongly individual Chantal, then, is increasingly losing control of her self through a growing mutability, Jean-Marc is choosing to assume a new identity of his own. But his appropriation of Cyrano is problematic in a similar way to his dependency on the seemingly stable Chantal, for both the letter-writing Cyrano and the constancy Jean-Marc covets in his lover are now similarly fictitious distortions, his assumption of the former therefore doomed only to advance the dissolution of the latter, productive of strategies that only fray her further. Jean-Marc's identity too

begins to dissolve. The moment he dons the mantel of Cyrano, his actions begin to contradict his earlier motivations; despite his anxiety regarding Chantal's growing mutability, he suddenly begins writing letters intended to return her to a point when her life held infinite potential, increasing her identity's fluidity rather than chastening it. This assumption of a fictive identity renders him as unstable as he sees Chantal, pleased with the effect his letters are having on her and simultaneously 'stung' by it (89). Similarly to the girl from "The Hitchhiking Game", Jean-Marc does not fully understand what he is getting into until he is in over his head.

Once he has become Cyrano, Jean-Marc is unable to shake off his hold, continuing to write Chantal letters despite the increasingly deleterious effect they are clearly having on the two of them and their relationship. He has become Cyrano in more ways than he can himself detect, not merely able to write a moving love-letter, but embodying also the man's own blurring of the real and the fictive between his own self and his fictional makeover by Rostand, unable to distinguish between his own motivations and those of the usurper who has taken over his identity. His letters plant the initial thought in Chantal's mind about visiting London and it is, later, their continuing effects that spark the anger in Jean-Marc that goads her onto the train overseas, where her identity loses its last vestiges of stability and ceases to be her own altogether. Chantal has now walked out of two relationships: her first departure is motivated from within, the sign of a healthily feisty being resisting the control over her identity of an invasive family group, leading to her becoming a successful careerist and financially autonomous; the second departure is forced upon her by the machinations of a fictional character, further stoking her burgeoning instability and engineering a series of situations that leave her stuck as 'Anne'. By the novel's close, then, the possibilities offered by mutability have run so catastrophically awry that both characters' potentials for happiness appear eroded. Jean-Marc may have been better off accepting that Chantal's growing instability is now her reality, rather than remaining so reliant on the constancy of her identity for the constancy of his own that he unwittingly locks both in an increasingly destructive cycle.

## **2. Shattered Identity**

The final pages of *Identity* render each of my above arguments at best debatable and potentially irrelevant, while at worst completely erroneous. Chantal may not work in advertising; Jean-Marc may not have written her a series of erotic letters inspired by nineteenth-century theatre; they may never have met on the Normandy coast.

At the exact point of no return for Chantal's hopes that a stable identity of her own might break out from the imposed template of 'Anne', she suddenly finds herself in bed with Jean-Marc, one having disturbed the other in waking, alarmed, from a dream. Chantal is now so terrified of her lover transforming into 'a snake or a rat or another man' the second he strays from her sight that she will remain fixedly watching him, the light on, 'all night' and 'every night' (153). Rescuing this twist from



its potential triteness is the presence of the first-person narrator, hovering suddenly overhead after an absence from the rest of the text almost unique in Kundera's oeuvre, pondering a barrage of vital questions that colour the reflections lingering in the mind of the reader upon finishing the novel moments later. The focus is not simply on the shock unreality of the majority of the narrative, but on the narrator's inability to deduce for certain either which of the two characters has been dreaming or at which point reality was usurped by fantasy.

Developing Genette's structural analysis of diegetic levels in *Narrative Discourse*, Brian McHale argues that postmodernist fiction often delights in 'deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world.'<sup>9</sup> His words perfectly describe the vast majority of *Identity*, which the reader trustingly assumes is the 'primary, diegetic world' but may be merely a dream occurring within the bedroom location that the narrative reveals in the closing pages. Earlier dream sequences described from Chantal's perspective are potentially shifted a further narrative level upwards, becoming dreams within a dream, not narratives in the second degree as they first appeared, but narratives in the third degree, which Genette describes as 'meta-metadiegetic'; the novel's geographic locations are effectively dismantled, the portions of the narrative ostensibly set within a restaurant, an office, a train carriage or a London townhouse all potentially occurring instead within the couple's bedroom.<sup>10</sup> McHale suggests, however, that in a typical postmodern novel this deliberate obfuscation of the genuine narrative level of each portion of the text is ultimately followed by a revelation that sees 'the true ontological status of the supposed "reality"... revealed and the entire ontological structure of the text consequently laid bare.'<sup>11</sup> In the therefore atypical *Identity*, this security never arrives, continually deferred by the narrator's own inability to work out at which point reality falls to dream, leaving him as much in the dark as the reader is at the close of a first reading. The narrator's slew of questions poses a direct plea to the implied reader and so, much like but even more overtly than within the closing passages of *Slowness*, she will likely be compelled after finishing the text to begin again with specific objectives in mind. The text's projection of its reader into the space occupied intra-diegetically by Jean-Marc, relative to Chantal, becomes apparent during the couple's reunion in her hotel room. Their conversation is reported twice in consecutive chapters, via the perspective of both participants, one of Chantal's replies to Jean-Marc's interrogation subtly changing between versions, from 'Yes, men, they don't turn to look at me any more' to 'Yes, indeed, men don't turn to look at me any more' (22, 24). The instability of Chantal and the instability of the text here directly merge, becoming one and the same.

While Jean-Marc assumes the mantle of the fictional Cyrano, the implied reader is encouraged to assume the mantle of the fictional Jean-Marc, confronted by the personally threatening rebellion of an entity that appeared stable. 'Who dreamed this story?' and 'At what exact moment did the real turn into the unreal...?' are two questions likely to be at the forefront of the reader's mind as she turns back through the narrative (152-53). Both of the narrator's above questions suggest multiple answers, none of which are watertight. A look back through the novel is likely to revolve around a

search for clues as to the unreal nature of the narrative, in order to determine at which point it can be definitively stated that either character has started dreaming. Many such signs are discernible, each of which may have appeared innocuous during the initial reading.

The highest frequency of the most obvious signs surround Chantal: in only the second chapter, she wakes ‘in the middle of the night after a long dream’ (5), the awakening failing to prove that the following narrative is real since a sleeper can, like *Life is Elsewhere*’s Xavier, move seamlessly from one dream to the next; later on, Chantal imagines she is ‘just the dream of some poor wretch’ (78); shortly afterwards, a switch in location is made mid-scene with a simple ‘Then she rang at the door of a graphology service’ (92), evoking the disjointed geography of a dreamscape; moments later, after an unlikely encounter with the same shady characters she met at the beachfront cafe, Chantal declares that she must be hallucinating (94-5); finally, after arriving in London, she is certain that ‘what is happening is not real’ (122). None of these instances allow the reader to say with complete assurance at what point reality turns to dream, collectively serving to muddy rather than clarify, but numerically these signs ensure that Chantal is viably the dreamer.

A similar, though less typically representative, suggestion that the dreamer is instead Jean-Marc appears when he is described as feeling ‘as if a beautiful dream were descending on him’ (137). But a subtler and perhaps, thus, ultimately more persuasive case can additionally be made for him, beyond the above declarative statements pointing towards Chantal. A fifth of the way into the narrative, Jean-Marc dreams about searching for Chantal across unfamiliar streets, only to find her ‘wearing a stranger’s face’ and shout her name in an attempt to restore her lost identity (32). As well as foreshadowing their later trip to London, this directly evokes Chantal’s strong desire during the orgy for her lover to find her and call her name for precisely the same reason (150). An idea originating from Jean-Marc’s perspective thus returns inflecting a scenario involving Chantal, while he is ostensibly off-stage. Similarly, Chantal’s journey to London is littered with crude sexual innuendos, illuminated by their presence alongside more vivid discussion of various bodily functions with her fellow travellers: the Channel Tunnel, for example, is described as ‘a round black hole into which, like a snake, the train was about to glide’ (131). The train is then described as ‘going down’ and ‘going deeper and deeper’, further consolidating its mimicry of the movements and rhythms of sexual intercourse (131-32). These passages function not only as the narrative’s rehearsal for the upcoming orgy but also, through establishing a direct correlative between phallus and train, between the sexual and the mechanistic, as a surreal confirmation of Jean-Marc’s thesis concerning the mechanical aspects of common bodily experiences. Once again, his absence from the scene is countered by concerns earlier established via his perspective colouring the narrative progression. Finally, the exact situation that dominates the final two chapters is anticipated by statements made by Jean-Marc precisely halfway through the narrative in both page-count and chapter numbering, concerning ‘two people in love, alone, isolated from the world’, Jean-Marc arguing that such a couple would flounder due to having nothing about which to talk (76). The re-emergence of these anxieties

during the final pages further demonstrates the sway Jean-Marc's consciousness holds over the narrative by transporting an idea established within what is possibly his dream outside into the real world.

But any certainty the reader of *Identity* might gain from these observations is threatened by the detection of elements established first via Chantal's perspective pervading scenes later experienced exclusively by Jean-Marc. The tattooed man who threatens her in both the Normandy café and the graphology office is later encountered by her lover in London (140). Also requiring negotiation is the fact that the concerns raised throughout the narrative by Jean-Marc and directed towards Chantal become, in the final chapter, their opposite, with her seemingly desperate to prevent the decay of *his* identity (152). The novel closing on Chantal's fears regarding Jean-Marc's transience at the very least suggest the possibility that the dreaming portions that establish instability as a threat originate from her own perspective, with her own waking worries displaced within the dream onto Jean-Marc's worries about her. What the aforementioned appearances of a tattooed man identically described from both Chantal and Jean-Marc's perspectives makes unlikely – though not at all impossible – is that the narrative is the product of two separate dreamers.

Either way, even if discounting this possibility were possible, then doing so would far from solve the narrator's conundrums. No certain answer can be found regarding the point at which reality turns to dream, while the identity of the dreamer would still hold at least two arguable possibilities. Chantal's sister-in-law declares at one point that she herself must be dreaming, raising the unlikely though tenable option that the entire narrative is a dream of hers involving the trials and tribulations befalling her brother's flighty ex-wife (111). This prospect suggests that even the final chapters are themselves a continuation of *her* dream.

The above paragraphs explore only a number of potential reactions to the text's suddenly naked indeterminacy. The salient point is that during a second reading, *Identity* manoeuvres the reader's concerns away from an engagement with the personal indeterminacy of its characters and towards its textual equivalent. What, exactly, is the story of *Identity*? Safe at home, Chantal dreams about a rendezvous on the Normandy coast that catalyses the end of her relationship with Jean-Marc; after returning from a weekend away with his partner, Jean-Marc falls asleep and imagines authoring a series of letters that result in her fleeing to London; after receiving a series of letters from an unknown admirer, Chantal falls asleep and imagines Jean-Marc to be their author; after an ill-conceived plan to restore his partner's confidence backfires, Jean-Marc falls asleep and imagines her leaving him; en route to the United Kingdom after splitting from her lover, Chantal dozes off into a nightmare predicting what awaits her there. The lasting effect of the novel hinges on the questions posed by its narrator in the penultimate chapter remaining unanswerable and each of these contradictory outlines remaining equally plausible. The start of each chapter, or each paragraph, or each sentence, becomes a potential point of disembarkation, shattering the narrative into a series of potential dichotomies between dream and reality. David Lodge cites permutation as one of

postmodernist fiction's trademarks, the selections made by older novelists regarding which material to include or eschew abandoned in favour of 'incorporating alternative narrative lines in the same text.'<sup>12</sup> As it has just been established, *Identity* potentially includes not just a couple of such alternatives, but over fifty. Furthermore, while Lodge states that the resultant confusion is usually resolvable through 'ranking the alternatives in an order of authenticity', here this proves impossible, since there is no evidence favouring one potential point of disembarkation over the myriad others.<sup>13</sup>

Just as it does relative to McHale's argument regarding narrative levels, then, by Lodge's template too *Identity* goes further than the average postmodern novel, not only creating uncertainty but refusing to resolve it to any meaningful extent. To prioritise one point of disembarkation between reality and dream over the others in order to reassert, after its loss, the narrative's coherence would be for the reader to mirror Jean-Marc even further, assuming in ignorance that reality resides with the stability that is now a mere simulacrum, rather than with the text's exposed instability. Each word of the novel carries the potential of signifying either dream or reality, but never fully realises either identity, potentially both but refusing to become, solidly, either.

This instability ruptures not only the novel's narrative but also its characterisation. Every fact the reader learns about Jean-Marc or Chantal's lives during the initial reading is potentially a fabrication conjured by the other's dream, or even by their own. Jean-Marc may not have a terminally-ill friend who inspires him to mull over the relationship between memory and identity; Chantal may not have left her ex-partner and found a job in advertising. All aspects of either's biography become open to question, including those upon which my earlier arguments have hinged. Various theories of the importance of characterisation in novels posit a strong link between our investment in the coherent identities that are often seen as a common feature of most fiction and our investment in the coherence of our own identities. Harold Bloom likens the 'literary representation of character' to 'a normative mimesis of ego, as if it were stable, whether in actuality it is not.'<sup>14</sup> Literary characterisation is thus likened to a form of denial, its proponents frantically attempting to efface the transience of their own selves through modelling coherent fictional characters, the existence of whom posits an exterior coherence that these characters appear merely to be representing. For Leo Bersani the sort of identity-formation reflected in fictional characterization is not merely comforting but vital to our safety, working to sublimate into intelligible structures 'the potentially limitless aggressiveness of desire.'<sup>15</sup> Hillis Miller argues that 'realistic novels have been a puissant reinforcement... of the illusion of selfhood' but have also, simultaneously, 'constantly and explicitly deconstructed that illusion' and 'shown belief in unitary selfhood to be an effect of the misreading of signs.'<sup>16</sup> Hillis Miller highlights the prevalence of self-serving denial only alluded to by Bloom when he argues that even the most ostensibly realist novels problematise the sanctity of selfhood in passages that clearly deconstruct the notion of character itself, yet are often passed over by critics blinded by presuppositions regarding the solidity of their own identities.<sup>17</sup>

It is arguable that readers would not approach a writer like Kundera looking for familiar characters in order to shore up their own identities and so such an argument is inappropriate here. Strongly identifying with Kundera's characters as though they are real people may involve the sort of contract between reader and text that the likely audience of an often explicitly postmodern writer would be too shrewd to make. Stressing this point, however, runs the danger of projecting a specialist, academic understanding of characterisation onto a readership large enough for the English version of *Lightness of Being* to enjoy bestseller status and *Laughter and Forgetting* and *Immortality* also to achieve widespread commercial success.<sup>18</sup> Combined with the fact that Kundera's novels are 'barely taught in Britain, in schools or in universities', this success suggests an audience sizeable though unversed in the theoretical abstractions particular to students of literature.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, of all Kundera's nine novels except *The Joke* and arguably *Farewell Waltz*, *Identity* ironically appears until its final pages the most realist, lacking the trademark extra-diegetic, metafictional narrator who often draws explicit attention to the fact that his characters are inventions.<sup>20</sup> It is at least feasible, then, that most readers would place as much faith in the reality of Chantal and Jean-Marc as theorists of novelistic characterisation argue readers often place in most fictional characters. Hillis Miller concludes his own exploration of the role of novelistic characterisation in consolidating our own identities by suggesting that, ultimately, the novel form's casting of identity into doubt is safe, its problematising always doused by a final reaffirmation, even if this reaffirmation is merely the effect of the reader's recognition that it is a coherent narrative voice that has been advancing the practice of deconstruction.<sup>21</sup> *Identity*, however, pushes Hillis Miller's vision of this safe recovery to breaking point. The realisation during the start of Chapter Fifty that the previous narrative is merely a dream initially acts as just such a reaffirmation of identity, relegating Chantal's dissolution and Jean-Marc's doubts to the realm of the unreal. Just as the reader feels more secure, however, the final sentences of the novel shatter her security afresh and leave it broken as the narrative concludes, since in the waking world itself Jean-Marc's identity is potentially so slippery that Chantal cannot lose sight of him for even a moment. It could be argued that the presence of the narrator during these two chapters is itself a reaffirmation of identity, the text suddenly littered with first-person pronouns and so demonstrating a strongly subjective voice previously absent, while establishing the identity of a new character who should wield control and authority over the text. But in this narrator, control and authority are totally absent, the first paragraph overtly from his perspective including a torrent of exactly twenty questions about his own text, the character to whom the reader may presume to turn for security thus riddled with doubt (152). While for Hillis Miller the fictional interrogation of identity always ends at a safe point, 'recovering what was lost in simulated or fetishistic form, beyond its loss', *Identity* uses its ostensible moment of restoration, as the lovers awaken, to pull the rug out from beneath the reader with even greater violence, the transition from dream to reality only seeming to offer security before threatening its characters afresh.<sup>22</sup>

But the aforementioned instability of the narrative itself is potentially even more disruptive to the reader's own identity than are the above ramifications of the ongoing instability of its characters. Charles Taylor and Daniel C. Dennett both stress the importance to our identities of narrative.<sup>23</sup> From their perspective, identities are constructed by our continually rehearsing and retelling stories about ourselves. Presumably, in order to do this, we need access to inspirational models that provide us with ready examples, such as those we encounter in the fictional media, and so the stories we tell about ourselves cannot avoid inheriting a fictive quality. Narrative fiction not only provides the reader with fresh potential models for the narrative construction of her own identity, but configuring the events of a novel into a coherent narrative – via the kind of meaning-fulfilment or ‘concretization’ strategies described by reader-response theorists such as Ingarden and Iser – functions also as an active rehearsal of this process. While the instability of *Identity*'s characters robs the reader of the comfort afforded by seeing the supposed stability of her own identity reflected back at her, the instability of the novel's narrative threatens the very procedure by which our identities are initially formed. Being able to construct one's life as though it were a story is described by Taylor as ‘not an optional extra’; if he is right, then losing faith in the ability to retrieve a story from a text presumably comprises a dire emergency, particularly when, during the first reading, the story appeared, deceptively, so easily retrievable.<sup>24</sup> The fractured narrative of *Identity* resists all piecing back together and the more the reader fails to concretize the novel into a coherent narrative, the more her tools may become blunted and the more she may come to doubt her ability to concretize the narratives that sustain her own self.

One result of our dependency on narrative is that ‘in order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.’<sup>25</sup> While Kundera's Czech novels rely mostly on the past tense and *Slowness* almost exclusively on the present tense, *Identity* from its first chapter haphazardly blends the two, containing both the conjugations ‘she sliced’ and ‘she imagines’ (4-5). These narrative flushes are initially discreet, the next few chapters remaining settled in the past tense, before Chapter Eight switches entirely to the present. By the final third of the novel, chapters alternate seemingly at random between the two, neither tense remaining specific to either character or to passages asynchronous or otherwise with the zero degree of the narrative's plotting. As explained previously, the tense of a narrative necessarily positions both the narrator and the reader temporally in regard to the events being described, the past tense projecting the narrating act forward into a time later than the story and the present tense making the story and the narrating act potentially simultaneous. The narrative of *Identity* wrenches its reader backwards and forwards through time, in one moment positioning her indeterminately later than the story events being described, in the next anchoring her alongside them: one paragraph posits a reader looking temporally back at a Chantal who has ‘found’ a letter from her admirer; in the next, the reader, displaced in time, finds herself alongside Chantal as she notices that it ‘*is signed*’ C.D.B. (56 [my italics]). Where the reader is located temporally in each sentence may be behind where she was located a sentence previously, destabilising her personal chronology. This temporal disorientation continues into the

chapters most likely to be set in the waking world, the narrator stating 'I see their heads, in profile', before describing how Jean-Marc 'tried to raise himself a little' (153 [my italics]). Both narrator and reader remain temporally unstuck as the novel ends, the very final clause that is not reported speech ('And then:') capitulating to this instability by lacking any verb at all, the narrator no longer even attempting to establish where he and the reader stand in relation to the story.

Neither *Identity*'s narrative nor its characters, then, are likely to provide succour for the reader's hopes for a stable identity of her own. Via the above theories regarding both narrative and character, it can be argued that these key features of the novel form function much like Lacan's notion of the mirror-stage of self formation, reflecting back at readers an image of human identity as stable and coherent, thus facilitating the joyous repression of our irreparable incoherence, the pleasure of the reading process thus the pleasure of the infant staring at his or her image of false stability.<sup>26</sup> The penultimate chapter of *Identity* is a stone flung at this mirror, bringing back into play the instability this textual mirror's falsely stable image seemed to be helping suppress.

This argument suggests that the extra-diegetic narrator's uncommon absence until the novel's final pages is the result of him having fled into hiding, hoping that by ducking out of view he will ensure that his own image will not appear in the mirror's face when it shatters into pieces. His questions regarding the nature of the text thus take on a renewed urgency as a direct plea for the reader's assistance, pushing her to find the answers so that the broken mirror can be put back together and he can step back out into his world with the relative impunity enjoyed by his counterparts from the Czech novels. The narrator of *Life is Elsewhere* was able to control the contours of his narrative to fulfil his chosen goal of denouncing Jaromil as forcefully as possible, while the narrator of *Laughter and Forgetting* was able to extend control over the most amorphous of all the Czech texts in order to enshrine and support the experiences of the otherwise lonely Tamina. The narrator of *Identity*, by comparison, has so little control over his own text that he has run into hiding, needing his reader's intervention if he is ever to step back out of the bedroom and into the daylight. And the reader should be very keen to assist him, considering that her own identity too is reliant upon the stable images of character and narrative that it needs to cement its own foundations.

*Slowness*, a novel in which the reader can intervene to great effect, is thus followed by a novel in which its narrator urges his own reader to intervene, but which then proves doing so impossible. The shaping force that the reader is asked to become for herself is revealed to be ultimately powerless in the face of a textual instability that resists all attempts to interpellate it according to the needs of third parties. The number of possibilities raised by the narrator's questions might suggest that the text is bountifully mutable. But it is ultimately not really mutable at the hands of the reader at all, for each of the possible ways its narrative and characters can be concretized into specific identities is undermined as soon as the reader catches a glimpse of any one of the many alternatives discussed above. While Chantal, within the dream, is distressingly assigned the identity of 'Anne' and appears to be able to do little about it, the moment this text itself is called what it is not, it dodges sharply out

of the way and the stable identity that the reader has fixed upon it crumbles to dust in her palms. Like Ludvik all the way back in *The Joke*, who was left needing to change goals that were utterly dependent upon the stability of a third-party who insisted instead on being ever changeable, the reader of *Identity* will have to learn to abandon goals of her own that likewise hinge upon the stability of a third party that she is exposed here as having no control over. It now falls to her to complete the manoeuvre that the reader of *The Joke* may have ended Kundera's first novel hoping Ludvik could complete himself.

Between *Slowness* and *Identity*, the text most dramatically in need of slowing down by its reader is followed by the text whose identity appears most dramatically in need of stabilising. Both of the French novels so far therefore engage with the sequences of variations leading into them through being the text in that sequence that most overtly places the theme under discussion on the representational level, thus asking the most demanding task of the reader and, through so doing, highlighting most overtly her own relationship with the theme under examination as it plays out across her experience with and within the text.

But the similarities end here, for the decisive victory allowed by *Slowness* is followed by a resounding defeat. This novel works oppositely to *Slowness* through its narrator imploring his reader to concretize the text's own identity in a way that it then demonstrates she cannot, after a text whose narrator does not realise that he needs any help at all, but across which the reader can very meaningfully intervene. A French text that places at the front and centre of its representational strategies a theme that has already appeared in more minor variations in the novels preceding it, in a manner that plays up its own implied reader's skills, is followed by a text that makes a similar manoeuvre in order to play up its implied reader's limitations. A return through the narrative of *Slowness* after finishing it once leads to the reader's triumph; a return through the narrative of *Identity* leads to *its* reader's bewildered defeat.

Previous novels may occasionally leave Lacan's mirror slightly scratched, but never to an extent that could not be smoothed over by an only reasonably experienced restorer. The textual mutability they demonstrate is generally safely marshalled by their narrators, while the actual events of the narratives and the biographies of the characters are never as inchoate as the narrative and characters of *Identity*. "The Hitchhiking Game", for example, might powerfully warn of the dangers resulting from a character seeking to take advantage of her own mutability, but everything other than the present identity of that girl remains completely stable. Nothing about her biography beforehand is ever cast into doubt and the actual events and situations of the story remain entirely unambiguous. Likewise with other characters such as Mirek and Marketa in *Laughter and Forgetting*. The significance of their lives might be reframed by the narrator redefining them in Part Six as existing only 'for Tamina', but the given events of their biographies are not themselves cast into the sort of doubt that leaves the reader completely unable to deduce what has actually happened to them. The



same is true also of the events of each of the narratives within *Laughter and Forgetting*, which likewise are reframed as 'for' Tamina, but which nonetheless survive, like those of all previous texts, without ever being subjected to the same doubt as to whether or not they even happened to the characters involved. The same is true of the events of all other texts. Chantal may or may not work in advertising or have ever visited the Normandy coast, while Jean-Marc may not have a terminally ill friend, but Ludvik was definitely exiled to the black insignias before seeking revenge through Helena, while Mirek definitely chased down letters to his ex-girlfriend. Narrators are still able to control these narratives without them ever even approaching a collapse into amorphousness. As such, their readers can always spy within them a stable reflection of the sorts of coherent narratives and characterisations that Bloom, Hillis Miller, Taylor and Dennett suggest are so vital to our identities. *Identity* is thus the first text that causes its reader to need to stabilise a third-party for herself, if her own coherence is to be guaranteed.

Yet in smashing Lacan's mirror for good, leaving it in a state that even an expert would be unable to restore, a text in rebellion has committed a decisive act of vandalism. The result is a text that the reader absolutely cannot control through shaping it into any particular form. The extent of its instability thus allows this text to succeed where many characters, from Ludvik to Chantal, have succumbed. And the narrator and reader of *Identity* both, therefore, necessarily fail where many acts of shaping in the previous novels have readily succeeded.

The Czech variations on this novel's themes may make the failure staged here all the more frightening. Since the implied reader's inability to control this text's instability is also her inability to turn it into one example of the sort of mirror required for the maintenance of the stable identity of its onlooker, then the reader's own stability must therefore be threatened by her failure, which in turn will leave her more open to the manipulation taken advantage of by the myriad third-parties of the previous novels. This text's rebellion is not just successful at resisting third-party attempts to shape it; this very resistance threatens the fidelity of the shaper's own identity. Resistance becomes a form of direct attack. If the reader of *Identity* has come here via the previous novels, she might appreciate now that despite the previous texts frequently showing mutability's dangers, she herself was never amongst the most likely casualties, for the texts that made these warnings always offered her relatively stable images, through their consistently coherent narratives and characterisations, that she could utilise as part of a rehearsal for her own stability. The guarantor of this safety is what is shattered here.

But the reader may yet gain some optimism from this experience. The very fact that the text shrugs off any particular form imposed upon it, by either the narrator or the reader herself, potentially makes a less stable identity appear a little less dangerous than demonstrated by Chantal's experiences within the novel, or by the experiences of the vast majority of Kundera's Czech characters throughout previous texts. The instability of this text is at least resistant to being fashioned according to third-party needs and so makes the very practice of third-party shaping appear less powerful and endemic

than across previous texts. Through the text staging a situation in which the reader is encouraged to become a shaping force, she may potentially learn here, from her own lived experience, that such shaping forces are not always as powerful as they imagine themselves to be and that instability can be harnessed as a defence mechanism to throw off imposed identities, instead of simply leaving us open to attack. This is a message that many main characters encountered throughout the Czech texts might find extremely comforting. Like *Slowness*, then, this second French novel still potentially engenders a valuable epiphany through its intensification of the pull on the reader of a theme that has rippled in and out of focus throughout Kundera's Czech novels, even if this particular epiphany arises through its own reader's failure, rather than through her success. The notion of a readerly failure itself becomes redeemed as, from the ashes of the reader's frustrated inability to concretize the text into any stable form, rises a powerful message of optimism.

Between *Slowness* and *Identity*, then, a dramatic shift in approach on the part of the oeuvre can be detected, even while both novels continue the same project of dramatically turning up the volume on the representational varieties of the variations upon their eponymous themes that have resounded throughout the earlier Czech novels. *Slowness* allows its reader a powerful success that thoroughly trains her in turning aside reductive representations under her own steam, but inadvertently runs the risk of replacing the aesthetic of doubt found throughout most earlier novels with a reductive certainty about slowness in all its forms. *Identity*, conversely, pulls its own reader towards doubting the extent of her concretizing abilities, while staging this very failure in a manner that plays out a freshly loud and un-moderated variation upon the theme under discussion and teaches her too that failure can lead to lessons even more valuable than those that spring from success. This fresh variation provides a true and encouraging counterpoint to prevailing trends in both this novel itself and those preceding it, throughout which ambiguity and amorphousness have never so vividly allowed any body, textual or physical, to escape unwanted interpolations as successfully as does the second French novel itself.

The following chapters will demonstrate the oeuvre moving even closer to its silence by finding a strategy occupying a middle ground between those of *Slowness* and *Identity*: a novel whose late variations on its theme pull its reader towards a valuable success, and a novel whose late variations pull its reader towards a valuable failure, are followed by a novel whose late variations place the focus not so much on whether or not its own implied reader *can* succeed, but on whether or not the knowledge she obtains and might worthily use is something that she *ought* to possess and make use of. The question of *could* that has resonated throughout the audience's experiences of *Slowness* and *Identity* is suddenly downplayed so that the question of *should* can sound its loudest.

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera. *Identity*. Trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1998) 34. Further references will be provided within the text.

<sup>2</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 35-6.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 233.

<sup>4</sup> See Cyrano de Bergerac. *Other Worlds: The Comical History of the States and Empires of the Moon and the Sun*. Trans. Geoffrey Strachan (London: Oxford University Press, 1965)

<sup>5</sup> Susan M. Lloyd. "Edmund Rostand's Success, Cyrano de Bergerac: An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Success of Cyrano de Bergerac, both in France and in Britain and America" (Norwich: Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation for the University of East Anglia, 1977) 65,79.

<sup>6</sup> Kundera has already employed the plot-device of a character borrowing the manoeuvres of Rostand's fictionalised Cyrano in his very first prose work, "I the Mournful God", originally published in Czech as one of the *Laughable Loves* short-stories but, like a number of Kundera's early texts, never translated into English. See Woods, *Translating Milan Kundera*, 72, 126.

<sup>7</sup> Edmond Rostand. *Cyrano de Bergerac: A Heroic Comedy in Five Acts*. Trans. Christopher Fry (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Brian McHale. *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987) 115; See also Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 227-36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>12</sup> David Lodge. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Arnold, 1977) 230.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>14</sup> Harold Bloom. "The Analysis of Character." *Bloom's Major Literary Characters: Hamlet* (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004) xi

<sup>15</sup> Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax* (Toronto: Little Brown & Company, 1976) 13.

<sup>16</sup> J. Hillis Miller. *Ariadne's Thread* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Woods, *Translating Milan Kundera*, 37-40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Kundera, *Life is Elsewhere*, 229; Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 109; Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 37; Kundera, *Immortality*, 7; Kundera, *Slowness*, 77-78.

<sup>21</sup> Hillis Miller, *Ariadne's Thread*, 98.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>23</sup> For Dennett, the core of the self is a 'center of narrative gravity.' See Daniel Dennett. *Consciousness Explained* (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 429. Taylor argues similarly that a 'basic condition of making sense of ourselves' is 'that we grasp our lives in a narrative.' See Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989) 47.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> For an infant, Lacan argues, the act of viewing his or her image in a mirror proves so transfixing due to constituting a powerful moment in which the self is observed as a complete totality, albeit a totality that can only exist at a physical distance from the infant him- or herself, 'in an exteriority', and so is a comforting sign of completeness from which he or she is already irrevocably estranged. The image of wholeness proves, however, so intoxicating that it is clung to for the rest of the infant's life, our true existence as incomplete and fragmented thrown into the unconscious and manifesting only through surreal dreams of nightmarish images. See Jacques Lacan. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". *Ecrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002) 75-77.

**Part Three**

*Ignorance*

### Five: Variations on *Ignorance*

Kundera's most recent novel at the time of writing, *Ignorance* was originally published in Spanish and Catalan and not originally intended to see the light of day in its original French form at all. Literary translator Zuzana Krupičková cites this fact as evidence of 'the ambivalence of the relationship' between the author and his French critics, an ambivalence arising from the expectations of his audience being widely missed by *Slowness* and *Identity*.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, though, of the three French novels considered here, *Ignorance* is the one most likely to meet the wants of a readership enamoured of Kundera's Czech work. Through exploring the unsettling return of two émigrés, Josef and Irena, to Czechoslovakia in the years following the collapse of Communism, the novel's thematic concerns and geographic setting themselves return to those of Kundera's earlier texts.<sup>2</sup> Unlike *Slowness* and *Identity*, the major characters of *Ignorance* are, bar one, all Czech, while the vast majority of the narrative takes place in Prague; furthermore, the novel focuses on existential situations contextually contingent on recent Czech history to an extent far beyond that of the previous French texts and closer to all of the Czech texts save *Immortality*. *Ignorance* should also be of interest through appearing arguably the most personal of all Kundera's novels. Its portrayal of Josef and Irena's returns to a changed homeland as even more alienating than their initial exiles is arguably a direct riposte to critics who have disparaged Kundera's own decision to remain in France.

The novel itself comfortably fits the mould established by *Slowness* and *Identity* in encouraging an activity of its implied reader, one fulfilled during a repeat reading of the text, which enables the reader to engage directly with the specific facet of 'the trap the world has become' examined within, which in this case is our ignorance of both ourselves and others. Irena is generally a victim of ignorance, while Josef stands as ignorance's unwitting champion. The narrator's exploration of ignorance is compromised by he himself utilising the same strategically advantageous ignorance he depicts via his characters and so potentially generating ignorance within his audience too. The reader of *Ignorance* can make a positive stand against the narrator's various alignments with ignorance through becoming cognisant of both the deficiencies of the narrator's arguments regarding Homer's *Odyssey* and the submerged identity of the novel's most important character, who is not any of the candidates most obvious during the majority of the initial reading. The implied reader will also become aware through this character, however, that not all cases of generating ignorance should be so easily countered and that the strategic construction of ignorance can sometimes be extremely difficult to challenge.

Just as has already been demonstrated respective to the first two French novels *Slowness* and *Identity*, the eponymous theme placed at the front and centre of *Ignorance* also reverberates throughout much of Kundera's Czech texts – though perhaps not in the extremely (perhaps bafflingly) one-sided manner suggested by Igor Webb. Webb stakes an extremely lofty claim when he describes 'all' of

Kundera's characters as 'rebels in the name of individual integrity and truth-seeking against totalitarianism.'<sup>3</sup> Were this the case, then the variations outlined throughout this chapter would be extremely repetitive and offer little in the way of marked variation at all, for each text covered would feature a series of characters overcoming an ignorance imposed upon them externally from the political sphere, through a firm commitment to the knowledge of self, others and the world around them that the totalitarian authorities deny.

This is readily demonstrable to be not the case. Many of Kundera's characters hold a deep-rooted ignorance of themselves, of their fellows and of the world around them, which they are not always especially keen to alleviate. And ignorance is much more than just a passive state inflicted upon these characters of supposed integrity by the totalitarian regimes that rule the fictional worlds in which are set all of Kundera's Czech novels save *Immortality*. Robert Proctor explores and gives a useful name for a concept that will become increasingly important throughout Chapters Five and Six, which he labels as 'agnogenesis', defined as 'ignorance making (or maintenance)'.<sup>4</sup> Ignorance, like knowledge, can be 'something that is made, maintained and manipulated by means of certain arts and sciences', or 'actively *engineered* as part of a deliberate plan.'<sup>5</sup> Proctor provides the convincing examples of both the tobacco industry and the US military producing ignorance as an active strategy to further their own ambitions. And while the majority of the examples in Proctor's collection continue this examination of powerful organisations or institutions generating ignorance in those they seek to control, Proctor also raises the intriguing possibility that this is not all agnogenesis is good for: the generation and maintenance of ignorance can also emerge as 'the best defence of the weak.'<sup>6</sup>

Many of Kundera's Czech characters demonstrate their own active commitment to agnogenesis and so heavily problematise Webb's claim, not only through being in ignorance, but through seeking to perpetuate it in others too. Sometimes they practice agnogenesis to further goals that appear obviously rather malign, but at other times agnogenesis is wielded as a potential, if not always successful, defence against the demands and impositions of totalitarianism. And ignorance does not only appear more positively depicted than Webb's model suggests when it is strategically generated in others. When totalitarian forms of knowing the world attempt to construct not so much ignorance, but a new vision of truth itself that overwrites the old and, through so doing, distorts the very idea of what truth actually constitutes, deliberately maintaining one's *own* ignorance can also appear a more beautiful way of being than one based around the pursuit of knowledge.

### ***The Joke***

My prior analyses of Kundera's first novel within Chapters One and Three of this thesis have already suggested that Webb's claims might be somewhat shaky, since all of the main characters in *The Joke* appear deeply ignorant of themselves, of others and of the world around them. Some, even after they have come into knowledge, hold a deep commitment with ignorance in other areas of their lives. To

pick one example of many: Helena, during a talk with Ludvik, excuses her own memories of how glorious it felt to side with the dominant forces throughout Eastern Europe's recent political history with the casual justification of 'how were we to know that Stalin had ordered loyal Communists to be shot?' (*TJ*, 187). Helena clings to ignorance as a form of moral defence, the state of not having held all of the facts exculpating her from blame or responsibility over historical injustices that she at least unwittingly cheered on from the fringes.

Webb's one-sided reading of Kundera's characters is challenged elsewhere, too. At the same moment as Helena makes her excuses to Ludvik, he is simultaneously generating and maintaining her ignorance about his vindictive intentions towards her, since what she takes to be the start of a grand romance is really part of his long-planned revenge against her husband. For Helena, playing up a past ignorance of her own provides a strategy for excusing her prior actions; for Ludvik, the favoured strategy involves generating ignorance in another person in order to further his own somewhat cruel ambitions. And at this point in the novel, Ludvik himself remains ignorant about Lucie's past, still mentally constructing her as a transcendent ideal of virginity existing above and apart from all earthly problems. His deliberate generation of ignorance in Helena is counterpointed by the ignorance that he is unaware remains within himself.

Doležel's reading of *The Joke* is more nuanced than Webb's unsatisfyingly monolithic interpretation of Kundera's entire oeuvre. For Doležel, Ludvik 'emerges as the most reliable narrator and, therefore, his representation is used to suggest the degree of unreliability of the other narrators.'<sup>7</sup> According to this account, Ludvik excels at the 'tearing down of veils'.<sup>8</sup> Doležel is suggesting that rather than all Kundera's characters battling against ignorance through a search for truth, certain characters hold a much more active relationship with ignorance than others, Ludvik's representations acting as a beacon that illuminates the ignorances within the representations made by his fellows. Ludvik's scorn towards the delusions held by other characters suggests that he himself would argue Doležel's conclusion to be true. It readily appears, however, that even Doležel's much more modest argument than Webb's itself misses how deeply a relationship with ignorance is ingrained throughout Kundera's works, for Ludvik is clearly no better than the other characters whose representations he supposedly dismantles.

As the various narratives that comprise the novel continue, it becomes clear that the coordinating force behind *The Joke* deploys its mutually relativising, first-person voices in order to make the same ignorance that permeates each character's representations even starker, Ludvik's included, demonstrating how he too is ignorant in many substantial ways. Doležel's model is thus too neat. Kostka's revelations in Part Six regarding Lucie's past, which unveil to the reader the ignorance of Ludvik's assumptions about Lucie's 'virginity', demonstrate one obvious counterpoint to Doležel's argument. Kostka's representation here directly proves to the reader the veiled nature of Ludvik's own sense of the world, so that in this moment it is Kostka's narration that reveals the unreliability of Ludvik's. There are also examples of Ludvik's pronouncements being undone by other moments

within his *own* narration, which not only further stress his unreliability, but starkly ironise it. His amazement ‘at the incredible human capacity for transforming reality into a likeness of desires or ideals’, for example, seems to be directed chiefly at Helena (181). But Ludvik himself, even after realising that his revenge plan is also based on a naive ideal rather than reality, clings just as ignorantly as before to his sense that Lucie is ‘removed from conflicts, tensions, and dramas’; indeed, his realisation of his ignorance regarding Helena’s marital situation only drives him even deeper into his *unrealised* ignorance about Lucie (203). Knowledge in one area appears to deepen his ignorance in another, suggesting that when knowledge is experienced as unwelcome, ignorance becomes something of a protective bunker. As one veil is torn away from Ludvik’s eyes – and not through his own deliberate actions – he swiftly buries his head in another.

If we can say that any one character fulfils the veil-tearing role that Doležel attributes to Ludvik, it is perhaps just as likely to be Kostka. It is Kostka’s eventual revelations about Lucie’s past that finally catalyse Ludvik’s own aforementioned realisation of how entrenched his ignorance has become, and how damaging was his shaping of Lucie’s identity into the virginal girl he needed to get through life with the Black Insignias. But neither does Kostka entirely fulfil the basic tenet of Doležel’s model that one character exists to illuminate the ignorance of the others, without his or her authority itself being compromised in turn: Kostka’s depiction of Ludvik as embodying ‘rationalist scepticism’, for one, is undone by Ludvik’s narratives showing the same absolute, irrational faith in his revenge plan and in his impressions of Lucie as Helena holds in both Ludvik himself and in Communism (245). The trend is not any one character excelling at the tearing of veils over and above the others, but each character’s perspective mutually illuminating the ignorance of representations that illuminate, in turn, the ignorances endemic to his or her own, less like a single beacon as Doležel imagines and more like a hall of mirrors.

It should be suggested, however, that this process functions more by coincidence than through a conscious desire on any single character’s part to further the cause of knowledge for either themselves or their fellows, since few of the representations’ illuminations of ignorance appear the deliberate result of another character’s thirst for truth-seeking. And whenever the tearing down of one character’s misrepresentations by another does produce knowledge, prior to Part Seven, it is usually within the mind of the reader, rather than that of another character. The reader notably receives the additional knowledge of Lucie’s past earlier than Ludvik himself, who remains ignorant of it while the reader is no longer. The reader likewise knows that Helena is being cruelly manipulated before Helena knows this herself. The reader thus becomes a truth seeker herself purely by moving from one page of the novel to the next, experiencing the reductive ideals generated within previous pages demolished as she precedes, while Ludvik and Helena’s own perspectives remain veiled.

It seems, then, that Webb’s argument is vigorously contradicted by Kundera’s first novel alone. The only committed truth-seeker here is perhaps the reader herself. While the characters within the novel mostly remain so ignorant, the novel frequently gifts her with knowledge in advance of the



characters who most need it and so moves her to experience how being a truth-seeker actually *feels*. She might experience a strong, readerly satisfaction at coming into knowledge before other people. She might alternatively wish that the characters could only know what she does. Both these possibilities would see her experience for herself the worth of knowledge over ignorance, either through the personal satisfaction it brings her as a successful truth-seeker, or through her own knowledge highlighting the mental voids within the characters who do not yet know what she does and who, fuelled by their ignorance, thus continue to act in ways ultimately harmful to both themselves and their fellows.

But the reader might, conversely, be driven to consider whether or not a move towards knowledge should always be considered pleasurable or useful, since further variations within *The Joke* draw out the sense that knowledge can instead be considered deeply invasive towards the subject that becomes *known*. After all, Lucie's past involves a heavily personal trauma that it seems entirely reasonable she would not like many people knowing about, particularly a total stranger to her like the reader herself. The reader's initial satisfaction about realising the truth underlying Lucie's terror during Ludvik's pushy advances might even soon appear to her unpleasantly voyeuristic. The reader comes into this knowledge via Kostka's recounting of coming into it himself, in a section that reads, with its series of short, sharp, occasionally cruel questions and demands for Lucie to speak when she is understandably reticent, much like a police interrogation (231-33). The reader thus learns about Lucie's past by effectively eavesdropping on an interrogation, receiving intelligence acquired for her through a degree of coercion but without having to get her own hands dirty. Not only is this information delicately sensitive, but the very process that sees it come to light suggests too that truth-seeking can occasionally be more of a grubby activity than a praiseworthy one.

The reader's potential satisfaction about her own progression into knowledge is counterpointed also by the Czech novels' most genuinely charming portrayal of the value of being and remaining ignorant. In Part Six, Kostka states that 'no one knows' the exact origins of the Ride of Kings folk procession (262). But rather than seeking to discover them, he argues that 'just as Egyptian hieroglyphs are more beautiful to those who cannot read them... so too, perhaps, the Ride of Kings is beautiful because the content of its communication has long since been lost and gestures, colours, words, come more and more into the foreground, drawing attention to themselves and to their own aspect and shape' (262). Unlike in the instances described above, Kostka knows he is ignorant in the very same moment in which he is being ignorant, and regards this state of affairs as worthy of celebration.

That this particular variation shows ignorance in such a sympathetic light can be at least partly illuminated by Eagleton's analysis of 'meaninglessness' within Kundera's novels offering 'a blessed moment of release' and 'a temporary respite from the world's tyrannical legibility.'<sup>9</sup> Eagleton's essay describes the totalitarian worlds in which are set the majority of all Kundera's Czech novels except *Immortality* as environments in which 'reality becomes so pervasively, oppressively meaningful that

its slightest fragments operate as minority signs in some utterly coherent text.’<sup>10</sup> The regime under which Kostka and his fellows live presses its attempt to marshal all of life around a single yet overarching schema of factuality to such an oppressive extent that it demands that every aspect of life and every area of politics and society must, as a prerequisite for its own legitimacy (and safety), transparently and unambiguously support a pre-determined and universalising brand of knowledge.

The Ride of Kings appears glorious because Kostka’s ignorance of its roots provides its symbols with absolutely no obligation to point to anything outside themselves, to exist purely and freely as aesthetic forms, in opposition to how the regime governing his country demands that every aspect of life be organised as signs marshalled outwards towards the same greater purpose. The effect of the regime’s practice is unwittingly to highlight the beauty of the *unknown*, of the pieces of culture and society that through their remaining unknowable cannot be forced to point outwards to anything larger than themselves. A totalitarian world thus leads to Kostka’s ignorance about this ritual facilitating his viewing it as something of a lone daisy in an redeveloped epistemological landscape of ugly tower-blocks. Were Kostka to work harder to alleviate his ignorance by committing himself to researching the ritual’s roots, then he would arguably be acting much like the regime itself, through not being content to let the colours and shapes and sounds of the ritual remain happily separate from an obligation to point to a supposedly greater cause outside itself.

Kostka’s satisfaction with remaining ignorant and revelling in the joy that this allows the ritual to bring him is thus a defence against the very organisational drives that sustain totalitarian ideology. It should also work to counterpoint any satisfaction that the reader of *The Joke* has been deriving from her own path from ignorance to knowledge during the novel so far. Rather than the path from ignorance to knowledge always marking a positive progression, she here sees a case where to take this route would involve destroying a thing of beauty, the innocence of which, in a world where little else is allowed to remain similarly innocent, only the observer’s ignorance can preserve.

Shortly before the novel’s closing sequences, then, Webb’s claim has become increasingly hard to support. This is not only due to Ludvik, Helena and Jaroslav remaining ignorant in ways they do not even know that they are ignorant. In addition to this, the reader may have come to doubt the ethicality of always being a truth-seeker herself, while Kostka’s lack of knowledge about the Ride of Kings shows a further reason to abstain from the process in which Webb imagines all of Kundera’s characters vicariously to engage. Kostka knows he is ignorant and is more than happy to remain so. But perhaps all the evidence needed to suggest that Webb’s point has some merit would be a general trend that sees at least the majority of the main characters becoming aware, by the close of the novel, of the extent of their relationship with ignorance and expressing an active desire to develop beyond it in the time remaining. The final sequences of the novel potentially serve this purpose by showing three of the four main narrators each arriving at a powerful moment of revelation.

Ludvik, for example, finally realises the extent of his ignorance towards Lucie, coming into the knowledge that he had only ever constructed her ‘as a function of [his] own situation’ (250). This is shortly before the even grander revelation that his plan for revenge is based on the ignorant misconception that Helena and Zemanek are still an item (288). These big epiphanies occur practically alongside those experienced by Helena and Jaroslav. The former finally learns that Ludvik has been using her as part of his planned revenge (283-4). Ludvik’s motivation in telling her this stems at least partially from his recently-acquired knowledge about how he has been mistreating Lucie, showing that, like ignorance, knowledge too can generate via a ripple effect, the removal of the veil around Ludvik’s eyes prompting him to remove, in turn, the veil around Helena’s. And shortly after, Jaroslav realises his son, Vladimir, has been conspiring with his mother to deceive Jaroslav about taking pride of place in the Ride of Kings festival, when he has instead bunked off to attend motorbike races in nearby Brno (305). The closing sequences thus launch a rapid-fire of epiphanies that shifts each main character away from the ignorances they have both experienced themselves and generated in others throughout the previous sections.

But this is not enough to suggest that Webb is ultimately proven correct. For the characters to be described as *truth-seekers*, for one, they would have had to reach these epiphanies through their own direction and agency, rather than stumbling upon them. The sequence, furthermore, is far from one of victory or triumph; judging from what happens in the immediate aftermath of these epiphanies, each of these characters would likely have much preferred to remain ignorant. Helena rushes to kill herself and is only saved by her newly-arrived ignorance about the actual contents of the pills she has taken, while Jaroslav very shortly after has a heart attack. Despite showing a series of ignorances each being undone, the final sequences of Kundera’s first novel do not focus on the potential triumph of these epiphanies, but on the pain and uncertainty that the new knowledge brings, once it destroys the delusions that were sustaining these characters’ lives.

The final sequence also provides a potential (if not deafeningly loud) counterpoint for the rather unsympathetic generation of ignorance within Helena by Ludvik throughout much of the rest of the novel, through the aforementioned case of Vladimir conspiring with his mother to make Jaroslav believe that he was taking centre-stage in the Ride of Kings ritual, when he was not (305-06). The example demonstrated by Vladimir is not a decisively positive portrayal of the practice, for as suggested the reader has a strong window onto Jaroslav’s distress when he finds out the truth. But Vladimir could hardly have predicted that his father would react with a heart-attack and his reasons for the deception are, if not clear-cut, at least easier to sympathise with than Ludvik’s openly cruel sexual manipulations, which are not even directed against the person upon whom he seeks to avenge himself but work through selecting a vulnerable female relation of his target as a prop that will shortly become collateral damage.

Earlier chapters show that Vladimir has already repeatedly stated, entirely reasonably, that he does not want to be involved with the Ride of Kings; his promise to take part is dragged out of him

through what could be described as emotional blackmail (127-29). Since his son is fifteen, Jaroslav perhaps should respect his individuality without intensively pushing him to validate Jaroslav's life-choices through repeating them himself; had he listened to his son with an empathic understanding of him as a separate being, then Vladimir's act of agnogenesis would never have been necessary and he could have been free to be his own person. On the other hand, Vladimir could reasonably be expected to have put himself through one day of activities he did not want to do in order to bring joy to the man who raised him. But even should the reader place this point above the others and so refuse to regard this act as definitively sympathetic, she should at least recognise it as less overtly *unsympathetic* than Ludvik's overtly demeaning agnogenesis within Helena. The scene facilitated by Ludvik's agnogenesis within Helena leads, after all, to scenes described by Banerjee as 'sadistic ribaldry' and by O'Brien as 'abusive'.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the faults of Vladimir's own agnogenesis, it falls far short of these descriptors. Towards the end of the novel, then, agnogenesis itself appears a little less obviously cruel a practice, even if not yet an entirely sympathetic one.

It *could* be suggested as a caveat to the trajectory I am drawing here that a central character being aligned to an extremely sympathetic sort of agnogenesis is already demonstrated earlier, via Lucie. But her failure to reveal her history of sexual abuse to Ludvik is not what I would strictly call agnogenesis. If a simple lack of providing all possible information could be counted as producing ignorance, then everyone alive at this moment in time would be guilty of generating or maintaining ignorance about a vast number of concerns that they are not immediately mentioning in the present. If the reader does not open every conversation by revealing what she had for breakfast that morning, the very concept of agnogenesis would surely be cheapened beyond any usefulness by referring to such an omission as such.

Lucie's history is admittedly a different matter, through being directly relevant to the situation in which she and Ludvik find themselves. But even so, it is impossible to say that Ludvik's ignorance has been (and is being) generated by Lucie as part of a deliberate strategy, with the concerted goal of keeping him in the dark for her own strategic benefit, even though, considering the extremely sensitive nature of her background, it would seem utterly excusable for her to be doing so. Firstly, she makes little attempt to hide the fact that sex terrifies her, so the consequences of her past are clearly on display for Ludvik to read and interpret with whatever degree of empathy or people skills he can bring to the situation. Secondly, she does nothing deliberately to generate in Ludvik the idea that she is a virgin, which is an erroneous conclusion made entirely under his own steam (92). She confirms his idea by nodding, and so at least maintains the ignorance that Ludvik has generated for himself, but very weakly; the idea of actively working to keep her past a secret is foreign enough to her that she can only do so via a non-verbal confirmation of an ignorance already generated beyond her conscious intent. And she willingly tells Kostka that she is not a virgin without any pressure; it is only the specific details of her previous experiences that he then drags out of her through a pseudo-

interrogation – during which, again, she makes no active attempt at deception beyond briefly being silent and so refusing to provide Kostka with either the truth *or* a lie that would keep it hidden (231).

If Lucie's actions *can* be described as agnogenesis, it is a muted, almost entirely passive variant, rather than an active, strategic commitment. Vladimir, on the other hand, actively lies about attending the Ride of Kings and conspires with his mother to preserve the illusion. And though the reader might side with either him or Jaroslav about whether or not it was the ethically correct course for him to take, the potential is definitely there to consider that given Jaroslav's evidenced unwillingness to respect his son's clearly stated wishes, Vladimir had little choice. It could also be stressed that this specific act of agnogenesis was designed to keep Jaroslav happy, unlike Ludvik's own agnogenesis being designed to make one person miserable through directly hurting another. Either way, after a novel where an extended act of agnogenesis is part of a cruel plan of revenge based around dehumanising a target who had little directly to do with his expulsion from University, a direct, concerted attempt to generate ignorance in another as part of a calculated plan is rendered, via Kostka's son, with a tentative sympathy.

The characters in Kundera's first novel all have a deep rooted relationship with ignorance, much like their more recent compatriots in *Ignorance* itself. Not only are they ignorant of their own selves, of other characters and of the world around them, but in Ludvik's case he deliberately generates ignorance in another in order to fulfil mostly unsympathetic goals against her husband. The most successful truth-seeker here is the reader herself, who, simply by moving through the novel, acquires knowledge about the extent of each character's ignorance comfortably before they do themselves.

The novel does not cleanly value knowledge over ignorance, for coming into knowledge can be deeply painful for characters like Ludvik, Helena and Jaroslav and destructive towards the beauty Kostka locates in the nebulous Ride of Kings. And it is hard to judge in turn that the majority of the variations discussed so far neatly prove the value of ignorance over knowledge. This is not only because the ignorance characters hold regarding each other often leads to their mistreatment of their fellows. As well as this, the truths from which ignorance protects characters like Ludvik and Helena are unsettling precisely because of circumstances engendered by their prior ignorance. Had Ludvik known the truth about Lucie's past, for example, he would likely not have treated her in a way that then proved deeply painful to him once her past had come to light. And had Helena known the truth about Ludvik's intentions towards her before becoming embroiled with him, she would not have got deeply enough involved for the later realisation of these intentions to so shame her. Ignorance often sustains itself by placing people in situations where the most comfortable outcome is to remain ignorant, but which earlier knowledge could have avoided altogether. If knowledge is painful, ignorance is still mostly to blame, and so having been knowledgeable in the first place would generally appear, by this point in the oeuvre, to be the preferable way of being.

Even lest this mark a victory for the cause of knowledge over ignorance, however, both the means by which the reader learns of Lucie's past and Kostka's argument about the Ride of Kings prevents it from being decisive. The reader will hopefully remember that regarding particular aspects of the world around her, it is not only ethically sounder but also far sweeter to be forever ignorant. And the late variation provided by the revelation that Jaroslav's son Vladimir has deceived him suggests that even a decidedly deliberate generation of ignorance in other people can be viewed with at least a tentative sympathy.

### *Farewell Waltz*

A very early sequence in *Farewell Waltz* sees the worth of knowledge brought down an additional peg, by suggesting that behaviour either self-defeating or harmful to others is not always the result of ignorance and can be perpetuated in full knowledge of the reasons behind it. When Klima states that he keeps cheating on Kamila because he covets that 'marvellous flight – filled with tenderness, desire, humility – bringing [him] back to [his] wife, who [he] loves more with every new infidelity', his self-awareness of both the morally questionable nature of his actions – hence his resultant 'humility' – and the motivations fuelling them appear to do nothing to prevent their continuance (*FW*, 30). Indeed, since Klima candidly describes his 'loathing' and his 'distaste' towards himself, this example echoes one possible conclusion from aforementioned variations in *The Joke*, which show ignorance to be a potential blessing (30). And considering that his self-knowledge is functionally useless in encouraging a positive change, ignorant is how he may as well have remained.

But this is not to say that the novel differs from *The Joke* by concertedly valuing ignorance over knowledge. The further that the reader proceeds, in fact, the more that louder variations on the side of knowledge suggest that the reserve is true. The fact that Klima might as well remain in ignorance is counterpointed by his act of agnogenesis against Ruzena, the unsympathetic nature of which surpasses that of Ludvik's cruel generation of ignorance in Helena from *The Joke*, since Klima does not even have the excuse of having been brutalised by the regime that imprisoned Ludvik. Throughout an excruciatingly extended sequence, Klima consistently lies to Ruzena about his motivations for encouraging her to abort their child, stressing that he is deeply in love with her and committed to leaving his wife, but wishes for their relationship to begin unstained by a commitment to a child conceived before they properly got together (51-61). It would be difficult to argue that Klima intending to leave Ruzena, once the unborn child is out of the way, is information that she is better off not holding before reaching a decision.

As matters go, Ruzena's ignorance about Klima's intentions can only ever be temporary, for Klima's agnogenesis comes with a fixed shelf-life. Were she to undergo the abortion with the promise of a relationship with Klima as a reward, then Klima's plan would be fulfilled and, the moment that he returns to his wife, Ruzena would suddenly be very knowledgeable indeed about the true nature of his

plan. Much like the various degrees of knowledge that Part Seven of *The Joke* brings to Ludvik, Helena and Jaroslav, this realisation would be deeply painful. But also similarly to at least Ludvik and Helena, rather than Ruzena wishing that she had never learnt the truth, she is much more likely to wish that she had come into knowledge much earlier so that her decision about how to act could have been made with the facts in hand. So while the earlier variation in this novel sees knowledge as functionally useless in a manner that suggests Klima may as well have remained in a blissful ignorance about the reasons for his infidelities, this later variation counterpoints it not only by re-inscribing the generation of ignorance in another person as self-servingly cruel; it also affirms the positive value of knowledge in combating such a manoeuvre and in preventing a future state in which a prior state of ignorance then becomes an object of nostalgia.

It should be pointed out that Ruzena's tragic death ironically undermines this ode to knowledge by preventing the future state, in which she would have wished for earlier knowledge, ever from arriving. But this does not prevent the reader seeing, through Klima's conversation with Ruzena, the case for knowledge over remaining ignorant as the result of another character's self-serving agnogenesis. And after all, at the later point when Ruzena reaches for her anti-anxiety medication, it is knowledge that the pill on top is actually Jakub's poison that she would have found particularly helpful and her ignorance of this fact that kills her. For all the myriad minor variations that could be charted within this novel, no single incidence of ignorance could save a character's life as surely as this one piece of knowledge.

Klima's attempts to manipulate Ruzena into an abortion also feed into a much larger, extended variation upon the nature of ignorance that runs through much of the novel. *Farewell Waltz* can be read as an exposure of Jakub's extremely deep-rooted ignorance about the comprehensively malign nature of humanity itself and its disposable attitude towards the sanctity of life. This particularly pernicious example of a character's ignorance emerges from Jakub's satisfaction at returning to Skreta the poison pill given to him long ago. Soon to emigrate from Communist Czechoslovakia for good, Jakub is advised by Skreta that 'the tablet could be just as useful elsewhere as here' (75). Jakub replies that 'the tablet was part of this country' and insists that he wants 'to leave in this country everything that belongs to it' (75). Combined with the narrative's comparison of the purges that led to Jakub's arrest with the rehearsal for this human-on-human violence that was the regime's earlier war against stray dogs, Jakub's rebuttal to Skreta presents the argument that life becoming cheaply disposable is a historically and culturally specific phenomenon tethered to the machinations of a malign political regime and its knock-on effects upon its populace (108). Were Jakub's argument to be born out, then in other countries – including America, which is where Jakub is heading – the absence of this specific regime would facilitate an entirely more positive valuation of human life that would render the need for such a pill completely anomalous. Here Jakub resembles the ignorantly reductive reader of Kundera's novels that the author criticises in his Preface to the second English-language version of *The Joke*, tethering the ills that he sees around him to the insidious influence of the Communist regime

and stopping his analysis there, rather than moving outwards and viewing these ills as signifiers of something much larger within human nature itself.

Firstly, as Banerjee points out, Jakub's belief that dignity necessitates the power to depart from life at a moment of one's choosing can be traced back to the Roman Stoics, meaning that it is hardly the specific result of living in a totalitarian communist state that he grandiosely images it to be.<sup>12</sup> And within *Farewell Waltz* itself, the lack of regard towards life shown by the communists against both dogs and humans is, contentiously, paralleled with Klima's aforementioned desperation to manipulate Ruzena into having an abortion. It would be reductive to say that the novel is anti-abortion per se, or that abortion itself is deployed as a signifier that humanity as a whole devalues life, beyond merely within a singular political context; what clearly *is* deployed for this cause is Klima tricking Ruzena into putting herself through one for reasons entirely cowardly and self-serving.

A further illumination of Jakub's ignorance emerges during the aftermath of Ruzena's death, once she has mistakenly swallowed Jakub's pill, an aftermath unfolding in juxtaposition with Jakub, ignorant of the tragedy he has set in motion, driving towards the Czechoslovakian border while imagining that he is leaving the specific country in which life has become worthless behind for good. The exact nature of this aftermath and the way in which it illuminates Jakub's naivety is prepared for during the earlier sections of the novel, principally through how both Ruzena herself and Olga are shown to read detective novels (104, 233). For as Ruzena's death is investigated, this text itself transforms before the reader's eyes into just such a work of popular fiction. The inspector muses, for example, that 'if we adopt the murder theory, we have to accept that someone slipped into [her] medicine tube a poison that could be mistaken for one of [her] tablets', before asking 'who might have had an interest in killing this woman?' and running at length through the proof both for and against each possible suspect, while the novel's main characters are assembled before him as in the dénouement of a Christie novel (265-69). *Farewell Waltz* does not start parodying the reading material enjoyed by Ruzena and Olga as much as, following Ruzena's death, it suddenly and exactly appropriates its tone and structure. A psychologically complex character whom the reader will likely have found it extremely hard not to see as a focal point of her sympathies is effectively killed again, by becoming a prop for a sequence plucked straight from genre fiction designed for the purpose of scintillating entertainment. This sequence's cheapening of Ruzena's genuinely tragic final hours suggests how in detective fiction, death itself is universally cheapened through its transformation into disposable entertainment.

Ruzena and Olga are clearly not the only people in the world to find entertainment in such works.<sup>13</sup> By assuming the mantle of this form of genre fiction popular the world over, in a chapter that reads like nothing else in Kundera's oeuvre, the novel adds to its portrayal of Klima's self-serving demands for an abortion further evidence that the Czech communists are far from responsible, as Jakub imagines, for life becoming worryingly cheap. Their regime is not the cause of this trend, but merely one further manifestation, alongside convenient abortions and a love of murder packaged as



entertainment. And though Jakub leaves Czechoslovakia believing Ruzena is safe, his despondence at the fact that he nonetheless did think that Ruzena possessed his pill, yet did nothing to take it back, leads him to realise that ‘he was leaving his only homeland and that he had no other’, indifference to death making Jakub ignorantly believe that he could only ever belong to the similarly indifferent Communist Czechoslovakia (272). The novel persistently underlines his entrenched ignorance by presenting the far more despondent – but apparently pragmatic – argument that Jakub will readily find a home no matter where he ends up, for similar signifiers of life having grown cheaply disposable as the necessity of possessing poison, appear somewhat endemic across the globe.

### ***The Book of Laughter and Forgetting***

Kundera’s fourth novel contains variations that echo those before, which further reiterate the ways in which characters can be ignorant of their own selves and of the people around them, while sometimes working to generate ignorance in other people for their own ends. But it also marks the strengthening of the close of *The Joke*’s previously tentative recontextualisation of agnogenesis by doubling back on the entirely cruel generation of ignorance in Ruzena by Klima in *Farewell Waltz*. *Laughter and Forgetting* showcases instead sympathetic examples of an active, deliberate manufacture of ignorance that appears increasingly as a valid survival strategy.

Characters here continue to be ignorant of the nature of their own actions and hypocrisies. Mirek, for example, believes that ‘the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting’ (*LF*, 4). This belief might lead the reader to expect Mirek to stand as the preserver of historical facts in opposition to the communist regime’s attempts at erasure, which is epitomised by the opening chapter’s detailing of President Gottwald’s removal of reminders of his executed colleague Clementis. Mirek appears oblivious, however, to the fact that his mission to reclaim lost letters once written to an ex-girlfriend is not an attempt to stave off state-enforced forgetting by preserving the endangered past in memory, but one to strengthen the account of the past that he wishes were remembered by seizing all evidence attesting to the contrary. He is now embarrassed of her and so wishes to take hold of any documents that concern their time together.

Mirek remains ignorant that his own actions are little different to those of the police he is seeking to evade and the larger forces whose side they are on, represented in this novel not only by Gottwald, but in Part Six too by a fictional simulacra of the later President Husak (217). Memory can be manipulated to further a forgetting just as easily as it can be marshalled to defend against this practice. This hypocrisy is never spelt out by the novel’s narrator, but Kundera himself utilises exactly the same terminology to present an argument that challenges Mirek’s understanding of his situation in the non-fictional *The Curtain*, when he states that ‘man is separated from the past... by two forces that... co-operate: the force of forgetting (which erases) and the force of memory (which transforms)’, and similarly in *Testaments Betrayed* when Kundera argues that ‘Remembering is not the negative of

forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting'.<sup>14</sup> These statements clarify the author's own position in a manner that suggests the flaws in Mirek's thesis and his consequent ignorance towards the hypocrisy of his actions are, by authorial intent at least, indeed designed to be illuminated by an alert reader able to make connections that remain blurred to Mirek himself.

Part Four contrasts Mirek's retrieval of lost letters with Tamina's efforts to secure personal diaries that she hopes will shore up her fading memories of her dead husband. As Banerjee suggests, 'Tamina's devotion to memory is motivated by a desire not for beauty', like Mirek's, 'but for life.'<sup>15</sup> Tamina is intent not on doctoring the past to make it appear more attractive, but on preserving it as a personal monument. But this is not to say that Tamina neatly counterpoints Mirek through being unambiguously on the side of knowledge, for in order to acquire her own lost artefacts she consistently generates ignorance in the acquaintances she has made since her flight from Czechoslovakia. Tamina leads one friend, whom she hopes will collect these documents when he visits Prague, to believe that they are 'political documents' rather than 'personal diaries' and love letters, since this deception better correlates with the colourful impressions Westerners hold about émigrés from countries like Tamina's and so will hopefully make him more willing to play his own part in what he will then consider an exciting drama (130). Shortly after this, Tamina deliberately speaks 'in an undertone' so that her friend does not realise she is using her phone to make an expensive international call to her Czech father, a move that again appears, at least to Tamina, as a necessity, born out of her status as a low-paid immigrant who cannot afford to make the calls herself (138).

A systematic cultivation of ignorance in these two people, then, genuinely seems to Tamina to be a necessary strategy to alleviate the consequences of having fled from a country of totalitarian rule, rather than a move designed to prevent inconvenient truths from coming to light (as for Jakub in *Farewell Waltz*) or to further seedy revenge fantasies (as for Ludvik in *The Joke*). The reader might not entirely approve of Tamina manipulating her friends, but considering Tamina feels she needs her diaries back in order for life itself to be survivable, *and* she has no intention of deliberately harming any of her targets, these moments of agnogenesis are less unsympathetic than Ludvik's or, especially, Klima's. Since Tamina genuinely feels that she needs to maintain her memories of her husband for life itself to be enduring, it is also an easier example to sympathise with than Vladimir's. And if her friends were to find out, it is highly unlikely that they would rush to commit suicide or have a heart attack, instead of being mildly nonplussed.

On the other hand, this act of agnogenesis is ultimately fruitless, since Tamina never recovers her diaries. The reader might even wonder that had Tamina told the truth to both of her colleagues, they might have been better moved by her genuineness and acted more enthusiastically to help her. The need for agnogenesis perhaps comes from a mind conditioned towards such a move after living for so long in a totalitarian regime, rather than through actual necessity. There is no direct evidence either way, and so the reader can only wonder exactly how useful bringing these characters into the

truth of the situation would have been for Tamina. The reader of this novel is left to dwell upon the uncertainty of whether or not a commitment to revealing the truth would have proven more successful than a reasonably sympathetic agnogenesis.

Tamina's actions are ultimately no more successful than a slightly earlier act of agnogenesis, one for which it is even easier for the reader to sympathise with the need, as the magazine editor R straightforwardly lies to her police interrogators that she does not 'know anything' about allegedly having hired a known dissident to work for her (98). Note the distinction between this and Ludvik's own appeals to his interrogators as recounted in Part Three and Part Five of *The Joke*: when he proclaims his innocence, he is saying nothing other than what to him is the simple truth, and nor does he attempt to lie by denying any knowledge of having sent the offending post-card. On this rare occasion, when agnogenesis could be directed at the people actively seeking him harm in the very moment when they are doing so, Ludvik was indeed committed to telling the truth. This earlier novel thus denies itself a potential variation that would have portrayed a moment of active agnogenesis in an entirely, rather than ambiguously, sympathetic vein, as though the oeuvre wishes to deny the reader such a straightforwardly sympathetic example of the practice so early on and to generate only compromised variations like Vladimir in support of it, before presenting cases where characters genuinely and convincingly believe it to be necessary for freedom, or even for life itself.

R.'s agnogenesis fails to save her from punishment as surely as does Ludvik's truth-telling before his own interrogators, but principally because she immediately backs down as soon as her interrogators contradict her account (98). We may wonder how events might have played out had R. stuck to her story, rather than switching in the blink of an eye from deliberate agnogenesis to a full-blown confession. Strategic and deliberate it may be, but concerted it is not.

Agnogenesis being marshalled in this novel not only by members of the regime like Presidents Gottwald and Husak, but also as a defence against the direct consequences of the regime's persecution – be it exile or interrogation – nonetheless facilitates subjecting the value of an active agnogenesis to a greater consideration than in the previous texts. The counterpoints here, while hardly deafening, are louder than those provided by the quieter counterpoint of Vladimir, who is hardly fighting for his life or liberty. This novel's re-evaluation of the practice of agnogenesis can still not entirely redeem it, because even when marshalled sympathetically it never appears particularly successful. The variations in this novel are those that most concertedly desire the process of re-evaluation itself, more than they do a switch from distrusting a concerted agnogenesis to viewing it as unambiguously the best option in the situations depicted. The reader of *Laughter and Forgetting* may more clearly see its sympathetic potential than the readers of earlier novels, however much she doubts its efficacy.

### *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

This novel further engages with the trend advanced by Tamina and R. from *Laughter and Forgetting*, which highlighted the potentially sympathetic nature of generating ignorance in others, even if these particular instances did not turn out successfully. Tomas, too, demonstrates an entirely sympathetic act of agnogenesis when he attempts to protect the identity of an editor who commissioned an article critical of communism, through falsely denying that he can remember the editor's name (*ULB*, 181). Unlike R., Tomas does not back down and continues to lie, even under a fairly rigorous examination. Like both R. and Tamina, however, Tomas' attempts are still not entirely successful, though in a way he could not have predicted. He continues his deceit by making up a physical description that unwittingly reminds his interrogators of another editor who has nothing to do with the offending article (182). His defence of one man thus succeeds, but only by placing another in the firing line. A well-intentioned agnogenesis can backfire against targets other than those intended.

As well as this further variation that attests to agnogenesis being a sympathetic form of defence, albeit one that never appears to work as intended, this novel also places the most concerted emphasis within the Czech fiction on how the intra-diegetic material Kundera's narrators turn towards in order to support their theses can, on occasion, fail to support it at all. While scrutinising Tomas' uncertainty about whether or not to initiate a third meeting with his new lover Tereza, for example, the narrator argues that 'There is no basis for testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes... like an actor going on cold' (7). Very shortly after, however, Tomas' decision to contact her is prompted by his recollection that Tereza's first visit, while ill, made her resemble a child in a 'bulrush basket', this memory leading him to realise that 'He couldn't very well let a basket with a child in it float down a stormy river', for had Moses not been saved from a similar situation 'there would have been no Old Testament, no civilisation as we now know it!' (10). For Tomas, this mythological or historical precedent functions as exactly the sort of rehearsal for a current situation that the narrator deems the lightness of being denies us. Our existential lightness is arguably framed here as the reason for our reliance on such mythologies, which, while doing little to alleviate the fact that we cannot ourselves enjoy a literal rehearsal of each decision, stand nonetheless as an immediate disproving of the narrator's argument that our decisions can call upon 'no basis for comparison.' Interestingly, the narrator of *Laughter and Forgetting* has already contradicted his fellow's central thesis himself, stating that 'historical events mostly imitate one another without any talent', highlighting that not all of his narrators are ignorant of the same notions as others (*LF*, 18).

A sign of narratorial ignorance more entrenched throughout *Lightness of Being*, however, arises from this narrator's continuing project to choose between the existential modes of 'weight' and 'lightness' (*ULB*, 5). Many signs emerging from the material he uses as a case-study to explore this dilemma suggest that neither potential answer is as ignorant as the very practice of presenting the two

modes of being as mutually exclusive opposites. His ongoing determination to value one of the two qualities as positive and the other as negative remains blind to the fact that the evidence he calls upon only undermines the very foundations of the binary that he is attempting to evaluate.

To select one of many examples, Tomas' career-change from surgeon to window-cleaner is overtly described as one from heaviness to lightness (189), but, shortly after, we hear of the frequency of such transitions following the 1968 Soviet-led invasion of his country (206). It is not that this means that Tomas' transition, posited as light, is instead neatly weighty, for viewing it via the lens of one pole of the binary opposition rather than the other keeps the binary intact, and being part of a trend occurring frequently amongst the Czech intelligentsia does not itself quite fulfil entirely the definitions of "weighty" provided in the novel's opening chapters. But it is enough to say that a trend described as light, due to moving Tomas away from a job he deeply cares about to one he disregards, is simultaneously a transition repeating itself across the local population and so also displays definite qualities of weightiness. Tomas' move is thus describable as neither strictly light nor weighty, for these are continually presented as discrete categories and his move contains elements of both. These observations are applicable also to the tanks with which the Russians subjugate the local population. Obviously heavy and weighty, described by the narrator as made of 'tons of steel', it is nonetheless these that catalyse Tomas' supposed fall to lightness (30). Again, lightness and weight fail to be as entirely discreet as the very nature of the narrator's investigation suggests that they must be.

This narrator, then, has an unfortunate proclivity for presenting evidence that undoes the very cause it is marshalled to corroborate. He also has little luck in utilising for this cause a text originally composed in Ancient Greek, seemingly misinterpreting the philosophical writing of Parmenides. The narrator suggests during the novel's opening that Parmenides 'saw the world divided into pairs of opposites', one half of each being labelled 'positive' and the other 'negative' (5). This reading of the sixth-century BC philosopher is far from tangential to the narrative, since it is the very catalyst behind the narrator's extended inquiry as to which of the pair of 'light' and 'weight' fits each valuation. According to this narrator, Parmenides decided that for this pair, 'lightness is positive, weight negative' (5).

The implied reader of *Lightness of Being* does not need to seek out anything about Parmenides herself by going outside Kundera's text and then returning to it, for the evidence that the narrator's opening thesis is based on a misconception already appears in front of her throughout the narrative as she proceeds through it for the first time. But only one text attributed to Parmenides survives today and so locating the source of the narrator's musings should not prove too laborious, though it becomes readily apparent that the crucial elements of this text seem at odds with what Kundera's narrator finds in it. Banerjee is the only English-language critic closely to engage with this section of the novel, but strangely does so by relating it not to the text written by Parmenides himself that the narrator of *Lightness of Being* appears to be citing, but to a text simply called *Parmenides* written by Plato around a century after Parmenides' death.<sup>16</sup> In the fragmentary text attributed to Parmenides himself that is

usually referred to as *On Nature*, however, the Ancient Greek narrator is informed at length by an unnamed goddess about the true nature of the world, which is starkly different from the ignorant constructions that she has seen put forward by humankind. Parmenides' narrator is told that humans 'laid down two forms in their minds for naming, of which one is not right [ie: negative]', 'distinguished opposites... and set up signs separate from each other – here the bright flame of fire, gentle and very light, in every way the same with itself [ie: self-identical] and not the same with the other. And then, off by itself, contrariwise, thick night...'<sup>17</sup>

We can see being decried here the same trend for constructing the world around falsely discrete binaries that is epitomised by the narrator of *Lightness of Being*'s own clinging to the categories of lightness and weight as though they were entirely self-identical and discontinuous from each other. The goddess' lesson for Parmenides, however, which Kundera's narrator completely ignores, is that 'everything is full at once of light and of obscure night', much like, as stated above, the Russian tanks cannot be said wholly to epitomise lightness or weight, since they display and contain elements of both.<sup>18</sup> The narrators of both Parmenides and *Lightness of Being* appear, then, to labour over the same misapprehensions, but while the former is shown the error of his ways by the goddess, the latter remains unable to see the true qualities of the evidence he investigates in the hope of solving his dilemma, evidence that should lead him towards learning the same lesson as his counterpart from antiquity, yet does not appear to do so, despite his clearly being aware of this counterpart's precedential experiences. His seemingly deep-set belief that the world must operate along binaries leads him to misread evidence to the contrary, both within and without the narrative that comprises his investigation into which side of the supposed binary between lightness and weight is best.

### **Variations on *Ignorance***

The characters of Kundera's Czech fiction are clearly far from all the truth-seekers idealistically imagined by Webb. If indeed this role truly belongs to anyone related to Kundera's oeuvre, it is perhaps to the readers of it themselves. As early as *The Joke*, the majority of Kundera's characters demonstrate a deep-rooted relationship with ignorance: they are ignorant of themselves, their fellows and the world around them. They are also often involved in actively generating ignorance in others. There is a general sense of aporia, however, regarding whether or not ignorance is a positive or negative state in which to exist and even whether or not committing agnogenesis is an unsympathetic course of action. While the sense that ignorance is bliss often comes from a prior lack of knowledge that could well have helped characters avoid falling into the very states in which ignorance then becomes coveted, in a select number of other cases ignorance appears genuinely and meaningfully sweeter. And the reader of *The Joke*, even if she usually finds it satisfying to get to the truth far more efficiently than the characters in the novel, will herself come into knowledge that she may doubt that the character it concerns would be happy with her knowing, at least not without her own consent. Not

only are the characters' relationships with ignorance not inevitably negative ones, but the value and even the ethicality of knowledge itself is brought into Kundera's trademark doubt. Though Webb's reading is definitely misguided and Kundera's characters are far from all truth-seekers, it is fair to say that even *The Joke* alone goes quite some way towards demonstrating they do not always have a good reason to be as Webb describes them.

Further novels continue to present both favourable and unfavourable portrayals of ignorance, while also praising and picking at the worth of knowledge, particularly in its capacity as the transcendental ideal that Webb imagines a deep commitment to would provide the best defence against totalitarianism. Whenever knowledge appears in the ascendance, a positive portrayal of ignorance or a sure sign of knowledge's limitations chimes in to unsettle it. *Farewell Waltz* makes a fairly consistent case *for* knowledge. While an early variation within this novel presents knowledge as functionally useless in encouraging any more sympathetic behaviour than the actions arrived at through ignorance, this is loudly counterpointed and potentially even drowned out altogether by a case where knowledge would easily have saved a life. It also turns the dial all the way towards presenting agnogenesis as negative, through *Klima* demonstrating possibly the cruellest example in the entire oeuvre.

*Laughter and Forgetting*, on the other hand, advances a tentative trend suggested towards the close of *The Joke* but unrealised in the following texts: examples of a deliberate agnogenesis now increasingly emerge that are at least not cruelly intentioned, even while their execution never works out successfully and so which leave the reader in no less doubt about whether or not agnogenesis is the best course of action, even in situations where it appears as a valid form of self-defence. Even so, *Laughter and Forgetting* refuses to resolve an aporia surrounding the ethical status of the practice by showing how agnogenesis is also the main weapon wielded by key members of the ruling regime such as Presidents Gottwald and Husak. *Lightness of Being* also introduces the fallibility of one of Kundera's extra-diegetic narrators, through demonstrating how its own narrator is blind to the subtler nuances of the material that he is seeking to evaluate. Not even those characters with a virtually omnipresent view of Kundera's textual worlds can inevitably shrug off the ignorance experienced by the majority of the other characters living and breathing within these worlds, even when they themselves are concerted in search of a truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernie Higgins and David Vaughan. "Czech Books: Milan Kundera's *Ignorance*, a novel that offers insight into exile and memory." *Czech Radio 7, Radio Prague* (<http://www.radio.cz/en/article/55813>, last accessed February 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Due to *Ignorance* never making clear the exact dates of Irena and Josef's various returns – which critic James Wood argues is a conscious obfuscation – it is impossible to determine if the novel takes place in Czechoslovakia or the Czech Republic, the latter resulting from the Velvet Divorce of 31 December 1992. The narrative gives the impression, however, that it occurs very soon after communism's fall and so throughout this thesis I label its setting 'Czechoslovakia'. See: James Wood. "Laughter and Forgetting." *The New Republic* (December 23, 2002) 36.

<sup>3</sup> Igor Webb. "Milan Kundera and the Limits of Scepticism" in *Massachusetts Review* Vol. 31, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990) 361.

<sup>4</sup> Robert N. Proctor. "Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study)" in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. I have added italics for emphasis. Later in the same edited collection, Nancy Tuana demonstrates the widespread and flexible nature of the practice when she applies Proctor's model to a feminist challenging of received knowledge by exploring 'women's bodies and pleasure' as an area that patriarchal culture has attempted to keep an object of ignorance. See Nancy Tuana. "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance" in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Eds. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) 111.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Doležel, *Narrative Modes in Czech Literature*, 124.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Eagleton. "Estrangement and Irony." *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Milan Kundera*. Ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. Eagleton's model echoes theorisations of totalitarianism going back to Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Throughout this foundational text, the main power of totalitarian ideology is described as its 'all comprehensive... scope', its attempted construction of a 'completely consistent, comprehensible and predictable world', its 'organisation of the entire texture of life' and its masquerading as a 'super sense' that has 'pretended to have found the key to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe.' See Hannah Arendt. *Totalitarianism: Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harcourt, 1966) 50, 61, 155.

<sup>11</sup> See Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox*, 38; O'Brien, *Kundera and Feminism*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox*, 121.

<sup>13</sup> After all, *The Guinness Book of Records* suggests that Agatha Christie is the best-selling novelist of all time.

<sup>14</sup> Kundera, *The Curtain*, 48; Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 126.

<sup>15</sup> Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox*, 149.

<sup>16</sup> Banerjee's description of this dialogic text by Plato as one in which 'Socrates finds himself acquiescing to notions that contradict his own established views' at least demonstrates that it correlates well with the mores of Kundera's novelistic aesthetic. See Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox*, 199.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Austin. *Parmenides: Being, Bounds and Logic* (London: Yale University Press, 1986) 169.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.



## **Six: Ignorance**

*“[Memory] is only capable of retaining a paltry little scrap of the past, and no one knows why just this scrap and not some other, since... the choice occurs mysteriously, outside our will or our interests.”<sup>1</sup>*

### **1. Ignorance explored**

Kundera’s most recent novel at the time of writing sees the return of the intra-diegetic variety of narrator who has characterised the majority of his novels since *Life is Elsewhere*, but was markedly absent from virtually the whole of the second French novel, *Identity*. Much like the narrator of *Slowness* was keen to investigate slowness, the narrator of *Ignorance* is the first who actively seeks to put ignorance itself under the spotlight as the prime area of his essayistic commentary’s study, rather than arriving at the theme of ignorance as a corollary of a different subject matter.

While the first French narrator follows many other essayistic commentators who have explored our society’s intensifying relationship with speed, ignorance remains a subject that has not been paid as much attention as it might warrant. Andrew Bennett has very recently observed that while a ‘vast area of philosophy is designated as epistemology, a theory of knowledge’, the other side of the coin, ignorance, is a potential avenue that has been almost completely ignored.<sup>2</sup> The narrator of *Ignorance* could therefore be described as something of a trail-blazer, striding out through his essayistic investigations into relatively uncharted territories.

Bennett’s own historicization of ignorance dwells at length on early Greek philosophy and locates within it a paradigm shift in understandings of ignorance, a shift epitomised by the value afforded ignorance by philosophy pre- and post-Socratic and the importance of literature in taking up the mantle once post-Socratic philosophy has cast ignorance out. The philosophy of Socrates is distinct from what follows because it revels in acknowledging both its own ignorance and the limitations of knowledge in general.<sup>3</sup> From Platonic philosophy onwards, conversely, ignorance becomes something starkly to repudiate. Bennett’s historicization then draws a sharp distinction between post-Socratic philosophy and the sphere of literature. Literature is framed here as the inheritor of the willingness to dwell in doubt and uncertainty that philosophy cast off, from Plato onwards, as it began to resemble more of a science. Literature for Bennett is, distinctively, ‘the place where ignorance can be entertained, explored, enacted’, a variety of discourse friendly, ‘unlike many forms of philosophy’, to ‘self-contradiction, perplexity, aporia.’<sup>4</sup> While Andrew Martin argues that ‘second-hand acquaintance with ignorance appears unobtainable’ and ‘first-hand cognizance, untenable’, Bennett’s model refutes this by presenting literature itself as a similar sort of solution to these conundrums as some would argue that God, unable to experience ignorance for himself, sought

through keeping Adam away from the Tree of Knowledge, literature providing a space in which, before its reader's eyes, ignorance is continually 'encompassed, articulated and performed.'<sup>5</sup>

Literature perhaps offers a perfect environment, then, for this narrator's attempts to fill the very gap in knowledge observed by Bennett. Yet previous narrators called into service within Kundera's Czech and French fictions have often fallen prey in various ways to ignorance themselves. It remains to be seen whether or not this is less likely to happen when ignorance is the prime subject under investigation, or if, conversely, this French narrator's closer proximity to such a subject-matter leaves him even more likely to fall under its influence, so that the ignorance here is 'encompassed, articulated and performed' within the novel's pages as much by him as by his intra-diegetic characters, just as it has been by at least one Czech narrator before him. The French trilogy itself has already seen one narrator pick entirely the wrong mode of representation for his own task and need his reader to do his work for him, and another who is so terrified of his own material that he has run into hiding and can only beg for his own reader's assistance in solving what is ultimately an unsolvable conundrum.

*Ignorance* focuses on the unsettling return of Irena and Josef to Czechoslovakia, decades after the now-fallen Communist regime forced their respective migrations to France and Denmark. Irena in particular is returning unwillingly, provoked by her frustration at her French friend Sylvie, whose fetishized impression of Irena as a long-suffering exile, desperate to return home and resume a life held long in stasis, betrays a cutting ignorance of Irena's reality. If Sylvie knew Irena at all, she would realise that Irena's exile, though initially 'imposed from the outside', was ultimately 'the best outcome for her life', setting Irena free from her imposing mother (*Ignorance*, 23). Irena's strong conviction that her home is now Paris is confirmed during her first night in Prague, her old friends totally uninterested in her happy experiences abroad, mirroring Sylvie in their capacity for remaining ignorant of Irena's true feelings. For Irena to be accepted in their company would require amputating 'twenty years from her life' and stitching her distant past directly to her present, equivalent to a surgeon cutting off her forearm and attaching her hand directly to her elbow (43). Also unnerving is the country Irena remembers having all but vanished: though the love she once felt for Prague is still evoked by the sleepy backstreets behind Hradčany Castle, the majority of the city has been seized by Western, capitalist values, which are worryingly embodied by Irena's current partner, Gustaf, whose decision to open an office in the city provided the immediate excuse for Irena's return. Irena's experiences here have much in common with Kundera's reports of his own, the author describing in *The Curtain* returning to Prague after the Velvet Revolution only to discover 'ideological stupidity' replaced by 'commercial stupidity', Irena therefore a kind of authorial surrogate much like Sabina in *Lightness of Being*.<sup>6</sup>

Gustaf's move to Prague demonstrates an ignorance of Irena's reality similar to Sylvie's: he believes that by so doing he is forging a connection with Irena's 'city', which, in actuality, is from her own perspective no longer Prague but Paris (23). Gustaf's ignorance further galls Irena by riding roughshod over not only her feelings for Prague, but Prague itself, reducing the complexity of its

history and culture to a series of trite commercial slogans displayed on T-shirts (101). Irena can thus be characterised as a victim of the ignorance of both her lover and her friends, suggesting that ignorance, in refutation of the worth afforded it by certain philosophical positions, is not necessarily a prize-worthy humanistic value, but that there instead exist hard and fast truths about a person that need to be acknowledged by her supposed familiars in order to avoid leaving her grievously wounded.

Josef's own return to Czechoslovakia proves also distressing. The majority of his space in the narrative involves a reunion with the surviving members of his family, chiefly his brother. Josef initially appears, like Irena, the subject of the ignorance of people who are ostensibly 'closest' to him 'in the world' (59). Josef's brother and sister-in-law, for example, brazenly enquire after his Danish wife, not realising that her recent death is one of the defining events in Josef's life. Unlike with Irena, however, the ignorance of others does not bother Josef as much as it suits him 'fine': Josef considers discussing her death as a 'betrayal', and so keeping his Czech family in the dark about their lack of knowledge is for him strategically advantageous (110). The narrative appears to depict him reaching a series of illuminating revelations, such as the focus of his life – presently his dead wife – remaining in Denmark and so Prague no longer representing a viable home for him, leading him to leave Czechoslovakia during the final chapter for what seems the final time. Some revelations involve Josef becoming cognisant of his own ignorance: though Josef remembers becoming a vet in order to spite his family, he is reminded later that his decision was fuelled by a genuine love for animals, arguably demonstrating a further instance of ignorance proving an invaluable tool, self-ignorance here allowing him to shore up an identity-affirming sense of rebellion (152).

But the most damaging way Josef is ignorant of himself is one of which he remains *unaware*, involving his treatment of two women in the past and present: an anonymous girl from his school years and, in the final chapters, Irena herself. On retrieving his diaries and reading about his cruel treatment of the former, Josef is relieved that he is now nothing like 'the little snot' who, through his artful blending of 'sentimentality' and 'sadism', strongly resembles Jaromil from *Life is Elsewhere* (83). The developing interaction throughout the novel between Irena and Josef, however, suggests that by its close Josef has changed less than he imagines. The pair meets by chance at a Paris airport en route to Prague, Irena remembering that many years ago Josef approached her at a bar in a potential liaison that was never realised. Josef, on the other hand, enjoys this encounter with an 'agreeable' and 'pretty' woman too much to admit that he cannot recall ever having met her before (48). The resultant dinner date, on the final night of Josef's return to Prague, sees a close emotional connection established, the characters' narratives converging as they swap near-identical stories of their original homeland no longer holding any meaningful ties. Following sex, however, when he fails to recognise the ashtray that he gave her during their first brief meeting, Irena suddenly realises that Josef has never known who she is: her frantic attempt to get him to refute this charge of ignorance by saying her name – an echo of Chantal's desperation that someone stabilise her identity, through the same manoeuvre, towards the close of *Identity* – is met only with an 'awkward' silence (186). Too cowardly

to acknowledge her distress, Josef can only disparage her drunkenness, wait for her to pass out – a transition he finds ‘sadly laughable’ – and, despite realising that he has ‘a chance, certainly his last, to help someone, and... to find a sister’, leave the hotel with Irena naked and unconscious (191-92). Within the novel’s final paragraph, the narrative abruptly switches between two consecutive sentences from describing Josef entering a taxi outside the hotel to describing his flight over Europe, the pace accelerating in order to match his desperation to leave Irena and Prague behind.

Kundera has stated that within his fiction sexual situations generate ‘an extremely sharp light which suddenly reveals the essence of characters and sums up their life situations.’<sup>7</sup> While James Wood argues that the above scene ‘struggles to make this frictionless fucking somehow significant’, the scene actually offers a particularly stark example of this common Kunderan manoeuvre.<sup>8</sup> The victim throughout the novel of the ignorance of her friends, family and lover – much like Lucie in *The Joke* is the victim of Ludvik’s ignorance – Irena finally meets someone she imagines knows her, only to discover that she is a bigger stranger to him than to all the others; despite seeing his own return as illuminating a series of valuable epiphanies, including one regarding his ignorance of himself, Josef remains ignorant of the fact that he is still the immature boy whose romantic manipulations led an earlier, unnamed girlfriend to attempt suicide. This final ignorance of Josef’s is just as key to his identity as both his decision to keep his family ignorant of the death of his wife and his ignorance over his real motivation for becoming a vet. Through Josef, then, the novel suggests that we cultivate and even *need* the ignorance that so distresses Irena, within ourselves and in others, because it buffers us from unsettling truths, in Josef’s case regarding his failure to change. While Josef generally learns throughout the novel exactly how he and those around him are ignorant, through becoming aware of the disparity between present knowledge and reality, the ultimate lack of self-awareness manifesting through his behaviour towards Irena represents what Andrew Martin would describe as a perfect, Edenic ignorance, undisturbed by comparison between what he knows and what he thinks he ought to know.<sup>9</sup> But this Edenic (or intransitive) ignorance, outside Eden, becomes, if anything, even more damaging than what Martin calls its ‘transitive’ or ‘anticipatory’ alternative: Josef departs from Prague without his belief that he is no longer his callous teenage self being ever problematised, completely unaware of the resultant potential for the broken Irena to follow the same sad path as his earlier partner. Josef’s strategic relationship with ignorance has so naturalised it that he has grown unaware of its true pervasion within his own character.

The sole notable academic discussion of *Ignorance* in English is a chapter of Nataša Kovačević’s, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial discourse and Europe’s borderline civilisation*. Here, Kovačević explores the novel’s depiction of ‘the new “foreignness” of Prague brought on by capitalist privatisation’.<sup>10</sup> The novel allegedly ‘exposes the... economic appropriation of Eastern Europe by (primarily) Western capital and rethinks the legacy of communism in light of the new situation.’<sup>11</sup> This reading is certainly easily supportable by much within the text, including the aforementioned condensing of Prague’s culture into breezy slogans beloved by Gustaf, the sudden

blitz of English language signs that replace those previously in Russian (95) and the swapping of a propaganda image showing a Czech clasping hands with a Russian soldier in favour of a near-identical alternative where the two hands are now white and black, which Josef imagines a lazy imposition of Western liberal values culturally meaningless to the supposedly homogeneously white Czechoslovakia (73). Kovačević is also correct to suggest that *Ignorance* is unusually conciliatory towards the departed regime: an old friend of Irena's, 'a girl from a poor family', describes with regret how the pre-1948 bourgeoisie and their descendents managed to seize control of the country within mere days of Communism's fall, a cynical though ultimately fair point that the novel never attempts to undercut (164-65).

Kovačević constructs, however, too easy a dichotomy between Kundera's oeuvre pre- and post-1989, her chapter beginning with the argument that he typically critiques the Communist Eastern Europe by continually showing it up against a 'democratic' and 'enlightened' European tradition that the West has done a better job of maintaining, but then begins in his French novels, particularly *Slowness* and *Ignorance*, to criticise the West too for also betraying this heritage.<sup>12</sup> Such an argument perfectly highlights the proclivity for reductive readings that emerges from studying Kundera via any ideological lens: throughout his six Czech novels, Kundera suggests that the irrationality of the Communist regime is merely one manifestation of a Europe-wide trend, which in the West manifests in the Parisian riots of the sixties (*Life is Elsewhere*), the banality of sex and nakedness when stripped of all transgressive potential (*Laughter and Forgetting*) and the kitsch of vacuous protest marches (*Lightness of Being*). The West does not begin to take flak only in the French trilogy. For the same reasons as I criticised Kovačević's reading of *Slowness* in Chapter Two, then, there is more evidence here that investigating Kundera's depiction of a particular political regime seems doomed to lead to ignorant reductions.

The narrator of *Ignorance* works overtime in rectifying the absence of critical thinking about agnology noted by Andrew Bennett, offering not one theory of ignorance but many, which prove ostensibly incompatible. My above paragraphs have touched upon the novel's vacillation between ignorance as a condition of which its carriers remain unaware and ignorance as a useful, albeit self-defeating, strategic orientation. Within the extra-diegetic portions of the narrative, the narrator himself adds to these suggestions about ignorance's nature by directly outlining three theses hard to reconcile. The first occurs in only the second chapter and so threatens to hold sway over the reader's interpretation of much of the novel: discussing the different etymological roots of the various European words for 'nostalgia', the narrator suggests that the Spanish 'anoranza' can be traced back to the Catalan 'enyorar', which in turn is rooted in the Latin 'ignorare', charting an argument – especially likely to strike a chord with the novel's initial Spanish and Catalan readership – that ignorance is a painful state inflicted by circumstance upon an exile or émigré, his nostalgia for his homeland essentially expressing 'My country is far away, and I don't know what is happening there' (6). According to this first stance, then, a return to the country in question would presumably alleviate

ignorance, not, as with Irena and Josef, either inflict it or leave it invisible. Much later, the narrator outlines another position, similar to the first: the ignorance that causes historical events to be rewritten or even falsified results, apparently beyond our control, from the inability of our memory to retain more than ‘a paltry little scrap of the past’ (123). Ignorance again appears a condition inflicted, not strategically assumed. Between these two theories, however, the narrator forgets himself and lets slip another: discussing Josef’s ability to live so comfortably away from his roots and family, the narrator candidly informs us that ‘as segments of their lives melt into oblivion, men slough off whatever they dislike, and feel lighter, freer’, depicting either, at best, ignorance and man in a grudgingly happy partnership, or, at worst, ignorance as a condition actively encouraged (76). In addition to the forms of ignorance demonstrated intra-diegetically, then, the narrator himself highlights at least two more: while one depicts humankind as the passive victim of ignorance, like Irena, the other more resembles Josef’s deliberate utilisation of ignorance due to its strategic advantages.

Martin defines intransitive, Edenic ignorance as ‘the state of being unacquainted’ with either ‘a cultural archive’ or ‘the textual embodiment of knowledge.’<sup>13</sup> The opposite sort of ignorance is described as ‘transitive’, where the amount of information that is unknown has itself become a known quantity. On the surface, the narrator appears to take a stand against the kind of ignorance represented within the narrative by Josef’s Edenic lack of prescience about the true extent of how deeply his naturalised ignorance has become ingrained. The aforementioned passages detailing at length the etymology of ‘nostalgia’ across several languages arguably represent a comprehensive cultural archive, while the narrator’s arguments elsewhere evoke figures likely to be obscure to the average English or French reader, such as the Icelandic romantic poet Jonas Hallgrímsson and his other small-nation compatriots: Petöfi, Mickiewicz, Preseren, Macha, Shevchenko, Wergeland and Lönnrot (111). Elsewhere the narrator introduces a parade of Czechoslovak cultural figures, including Neruda, Voskovec, Werich, Hrabal and Skvorecky (136). Though these passages provide very little actual knowledge of the artists in question, they at least alert the reader to their existence and to how little she knows of them, at worst transforming her ignorance from intransitive to transitive. Even if she remains ignorant of anything more substantial than their names, this ignorance is at least starkly illuminated for her as a potential stepping-stone into further knowledge.

These sections, however, mark a dramatic exception from how, elsewhere, ignorance is a condition the narrator can never quite shrug off, demonstrating that even when ignorance itself is the sole avenue of investigation rather than a corollary of a different subject-matter, a narrator of Kundera’s can still end up becoming seduced by its charms. Throughout the novel, the experiences of Irena and Josef are contrasted with those of Odysseus approximately three millennia previously, much like *Slowness* compares the actions and mentalities of its characters with those of Denon’s *No Tomorrow*. The narrator locates in Homer’s poem a source for the model of the Great Return that Sylvie throws so ignorantly at Irena. This ‘founding epic of nostalgia’ shows Odysseus forsaking a life of ease and comfort with the lusty sea-nymph Calypso in order to return to his native Ithaca,

following a twenty year absence precipitated by the Trojan War (7). Odysseus, the narrator argues, chooses ‘the apotheosis of the known (return)’ over ‘ardent exploration of the unknown (adventure)’ and, through portraying him thus, ‘glorified nostalgia with a laurel wreath and thereby laid out a moral hierarchy of emotions’ (8-9). The complaints of émigrés about the ignorance of people like Sylvie are thus ‘a lost cause’ (9). The narrator’s depiction of the *Odyssey* is not the straightforward misrepresentation of *No Tomorrow* made by his too-hasty counterpart in *Slowness*, but deserves a similar scrutiny.

Through its focus on Odysseus’ desperation to return to Ithaca, the narrator’s reading of it in *Ignorance* fits a discernible pattern that receptions of the poem following the Second World War have focussed on the pain experienced by both its hero and the community left without him by his displacement.<sup>14</sup> This narrator takes the trend further by arguing also that Odysseus’ displacement will continue even after his homecoming. Much like the reading of *No Tomorrow* within *Slowness*, the narrator of *Ignorance* extrapolates beyond the end of the poem’s narrative and states as an unproblematic given that following Odysseus’ return, his fellow Ithacans showed the exact same lack of interest in his experiences abroad as do Irena’s friends in Prague towards her own (34). Reviewer of *Ignorance* Hugh Barnacle correctly suggests that ‘this seems counter-intuitive’, since it is easier to imagine, given the generic hallmarks of the epic tradition, the Ithacans ‘packing the halls to hear what their long lost king’s been up to.’<sup>15</sup> There is indeed little evidence in the poem itself to support the narrator’s vision. Homer’s narrative ends mid-scene soon after Odysseus’ return is revealed, leaving little space to discuss his reception by the Ithacans, but even so, directly contradicting *Ignorance*, Odysseus’ first night after discarding his disguise is spent with his wife Penelope so ‘enchanted’ by his stories ‘of all the pains / he had dealt out to other men and all the hardships / he’d endured himself’ that ‘sleep never sealed her eyes till all was told.’<sup>16</sup> The first person he spends quality time with once the crisis is over wants to hear all about his exploits.

The narrator providing this false image of an Ithaca apathetic about Odysseus’ exploits seems to fulfil two shaky rhetorical needs: firstly, the image counters what the narrator views as Homer’s irresponsible ‘hierarchy of emotions’, established by the poet’s supposed glorification of nostalgia; secondly, it frames the novel’s similar depiction of Irena’s experiences as completely ahistorical, by equating them with an identical case-study that occurred three millennia previously. But to read the *Odyssey* as straightforwardly glorifying nostalgia and return is to misunderstand the poem, meaning that this first need arises from a misreading and so is ultimately unnecessary; a less ignorant reading can detect much that undercuts the strands supporting the narrator’s own interpretation.<sup>17</sup> The *Odyssey* already contains as much material problematising return as it does material glorifying it. Most strikingly, Odysseus’ fellow soldier, Agamemnon, reaches his homeland only to be immediately murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and subsequently laments in the Underworld that ‘for [his] return Zeus hatched a pitiful death’, wishing that, like Achilles, he had been allowed to die at Troy.<sup>18</sup> The swineherd Eumaeus, kidnapped by Phoenicians from his own homeland of Syrie, eventually reaches

Ithaca and ‘the house of a decent, kindly man / who gives [him] all [he needs] in meat and drink’; that this is an observation made by Odysseus, rather than Eumaeus, does not reduce its significance in countering the strands of the narrative glorifying return, for it demonstrates Odysseus himself becoming cognisant of the fact that a comfortable life can be achieved far from one’s birthplace.<sup>19</sup>

A further potent example of nostalgia being problematised results from the fate of the Phaeacian seamen who transport Odysseus during the final stage of his homecoming, crushed by Poseidon on their return voyage while in sight of their fellows on the Scherian shore, their friends and family therefore unlikely to remember Odysseus’ desperation to reach Ithaca with benevolence.<sup>20</sup> Andrew Dalby wryly suggests a similar argument when he observes that ‘by the end of the poem, Odysseus has wiped out two generations of [Ithaca’s] young men; that’s when we wonder... whether his return has been the best outcome for the city.’<sup>21</sup> We should also remember that Odysseus never intends to remain in Ithaca. Though his need almost immediately to leave and travel until he locates a ‘people who know nothing of the sea’ has been inflicted upon him much earlier by the seer Tiresias, it means nonetheless that his return cannot last.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, immediately upon waking from his first night with Penelope in twenty years, Odysseus casually informs her that he intends to conduct a series of ‘many raids’ – presumably against other islands – suggesting that even without Tiresias’ instructions he would not have remained on Ithaca for long.<sup>23</sup> Throughout the poem, then, the notion of return and the state of nostalgia that fuels it are depicted with scepticism just as readily as they are glorified. That the narrator misses the vast array of incidents in the *Odyssey* during which nostalgia is problematised mirrors his resultant attempt to problematise Homeric nostalgic for himself via an argument that directly contradicts one of the few passages in which return *is* actually depicted happily, together making his own allegiances with ignorance doubly vivid.

Arguably cultivating ignorance for reasons of convenience via his reading of the *Odyssey*, this narrator may be far more like characters stretching from Ludvik to Josef than he would be comfortable admitting. His investigation into ignorance has not made him any less likely to suffer from it himself or facilitate the spread of it in others. The implied reader of *Ignorance* is one who, if not aware of this text already, will – much like her counterpart in *Slowness* – be galvanised enough by the narrator’s negative portrayal of ignorance to feel compelled to put his own representations to the test, reading around the topics in question and bringing this new knowledge to a return to *Ignorance* itself. Calvino’s argument that ‘the classics are the books that come to us bearing traces of readings previous to ours’, their true worth therefore often arising through our ‘surprise... vis-a-vis the notion that we had of [them]’, perfectly describes the likely results of this practice, the portrayal of the *Odyssey* within *Ignorance* combining with any notions regarding Homer garnered from elsewhere, the former especially falling prey to demolition when the reader experiences what the poem actually has to say.<sup>24</sup> Homer’s work is thus transformed by *Ignorance* – similarly to how Denon’s *No Tomorrow* is transformed by *Slowness* – into an arena in which ignorance is brought into plain sight and challenged. During a re-examination of *Ignorance*, then, the reader will not merely follow the narrator’s



arguments but actively call him out for the ignorance he shares with his characters and has been cultivating within her own mind too. But distinct from and even more important than the new awareness of the narrator's ignorance during this re-examination will be the implied reader's new awareness of her own. Throughout the initial reading, hearing the narrator's talk of the *Odyssey*, the reader will at least be aware that she is encountering readings of an exterior narrative construct concerning which there are likely to be alternative interpretations. Conversely, for the vast majority of the initial reading, the reader will be almost certainly *unaware* of her own Edenic unawareness that the character who best encapsulates the novel's concerns and warnings is one even more adept at strategically cultivating ignorance than both Josef and the narrator, though for reasons that are perhaps much more justifiable.

## 2. Overcoming Ignorance?

First-time readers of *Ignorance* will be, almost inevitably, ignorant themselves of the novel's most important character, even when this character is present on-stage right in front of the reader's eyes. This is not Irena, Gustaf, Josef or the narrator, but the mostly invisible Milada.<sup>25</sup>

Towards the middle of the novel, Josef's diary entries reveal a high-school romance with a nameless teenage girl, whom Josef treated with an immature and brazen cruelty (72, 83). The central chapters then fluctuate in perspective, flitting mostly between Josef's reminiscences about his past behaviour and the experiences of the girl herself, who is so desperate to make a grand gesture in response to her abandonment by him that she attempts suicide via taking sleeping pills while alone on a snowy mountainside (106-108). Miscalculating both the required number of pills and the fact that the temperature would rise over the afternoon in question rather than fall, the girl survives but loses her left ear to frostbite, transforming her into an ashamed recluse (118-119). Her narrative is then quietly dropped. Throughout this section the girl remains nameless, referred to by the narrator only via third-person pronouns. If any certain identity is attributed to her by the reader, it is arguably likely to be that of a young Irena, for a chapter obviously from Irena's adult perspective precedes the chapter introducing the teenage girl's suicide attempt, without any obvious sign that the third-person female pronouns in the former chapter and the latter refer to different women (101-102). Much later, however, in one of Kundera's deftest character moments, the teenage girl who lost an ear is revealed to be Milada, an ostensibly unimportant character introduced in one chapter near the novel's start as a workmate of Irena's ex-husband, before fading from the reader's sight until this disclosure very near the novel's end.

Milada's centrality to the novel's thematic concerns is expressed via both the literal centrality of the defining events of her life within the space of the narrative and the near-symmetrical positioning, respective to the novel's opening and closing chapters, of her first appearance and later unveiling. The novel is literally constructed around both her presence and her absence, around both

the reader's ignorance of her importance and its eventual exposure; it is a novel about Milada, and whenever Milada goes offstage, it is a novel for Milada. She is the perfect counterpoint to Irena, whose real identity is similarly invisible to friends such as Sylvie, though despite, rather than because of, Irena's own wishes.

It would perhaps be unfair to highlight the implied reader's ignorance regarding Milada's importance for the entirety of the first reading, for there is no conceivable way that her importance could be known. The reader has not yet been tempted with the apple that brings her own prior ignorance out into the open. But the point at which the reader could plausibly become cognisant of Milada's significance is much earlier than the point at which the narrative explicitly reveals that she is the teenage girl described in Josef's diary. The most attentive of readers holds enough information to determine the teenager's true identity by the point that the narrative recounts the amputation of her ear. When Milada is first introduced, a physical description unusually long for one of Kundera's narrators informs that her hair is the 'same' as it always is whenever Irena has seen her, 'covering the ears and falling to below the chin', the usual scarcity of such specific details in Kundera's novels giving these additional emphasis (39).<sup>26</sup> Irena additionally observes that Milada's otherwise-attractive face wrinkles unbecomingly as she speaks but, since we do not talk to ourselves while we look in the mirror, Milada must imagine herself to be beautiful (39). The unnamed teenage girl ironically does just this immediately prior to her suicide attempt, scrutinising her still visage in a mirror and concluding that she is 'very beautiful' (108). It is likely that the vast majority of readers will not notice these small clues; furthermore, while it could conversely be argued that these clues are supposed to make it immediately obvious that the teenage girl is Milada, if this were so then there would be no need for the narrative to refer to her only via pronouns, rather than explicitly providing her name. From the moment the above clues are provided and an acknowledgement of the teenager's identity being that of Milada thus becomes conceivably possible, however, it can be stated reasonably fairly that the reader who does not recognise her is ignorant – ignorant, ironically, in a similar manner to Josef in the Paris airport, when he fails to realise as Irena approaches him that he has met Irena before (48). Later on, when Milada and Irena meet for the second time, Irena directly remarks that she has never seen Milada with any other hairstyle, only for Milada to 'sidestep' the topic, which provides a late opportunity for the reader to realise her hairstyle's significance and connect Milada to the teenage amputee, shortly before the connection is explicitly revealed (161). Even Irena herself, depicted throughout the novel as the victim of the ignorance of others much like Lucie in *The Joke*, demonstrates ignorance towards Milada, impressed by the fact that she has 'no charade' when, in actuality, her entire routine is dedicated towards preserving her secret (44).

Milada further demonstrates, similarly to Josef and the narrator, the strategic motivations behind cultivating ignorance in others. And, also as with Josef, this tactic proves self-defeating, though for Milada to an even greater extent. While Tomas' agnogenesis in *Lightness of Being* backfires against another colleague who is pegged as a dissident through Tomas's false description,

Milada's strategies backfire against her own potential for happiness. In order to keep people ignorant about her ear, she has developed via 'enormous discipline' an 'elaborate system of precautions', shunning deep connections or romantic relationships and finding a hairdresser far from anywhere that might lead to chance encounters with friends (176). Ultimately, however, her life is one of loneliness, Milada wishing she could escape to another planet where she would not feel so oppressively defined by her mutilated form (192-94). This last point means that Milada proves additionally important to the narrative by encapsulating – even more so than Irena or Josef – its central argument de-emphasising attachments to places of birth. The most harshly ironic of her strategy's failures perhaps involves it being designed to keep people thinking Milada is beautiful when, as discussed above, Irena thinks she is not, for reasons beyond Milada's awareness or control; Milada is therefore ignorant herself that the motivation behind her cultivation of ignorance in others is doomed to failure before she even began, even while the cultivation itself is extremely successful. Unlike with Josef, then, who by the end of the novel is hardly well-balanced as a person but has yet to suffer personally from the most self-defeating ramifications of his allegiance with ignorance, Milada more starkly showcases to the reader this strategy's potential negative consequences.

Milada's cultivation of ignorance does not differ from Josef's own solely through more clearly demonstrating the pitfalls of such a strategy, but also through directly making the reader complicit. Just as Milada's strategies leave her friends, most obviously Irena, unaware of her past, the middle portion of the narrative neglecting to use her name leaves the reader similarly in the dark; the strategies she uses in her daily life to keep her friends unaware of her past are mirrored by the strategies employed within the narrative. It could be argued that these sections do not demonstrate Milada herself cultivating the reader's ignorance entirely through her lone efforts like she does with everyone else in her world, as much as they demonstrate the narrator assisting Milada in her secrecy, since it is presumably he who selects between proper noun and pronoun; we have already observed both the narrator and Milada separately aligning *with* ignorance rather than against it, and so the former making use of his omniscience in order to further the goals of the latter makes sense. By the novel's close, the narrator has broken this contract with Milada, this breach correlating with the other sections of the narrative demonstrating the narrator problematising the ignorance encouraged by Josef and experienced by Irena: in order further to problematise, and even directly combat, the deliberative cultivation of ignorance at the hands of people who are not him, the narrator eventually refuses to allow Milada to perpetuate her deceptions, revealing her true identity to his audience, at first implicitly, then explicitly.

Of course, the details provided about Milada's secretive and lonely schedule ensure that it is highly unlikely that she would be happy with the idea of every possible reader of the novel being made aware of her secrets. But though the narrator exposing Milada raw to his reader makes his failure to notice his own complicity with ignorance additionally ironic, this move is presumably positively intentioned. Firstly, the narrator might say, it rescues Milada from the trap her life has

become, making her visible to a large audience who, presumably, will be sympathetic to her pains rather than harshly judgemental, perhaps enabling Milada to realise that the motivations underlying the strategic cultivation of ignorance are usually self-defeating. Secondly, Milada's unveiling is the most crucial scene in the novel due to it simultaneously illuminating *and* alleviating the reader's own ignorance, so that during a repeat reading of the novel she will be aware of Milada's presence during its middle chapters, able to say her name for herself and so restore to her the potential to live a life full of the experiences that she is currently denying herself.

But there is still another means by which Milada's deliberate cultivation of ignorance is different to that of Josef and the narrator – a means that seriously questions the sense of nobility to the narrator's decision to unveil her presence, as posited by the above argument. While Josef and the narrator of *Ignorance* attempt to engineer ignorance for less than sympathetic reasons, Milada is arguably appropriating the process in order to protect herself from a judgemental society that, at least partly because she is a woman, will always judge her worth as a person via her body and will, thus, disparage her because this body has become what the regulatory norms of this society would interpellate as imperfect. While Josef represents the negative side of deliberately cultivated ignorance, then, Milada follows Czech characters like Vladimir, *Laughter and Forgetting's* Tamina and R., and Tomas, through demonstrating its more sympathetic potential as a defence mechanism, however much it ends up limiting her.

By this argument, the narrator should not have made the manoeuvre of unmasking her true identity to the novel's audience, however benevolently intended he may have been, because her decision to engineer ignorance in others has arisen from her experiential knowledge of living as a disfigured woman within a patriarchal culture, experiential knowledge of which the narrator is himself ignorant, leaving him – along with everyone else who is not Milada – hugely lacking of the right to reveal her presence, however much they are convinced that doing so would only help her in the long run. The narrator, so keen to alleviate others' ignorance at some junctures, but only further entrenching it at others, should thus not have broken the pact made to keep Milada's identity and bodily-status secret, and should instead have realised that in a powerful distinction from Josef's engineering of ignorance in Irena, Milada's own strategy of agnogenesis is one with which no one has the easy right to interfere. And yet none of these points escape the fact that Milada's lifetime of agnogenesis fails to demonstrate a positive portrayal of this practice: her decision to become invisible is still one that makes her lonely and unhappy, while its necessity unavoidably testifies to the continuing presence of the oppressive regulatory bodily norms that generate this necessity, the dismantling of which would ensure Milada could be happy without needing to align herself with a sympathetic but still self-defeating practice of agnogenesis in the first place.

The above cognisance of Milada's importance to the novel also casts fresh light upon its intertextuality with the *Odyssey*, for Milada is not the only character referred to in *Ignorance* who strategically engineers ignorance of his or her identity. Sheila Murnaghan points out that it is

Odysseus' 'inherent inclination to disguise... his deviousness and... his continued cautiousness' that endear him to Athena and distinguish him from lesser, hastier men.<sup>27</sup> Athena indeed informs Odysseus that 'anyone else, come back from wandering long and hard / would have hurried home at once, delighted to see / his children and his wife. Oh but not you.'<sup>28</sup> Murnaghan goes on to argue that in the world of ancient Greece, Odysseus' willingness to disguise himself is especially venerable, since recognition, achievement and status are so culturally important and closely bound together, Odysseus' humbleness in eschewing these sharply distinguishing him from the prouder and therefore doomed Agamemnon.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, had Agamemnon taken the time to gather intelligence and been willing to assume a disguise, it is unlikely he would have blundered so rashly into the hands of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, just as Odysseus avoids murder at the hands of Penelope's many suitors. Crucially, the narrator of *Ignorance*, though he summarises much of the poem in some detail, neglects to mention these incidents even in passing. This arguably comprises a deliberate attempt to avoid depicting Odysseus as a man who actively chooses to cultivate ignorance in others for a valuable and necessary reason. Odysseus is able to achieve his homecoming while his fellow veteran is not because he is willing to make it a slow one and defer the moment of its fruition, chiefly through revelling in the possibilities created by destabilising his identity in order to inflict upon his enemies ignorance of his presence and plans. Odysseus may, therefore, be the ideal reader of Kundera's three French novels, finding a vital strategic use for slowness and the destabilisation of his identity and even going further than the only sympathetic engineering of ignorance within the third novel in presenting ignorance's possible positive side, his own cultivation of unawareness in others even more justifiable – as starkly necessary for preserving his life – than Milada's. And he appears to cultivate ignorance non self-defeatingly to an extent that Milada does not, since while she remains fixedly disguised by the novel's close, except to its reader, Odysseus is able to abandon his masquerade and be reunited with friends and family, in stark opposition to his lonely modern counterpart, who practically has neither as a result of maintaining her masquerade.

But the reader's knowledge of other sections of the *Odyssey* also not summarised by Kundera's narrator, however, unsettles Odysseus' position as ignorance's worthy advocate. After restoring order in his own household, Odysseus journeys to the farm of his father Laertes, where, for no conceivable reason, he tests this 'man worn down with years, his heart racked with sorrow' by approaching him as a stranger, one who has himself met Odysseus in a far off land, only deigning to reveal his identity once his father is completely broken.<sup>30</sup> In this passage, very soon before the poem's close, we can see that Odysseus' proclivity for disguise potentially begins to overcome him and that, though he first hides his identity for vital reasons, he continues to cultivate ignorance more for his own amusement in a manner that could, as it has with Milada, become more of a curse. When an awareness of Milada's disguised presence, then, combines with a more complete knowledge of the *Odyssey* than facilitated by the summary provided by the narrator of *Ignorance*, the reader of Kundera's novel is led to consider the contrasts and similarities between Milada's disguise and that of Odysseus, but will be

unable to establish if the latter is entirely positive or negative. While Odysseus would only have to mention the fate of Agamemnon perfectly to justify his own initial engineering of ignorance, there is a hint that he has inadvertently set in motion a trend that might later ensnare him, albeit one that the point at which the narrative ends means we cannot establish will become enduring or not. We simply cannot say, therefore, if Odysseus is a contrast to Milada, a counter-point to the novel's general depiction of ignorance as self-defeating and so one that makes the novel embrace the author's declared ethos of prioritising doubt over certainty, or, conversely, an identical case to Milada's of a once-necessary activity becoming self-defeatingly entrenched, meaning that the novel's general thrust remains unproblematised. Bringing new knowledge of Milada and the *Odyssey* back into *Ignorance*, then, is conducive ultimately only of further uncertainty. But this is an uncertainty from which the implied reader of *Ignorance* can powerfully learn, like the reader of *Identity*, who capitulates in the face of an indeterminacy that cannot be resolved into any particular identity mould and thus learns from this experience that not all instabilities are ripe for shaping. She may now be kinder to those who demonstrate ignorance, the realisation that not every aporia produced by the novel and its intertextualities can, or (as with Milada) ethically *should*, be resolved, leaving the knowledge that ignorance will always be a state with which we remain, to some degree, acquainted.

It is worth considering as an addendum that Kundera himself could be said to perform the same strategic cultivation of ignorance that we have often seen via his characters, through his selection of the fictional situations he has included within his third French novel. In justifying to his critics his own decision to remain as an émigré rather than returning triumphantly to his country of birth following the fall of Communism, he has arguably skewed the evidence by depicting characters who, coincidentally just like Kundera, are happiest far from their homeland.<sup>31</sup> A novel desiring to embrace doubt over certainty might have chosen to include, as a variation, a character in counter-point who longs to return to his or her place of birth and does so joyously. *Ignorance* appears entirely certain that returning from exile will be a disappointing experience, but is hardly a textual laboratory objectively discovering this to be the case; Irena, Josef and – hypothetically – Milada are arguably happiest away from their place of birth because their author is himself. Through its author's very possibly unconscious urge to demonstrate the flaws of his critics' wishes for him, this novel might only be furthering ignorance of the seemingly plausible possibility that homecomings can be happy affairs too. Having digested the novel's arguments in the manner suggested in the previous paragraph, the reader should remember to consider the facts of Kundera's own agnogenesis without coming down too hard on him, even if Kundera's cultivation of ignorance regarding the possibility of a happy return from exile cannot be considered quite so sympathetically as can Milada's defensive cultivation of ignorance regarding her identity and her disfigurement.

The reader's return through *Ignorance* sees Kundera's third French novel leave her with the lingering question of how to solve a problem like Milada. On the surface, this echoes a situation from all the

way back in *The Joke*, whereby, through Kostka's discoveries about Lucie, the reader of that novel also comes into sensitive knowledge regarding a female character that that character would not necessarily want her to know. Towards the end as at the start, the ethicality of holding a piece of knowledge itself is brought into question within the mind of the reader herself, through the figure of an outed female character. An oeuvre intent on exploring the world through doubt rather than certainty thus returns to a previous dilemma, which takes a reader exploring the world herself, through the texts before her, and causes her to stumble upon private information, therefore making her doubt the very ethicality of exploring when it leads her into places where she may be unwelcome.

But this is not just a straightforward replay of the very early situation regarding Lucie. As suggested in Chapter Five, Lucie is engaged in an extremely passive process of agnogenesis, if she can be described as engaged in agnogenesis at all. The reader never learns of any concerted series of strategies by which she deliberately produces ignorance in those around her; despite their extreme sensitivity, her secrets are kept more by accident than by design. Milada could hardly be more different, since the procedures of her entire life are built around concealing her injury and these procedures are laid bare before the reader. The reader of *The Joke* has a reasonably fair cause for doubting that Lucie would want her secrets known to all and sundry, especially without her consent, but there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that she would not be comfortable with opening up to the right people. All the reader knows for certain is that Ludvik's intense lack of delicacy leads to Lucie not being able to open up to *him*. Conversely, the reader of *Ignorance* can be entirely sure that to drag Milada out into the open would definitely and conclusively override the wishes that are governing her entire life.

Previous sympathetic examples of intra-diegetic characters using a strategic, concerted agnogenesis, working through direct manipulation and overt lying, are directed against either one individual or a handful of specific people, rather than against everyone who could possibly ever meet its progenitor. Vladimir lies to his father about attending the Ride of Kings, but is obviously fine with the friends he runs off with knowing that he is in Brno instead. Tereza's strategy for reclaiming her lost letters is dependent upon keeping her two colleagues ignorant, while R. and Tomas' own sympathetic acts of agnogenesis are directed only towards their interrogators and the authorities that they represent. Milada, on the other hand, is set on producing ignorance within virtually everyone she encounters, regardless of any more discerning criteria. Not only is this the largest pool of people within whom any character is strategically generating ignorance as a defensive manoeuvre, but the reader herself is necessarily included. Vladimir, Tereza, R. and Tomas presumably would not mind the reader knowing the truth, as long she has no reason for telling the more limited number of people their strategies are directed against. Milada almost definitely would. As a corollary of this extensive reach of her attempted agnogenesis, it is also the most temporally extruded of any throughout the oeuvre, encompassing not only a moment during which a specific task is being furthered, but instead continuing throughout decades of Milada's adult life and with no end in sight.

The sabotage of Milada's agnogenesis, by the narrator intent on uncovering ignorance within and generated by other people much more rigorously than addressing the ignorance within and generated by himself, thus leads to the reader uncovering the single piece of knowledge that most explicitly resembles contraband. And yet this contraband knowledge is perhaps not knowledge that the reader will easily accept that she should eschew possessing. For one, it potentially allows her to experience the common but no less considerable satisfaction of a reader getting to the truth, which reaches its peak during a turn back across the novel through both the middle portion where the student remains unnamed and two scenes either side of it during which Irena meets Milada and observes her hairstyle. This is not like the knowledge the reader gains during the final scenes of *Identity* that at some point reality has turned to dream, for the only possible realisation to which this knowledge leads is arrived at through it continually frustrating the reader's efforts to do anything practical with it; and it is only partial knowledge, for the text's amorphousness means that there simply is no exact point at which reality turned to dream. This knowledge is *not* knowledge that the reader can use to do something to the text of *Identity* that the text of *Identity* does not want her to do, since it effortlessly slips out from every shape imposed upon it. The knowledge gained towards the end of *Ignorance* could hardly be simpler or clearer by comparison. Three earlier moments in the text become moments where the reader can feel an easy satisfaction at knowing more than she did during her initial voyage through the novel and more than the character involved would have her know, without any doubt about whether or not she is factually correct.

It is, more often than not, satisfying to look back over any text after knowing the twist and see how earlier clues were covertly building towards it under the reader's nose, to keep in mind the earlier, more ignorant experience of those moments and compare them against the new knowledge of what they are really signifying, of what was really going on. The precise way in which this novel engages with such a trend through its careful laying out of what can come to be recognised as neatly identifiable signifiers appears designed to make taking possession of the contraband knowledge about Milada and showing off with it during a second reading as receptionally pleasurable as possible. The character most concertedly trying to hide is the one that the oeuvre makes particularly satisfying to out.

In addition to the pleasure this knowledge gives the reader as a reader, once the thrill of truth-seeking (and truth-finding) has died down it might also seem useful to her as a potential friend to Milada. Any guilt she feels about breaking Milada's agnogenesis during these earlier moments is potentially tempered by the idea that the knowledge Milada is attempting to keep from virtually everyone is surely not nearly as sensitive as she imagines. As well as being the most extensive case of a self-defensive agnogenesis in terms of both its breadth and its duration, it might also seem the most disproportionate. Her missing ear is unlikely to become as major a talking point as she appears to think and the majority of people who discover it are hardly likely to decry or disown her. Revealing to an individual like Milada that her secret is known and that the knower's opinion of her as a person remains unchanged might even be the first step towards this individual relinquishing her agnogenesis



and resuming the full life that her rituals are completely denying her. On the other hand, this is simply not the reader's call to make. And given the sheer extent to which Milada is desperate to keep her secret, even a well-intentioned and friendly attempt to reassure her that she need not be could cause her to retreat even further.

*Slowness* has been established as the novel most in need of slowing down by its reader and *Identity* established as the novel most provoking of the need for its identity to be stabilised. *Ignorance* continues this affective pull within the late French variations on the themes of slowness, identity and ignorance, through being the novel that most provocatively taunts the reader herself about whether or not she ethically should know something placed in front of her. It demands the most insistently that she think for herself whether or not a new piece of knowledge is appropriate for her to have, and even to use against another person's express wishes, or whether or not she should, herself, have been kept in ignorance. She observes the most temporally extensive and entrenched generation of a self-defensive ignorance throughout the oeuvre alongside the character's sheer determination in maintaining it, yet almost inevitably feels a readerly satisfaction in breaking it and also considers whether or not the character in question might actively benefit from her ability to further it being taken from her beyond her agency. Kundera's variations thus move even further towards their silence by leaving the reader of the third French novel with the most tangled and personally affective dilemma about the possession of knowledge itself, and about the positives and negatives of herself being kept in ignorance.

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera. *Ignorance*. Trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2002) 123-24. Further references will be provided within the text.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bennett. *Ignorance: Literature and Agnology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009) 16. This lack of attention is historical. Though the same philosopher, the Scottish rationalist James Ferrier, coined in his 1854 text *Institutes of Metaphysics* both the terms 'epistemology' and its opposite 'agnology', the latter denoting literally a 'theory of ignorance', the first term is explored over 323 pages while the second is afforded only 44, this disparity remaining up to the twenty-first century reflective of the field at large. See James F. Ferrier. *Institutes of Metaphysics: The Theory of Knowing and Being* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1854) 395.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, *Ignorance*, 10, 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Martin. *The Knowledge of Ignorance: From Genesis to Jules Verne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 10; Bennett, *Ignorance*, 23. For a description of Adam as a looking-glass through which God could observe the state of being ignorant, see Martin, *The Knowledge of Ignorance*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Kundera, *The Curtain*, 26. Sabina's painting style shows, on the surface, 'an intelligible lie', while submerged beneath lurks 'the unintelligible truth', and so rather resembles Kundera's aesthetic as a novelist (*ULB*, 60).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Webb, "Milan Kundera and the Limits of Scepticism." See also: "Afterword: A Talk with the Author by Philip Roth" in Milan Kundera. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Penguin Books, 1983) 236.

<sup>8</sup> James Wood. "Laughter and Forgetting" in *The New Republic* (December 23, 2002) 36.

<sup>9</sup> Martin, *The Knowledge of Ignorance*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Nataša Kovačević. *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial discourse and Europe's borderline civilisation* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 82.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, *The Knowledge of Ignorance*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> This stance is persuasively argued in Edith Hall. *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008) 161.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Barnacle. "Homeward Bound." *New Statesman* (<http://www.newstatesman.com/print/200211040042>, accessed May 2012)

<sup>16</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Books, 2006) 465.

<sup>17</sup> To be fair to the narrator, many twentieth-century critics have reduced the *Odyssey* along similar lines, notably no less than Eric Auerbach, who argues that 'Homeric poems conceal nothing... contain no teaching and no second secret meaning' and thus represent a completely transparent reality in which 'all cross-currents, all friction... which confuses the clear progress of the action and the simple orientation of the actors, has disappeared.' See Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 13, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, 469-471.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 291-92.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Dalby. *Rediscovering Homer: Inside the Origins of the Epic* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006) 201. Dalby's observation is indicative of the general motion in recent criticism of the *Odyssey* toward a more questioning alternative to the vision of simplicity put forward by critics like Auerbach in his *Mimesis*. For William G. Thalmann, for example, the *Odyssey* continually 'reveals important ambiguities in its dominant values' and is ultimately a 'polytropic text, impossible to reduce to a single summary or a set of oppositions.' See Thalmann, *The Odyssey: an epic of return* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992) 12-13, 137. Michael Silk similarly finds in the poem a 'restless, exploratory character' via which 'ends are opened, questions raised [and] alternative voices let loose.' See Silk. "The *Odyssey* and its explorations." *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*. Ed. Robert Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 44.

<sup>22</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, 464.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

<sup>24</sup> Italo Calvino. "Why Read the Classics?" *The Literature Machine: Essays*. Trans. Martin McLaughlin (London: Vintage, 1997) 128.

<sup>25</sup> A more psychoanalytically-inclined critic than myself might be interested to know that Milada shares her first name with the author's mother, Milada Janosikova Kundera. In a fascinating act of symmetry, the most important (and entirely visible) character in his first novel shares his own name with Kundera's father, Ludvik. See Misurella, *Understanding Milan Kundera*, xi.

<sup>26</sup> Kundera outlines his dislike of the tenet of 'realism' that demands 'a writer must give the maximum amount of information about a character', including his 'physical appearance', saying 'is Tomas dark or fair?... Decide for yourself.' See Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 33-34.

<sup>27</sup> Sheila Murnaghan. *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) 3.

<sup>28</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, 297.

<sup>29</sup> Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey*, 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, 475-78.

<sup>31</sup> Ewa M. Thompson somewhat indecorously cites Kundera as one of many contemporary writers whose experiences suggest that 'in the present age exile is generally a privilege rather than a disadvantage.' See Thompson. "The Writer in Exile: The Good Years." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter, 1989) 500. Pichova agrees to the extent that Kundera 'left behind an enforced silence... only to find an increasingly widening audience while writing from his new territory'. Pichova, *The Art of Memory in Exile*, 7.

## Conclusion

The previous six chapters have charted a voyage through Kundera's Czech fiction and into the interiors of the three French novels *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*, exploring three series of variations on these three novels' eponymous themes as they ripple in and out of focus across the Czech texts from *The Joke* to *Immortality* before taking centre stage in the French novels of their own. This voyage into the interiors of *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance* ultimately becomes a voyage into the interior of their readers' own selves too, during which their skills and limitations are placed most concertedly into the spotlight, conducted by an oeuvre seeking with an increasing urgency to prepare its readership for a coming time when it senses that its variations will be all played out.

Kundera's first French novel, *Slowness*, loudly extols the virtues of slowness while spectacularly failing to demonstrate them. Fortunately for its all too speedy narrator, however, this gulf between the novel's constative and performative elements makes it not a failure but a surer success. By outlining a set of promising values but demonstrating a lack of them, the novel draws the reader into its core through encouraging her to concretize it through applying these values to the narrator's own arguments, the values' worth illuminated by a slow reading of the novel that exposes the narrator's representations of libertinism and Denon's novella *No Tomorrow* as just as flawed as the results of reductive sound-biting that the narrator himself denounces. The ignorance engendered by speed and the value of slowness in facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the world are thus both demonstrated within the novel and so the arguments of its narrator are fundamentally upheld, albeit through the reader becoming a far better representative of these arguments than he.

His second French novel, *Identity*, itself lacks what Jean-Marc most craves in his partner Chantal: a stable and consistent identity of its own. Throughout a first reading of the novel, the reader follows Jean-Marc's increasing concerns about the mutability and ultimate amorphousness of the identity of his lover, which alters alarmingly depending on a multitude of factors and appears a pervasive effect of her close proximity to the advertising industry, itself dependent on manipulating the mutable identity of products and services. *Identity*'s closing twist, however, diegetically shifts the main locus of transience from Chantal to the text itself, the narrator confessing that not even he can be sure at which point in the novel reality turned to dream, or which of the novel's characters is the dreamer. The implied reader now becomes much like Jean-Marc, eager to restore the lost stability of a body now almost infinitely mutable to help shore up the coherence of her own self, focussing therefore, during each successive reading, less on the fortunes of the characters and more on the narrative itself, seeking to delineate the exact moment of the switch from reality to dream. It is, crucially, the impossibility of this task that means the identity of *Identity* itself can never be maintained: the start of potentially any sentence could contain the shift from reality to dream, splintering the narrative into a multitude of possible alternatives, none of which can crystallise as

definitive. This is a text whose identity is so fluid that it ceases to be mutable altogether, resisting any attempt to fix it into the single form the reader might need to prevent her own identity being threatened in the collapse. Any self she assigns the novel is effortlessly shrugged off and so she can only give up any attempt to stabilise it.

Kundera's third French novel, *Ignorance*, shows an extra-diegetic narrator struggling to understand the eponymous existential condition, while ignorant of the fact that he suffers from it himself and so furthers it in others. While exploring ignorance principally via the intra-diegetic characters Irena and Josef, with the former usually appearing as the unwitting victim of the ignorance held by the latter concerning both his own hypocrisies and the emotional needs of the people around him, the narrator performs his own ignorant reductions of Homer's *Odyssey*. This is an ignorance that the reader can call out and surpass through bringing her own knowledge to Kundera's novel, in a similar manner to her exposure of the first French narrator's soundbites of libertinism and Denon's *No Tomorrow* within *Slowness*. But the reader also discovers that ignorance should not be denounced too speedily. Much as the reader of *Identity* ultimately parallels Jean-Marc in desperately seeking to restore a shattered stability, the reader of *Ignorance* will likely parallel Josef through being ignorant herself, during an initial reading, of the novel's true primary character, revealed by the narrator's unmasking, very near the novel's end, to be the mostly invisible Milada. But rather than feeling unproblematically satisfied at a further demonstration of ignorance being overcome, this time with the narrator's assistance rather than despite his hindrance, the reader may look more kindly upon Milada's reasons for generating ignorance in those around her and view this behaviour as undeserving of condemnation, even though this sympathetic depiction of agnogenesis proves extremely self-defeating and limiting, rather than liberating. The reader may simply feel that the knowledge she has gained of the extent of Milada's presence is knowledge that she is not herself entitled to possess, perhaps coveting instead an overturned *lack* of knowledge that would handily eschew the dilemma of what to do with it altogether.

These, then, are Kundera's three French novels. But variations on slowness, identity and ignorance have played out in major and minor key throughout Kundera's Czech oeuvre, long before their taking centre-stage in the three novels that carry their names. None of these texts are exploring new themes unique to them, only placing themes covered elsewhere for the first time in the foreground in a way that plays out, more overtly and intensely than in any of the previous variations, through the readers' interactions with and concretizations of the texts themselves. For Kundera's three French novels are ultimately novels that know that they are approaching the final stages of their author's novelistic project. The series of variations on the three eponymous French themes that have sounded before them serve to highlight how, within *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*, the distinct nature of these themes' late variations becomes the very ammunition of the oeuvre's campaign to prepare its readership for a time when there are no more variations left to come and any future voyages through

other oeuvres must be conducted without its guidance. These late variations show the same awareness of impending death that Adorno locates within the late style of Beethoven, yet this awareness has led to a keen interest in preparing the readership that will outlive them, through drawing it deep into the textual centres of the novels that use these late variations as their foundations. The first of these three mobilisations is an arguable misfire for a project coveting doubt over certainty, leading to the following two texts seeking to retain the first text's pulling into its centre of the implied reader herself, while trying to correct its oversights. The latter in particular does this through achieving a particularly apt irony for such a late flourish of an author such as Kundera – a man so unambiguously keen on the power that the novel form enjoys in facilitating its audience, through this audience's voyage through the textual worlds before it, to discover the value of doubt over certainty, of questions over answers.

*Slowness* encourages of its own reader a manoeuvre facilitated on a much smaller scale for the reader of *The Joke*, who could slow down the heady onward rush of Helena's representations of Ludvik and, through turning backwards against Helena's ongoing momentum, recognise the inadequacies of these representations. In demonstrating the value of a receptional slowness, it also follows the two novels immediately preceding it, *Lightness of Being* and *Immortality*, though these novels do so by asking their readers to follow the representational strategies and pace of their narrators. The reader of *Slowness* not only has to be much slower than the reader of *The Joke* through turning backwards through an entire novel with knowledge brought from outside the oeuvre itself, but she must do so through breaking free from and turning back against the headlong representational rush set by the first French novel's own speedy narrator.

The late variation upon slowness that comprises *Slowness* itself thus asks more of its implied reader than the variations on its themes preceding it have asked of the readers of previous novels. The reward is the nurturing of the reader's skills in identifying representations false through their sheer haste and in discovering the truths shrouded beneath them through her own diligent slowness, even when to do so requires the gathering of materials outside the oeuvre altogether. The gulf between the narrator's persuasive argument and the mode through which this argument is made sees the novel providing the impetus for the reader to go through this double-checking, but leaves her to get on with actually doing it entirely independently. It thus acts as by far the most intensive training ground in the oeuvre for seeing through and overturning, entirely under the reader's own steam, the reductive imagology explored in the previous text, *Immortality*. The *loss* for this component of the oeuvre results from the hasty narrator who the novel marshals to facilitate this nurturing producing a text with no time for the aporia between slowness and speed that characterises the majority of the previous novels, which has been particularly helpful for the author's coveted aesthetic by contextualising and moderating the generally positive valuation of receptional slowness within *The Joke*, *Lightness of Being* and *Immortality*. Furthermore, the sheer efficiency with which the reader of *Slowness* can call out the narrator's misrepresentations for herself and prove them false might see the value of the skills

nurtured here downplayed by an entirely certain and, thus, anti-Kunderan faith in her own newly unveiled abilities.

*Identity* reverses both of these potentially problematic trends. On the surface, this novel seems to be confirming the variations upon identity within each of the Czech novels, as the mutability of Chantal's identity leaves her open to a hellish reshaping and Jean-Marc's attempts to stabilise it via adopting the fictional template of Rostand's version of Cyrano only makes the situation increasingly fraught. These experiences would seem wholly familiar to the vast majority of Kundera's Czech characters. *Identity*, however, is ultimately the only French novel so far to treat its central theme in a manner completely unlike any of its previous variations, which does more than just intensify a pull on the reader that is already exerted to a more minor extent elsewhere. Each time previous variations sounded similar warnings about the dangers resulting from our mutability, they did so via texts that remained themselves basically stable. The readers of earlier texts are never asked to piece together the basic facts of these texts' characters or narratives and thus never see their own identities threatened through the removal of the stable mirrors that these texts still provide. And not only is the reader required to construct this mirror for herself through controlling the seeming mutability of *Identity* – this novel then makes manipulating its identity for the reader's own purpose resolutely impossible, thereby providing by far the loudest counterpoint to variations that have sounded both within this novel, through Chantal, and throughout earlier texts, via the majority of Kundera's Czech characters, through showing an unstable body using its own instability in an unambiguously successful act of resistance against efforts to shape it.

While the late variations that comprise *Slowness* draw the reader of that novel towards the most powerful success within its own sequence of variations, the late variations that comprise *Identity* draw its own reader towards failure. This reader will learn that some bodies cannot be readily controlled, even when she seemingly *needs* to control them. The comfort blanket this text throws her emerges from this very failure suggesting that the solidity that Chantal and her Czech predecessors might ultimately have longed for is not perhaps as resolutely necessary as it may have appeared, since the unstable identity of this text refutes virtually all previous patterns by *not* leaving it open to be manipulated by third-party hands. If this text can be anything that it wants without the instability fuelling this freedom ever becoming dangerous, then perhaps so can the reader too. She is, thus, not only dragged towards a failure, but is encouraged too to see that failure can illuminate just as surely as success and that not all problems need to be solved. Through the novel's closing questions and the threat cast upon her own identity both provoking her to solve what is unsolvable, these late variations on identity loudly impress upon the reader not only that not every question she encounters can be answered, or every riddle deciphered, but that sometimes these failures are themselves more valuable than successes and can lead to insights that a success would have caused to elude her.

The late variations on slowness and identity, then, become the respective backbones of the novel most crying out for its narrator's momentum to be slowed down and the novel that seems most

in need of its own reader granting it a stable identity. The first is a goal that, if the requisite effort is put in, is readily achievable; the latter, despite any amount of effort, remains impossible. *Ignorance* sees the oeuvre move a stage further towards its end through the late variations on its own eponymous theme finding a thorny middle ground between these two positions. The narrator's ignorance of his own ignorance resembles the lack of insight into his own position demonstrated by the narrator of *Lightness of Being*. His outing of Milada, meanwhile, sees the novel hark all the way back to *The Joke*, where the reader of that text too encountered sensitive information about a female character, without that character having any agency over this disclosure. But much like *Slowness* intensifies rather than merely repeats an opportunity already provided for the reader of *The Joke*, so too does *Ignorance* intensify its own reader's dilemma.

This intensification occurs in a number of ways. Firstly, we can be much more sure that Milada would not want the information regarding her suicide attempt and disfigurement known than we can about Lucie's infinitely more passive and virtually accidental maintenance of her own secrets. The reader of *Ignorance* directly sees that a very deliberate generation of ignorance in everyone she could possibly meet, save her hairdresser, has become the guiding principle of Milada's life, so the reader's coming into knowledge overturns Milada's entire reason for being. The reader's insight into Milada's existence, furthermore, demonstrates how the strategies behind this generation of ignorance are themselves directly responsible for keeping her isolated and lonely, prompting the question of whether or not preventing an individual like her from maintaining the illusion might actually lead towards a reconciliation that ultimately sees her better off. Beyond this problem, there also rests the purely selfish conceit that the text's placement of what can later be identified as obvious signifiers of Milada's secret would make such an outing of this secret peculiarly satisfying for the reader. This is not just the most overtly contraband knowledge in the oeuvre, then: in addition, Milada's concerted and deliberate generation of ignorance is both the most satisfying of such cases for the reader to break and the most potentially valuable for its perpetrator to have broken. Here, the impossibility of stabilising *Identity* is replaced by a marrying of the *possibility* for turning aside the false representations of *Slowness* with an added ethical problem that might leave the reader longing instead for the *impossibility* of the second French novel. The reader can call Milada out in front of the only friends she has far more easily than the reader of *Slowness* can slow down the first French novel, yet is left to wonder whether or not she *should* in the face of Milada's long-term and ongoing resistance, even when Milada may herself be the one most helped by such a theft of agency.

The fastest novel so far, prompting *and* requiring the hardest stamping down on the brakes so that the reader can leave it stationary in the lay-by and check its representations elsewhere, and the novel formed of the variations on identity that are most provoking of attempts to stabilise it, are thus followed by the novel formed of the variations on ignorance that generate the strongest dilemma within the reader about the virtues of remaining herself ignorant, through highlighting the personal and ethical problems that emerge when texts take the reader into places where the characters would

consider her resolutely unwelcome. The voyage in the form of variations that characterises Kundera's oeuvre becomes, here, less of a voyage and more of a concerted trespass. The late variations on ignorance thus lead the reader into a peculiarly fitting irony. Through constructing the strongest dilemma yet of whether or not the reader herself should either enjoy new knowledge for her own pleasure or use it to help those it concerns, or else have remained altogether ignorant, *Ignorance* sees Kundera's voyage highlight, for the reader of this very late phase, that the intellectual curiosity underlying such a voyage might only lead her towards questioning whether staying at home might not have been the wiser or even the more ethical option.

*Ignorance* therefore continues the trend of these late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance already established within the previous novels: they remain the gravity that allows the late novels that use them as their foundations to pull the readers most forcefully inwards towards their textual centres. The reader of the first French novel is pulled in through the gap between the narrator's infectious love of slowness and his own intense speed; as a result, she is thoroughly trained in seeing through false and reductive representations for herself. The reader of the second French novel is pulled in by the closing revelations about the text's nebulous identity and the narrator's subsequent barrage of direct questions; as a result, she is led to realise through her own frustrated efforts that not all texts she will encounter on future voyagers will be easily concretized into a finished form or all answers forthcoming, and that future failures of hers can themselves present valuable messages if her failure can be looked past, thereby reducing her need to always know the final answer. And the reader of the third French novel is drawn in by the presentation, at the end, of new knowledge about a character invisibly present before the reader in earlier scenes, that, while potentially usable for the pleasure of herself and the benefit of another, reminds her nonetheless that the very curiosity about the world that will lead her to embark upon future voyages, under different captainships than Kundera's, might itself be responsible for intrusions into places where she should not be and lead towards thorny dilemmas that she might rather forsake altogether, involving good intentions that can twist around and be experienced by their intended objects as gross personal violations. Nothing at all should remain so sacrosanct that it cannot be probed or questioned; not even the ethical value of the voyage itself should be taken for granted when it uncovers what resolutely wishes to remain hidden.

It might be argued as a moderation of the importance of my characterisation of Kundera's late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance within these three French novels, that this pull they exert upon their implied readers is actually less to do with their lateness and more to do with the simpler fact that in these three novels they are placed at the front and centre. Could these late variations drawing the implied reader into the text and engendering these lastingly memorable successes, failures and dilemmas have as much to do simply with their having taken centre stage in these novels as with their lateness? If so, then my analysis here might tend less specifically towards a theory of the lateness of these variations and more towards a theory of how Kunderan themes appear in their *own* novels compared with how they appear in the novels that do not bear their names. An



alternative means of exploring the place of these three French novels in Kundera's oeuvre might therefore compare their treatments of slowness, identity and ignorance not with the appearances of these themes in earlier novels, but with these earlier novels' treatments of their own primary themes – to compare the treatment of slowness within *Slowness* with the treatment of jokes within *The Joke*.

One aim of this thesis that would not have been met by such a project is the intent to show that these three French novels do not see Kundera bereft of the subject matter that has kept him in business up to that point and reaching towards new themes, but intensifying the affective pull upon the reader of themes that already resound throughout the better regarded and more critically visible Czech texts. And even if this approach *were* engaged with in the same depth as the approach taken here, it would still mark the French novels as distinct in how the themes there are consistently treated, in a similar way as already charted throughout this thesis. The prime butt of history's black humour in *The Joke* is Ludvik himself. The characters in Kundera's third novel who waltz towards their farewells are the soon-to-emigrate Jakub and the soon-to-die Ruzena. The characters in *Immortality* most concerned about how they will or will not be remembered by posterity are Agnes and Goethe.

These texts may of course lead their readers to consider their own relationships with each eponymous theme as they consider the roles the themes play respective to each character, but never so consistently through this relationship being pulled so urgently down into and diffused throughout the textual space itself, so that the theme plays out at its loudest through what the text prompts its implied reader to do (or attempt to do; or consider doing) not just *with* but *to* the text and the characters within it. The implied reader of *The Joke*, for example, will likely spend portions of the novel holding the same faulty assumptions about Lucie as Ludvik, yet absolutely nothing within the text pulls her towards attaching the same immense significance to Lucie's virginity, so the joke is never aimed at the reader with anything like the force it is aimed at Ludvik. Throughout these three French novels, the titular themes consistently relate to the relationship between text and reader in a way that they do not, as a hard rule, throughout the Czech novels, to the extent that her own experiences with these themes effectively displace those of the novels' ostensible main characters, rather than playing out alongside them. The extreme pull of these variations within the French novels, then, is absolutely not an inevitable result of the themes taking centre stage; it is a result of their taking centre stage at later moments in their sequences, within later novels. By whichever of these two routes an analysis voyages towards the French novels published at the time of writing, the conclusions about what is happening distinctly in these French novels should remain basically the same. The lateness of the variations on slowness, identity and ignorance and the lateness of the French novels built around them have much in kind.

These late variations' overt keenness to pull their implied readers deep down into these French novels potentially even accounts for why these novels appear such simply structured and brief reads compared to the Czech works. From the outside-in, they want to appear as accessible and innocuous as possible, so that they might draw in the greatest number of potential subjects upon

which they then can work. Adorno's description of late style as 'prickly' is, in the late variations on these three themes of Kundera's, neatly reversed, for this metaphor gives the impression of an unpleasantness on the surface of texts that discomforts the potential audience enough that they stay away. The outside surfaces of Kundera's late texts *aim* not to disconcert, but to invite. Adorno's adjective suggests an imposing image of cacti, forcing away those that would consume them. Kundera's late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance *want* to work more like Venus flytraps. They entice the implied reader in, then they close around her. Only once their textual juices have worked they way upon her, they must let her go, so that what she has learnt can be carried with her across her future voyages.

It remains to be established whether a fourth French novel would follow the pattern set by the late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance shown here; whether it, too, would hone in on a theme already often in the background of the earlier Czech novels in a manner that produces a *late* variation on that theme that fits the pattern of what I have shown is, consistently, the late nature of the central variations on slowness, identity and ignorance within the French novels published at the time of writing.<sup>1</sup> The late variations on these three themes, nonetheless, consistently show both a knowledge of the oeuvre's impending silence and the keenest urgency within these sets of variations that the readers of this oeuvre be pulled into the texts built around them and left with lasting skills and lessons they might carry while journeying beyond it. As it begins to see its death approaching as a real possibility, the oeuvre responds, through the late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance, by intensifying attempts to draw in and prepare those who will outlive it. In *Slowness* and *Ignorance*, these lessons are intensified versions of those conveyed via previous, minor variations from the Czech novels; in *Identity*, the lesson arrives via an experience that is unique to that novel. The final irony of these three novels, however, perhaps directs itself back at Kundera himself. Despite these late variations' urgency to pull their readers deeply into their novels and provide them with a particularly affective series of successes, failures and dilemmas, these do not seem to be novels that are being read as keenly or as critically even as Kundera's earlier Czech texts. While the implied readers live to be drawn in by these late variations on slowness, identity and ignorance and provided with skills and lessons to endure once the oeuvre has played its final notes, the actual readers outside the texts appear to be busy doing (or reading) other things. Kundera at least appears to be an author well equipped for appreciating the funny side of this discrepancy.

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno's analysis of Beethoven raises the possibility of individual late texts departing from that author's consistently established late style, as Adorno argues is the case with Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, composed between 1819 and 1823 and first performed in 1824, three years before Beethoven's death. See "Late Work without Late Style" in *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 138. Given that I have identified a consistency within the lateness of the eponymous themes within *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*, I would like to consider the possibility that a fourth French novel whose main theme does *not* stand in the same relationship to the manifestations of that theme within the Czech works might similarly be described as "Late Kundera without Kundera's Late style".

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