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### Oedipus Fallen: Irony in the Fiction of Milan Kundera

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Oedipus Fallen:

Irony in the Fiction of Milan Kundera

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### Dialogic Irony

The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own "I" ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about (The Unbearable Lightness of Being 221).

The dialogue Kundera depicts between himself and his characters is central to his work because this interplay mirrors that between the author and the reader. In that Kundera is sometimes a character in his fictions (not just a narrator), we must consider his role in his fiction as one of personas; some stronger, some thicker than others. Kundera, as the self-conscious, autobiography-writing narrator of his stories, uses irony to mediate between his and our perspective on the subject matter. Considering that his narrative tone has remained remarkably similar throughout his novels, and that his subject matter has closely followed the events of his life, we can conjecture that the narrative voice of his novels is not a fictive "lie" as if he was telling the story through a character's consciousness, like Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, for instance, but rather that it is some approximation of a "Milan Kundera" character who is the narrator of all his novels. The tone of his novels also serves to screen the reader from the "truth" to be wrested from Kundera; he employs self-deprecation, playfulness, cruelty, and lyricism to set off a spark of mystery in the conversation between himself and his readers.

The relationship between Kundera's tone and the irony implicit in a given passage is contingent on a dialectic between

reader and author; the constantly shifting tone of Kundera's work is in place because Kundera sees the reader's involvement as a vital part of fiction's power. Kundera's fiction is like an essay or a speech in that he does not adopt a consistent tone to his fictional and quasi-fictional material; using irony, he shifts his tone to move his audience around the issues he explores. Kundera's tone therefore encompasses confrontation with the reader's sensibilities (i.e., "Physical love is unthinkable without violence" [Unbearable 111]), as well as careful apologism (especially in relation to Tomas of Unbearable):

By the word "nonlove" I do not wish to imply that he took a cynical attitude to the young woman, that, as present-day parlance has it, he looked upon her as a sex object; on the contrary, he was quite fond of her, valued her character and intelligence, and was willing to come to her aid if ever she needed him. He was not the one who behaved shamefully towards her; it was his memory, for it was his memory that, unbeknown to him, had excluded her from the sphere of love (Unbearable 208).

Lyrical relaxation is also a strategy employed by Kundera: "Necessity knows no magic formulae--they are all left to chance. If a love is to be unforgettable, fortuities must immediately start fluttering down to it like birds to Frances of Assisi's shoulders" (Unbearable, p.49).

A comprehension of irony which sees it as something more than "saying one thing and meaning another," is essential because for Kundera an integral part of caring is a complex, ironical perspective on not only our own abilities and personality, but of those whom we care for as well. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting<sup>1</sup>, Kundera writes that "love is a constant

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter referred as BL&F.

interrogation" (163) to testify to the dialogic, interwoven and often ironical nature of compassion when the central character, Tamina, who is normally the silent listener, is finally asked about her life by a stranger who comes into her cafe:

They began talking. What attracted and held Tamina's attention was his questions. Not what he asked, but the fact that he asked anything at all. It had been so long since anyone had asked her about anything. It seemed like an eternity! The only person who had ever really interrogated her was her husband, and that was because love is a constant interrogation. In fact, I don't know a better definition of love (163).

In Kundera's metaphysics of weight, which along with a metaphysics of lightness, is discussed in Unbearable, compassionate interrogation is an apex, while the unquestioned acceptance of kitsch is the nadir. Like the attraction Tamina feels for the stranger, we are meant to cross examine Kundera's work. If we don't, we aren't holding up our end of the conversation; by remaining passive, we are disrespecting Kundera's invitation into his realm of ideas and we are disregarding his abilities as a question-raiser. Therefore, we must trust that at any given point in Kundera's work there will be many answers to the questions he raises simply because if there was only one answer, the question wouldn't have been worth raising. An understanding of the dialogic aspect of Kundera's work is essential because the texts are only half the experience for his readers. Kundera's work is not a well-wrought urn which is meant to remain untouched on the museum's pedestal; it is a fluid conversation which is to be refuted at times because, as opposed to bewitching his readers, Kundera wishes to engage us with the work. It is of

course difficult to gauge reader response without a reader's poll, but to understand the experience of reading Kundera as a conversation as opposed to a lecture is the first step to opening his work to effective critique.

When Kundera speaks of the novel as a form which should induce questions instead of answers, we can see his approach as dialogic, a term which M.M. Bakhtin explicates in his The Dialogic Imagination. Tzvetan Todorov sees criticism as a conversational mode as well; as he puts it in his recent article, "A Dialogic Criticism,"

Dialogic criticism speaks not of works but to works, or rather, with works. It refuses to eliminate either of the two voices present [the text's and the critic's]. The criticized text is not an object to be taken over by a "metalanguage," but a discourse which encounters the critic's discourse; the author is a "thou," not a "he," an interlocutor with whom one discusses and even debates human values (Todorov 72).

Todorov goes on to cite Kundera's writing (along with that of Solzhenitzyn, Gunter Grass and D.M Thomas) as being well-balanced between "art for art's sake" and "litterature engagee"--"these are works which know themselves to be both literary construction and search for truth" (76). This resonates strongly with Kundera's meditations in the first essay in his book, The Art of the Novel. There Kundera asserts that the "conquest of being" requires a genre, the novel, to fully express the trials and tribulations of being. The novel should encompass the "wisdom of uncertainty" as opposed to either-or encapsulations which betray our "inability to look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge" (7). He calls for literature to encourage a communal effort with respect to making sense of the world, texts which

"are trying to understand with us," as he says. An integral technique Kundera employs to put this theory into practice is his use of irony in his narratives, which because of its ability to distance us from the characters and their plights, allows us to see both the laughter and pathos in their lives.

In "Epic and the Novel," M.M. Bakhtin cites ironic laughter as the element of the novel which allows us to examine the human condition: "Laughter destroyed epic distance; it began to investigate man freely and familiarly, to turn him inside out, expose the disparity between his surface and his center, between his potential and his reality" (Bakhtin 35). Kundera's thoughts echo Bakhtin's: as Kundera sees it, the novel came into existence "as the echo of god's laughter," as marked by Don Quixote and Sancho Paz "thinking, but not receiving." The doubt of God's benign presence, and of man's infallibility which brought the novel into existence, was intimately tied to irony, as both Kundera, in his The Art of the Novel, and Brian McHale, in his Postmodernist Fiction (29-30) point out.

As Alan Wilde indicates in his study of irony, Horizons of Assent, an understanding of irony involves an affirmation-- "without either complacency or despair"--in the "'unfinished'" (6). Kundera sees the theory of novel in much the same light: "All great works (precisely because they are great) contain something unachieved" (Art 65). When Kundera forwards his manifesto--architectonic clarity, novelistic counterpoint ("which can blend philosophy, narrative and dream into one music") and



the hypothetically playful and ironic novelistic essay--I take him to be forwarding a more egalitarian mode of writing, one which creates space for the reader's reactions.

Kundera sees the task of the novel as one of comprehending, as opposed to judging. Comprehending, not necessarily in pursuit of an answer, makes room for irony and ambiguity. As Kundera views it, a lack of closure, an unfinished, ambiguous quality, is vital to the novelistic medium:

If, in everyday life, I should say to you "everything you say seems ambiguous to me," it would be a reproach. Meaning you either do not want or do not know how to speak your mind succinctly. It isn't very flattering to be ambiguous, is it? And yet in the art of the novel to be ambiguous is not a weakness [...] This explains why one must never confuse a confession with a novel! A confession shouldn't be ambiguous, it should clearly and honestly say what is on the confessor's mind. The novel is not a confession (Elgrably 6).

To Kundera the novel is a universe of "imaginary selves" (Art 6) which have their own conceptions of the truth which differs (or concurs) with the perceptions of the "others" involved in the realm of the novel, the narrator, the other characters, and the reader. "You see, all of a sudden we find ourselves in the universe of ambiguity. Well, the novelist wants to take hold of this ambiguity and say to his reader: don't simplify the world! If you want to understand it you must grasp it in all its complexity, in its essential ambiguity!" (Elgrably 7). If the aim is to be "fair" to Kundera's fiction, an attempt should be made to examine how and why this "essential" ambiguity is perceived by Kundera, how and why irony and ambiguity is used in his works, and how and why this unfinished quality affects the reader. Kundera's tone is both half the battle and half the

reward (in that it is half the content) of his fiction. Why this tone is in place and how it operates is a vital issue, one which I will address here because it is not sufficiently covered in the critical literature.

### A Defense of Irony

The ironic tone which pervades all of Kundera's novels is not an authorial indulgence devoid of interpretive import, but a central vehicle of Kundera's perspective, one which has its roots in the ironies of Czech history and Kundera's role in it. To Kundera, historical reality is a monster which is to be avoided because it cannot be escaped. As a contemporary novelist, he perceives history in a light which varies from his predecessors; hence his fiction reflects history and the coming-to-terms with history as a paradoxical trap:

For Cervantes, history was the barely visible background of adventure. For Balzac, it became a "natural" dimension without which man is unthinkable. Today, at last, history appears like a monster, ready to assault each of us and to destroy the world. Or else (another aspect of its monstrosity), it represents the immeasurable, incomprehensible mass of the past--a past which is unbearable as forgetfulness (because man will lose himself), but also as memory (because its mass will crush us) [Kundera, "Esch ist Luther" 272].

This is the attitude which is enacted in the explorations of the themes of laughter and forgetting in BL&F. Tamina silently aspires not to lose her past while being violated by the graphomaniacs at the cafe and by the children on the island of forgetting. Kundera, as the narrator in "Angels" (I), is caught between the pain of enduring the evils of his past and the

impossibility of ever disconnecting himself from Czechoslovakian roots. BL&F is bitter novel because it is a response and an enactment of ontological precariousness; it is an elegy of cultural death, which relegates its expatriates into the unbearable lightness of being. In the afterword to BL&F, Kundera addresses this issue when he discusses the fragility cultural connectedness (i.e., sense of self, existence, being) in light of his country's erasure from Europe. As Fred Misurella writes, in reference to Kundera's thoughts, in "Milan Kundera and the Central European Style":

[...] if men [and women] know that they will die as individuals, they can at least take comfort in the immortality of their countries, their customs, their deities. When those are destroyed before their eyes, it must be unimaginably crushing, threatening their sense of destiny, their faith in a larger order, their belief in themselves (Misurella 41).

The roots of Kundera's ironic perspective are in his experiences as a Czech intellectual during which time he was steeped in the dramatic ironies of the Central European novel (Musil, Kafka, Gombrowicz) and, more importantly, the tragedies of the day-to-day erosions of colonial communism.

The crises of conscience which Kundera underwent between 1950 and 1960 is what accounts for the centrality of the experience of the (male) Czech intellectual in Kundera's fiction. Kundera's realization of the ease with which he fell in and out of favor with the communist party (twice), and the proximity between himself (as a socialist poet) and his "unrealized possibility," Jaromil, undoubtedly was a frightening confrontation with the larger question which informs his fiction:

the immensity of external forces and the powerlessness of the individual to effect change. This crisis was a universal one for Kundera's generation; he and his contemporaries

[...] became writers at a time of the total relativization of all values, both national and social, and they themselves are to a certain extent constituent parts of a new "absolute evil" in the name of "absolute good"...[they] had to cut their way through to truth at the cost of destroying their own illusions, their own "happiness," with all the risks which such a radical revolution against the self can entail. Through the work of history they were preserved from a new illusion, they kept their distance from history, from contemporary life, from man, and they even came to shoulder that heaviest burden, the renunciation of the "last thing which is left to man," hope (Liehm 44).

The background of Kundera's conception of irony begins with his experiences as a Czech intellectual during the 1950s and 60s when culture was erased and Joy was put in its place. In the same interview cited above, Kundera reflects on the attitude which he embodied in his first collection of stories, Laughable Loves (which Kundera began to write in the early 1960s, after he abandoned lyric poetry). Here, Kundera's skepticism seems to be at a low-point:

As soon as you grasp that the world which surrounds you is not worth taking seriously, you will reach dizzying conclusions. To speak the truth will become absurd. Why be candid with someone who is actually crazy, whom you cannot take seriously? Why tell the truth? Why be virtuous? Why take your work seriously? And why take yourself seriously in this meaningless world--that would be the height of ridiculousness. The sense that the world cannot be taken seriously--is an abyss. And the "laughable loves" are laughable stories, played out on the edge of the abyss (51).

The protagonist of Kundera's third novel, The Farewell Party, is character who seems to be deep in the abyss of which Kundera writes. Jakub has been thrown into limbo, and though he realizes it, he can do nothing about it. Jakub depicts himself as one who has abandoned any faith in absolutes:

I'll tell you the saddest discovery of my life: The victims are no better than their oppressors. I can easily imagine the roles reversed. You can call it a kind of alibi-ism, an attempt to evade responsibility and to blame everything on the Creator Who made man the way he is. And maybe it's good that you see things that way. because to come to the conclusion that there is no difference between the guilty and their victims is to reach a state where you abandon all hope. And that, my dear, is a definition of hell (The Farewell Party 70).

However, Kundera's next two novels are not in the grips of the abyss. Kundera's later fiction, as if distanced from the difficulties of the past, is permeated by ironic self-referential narration, whereas in The Joke and The Farewell Party (and to a lesser extent in Life is Elsewhere), the irony is more implicit in the stories themselves.

#### A Defense of Irony: The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.

In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, irony mediates between the evils of the past and the pain of remembering. BL&F is also a bleak work, however, because the irony becomes a weight as opposed to a release for the reader. It does not allow us to escape the pathos of the character's lonely lives because the unifying element of the story is thematically, as opposed to narratively, based. Only one character recurs in BL&F, which tempts readers to call this a book of stories rather than a novel. Given its essayistic, polyphonic style, BL&F was an incursion into the limits of story-telling for an author who had been pushed to the limit of his continent<sup>2</sup> by the monster of

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<sup>2</sup>In Book, Kundera relates the story of his self-imposed exile: "It is now the autumn of 1977. For eight years my country has been drowsing in the sweet, strong embrace of the Russian

history. For readers not aware of the friction between Kundera's past as a communist poet, and his unbearable present as an expatriate, BL&F may seem like a novel lacking in moral and emotional punch.

As Tamina and Hugo's interaction suggests, dissident status was not an easy one in the West. Kundera, since the publication of The Joke, has complained that readers were reading his work only on a political level. Sabina, the expatriate artist in Unbearable, has Kundera's feelings in mind when she protests to her treatment in the West: "My enemy is communism, not kitsch!" (Unbearable 254). BL&F is confrontational and bitter because it seems the Czechoslovakian dissidents were thrown into an atmosphere of the Western intellectuals' feeling for their status as opposed to being taken seriously, or as an end in themselves, to use Kantian terminology (i.e., they were taking him as an allegory for something else). Kundera's experience in France, as disclosed by BL&F, taught him that sentimentality, or kitsch, as it's called in Unbearable, was a world-wide tendency. At the same time, however, Kundera's depictions of kitsch show it to be a culturally bound phenomenon, in other words, the antithesis of an ironical perspective on the cultural forces which shape the individual's tastes and preferences. As a dissident, Kundera is

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empire [...] my books are banned from all public libraries, locked away in the cellars of the state. I held out a few years and then got into my car and drove as far west as I could, to the Breton town of Rennes, where the very first day I found an apartment on the top floor of the tallest high-rise. When the sun woke me the next morning, I realized that its large picture windows faced east, toward Prague" (128).

allowed the perspective to expose kitsch as a nationalistic phenomenon, one which is the servant of the state.

Kundera explicates his conception of kitsch in Unbearable: the first tear, the one which falls from the viewer's eye because something seems beautiful, is not an evil phenomenon to Kundera. The second tear is kitsch (251) because it falls on the condition that the person affirms that the first tear fell for an appropriate, culturally normative, object of sentiment. Kitsch is, therefore, the enemy of individualism because it is the tendency to give oneself over to the sentiment of a shared value-structure, thereby stifling an individual aesthetic and emotional value-set. The French (and German, and English, and the American) people's easy acceptance of Kundera's "plight" was kitschy in that sentiment preceded consideration when it came to Kundera's personal experience with the regime. His acceptance in the West was, in some sense, an erasure of his life because he was not an original thinker to the Western intellectuals, he was a dissident artist. Kundera's first novel in the West, it seems, was destined to be embittered considering the trap Kundera found himself in: if he did write a novel which outwardly condemned the Soviets, he would have betrayed his views on what the novel should encompass, if he didn't, he would have been criticized for treating the experience of his past in a frivolous manner. Kundera escapes this trap by avoiding ideological assertions, that is, by writing "lightly as well as lucidly," as Terry Eagleton has said (Eagleton 31). Eagleton goes on to write,

"What intensities there are in Kundera's work belong, as it were, to the subject-matter rather than to the mode of conveying it, hedged round continually with an irony which represents the borderline between too much meaning and too little, the portentous solemnity of the ideological and the bland dissociation of the cynic" (31).

Writing and existing on the borderline is not an unfamiliar state for Kundera because, as his characterizations of Mirek (In "Lost Letters" I), Jan, and Tomas in The Unbearable Lightness of Being suggest, Kundera is intimately aware of the experience of the perilous existence of the Eastern European intellectual. In terms of his propensity for critical thinking, Kundera was as unrelenting in 1960 in Czechoslovakia as he is today. In a speech at the Fourth Writers Congress in June of 1967, Kundera appealed to his fellow writers to rise above artistic compromise and mediocrity in an effort to put in place a new standard of excellence for Czech culture, one which left behind the lyrical state-poetry of the Stalinist era:

Who are the vandals today? Not your illiterate peasant setting fire to the hated landlord's mansion in a fit of rage. The vandals I see around me these days are well-off, educated people satisfied with themselves and bearing no particular grudge. The vandal is a man proud of his mediocrity very much at ease with himself and ready to insist on his democratic rights [...] he adjusts the world to his image by destroying it [...] People who live purely in their own immediate present tense, without culture or awareness of historical continuity, are quite capable of turning their country into a wasteland with no history, no memory, no echo or beauty (Porter 6).

The contentious power of his rhetoric, and his implication of the Communists as the cause of his country's cultural depravity, served as the authorities' excuse to expel Kundera from the



Communist party soon after his speech was delivered (6). When he speaks of the vandals of Czechoslovakia, however, there is no reason to believe that this passage is limited to Czechoslovakia; considering Kundera's characterizations of the Western intellectuals--Jeanne, Papa Clevis (in "the Border"), Hugo and Bibi in ("Lost Letters"), and most significantly, Franz in The Unbearable Lightness of Being--it is not difficult to sense that Kundera's hatred of passivity is one which transcends national borders.

Kundera's tirade in 1967 previews his thoughts on the universality of kitsch--communist, liberal European, or The American dream--in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Kitsch is dangerous to Kundera as a novelist because received ideas are not what Kundera wishes to uphold. His tendency is to agitate against received ideas in the name of freedom because of his experiences of suppression and compromise under the communists in Czechoslovakia. The state of Kundera's thoughts following his emigration is summed up in an interview in Le Monde directly following his completion of BL&F in 1978.<sup>3</sup>

All truth is hidden and from that you can draw your conclusions. No one can hold a monopoly on truth, but you can take hold of other men's truths and play with them in an endlessly comic *teatrum mundi* this is the sole consolation for which you may hope (Liehm 48).

This statement, fittingly enough, can be comprehended from two perspectives: the sole consolation which Kundera offers could be viewed as a futile game or an essential game. The fact that

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<sup>3</sup>The interview appeared on January 19, 1979. The French translation of the novel came out in '79, the English in '80.

truth is irrevocably hidden can be an irksome fact of life or a liberating one. The fact that Kundera sees the world as a comic theater of play-acting can be disturbing or realistic, depending on your estimation of the world. What I think is "absolutely" liberating, however, is Kundera's assertion that no one has a monopoly on truth: not the author, not the critic, not the reader. In that this lack of closure is evoked by ironical approaches to what Kundera sees as tragedies in modern existence, Kundera's fiction is a fiction of togetherness, as opposed to elitism; if we are able to see Kundera's irony as an approach which serves to "open the floor" with respect to a given question, rather than a subterfuge which obscures a hidden meaning, we see that for Kundera's novels, irony and compassion are tied together.

The complexities of Kundera's mode of telling often lead readers to accuse him of elusive and hypocritical story-telling. Roger Kimball, in his article, "The Ambiguities of Milan Kundera," asserts that Kundera "wants both the freedom of fiction and the authority of historical fact; he wants, that is, the cachet of being a dissident writer without the uncomfortably definite political commitments that status brings with it" (13). Kimball interprets Kundera's critiques of sentimentality, "circle dancing" and kitsch in BL&F as problematic: he writes that "while there is no doubt that Kundera brings considerable insight--not to mention cleverness" to these issues, he claims that Kundera "indulges in a lamentable tendency to aestheticize these

concepts, to use them to disarm the very distinctions they were meant to illuminate." He goes on to imply that authors must write "seriously" about issues they take "seriously": "how can a novel recount 'the story of totalitarianism' [quoting Kundera] and not take the world seriously." Kimball concludes his discussion with this accusation:

we should remind ourselves that criticisms of kitsch, too, can have their kitschy appeal. And it is here, perhaps, that we can witness most clearly the essential ambiguities of Milan Kundera--ambiguities that are not, alas, the inexhaustible ambiguities of human nature but the meaner, more predictable ambiguities of a writer struggling to maintain a predefined image of himself as ideologically correct (13).

To this parting shot Kundera would reply that he does not have a predefined image of his ideological correctness (at least not one which he would commit to in his fiction or in interviews), and if he does, it would tend to be one which was consciously anti-correct, because to Kundera "correct" is a corrupt description of *The Good* toward which we are all to aspire. Secondly, Kimball does not consider that the "kitschy appeal" of Kundera's discussions of sentimentality could in fact be deliberate gestures meant to amplify the effect of the content as opposed to slicing it to pieces, as Kimball would prefer to see done. Another critic, John Bayley sees Kundera's "aesthetizations" in a more constructive light:

The novelist can oppose the state, as Solzhenitsyn has done, by using its own method against it, by making Socialist Realism serve a different though equally "serious" moral outlook. Or it can be opposed by means of fantasy and irresponsibility, as Russian dissident writers--Sinyavsky, Dovlatov, Aksyonov--have lately been doing, and as Kundera has done in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. The drawback of this method is that you may throw out the baby with the bathwater, so to speak. By opposing lightness and humor to communist weight the novelist may himself become merely light and frivolous (Bayley "Fictive

Lightness" 92).

I think Kundera would agree; he might add, "why tell the truth in the abyss? Why should I limit myself to a serious mode, fictional realism, a mode of telling which I have censured at length for being sentimental; why fight kitsch with kitsch?" He might continue to say, "who is a critic to say what tone authors should take towards their subject matter?"

Kimball mis-reads Kundera's fiction because he is bringing the author's dissident status and statements in interviews to the novels instead of visa-versa; that is, he over-reads Kundera's ideological "stances" in interviews and under-reads the ironic pathos which often pervades Kundera's work. Although "Angels" does offer "gestures" of reality (i.e., autobiographical "truths"), Kundera's aim is not to condemn the occupation of his country (what Kimball seems to imply by his loose term, "critical weightiness"), but rather the pathos of the human condition, and more importantly, what it feels like to be pathetic. In his story, Kundera portrays himself<sup>4</sup> as a fallen angel in a country of angels who refuse to come down to earth; hence his depiction

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<sup>4</sup>Although the identity of the speaker is not without problems (we don't know if Kundera is lying, for instance) the speaker should not be read purely as a fictional consciousness because earlier in the story, Kundera has named himself as the narrator (during his description of a forged signature of his astrology books: "Right underneath, disguising my handwriting, I wrote, 'a Milan Kundera avec admiration, Andre Barbault,' and leaving the books thus..." [p.59]) At the same time this is an author looking back to his past. Considering the trauma of Kundera's past, and considering that the medium in which he works is fiction, we can't assume that this is Milan Kundera, but rather "Milan Kundera."

of the circle dance shows the angels' lifting themselves off the ground. This moment of magic realism in Kundera's fiction is not devoid of thematic, or normative meaning; it is not an "aesthetitization," as Kimball would call it; Kundera's moments of ironic self-referentiality are not simply "gestures of reality in order to give his fiction an aura of truth and critical weightiness," they are fictional enactments of a perspective on Czech history.

Circle dancing is the phenomenon which Kundera refers to when he wishes to evoke the naive malignancy of the Brotherhood of Man. He depicts the circle as a magic realm of sentimental togetherness which rises above those whom they've left behind. The pathos with which Kundera portrays himself and the other fallen angels is contrasted to the univocal Joy (with a capital "J," as Kundera says in The Joke) of the child-like naivete of the members of the communist party, the angels. One element of circle dancing, lyricism, (as Kundera explores in Life is Elsewhere), is that it forced art to serve ideology which then allowed sentiment to rise above the cruelty it perpetrated. Here Kundera writes about Paul Eluard, the state-serving poet who dances in the streets of Prague while his fellow artists' remains are being cremated:

they were taking two steps in place and one step forward without touching the ground, yes, they were rising up over Wenceslaus Square, their ring the very image of a giant wreath taking flight, and I ran off after them down on the ground, I kept looking up at them, and they floated on, lifting first one leg, then the other, and down below-- Prague with its cafes full of poets and its jails full of traitors, and in the crematorium they were just finishing off one Socialist representative and one surrealist, and the smoke climbed to the heavens

like a good omen, and I heard Eluard's metallic voice intoning,

**Love is at work it is tireless,**

and I ran after that voice through the streets in the hope of keeping up with that wonderful wreath of bodies rising above the city, and I realized with anguish in my heart that they were flying like birds and I was falling like a stone, that they had wings and I would never have any (68-9).

Kimball's estimation of this passage, that it represents the "modernist preoccupation with the relation between art and truth, between art and reality" (10) is not adequate. That fact that this passage is aware of its fictionality doesn't deprive it of meaning, or "critical weightiness," as Kimball seems to suggest. Its overt fictionality is a comment on the circle dancer's conception of the Reality their Joy was perpetrating. The tone of this passage is elegiac and naive; naive because Kundera is molding his narrative to the consciousnesses of the angels, naive also because the realization comes as the speaker, a young Kundera, is becoming aware of his fallen status and the evils of poetry. Kundera, looking back on his youth, portrays himself as on the brink of realizing his role as a former "angel," "circle dancer," and writer of lyric poems about the Joys of communism. Therefore, his tone is both wistful and remorseful; he is like an ostracized child who still wants to play with the gang even though they kicked him out of the club. The naivete of the above passage turns into an embittered account of what his fallen state has done to his sensibilities:

I could think of nothing but my monumental desire to rape that fine girl, my friend. The desire has remained with me, trapped like a bird in a pouch, a bird that wakes up now and then and flaps its wings.

Perhaps that wild desire to rape R. was merely a desperate attempt to grab at something during the fall. Because from the day they excluded me from the circle, I have not stopped falling, I am still falling, all they have done is give me another push to make me fall farther, deeper, away from my country and into the void of a world resounding with the terrifying laughter of the angels that covers my every word with its din (76).

The pathos of the story is disclosed to us at the end when Kundera confesses his complicity both in the evils perpetrated by communism and the evils perpetrated by being kicked out of the circle dance. The tone of both passages is pathetic (in the sense of "evoking pathos"), but the difference between the two passages is crucial: in one the victim is hurt, but harmless; in the second, Kundera-child turns into a monster when he feels the urge to rape his friend in a borrowed apartment. The circle dancing of "Angels" is, therefore, not a mere "aesthet<sup>C</sup>itization."

Kimball's mistake is that he uses the term aesthetics in a pejorative manner when he writes about Kundera's aesthet<sup>C</sup>itizations of kitsch. For Kundera, an author for whom aesthetic liberation was a fundamental part of protest, aesthetitization is part of his repertoire of "serious" authorial strategies and is not a matter to be taken "lightly." Kundera is trying to convey, using airy, kitschy description, the sensation of what it feels like to be Lucifer, falling from Heaven, vanquished for questioning authority. Kundera's criticism of the Stalinist era is an issue which informs Kundera's work because it plagues the author's existence. Kimball's critique of Kundera is short-sighted because Kundera's tone is more complex than he realizes.

If we are assessing a novel, then we must assume everything

is a fictionalization (not an ideological assertion, as Kimball seems to suggest), and then interrogate the work according to the following question: aesthetitization to what end? With this question, we can see that the circle dancing of the story "Angels" is a perception of "historical fact," as Kimball puts it, filtered through the "freedom" of the fictive form, as Kimball puts it. Because Kimball sees history and aesthetics as conflicting, opposed phenomena<sup>a</sup>, he is not a good reader of Kundera's work; Kundera's experiences teach that history is an organic, irrational entity which makes frightening incursions into aesthetics and oppresses those who oppose the artistic mode of the state. Historical facts have moved from the realm of reason to the domain of irrationality, according to Kundera:

Why did Germany, why does Russia today want to dominate the world? To be richer? Happier? Not at all. The aggressivity of force is thoroughly disinterested; unmotivated; it wills only its own will; it is pure irrationality [...] In the course of the Modern Era, Cartesian rationality has corroded, one after the other, all the values inherited from the Middle Ages. But just when reason wins a total victory, pure irrationality (force willing only its will) seizes the world state, because there is no longer any generally accepted value system to block its path (Art 10).

Kundera's experience of the world demands a drastic and complex aesthetic response to "historical facts" because a) history is a monster and needs to be fought, and b) history is threatening our bastion of individuality, art. The example Kimball offers, circle dancing, renders his dichotomy ("freedom of fiction" versus "the authority of historical fact") useless because the complexities of Kundera's irony, tone, and authorial impositions are not subject to easy categorization. In Kimball's example



from "Angels," magical realism is used to at once ~~to~~ mimic the "magic qualities of the circle" (Book 65), and to combat the mode of communist art, Socialist Realism. Kundera's work deals with fact and fiction, weight and lightness, in complex and sometimes interchangeable ways. As Kundera demonstrates in Unbearable with his fictional exposition of lightness and weight, these are rich concepts, worthy of a novel precisely because they are not easily tied down to a meaning. Kundera's work teaches that sometimes a polyphonic-ambiguous-contrapuntal approach to fiction can purvey semblances of heaviness (or lightness) through any number of narrative approaches.

### The Unbearable Lightness of Being:

#### Ironic Mobility

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is Kundera's best work to date because it employs a wide range of narrative styles. The dominant tone of the novel is discursive and philosophical (and therefore distanced and ironical), but Kundera consistently contrasts this mode with more lyrical ones, creating movements and tonality (i.e., "tones of gray") by contrasting ironically light (Diderotan) narration to a more devoted, "Tolstoyan" (Bayley Order 177) mode. Kundera's narrative virtuosity is most evident in his handling of Tomas because he is the central ambiguity in a novel where ambiguity is central. Tomas and the narrative tone make a transition from philosophical lightness to devoted heaviness. The narration and Tomas are intimately tied

together because Tomas is the central character in the novel and because Tomas's fall from certainty is one of the best executed and most important narrative enactments in Kundera's fiction.

In that Tomas is able, unlike the other characters, to effect change in his life in time to effect the life of his lover, we can see his self-realization as a hopeful gesture in a novel which, up until Tomas's devotion to Tereza, had seemed skeptical about the potential for valid human relationships. Tomas's move to devotion alters the shape and tone of the novel: it goes from a treatment of the lightness of his infidelities (and the lightness of the narrator's attitude towards Tomas's behavior) to the heaviness of Tomas's devotion to Tereza (and the narrator's shifting into a pastoral narration to depict their new life in the country).

Sabina sheds light on this issue when she observes Tomas as a figure in one of her paintings: at the foreground, or surface of her portrait, she envisions the "intelligible lie" (63)--Tomas as Don Juan; underneath she perceives the "unintelligible truth" (63)--Tomas as Tristan. She sees him in this manner because Tomas, after he meets Tereza, wants to encompass both themes into his being: he wants a Don Juan existence with Sabina and a Tristan life with Tereza. In the end, though, as Sabina notes, "he died as Tristan, not as Don Juan" (124). According to Sabina then, he died under the heaviness of commitment: he was crushed under the truck with his wife to whom he had devoted himself. However, unlike Franz, Tomas and Tereza are never "killed off" in

the course of the story. Therefore, the issue deserves some explication.

Kundera opens the novel with the philosophical question which gave rise to Tomas. The choice is between two absolutes: the nonexistence of return, where "everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted" (4), and eternal return, where "the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make" (5). The questions Kundera poses, and the manner in which he does so, suggests that irony is at work. Kundera's "reconciliation with Hitler" seems purposely forced to fit his contentions. Similarly with his argument in favor of weight:

The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man's body. The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously and image of life's most intense fulfillment (5).

Kundera's skipping between references of Nietzsche, warring African kingdoms, Robespierre, Hitler, Jesus Christ, Parmenides and the "love poetry of every age," suggests that this is not a sincere inquiry into any of these issues, but rather an approach which wishes to convey the feeling of metaphysical lightness of rationalizations. However, underneath the intelligible lie of Kundera's Diderotan lightness, there lurks the more Tristan-like issue of which is better when Kundera addresses which is positive (or negative), lightness or weight. This is, then, the unknowable truth, because after revealing what Parmenides thought, "lightness is positive and weight negative" (5), Kundera

asks the reader, "Was he correct or not? That is the question. The only certainty is: the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all" (6). (In other words, the only certainty is uncertainty with respect to this question.)

Tomas's character is central to the work because he is the fictional enactment of this philosophical posturing. His history could be defined as the verbrato between the heavy and light pitches of existence. The history of his verbrato goes something like this: before the frame of the story he is presumably an intellectual fleeing the heaviness of the regime's restriction (so, he begins at L, for "light"); then he gets tied down by a wife and son (H...) which he then abandons (...to L); Tereza comes along and persuades him to commit (H...), but he continues with his infidelities anyway (...L); this causes Tereza to return to Prague, leaving him light for the weekend, but he soon feels the tug of compassion and returns to her (back to H); fed up with being a slave to imperatives, he refuses to sign his Oedipus retraction thereby depriving himself of surgery, his professional imperative (over to L); after two years, this becomes wearisome and he finally feels the force of Tereza's love (now at H); he then dies with her, which according to this scheme means he's released from heaviness, which must mean he becomes light...(more about that later). If this schemata seems forced, so much the better. All of Kundera's characters seem forced into hypothetical boxes (only to break out at crucial moments). But Tomas escapes from his "Es Muss Sein" motif because of his

theme's intermingling with Tereza's. It is fitting then that his theme, that of "Es Muss Sein," be the dominant mode of the novel. If we consider the transition from light to heavy as a legitimate formal movement in the text, then we can see its microcosm, Beethoven's using a joke to create a solemn theme in his last quartet:

So Beethoven turned a frivolous inspiration into a serious quartet, a joke into metaphysical truth. It is an interesting tale of light going to heavy or, as Parmenides would have it, positive going to negative. Yet oddly enough, the transformation fails to surprise us. We would have been shocked, on the other hand, if Beethoven had transformed to seriousness of his quartet into the trifling joke of a four-voice canon about Dembscher's purse (195-6).

Yet oddly enough, Tomas succeeds in making heavy go to light (by his refusing to sign his Oedipus retraction) soon after this passage in the text. But he succeeds only for a short while. After two years of lightness Tomas realizes his weariness, he dreams about the "Es Muss Sein" of his love, and then formulates "the difficult or weighty resolution" while Tereza sleeps by his side.

Up until this point, however, Tomas has been the ever-questing, ever-analyzing categorizer, who could not rest until he had "acquired yet another piece of the world" (207). Up until Tomas's weighty resolution, Kundera had narrated Tomas's thoughts and actions as if he was Cervantes to Tomas's Don Quixote, as if he were allowing Tomas's existence to stand out against the backdrop of political oppression and emotional commitment, to stand out in all its "splendid lightness" (5). After Tomas self-realizes, the tone of the book changes drastically. Tomas

essentially disappears from the narrative, his life is no longer light but rather sunken into the role he has chosen as a dutiful husband, and a rabbit in Tereza's arms (306). By the end, Tomas is no longer a force in the novel because he has given up the epistemological wanderings of his youth and retires in the narrative as a fallen Don Juan and an aged Tristan. In a sense, then, Tomas's perspective on himself was disastrous in that it was a suicide of self. On the other hand, it seemed Tomas needed to pay more attention to the particulars, the realities his world-surgery was producing. In the beginning of the novel, before his fall, Tomas is presented via a distanced ironic perspective, which mirrors his thought processes:

He remained annoyed with himself until he realized that not knowing what he wanted was actually quite natural.

We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come [...] *Einmal ist Keimmal*, says Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all (8).

This is a variety of ironical narration relies on Socratic skepticism to work through a dialectic of reasoning in search of an answer. With Tomas's "resolution," however, another variety of perspective is offered, one over which the rational intellect has no control. Tomas's acceptance of Tereza was an embracing of the powers of "others"--in particular fortuity, in particular Tereza as the representative of chance in Tomas's life. Tomas's coming to terms with his past represents an ironical perspective on oneself which is not light, one which causes because it is not liberating but enclosing; Tomas's perspective is not the result

of his ability to differentiate himself using Socratic Wit, as he demonstrated in the beginning, but rather a perspective which forces Tomas to adopt the life-view of the fallen angels.

Tomas's fall from questing is echoed by Kundera's reference to Oedipus in the beginning of the second section devoted to Tomas's perspective (the second "Lightness and Weight"): both figures order the world with maximal efficiency and perceptive, assured abilities until they self-realize, fall and are led out of the city. Both go from strong to weak.

#### Oedipus Looks

Tomas's character begins at what seems remarkably similar to Kundera's description to Kundera's description of Descartes' conception of the "master and proprietor of nature":

Having brought off miracles in science and technology, this master and proprietor is suddenly realizing that he owns nothing and is master neither of nature (it is vanishing, little by little, from the planet), nor of History (it has escaped him), nor of himself (he is led by the irrational forces of his soul). But if God is gone and man is no longer master, then who is master? The planet is moving through the void without any master. There it is, the unbearable lightness of being (Art 42).

Tomas is presented to us as the rationalist enthralled in the unbearable lightness of being. He is the consummate surgeon, who sleeps with women in order to snip "yet another strip off the infinite canvas of the universe" (207). Tomas is obsessed with the "small gap of the unimaginable" where the unreality of reality exceeds his imagination; this is the monster in Tomas, where "his passion for surgery and his passion for women came

together." "Even with his mistresses, he could never quite put down the imaginary scalpel. Since he longed to take possession of something deep inside them, he needed to slit them open" (200). We must remember that "imperative" is why Tomas was created: "'Es Muss Sein!' was rooted inside him" (194). Tomas's professional imperative seems to be a deep part of his personality because he is able to rise above the inadequacies of his own being, he is able to control fate and touch the face of God:

Surgery takes the basic imperative of the medical profession to its outermost border, where the human makes contact with the divine. When a person is clubbed violently on the head, he collapses and stops breathing. Some day, he will stop breathing anyway. Murder simply hasten a bit what God will eventually see to on His own. God, it may be assumed, took murder into account; He did not take surgery into account (194).

Tomas is presented as the ideal of the modern age, someone who can stand up to the silence of God and can effect change in His universe.

Tomas, as the soulless rationalist, comes close to Kundera's thoughts on political kitsch, suggesting that scientist kitsch and politician kitsch are close cousins. The contradictions of Tomas's life, particularly those of his love life, force him into either/or rationalizations to protect himself from blame. As Kundera writes in Art, "To take, with Descartes, the thinking self as the basis of everything, and thus to face the universe alone, is to adopt an attitude that Hegel was right to call heroic" (6). Tomas's early experiences with Tereza lead Kundera to reveal to us the "thinking self" in Tomas:



Tomas came to this conclusion: Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite. Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman) [15].

Tomas's tendency to split questions into either/or, this or that, like the theocrats, politicians, and historians (perhaps all humans), is to protect himself from ambiguity and the painful particulars of his life (Tereza and his son's suffering). The distance employed by Tomas to protect himself from the "aggression of love" (298) is reinforced by the narrator's distancing us from the minutia of Tomas's life. We are not given any background on Tomas because he does not live in the past; his sufficiency is his intellect and his relentless questing. His outlook is ironic, in that it recognizes contradiction. But because emotion clouds the smooth operation of the rational self, Tomas's outlook is devoid of compassion.

Tomas's thinking on the concepts of compassion and betrayal is a simple matter to enumerate: compassion is the "sickness" (31) which Tereza infected him with; betrayal is the lightness of the erotic friendship which thrives on not feeling for another, but rather achieving maximal pleasure for oneself. Tomas's conception of the world derails, however, when it encounters fortuity, or coincidence. These phenomena, being external to human affairs, are not in the ken of the thinking self. When Tomas realizes that Tereza's presence in his life was neither heavy nor light, that she was not the "Es Muss Sein!", but the "personification of absolute fortuity" (35), that she was not a

weight, but an unbearable lightness, Tomas gets his second stomach ache of the novel: "It was late at night. His stomach started acting up as it tended to do in times of psychic stress" (35). (When faced with a question his intellect cannot answer, Tomas's stomach will inevitably act up, hinting to us that Tomas is feeling the disunity of Body and Soul.)

Tomas's inability to face up to the complexity of his love for Tereza (the downside to Tomas's thinking-self approach to life) is an outward expression of his inability to accept the beauty of ambiguity. In that pleasure and beauty involve an acceptance of the contradictory, the unfinished, and the ambiguous, Tomas's character seems barred from them because it seems that Tomas's character, as a surgeon and rationalist, was created to conquer the contradictions of life. Unlike Tereza, Tomas is not supposed to allow himself an awareness of the contradiction between his body and his soul--as a surgeon he to force his body and other bodies to submit to the force of his intellect. By denying "the wisdom of uncertainty" (Art 7), Tomas is blinding himself to the interplay of human lives ("the essential relativity of all things human"[7]) in addition to depriving "his life of a dimension of beauty" (Unbearable 52). Hence Tomas's womanizing is not a search for beauty--because he is not a "lyrical womanizer" (201)--it is a lab experiment to define a given woman's uniqueness: sex is not an act in search of "pleasure (the pleasure came as an extra, a bonus) but for possession of the world (slitting open the outstretched body of

the world with his scalpel)" (200). Tomas, as an epic womanizer, in pursuit of knowledge (201), must distance himself from his lovers in order to establish their unique qualities in his memory so he can take note of them after he departs. One such post-tryst wrap-up is amplified by Kundera's narration: Kundera numbers the observations Tomas comes up with after his episode with the giraffe woman to comment on Tomas's cold calculations. After his lovemaking, Tomas

[...] went off in the best of moods, trying to fix her essence in his memory, to reduce that memory to a chemical formula capable of defining her uniqueness (her millionth part dissimilarity). The result was a formula consisting of three givens:

- 1) clumsiness with ardor,
- 2) the frightened face of one who has lost her equilibrium and is falling, and
- 3) legs raised in the air like the arms of a soldier surrendering to a pointed gun (206).

Tomas is a victim and purveyor of what Kundera calls the "lyrical illusion of the age of science" (40), the unity of body and soul, because he strives to deselect information in order to come out with a conclusion, thereby banishing the beauty of contradiction and accident. Tomas uses his body and his intellect in unity, as a categorizing machine, to reduce a woman's behavior to the essentials.

#### Oedipus Sees

Tomas's fall from his heroic status as a thinking self down to a rabbit in Tereza's arms is caused by his rebellion against "Einmal ist Keinmal". His denial of "Einmal ist Keinmal" involves resisting the political, professional and familial

imperatives surrounding his Oedipus article. Tomas's dreams reveal to him two other, more important imperatives. The first is his realization that "Love lies beyond the "Einmal ist Keimnal" of his sexual imperative. The second is uncovered when Tomas dreams of the "Einmal ist Keimnal" of his love and realizes that Tereza, because she lies beyond any compulsion, because she is fortuity personified, is his escape from the commitments of his life. However, Tereza's love is not a "light" concept in Tomas's life. The compassion he feels is not a liberating factor, but a humanizing one because it forces him to come to terms with the pain he has caused Tereza. At the same time, his devotion to Tereza is an escape from his intellectual self-reflexivity, from the "stimulating phrase," (39) from which he was conceived: "Einmal ist Keimnal" By acknowledging the evils of his past, Tomas is escaping from the non-existence of return (where being is only a futile game for the Creator's amusement).

As Kundera writes in Art, man's pursuit of truth is a comical one; Kundera sees man's questing in terms of a Jewish proverb--"Man thinks, god laughs"--"But why does God laugh at the sight of man thinking? Because man thinks and the truth escapes him. Because the more men think, the more one man's though diverges from another's. And finally, because man is never what he thinks he is" (158). When Tomas sits up in bed, he realizes that he is no longer what he thinks he is. His recognition represents the fall of the hedonist/Don Juan:

There comes a moment when the image of our life parts company with the life itself, stands free, and, little by little, begins to rule us.

[...] a hedonist resists the transformation of his life into a fate. Fate vampirizes us, it weigh us down, it is like a ball and chain locked to our ankles (Art 129).

The tone of this passage ("There comes a moment") suggests that Kundera is simply speaking of the middle-age crisis of the Don Juan characters which appear in almost all of his novels. Kundera makes this common crisis much more interesting though: when the Don Juan realizes, in his mature years, that his seductions are in fact essential to his character, as opposed to a liberating facet of his character, his womanizing takes on an ironic tinge. Tomas' realization is of this genre. It is because of Tereza that he now (sitting up in bed after his dream) sees himself as nothing like the man he thought he was: he is no longer a surgeon, no longer a womanizer; he is on the brink of forgoing his past altogether with a move out to the country.

Tereza seems sent to him by the fates to help him out of his imperatives and cope with his fall from grace; she also represents fate in that her existence is what it takes to root the imperatives, the monster, out of his being. She is not the "Es Muss Sein" of his life, but she is certainly closely related to it: she is the reverse of imperative (which is an analytically derived effort to grasp another grain of sense from the ever-laughing god); she is his fate, which is incomprehensible. By accepting Tereza, Tomas is recognizing not only Tereza's vulnerability and need for his care, but also his own vulnerability to the twists of fate. This is at once a crushing and liberating realization: Tomas goes from the lightness of his

inept efforts to effect change (surgery, which is only a prolonging of the inevitable, and analysis--which often yields no answers) to the heaviness of realizing his weakness. At the same time he makes heaviness go to light: he is freed from "Es Muss Sein;" he is free to take part in the idyll of country-living. This moment is the breaking point for Tomas/Oedipus/Don Juan, the moment when he sees the power external forces (<sup>Tereza</sup>~~tear~~, God, History, Fate) have had on his life: from this, Tomas confesses to himself that the outside world (which had been his operating table) was no longer his concern and that his task was to assuage his guilt and concentrate on what Kundera calls the "second infinity" in BL&F, the one "so nearly within reach":

Man knows he cannot embrace the universe with all its suns and stars. But he finds it unbearable to be condemned to lose the second infinity as well, the one so close, so nearly within reach. Tamina lost the infinity of her love, I lost my father, we all lose in whatever we do, because if it is perfection we are after, we must go to the heart of the matter, and we can never quite reach it.

That the external infinity escapes us we accept with equanimity; the guilt over letting the second infinity escape follows us to the grave. While pondering the infinity of the stars, we ignore the infinity of our father (BL&F 165).

Up until Tomas self-realizes, he is the master and proprietor of the first universe who sacrifices Tereza to his search for knowledge. Tomas's move into the second infinity comes when he realizes that even in the best of all possible worlds, where he is with his ideal love partner, that "time and again he will abandon the house of his happiness, time and again abandon his paradise and the woman from his dream and betray the "Einmal ist Keinmal" of his love to go off with Tereza, the woman born of six laughable fortuities" (239). This confession is an "ineffable"

(239) one because it belongs in a new category of knowledge for Tomas, one that marks the end of his former dominion, of his duty to imperatives. Hence, when Tereza wakes up after Tomas's weighty resolution, Tomas no longer fears for her while she sleeps because he senses that she no longer has anything to be anxious about and he no longer has any desire to cause her suffering: instead of fearing her nightmares, Tomas decides to "plant the image of a new dream in her mind" to "lull her back to sleep" (240). He decides to loose himself of all self-imposed missions and give himself over to her devotion.

#### Oedipus Fallen

After his resolution, Tomas feels that he is free: "it's a terrific relief to realize that you're free, free of all missions" (313). Without a mission, however, Tomas fades into the narrative of the novel and becomes a Tristan among Tristans. He seems old to Tereza, and in her dreams she pictures him as a rabbit which she could "press to her body" and take "home with the feeling that she was nearly at her goal, the place where she wanted to be and would never forsake" (306). Here, Tereza's fidelity has finally won the "power-play" (289) of love: theirs is no longer "an oddly asymmetrical construction" supported only by Tereza's "certainty of fidelity" (160): it is now equal, or even weighted in the opposite direction, given that Tereza and her relation to nature is the concentration of the final section of narrative. Without the "aggression of love" (298) or the

"stupidity of sex" (237), Tomas and Tereza have entered a paradise--a sorrowful, elegiac one, but a utopia nonetheless. Tomas, reduced to a rabbit, doesn't seem to be an attractive reality for Tereza, but it is one that pulls her heartstrings. When she learns that Tomas has been happy as a farmer in the country, she feels a mixture of emotions; she feels sad because she has not reached "something higher" (49) by marrying one of Czechoslovakia's best, and most charming, surgeons, but rather by bringing him down to her social class and by leading him out of the city and into the provinces: sad because they, at the end of Tomas's fall, are "at the last station" (313) of their social lives. She is also happy, though, because they are finally together. Their status in society, the "form," (313), as Kundera submits, is a system of measurement to determine the strength of people relative to other people; the form, then, is sadness because they have become weak, they have given in to the forces of Czechoslovakian politics in favor of retiring to the countryside. Happiness, or togetherness--the "content" as Kundera calls it--does, however, fill "the space of sadness" for Tereza and Tomas. Tomas's state is sad in that he no longer is the ever-questioning Don Quixote, but it is also liberating, or happy, because he is no longer forced, by his thinking self, to view the world as his operating table. He becomes passive, which is sad, but he gains contentedness, which allows Tomas and Tereza's connectedness to flourish.



The conclusion of the novel is ironic in that Tomas and Tereza seem to be united only to die the next morning. The ending is also, however, ambiguously ironic in that Tomas and Tereza are never "killed" in the novel. So, in this sense, they remain as happy, immortal characters in the realm of magical realism.<sup>5</sup> In that the conclusion is aware of its fictionality, the concluding passage is not in the domain of tonal deception. It remains, however, a refutation of the cruelty of reason and the sentimentality of kitsch. Like the entire concluding section, the tone of the passage is distant and pastoral because the author is loosing his grip on the narrative, allowing it to settle in our memories. He no longer feels the need to shout, or deceive us with ironical games. But he does feel the need to enlighten with the dramatic ironies of fiction. The "unfinished" quality of the close of Unbearable is a gesture of trust extended by an author for whom trust and reader-relations is problematic. We can take Kundera's trust and interpret the ambiguity out of it, or we can appreciate it as a gift of beauty and irony which is meant to move us--not in one direction or the other, but through us and under us.

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<sup>5</sup>The end is a "realistic" portrayal of an event foreseen by Tereza's dream about Tomas's turning into a rabbit (304-6); narrative realism enacts a dream, thereby throwing it the passage into the realm of "illusionary" representation, or magical realism.

Coda

My conclusion will revolve around Kundera's assessment of Tomas's status at the end of the novel:

What does it mean to turn into a rabbit? It means losing all strength. It means that one is no stronger than the other anymore (313).

The heroic thinking self, which Tomas personifies throughout most of the novel, exists for and because of differentiation. By virtue of the strength of its intellect, the thinking self is to dissect the contradictions of the world in order to justify its existence. Like a critic confronting a text, the thinking self is to pick apart the data of the "world," rising above it and apart from the other rational agents, thereby differentiating themselves from the other selves. However, to give yourself over to the ambiguity of certain questions, "terminal paradoxes," (12) as Kundera calls them, is essential. To mobilize other facets of one's awareness--facets which can appreciate the confounding equality of human needs, desires and perceptive abilities--is an essential step for both a well fleshed-out metaphysics of being and a full bodied critique. To confess that there are certain scenarios which render the intellect helpless is to open yourself to the irony of coincidence and weakness: it means, in terms of Kundera's assessment of Tomas, turning yourself into a rabbit, and abdicating the "gift" of reason (which forces human to rationalize against human, self against other, this or that, either/or). To become a rabbit is to deny dichotomization because irony is the monster in the kingdom of kitsch: through

ambiguity irony equalizes this and that until "one is no stronger than the other."

For Tomas and his slavery to the poles of "lightness" and "weight," and for Kundera, as a dissident author, irony is the escape. Just as Tomas's retirement to the country-side is a difficult event to define--because it does not belong in either lightness (because he reflects on the wrongs of his past) or weight (because he is free of imperatives)--so to with Kundera, whose fiction is often impossible to pin down to either/or. By using another method to interrogate Tomas's fall, that of ironical awareness, we can see that Tomas has been thrown into the caring hands of irony: he is now able to give his life significance by using sources other than his mind; the sketch of Tomas's existence is allowed to fill itself out with Tomas's awareness of his love for the editor and Tereza. His attraction/repugnance for his son is, then, crucial because it represents the first time Tomas is able to gain perspective on his body: the "coincidence" of Tomas's features and expressions on a similar face seems to jar Tomas into a recognition of otherness.

Tomas's life and the vitality of the novel as a whole is dependent on irony because with the ironical self-reflection of both Tomas and the reader, our roles in the fiction can become more than sketches. Irony is necessary, then, not to avoid, but to make comprehensible and significant.

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