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The Art of the Novel: How Kundera Helps Us Read The Unbearable Lightness of Being

Matt Plavnick

I. “The sole raison d'etre of the novel is to discover what only the novel can discover. A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel’s only morality.”

These are the lines which led me to write on Milan Kundera and The Unbearable Lightness of Being. The lines come from Kundera’s essay “The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes” (5-6), and I find them both accurate and troubling. In that essay, and the rest which make up The Art of the Novel, the author asks some questions and answers others regarding the history of the novel, the role of the novel in art and culture, and the novel’s responsibilities and obligations (here going a long way toward his definition of the novel); he also deals with authors and artists, difficulties of language, and, perhaps most importantly, the question of “What next?” for the novel.

In all of Kundera’s writing there is the search, the yearning, to understand more of the world around us--specifically around Kundera. His fiction deals both with the lives of people caught up in this world, some happily, some miserably, each undeniably held by human constraints, and also with how these people are affected by their natural constraints. His critical writing offers further examination and theory about these constraints: what they are, specifically, how they work, and how they affect people. With this comes a detailed assessment of our epoch, which he calls “The Modern Era,” and the phenomena that characterize it, most notably the “terminal paradox.”

1 Kundera’s best example/definition of a terminal paradox is found in The Art of the Novel: “[Descartes and Cervantes] laid bare the ambiguity of this epoch [the Modern Era], which is decline and progress at the same time and which, like all that is human, carries the seed of its end in its beginning” (4).
When Kundera asks questions, he often looks for answers in literature: Kafka, Cervantes, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Diderot, Musil, Mann, Broch. When he is asked for examples of his theories—as in the two dialogues with Christian Salmon which are included in The Art of the Novel—or about how he understands those theories in relation to people, the author frequently turns to his own work, offering insights gleaned from the lives and situations of his characters. It was not until I learned this—that for Kundera, writing is the exploration of life, of the problems and possibilities of human existence—that I felt prepared to write about The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

Those lines which open my paper feel absolutely right to me, correct in their assertion that the novel has a moral obligation to discover, to explore, to learn. Yet their language is troubling. It begs the question, it fails to define precisely what the novel can discover. Perhaps this is because the breadth of knowledge available to the novel is unlimited; perhaps to define all of the novel’s potential for discovery is impossible. Despite the statement’s flaw, its heavy handedness, its ultimatum, I agree with it. This is the criterion, I think, for all forms of art. Art’s goal is most often—if not always—expression, and because of its nature, art has the opportunity to express in ways different from the daily norm. To the extent that artists might always search for variations on or new modes of expression, art will always possess the potential to establish new vocabularies and perspectives with which to understand the myriad set of human experiences. This is the obligation of art. This is the obligation of the novel. Kundera’s dictum explains for me a concept I’ve often sensed but never possessed the words to articulate: writing (or any art) which does not explore life—the human experience—in one
way or another, is useless writing (or art). It can be argued that there is something of
human experience in all writing, and I would not disagree with this. But not all writing
explores the human experience; not all writing manages to provoke readers to reevaluate
and explore life for themselves with a new type of vision or perspective gleaned from the
text. This type of exploration leads to the "knowledge" that Kundera so boldly claims is
"the novel's only morality." When such knowledge is either not pursued or pursued but
not captured, art is not achieved. This is a demanding responsibility to set upon the
shoulders of both art and artist, but it is reasonable to expect that art should in some way
move us. And by suggesting this, I do not think that Kundera slams the door on purely
aesthetic endeavors. He simply makes clear that aestheticism can and should offer some
new take on life, a new perspective or vocabulary. Kundera writes highly of Kafka,
Joyce and Faulkner, all of whom developed new aesthetics, not for form's sake but rather
for the sake of expression. Beyond their forms there is never emptiness, and this, I think,
is the expectation, the criterion, which Kundera establishes in his statement.

Kundera's books possess a broad affective capacity, by which I mean the ability
to both contain and evoke emotional energy. This emotional energy is the key to
shedding new light on the possibilities and problems of life: by getting a reader to feel,
the author may tap into the wells of sympathy or revulsion which open new passages of
thinking or observation. Kundera's ability to make me feel things about his fiction and
nonfiction is central to my understanding his works; what he discovers in his novels is
key to their success—not in a conventional sense, but in the moral sense iterated by the
statement here discussed.
The purpose of my writing here is to better understand The Unbearable Lightness of Being by looking at Kundera’s thoughts on the novel (as a form) and its possibilities. Exploring his characters and themes in accordance with his theories will help readers of Kundera read Kundera. By understanding his purposes readers may better understand his methods, and vice versa. This paper explores how his writing works in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, and what it works toward; examining Kundera’s critical writings will help establish both. Kundera works on the principle of theme: in order to shed light on previously darkened areas of existence, observation must be made about the situations characters find themselves in. From these observations, the author weaves together a tapestry of ideas, commentary, regarding the characters’ situations, actions and emotions. It is this tapestry which offers a new perspective on life, which redefines the set of human experiences. It is this tapestry which is at the heart of The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

II. “Whenever a novel abandons its themes and settles for just telling the story, it goes flat.”

In The Unbearable Lightness of Being Kundera sets out four characters whose lives are dominated by experiences and emotions largely beyond their control. In Tomas he displays the torn thinker, whose analytical mind constantly wrestles with his compassionate heart. Tereza is a model of feminine romanticism, pent up her entire life in a closed little town devoid of romantic opportunities, until she meets Tomas and finds her chance for escape. Sabina, a strong-minded artist, feels herself fighting cultural
tyranny wherever she goes—namely kitsch—and insists on clearly defining for herself the meanings of her own words and actions, as well as those of others. Franz, who is somewhat removed from the other three—he interacts only with Sabina, and never meets Tomas or Tereza—is connected nonetheless to many of the same challenges and concerns, especially regarding his life decisions; throughout the novel he finds himself reconsidering those things he has always known—duty to his wife and daughter, the sensibility of his vocation, and indeed, his complete self image. As if these internal conflicts were not enough to keep each character busy, Kundera, true to life, adds the pressures of outside forces to this mixture, and thus reveals some of the possibilities and problems of human existence. These outside forces are of two different types. The first is made up of interactions between characters who care for one another but have conflicting interests—Tomas and Tereza, Sabina and Franz; Kundera shows the strain this places on daily life and decision making for each character. The second of these types is composed of larger social forces, namely politics and history, and focus is placed on how these may further amplify a character’s struggles in life. Kundera reveals how the demands that both types of forces might place on a character add a sometimes unpleasant weight to human existence.

The novel is an exploration of conflict, satisfaction and existence as they pertain to these four characters. It is also a personal meditation for the author, whose goal is to understand the human situation by shedding new light on it via the novel\(^2\). For Kundera,

\(^2\) “To understand the self in my novels means to grasp the essence of its existential problem” (AN 29); “Meditative interrogation (interrogative meditation) is the basis on which all my novels are constructed” (AN 31); “The novel is a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters” (AN 83).
it is no longer a unity of action which defines the course a novel is to take. Unity of theme is the overarching perspective here, and Kundera ties his themes in masterfully to one another. This is not to say that plot is dismissable in this novel, but its importance surfaces in relation to thematic problems. Take Tereza’s entrance into Tomas’s life in Prague: she arrives at his door with a copy of Anna Karenina under her arm. Her arrival, an action in the plot, is irreplaceable. For Kundera to raise the questions he does, Tereza must go to Tomas. But the significance of this action is revealed only as those questions come to light. Kundera, through Tomas, investigates the hidden fortuities which bring Tereza to Prague, and by doing so observes the infrequency with which most people generally consider such fortuities in their own lives. He then goes further, to pit these two lovers against one another in regard to their relationship and its fortuitous origins. For Tomas, a relationship that owes itself to chance and chance alone is without possible merit; if without chance he and Tereza would not have found each other, then perhaps there are not enough mutual elements bringing them together. And her arrival with Anna Karenina can only be interpreted as ominous. For Tereza, however, chance is the beautiful weightlessness of life; it is the one saving grace in an all too heavy existence. Without chance, and the hope it brings, she would have nothing, and she is thus loathe to reject it. How splendid her coupling with Tomas must be, how rare, if, without the unlikely chances that brought them together, it never would have occurred.

Kundera’s own take on the relationship between plot and theme supports my instinctive sense that these elements are necessarily intertwined in his fiction. He is careful, however, to avoid misunderstandings: when he works, he sets out first to write a
story, with characters in mind and possible situations in which to place them. As this framework is developed, thematic observations and reflections emerge: “All these reflections on terminal paradoxes, et cetera, did not precede my novels but proceeded from them” (AN 41); “The themes are worked out steadily within and by the story” (AN 83). Which, then, is more important: story or theme? As a reader, I cannot help but feel more greatly affected by theme than by story. Certainly, the stories Kundera tells are fresh and revealing. How are these stories revealing, though? Is it simply the course of action taken in The Unbearable Lightness of Being which adheres in my memory? No. The image of Tereza at Tomas’s door with Anna Karenina under her arm is lasting, but it would not stick in my head so clearly were it not for the digression into fortuity that Kundera makes. Once the author observes the very unlikeliness of Tereza’s appearance in Prague, I find the image all the more remarkable and exhilarating. “Whenever a novel abandons its themes and settles for just telling the story, it goes flat” (AN 83). This is Kundera’s success: not to simply offer up Tereza at Tomas’s door, but to chronicle the startling fortuities which brought her there, and then to contrast her intense hope and faith in such chance events with Tomas’s distrust of them. Kundera acknowledges this style as “novelistic counterpoint,” (AN 80), a part of what makes up “polyphony,” the existence of separate and distinct voices, in the novel (AN 73-74). The author breaks into the action, the sequence of events, to discuss the themes surrounding the events. Kundera refers to this counterpoint specifically as “digression”: “A theme . . . can be developed on its own, outside the story [plot]. That approach to theme I call digression. Digression means: abandoning the story for a moment” (AN 83-84). The word “theme”
for Kundera finally means “an existential inquiry” (AN 84). Thus his digressions expand his themes, which are themselves explorations into existence.

This is where the novel of action differs from the novel of ideas. Kundera’s works fall clearly into the second category. Rather than an end in itself, achieving action in a novel is a means to an end: offering up reflections and observations about certain events in the novel, about why those events might have happened, or about what the consequences of such events are--these are the goals of the novel of ideas. In discussing the novel of ideas, however, I feel responsible to point out that the word “novel” is the key word of that phrase, rather than “ideas.” For Kundera, I think, this is how the novel ought to be known anyway; not as mindless entertainment, what Jeanette Winterson calls “printed television,” but as provocative and exploratory art, hence his definition of the “moral novel.” Part six of Kundera’s The Art of the Novel is a unique essay/glossary entitled “Sixty-three Words.” In it Kundera offers this as his definition of “ideas”: “My disgust for those who reduce a work to its ideas. My revulsion at being dragged into what they call ‘discussions of ideas.’ My despair at this era befogged with ideas and indifferent to works” (131). I find something poetic in this definition. Even though the statement is somewhat vague (“those,” “they”), and fragmentary, and elliptical, the author, in startlingly concise wording, makes clear the main disadvantage of critical analysis of art: that it too often strips art from ideas, and that the suggestion is made by whoever “they” are, that art is second place to ideas, or that art is only the vehicle by which ideas are communicated. My suspicion is that the “they” Kundera refers to are the same people who “seek at the novel’s core not an inquiry but a moral position”; “they
require that someone be right” (AN 7). And Kundera reflects a little bit later that “the novel too is ravaged by the termites of reduction, which reduce not only the meaning of the world but also the meaning of works of art” (AN 17); I believe with the word “they” he refers to these “termites of reduction,” those who wish to make life easy by reducing thoughts and actions to right and wrong, leaving no room for confusion, no room for ambiguity. I by no means intend to disqualify the art of The Unbearable Lightness of Being when I focus on its ideas.

The art of this novel lies in its ability to pull together actions and themes in an extraordinarily complementary fashion. To call Kundera’s works “novels of ideas” is not to deny them their actions, their plots. But if plot comes first in crafting these novels, as Kundera claims and I readily believe, it takes a back seat to ideas when the novels are actually read. And I believe this is the inherent “art of the novel,” to accomplish what only the novel can accomplish: “The sole raison d’être of the novel is to discover what only the novel can discover.” The novel is not the only medium which can successfully combine narrative, action and ideas in a fluid manner, but it is unique, a world unto itself, different from poetry, different from playwriting, different from film. When a novel achieves this combination it can reveal a “hitherto unknown segment of existence” (AN 5-6)--and this, according to Kundera, is the ultimate art of the novel.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being moves according to an unspecified hierarchy. As I see it, the novel’s unity lies in its ability to establish thematic problems and

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3 Here when Kundera uses “they” he is referring to “religions and ideologies” (AN 7), but what are these at heart if not the products and tools of people, and thus directly representative of the people who utilize them?

4 Verse, that is; Kundera is right to suggest in his essay “Somewhere Behind” that there may be poetry in all art, that “poetry” is not necessarily verse, and that “poets” do not necessarily write verse.
observations, tying each of these themes in with one another and raising further questions about human existence in the process. One way to achieve this thematic unity, perhaps the only way for a novel to do so, is by asking questions about the characters’ actions—what does each character do, and how does this affect other characters?—as Kundera does in the scene where Tereza appears at Tomas’s door. By raising these questions, the author can arrive at conclusions which may shed light on real existential problems. Do not mistake this to mean Kundera offers answers—instead, his is the “wisdom of uncertainty,” as seen in Cervantes and Kafka (AN 6-7). His characters, while not “real,” are also never completely fictitious. Their experiences, their concerns, are similar to the experiences and concerns of the author and people around him; the characters are born of “a stimulating phrase or two or of a basic conversation” (ULB 39). Were the author to provide answers or solutions for the characters and their concerns, he would risk cheating the characters of their realness, of their remarkably alive nature. Just as simple and satisfying solutions rarely arise in real life human situations, so too are such solutions scant within the realm of Kundera’s novel. Rather than arriving at solutions, Kundera’s goal is, I think, to arrive at situations and questions, of the sort which accompany real life; to examine real life through the unique lens which only the novel can provide; to satisfy in a new way the very human desire for knowledge of the outside world. In regard to Kafka, for example, Kundera observes that the former asks in his literature “What possibilities remain for man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that internal impulses no longer carry weight?” (AN 26). It is this type of exploration which Kundera himself is after in his own novels: to raise questions like this,
to explore the quest for the self both internally and externally, and to push further our awareness of the possibilities and problems of human existence. It is in the execution of this search that Kundera is unique. No one else in the history of the novel portrays communist Czechoslovakia as Kundera does; no one else created Tomas, with Tomas’s views, his instincts and his predilections, his desires and experiences. This is Kundera’s goal, to discover what only Kundera can discover, to show to the rest of the world what only Kundera can reveal, in his unique way.

III. “I have been thinking about Tomas for many years. But only in the light of these reflections did I see him clearly.”

Part of understanding *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is to recognize how the characters came to be. Kundera appears entirely in control of the characters and situations which appear in his novels. But to believe this may be misleading. Perhaps it is the willingness with which this author abandons his control over characters that makes their situations so real, so true to life. He never appears to manipulate the thoughts or actions of a character to serve other purposes, such as the movement of plot or action; instead, the author acknowledges the value of those thoughts for their own merit; he gives over to the thoughts of his characters. Nowhere in Kundera’s fiction do I find myself in disbelief, or unwilling to accept circumstances as they are offered to me. This quality is part of the success of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. As a reader I am pleased at the author’s honesty: when he crafts a situation, he admits so. “I have been thinking about Tomas for many years” (6), states the narrator, after the initial two chapters of the book in which he contemplates lightness and weight and the writings of
Nietzsche and Parmenides. This statement is not meant to mislead the reader, to create confusion about the identities of narrator and author. There is a specific author of this novel, and there is a specific narrator, and they may well be the same person. I am comfortable with a touch a presumptuousness on my part—for me, the narrator is Kundera, and it is that simple. He is involved in his novel, to a degree which is inextricable. This is not a narrator who simply reveals plot lines; he does not provide the role of Greek chorus between scenes of action. Instead he shares himself, and in doing so creates Tomas. “I have been thinking about Tomas for many years.” This is the voice of a creator. “But only in the light of these reflections [on Nietzsche and Parmenides] did I see him clearly” (6). It is the voice of a creator, an author, who shares with his readers not only the final product, but the process by which he arrived at that product. This is important—in failing to note the means of Tomas’s creation, I may never fully appreciate the character for what he is: an expression of doubt and curiosity, on the part of his creator, and a means by which to explore those emotions. Kundera discusses this in a dialogue published in The Art of the Novel: “That reflection [on Nietzsche’s eternal return] introduces directly, from the very first line of the novel, the fundamental situation of a character—Tomas; it sets out his problem: the lightness of existence in a world where there is no eternal return” (29). This guidance from the author makes perfectly clear the necessity of those reflections on eternal return, and lightness and weight, in relation to Tomas.

Kundera goes further to establish his role in the novel. “It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were
not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation" (ULB 39). He is thus further enmeshed in the reader's consciousness as "the author." In this passage lies another key to understanding Kundera's goals with this book. Where do the "stimulating phrase or two" and "a basic situation" come from? From the author--his life, his experiences, his observations, and most importantly his imagination. Any and all of these can be felt at different times and in different places in the novel. At the same time that he probes the mysteries of the mind--his mind: "... only in the light of these reflections did I see him clearly"--he takes stock of the outer world, of the environment that he and his characters know, or, more importantly, that they don't know. For all of Franz's previous confidence, for example, for all that he thinks he knows, he is moved nonetheless to reevaluate and reconsider his life situation. Tomas and Tereza both, despite their personal recognition of irrationality within each of them, are powerless to put that irrationality to rest. Each wrestle with it through the course of the novel, letting what they know be dethroned by what they feel. Tomas knows he should give up other women, but feels as if he cannot live without them. Tereza knows that she should not feel threatened by Tomas's women, but feels threatened anyway.

IV. "But just when reason wins a total victory, pure irrationality (force willing only its will) seizes the ... stage, because there is no longer any generally accepted value system to block its path."

The paradoxical nature of life is the preeminent theme figuring in this novel. Each character must deal with what Kundera calls "terminal paradoxes," a characteristic of the Modern Era which is well exemplified in the above quote from "The Depreciated Legacy
of Cervantes" (AN 10). Other examples of the terminal paradoxes Kundera deals with are: Tomas’s love, unique and irreplaceable, for Tereza, and his simultaneous need to sleep with other women; vertigo, as seen in Tereza, which is not simply the fear of falling, but the fear that one might let oneself fall, the fear of letting go the rail despite oneself; the indispensability of language and yet the inability of language to capture the essence of meaning which a character wants so dearly to communicate—take Sabina and Franz, and “Words Misunderstood”; the proliferation of kitsch, which is the “absolute denial of shit” (ULB 248), and its inherently misleading nature, coupled with the absolute need to hold onto hope in such a manner as only kitsch permits people to. All of these make up the paradoxical themes of the novel, the examples by which Kundera presents his understanding of terminal paradoxes. These situations recur over the course of the novel, and are always unique; Kundera observes terminal paradoxes in every corner of life: interaction with the self, interaction with others, and interaction with the larger social forces (I mentioned history and politics, and will deal later with examples of each as they play into the characters’ lives).

Identifying these paradoxes offers Kundera the opportunities he’s looking for to move from situation to observation, from plot to theme. For example: Tereza’s situation regarding Tomas’s infidelities leaves her feeling helpless and weak. This in turn leads to vertigo, which may be Tereza’s only means to gain the attention from Tomas that she wants. “[Vertigo] is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves”; “We might also call vertigo the intoxication of the weak. Aware of his weakness, a man decides to give in
rather than stand up to it. He is drunk with weakness, wishes to grow even weaker, wishes to fall down in the middle of the main square in front of everybody, wishes to be down, lower than down”; “Pick me up,” is the message of a person who keeps falling. Tomas kept picking her up, patiently” (ULB 60, 76, 61). It is this last gesture which Tereza is after. If she cannot convince him to leave his other women, at least she can see his love confirmed every time he picks her up. And, more than love, his picking her up reflects his soucit, his compassion, his “co-feeling” with her. “This kind of compassion . . . therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme” (ULB 20). Vertigo is Tereza’s last available tool to affirm Tomas’s love for her. But just as she is empowered by vertigo, she is also paradoxically rendered incapable of doing anything else. In order to go on happily with her life she must gain Tomas’s affirmation; as long as she seeks that affirmation, however, she cannot go on happily with her life.

I understand clearly Tereza’s actions because of the author’s observational digressions and examinations. Kundera never directly tells the reader that Tereza wants Tomas to pick her up, but by offering her actions, and then by explaining some of his terms (“vertigo”), he leads the reader to understand, thematically, what the author understands. He is not breaking the old writing maxim “Show, don’t tell”; instead he is offering layers of showing—he shows what goes on at the surface, and, by observation, shows what may be going on underneath the surface, thereby adding texture to his writing.
Kundera makes use of other devices to move from action to theme. The motifs which are presented in the novel illuminate to a greater extent the differences between people, and the power of terminal paradoxes. Kundera defines the word “motif” as “an element of the theme or of the story that appears several times over the course of the novel, always in a different context” (AN 84). I would add that motifs form patterns which give texture to daily life, patterns which characters—people—sometimes recognize, sometimes don’t. Every time a motif is taken out of its original context, it develops a new connotative value of its own. Sabina’s bowler hat is one motif. She understands it in a certain light: it belonged to her grandfather and represents something of her connection to history; when Tomas puts it on her head during their flirtatious foreplay, however, it takes on an erotic value. Now, whenever she sees the hat, Sabina is reminded not only of her grandfather but also of Tomas and the erotic playfulness that she shares with him. Still later, when they meet up again in Geneva, Sabina wears the bowler to greet him at the door, and the hat is automatically interpreted by Tomas as a symbol of times past. This gives their lovemaking on that occasion a nostalgic tone, and from there the hat comes to represent all that the lovers understand about each other, all they’ve shared, and all they’ll lose as their lives diverge from one another. Change the context one more time, and the value of the hat is again irrevocably altered. When Sabina dons it in her lovemaking with Franz, his unfamiliarity with the motif makes him uncomfortable; not only can he not know the significance of this object, he does not realize that removing it from his lover’s head is seen as a reprimand, and this will subject him to Sabina’s reevaluation of him. By rejecting the hat, Franz unwittingly betrays himself to
Sabina; she knows clearly now that a connection between the two of them is missing.

There are other motifs as well: music, the dog Karenin, the myth of Oedipus, concentration camps, and even Prague’s park benches all serve as symbols whose meanings constantly give Kundera’s characters cause to reevaluate their situations.

V. “[Descartes and Cervantes] laid bare the ambiguity of this epoch [the Modern Era], which is decline and progress at the same time and which, like all that is human, carries the seed of its end in its beginning.”

I mentioned earlier the pressures of outside forces that Kundera foists upon his characters in order to further complicate and confuse their lives. These forces overlap through many of his novels, and they are social--socially established, socially enforced, socially understood. These forces often appear more troubling to Kundera’s individual characters than to the rest of society, and each gives rise to Kundera’s terminal paradoxes. The passage above is taken from “The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes” (AN 4), and is perhaps the ultimate example of what Kundera means when he refers to terminal paradoxes. History is certainly one of these forces. Politics is another. Social mediocrity, which gives rise to kitsch, is a third. Here terminal paradoxes are further explored, now larger, and confusing to the characters in a new way, because they are amplified from the paradoxes which crop up in personal life to the social realm of existence.

The power of each force is difficult for the characters to fully grasp. Kundera writes of “the train called History” (AN 8), and chronicles its effect on the course of the novel. Later he discusses the effect of history on individual characters. On the role of
history in his work, Kundera states: “All historical circumstances I treat with the greatest
economy . . . I keep only those that create a revelatory existential situation for my char-
acters” (AN 36). An excellent example of this takes place in The Unbearable Lightness
of Being, part 4. Tereza--troubled by her recent affair with a young engineer, who, in
her paranoia, she has turned into an agent of the secret police out to trap her in an infidel-
ity and thus have some dirt with which to blackmail her later--leaves her apartment for a
brief walk to the Vltava river. “The river flowed from century to century, and human
affairs play themselves out on its banks. Play themselves out to be forgotten the next
day, while the river flows on” (ULB 170). This soothed her, soothed her anxiety over her
recent attempt to banish her soul from her body, to release her body from the demands of
her soul, and to enjoy letting another man penetrate her--which, of course, she did not
enjoy, could not enjoy, because her soul refused to leave, merely waited for Tereza to
reclaim her soul from the corner of her body where it waited patiently and laughed at her
during her lovemaking. Standing next to the river and finding solace in the idea that her
actions might be washed away and forgotten along the riverbank, she notices a “strange
object in the middle of the river, something red--yes, it was a bench . . . . Followed by
another. And another and another, and only then did Tereza realize that all the park
benches of Prague were floating downstream, away from the city” (171). This passage
exemplifies Kundera’s observation that “man has now become a mere thing to the forces
(of technology, of politics, of history) that bypass him, surpass him, possess him” (AN 4).
For Tereza--as well as Kundera--this is ominous. Only the night before she had wanted
to convince Tomas that they should leave Prague, that nothing good was left for them in
the city of police spies, that they should move to the country, where, of course, Tomas would no longer be able to sustain his multiple erotic relationships, and Tereza might be able to leave off dreaming her fears and anxieties night after night.

This scene at the riverside reveals Kundera’s subtlety when combining elements of internal and external pressure to render a character confused and disturbed. The author does not reveal the historical circumstances surrounding the floating benches. All he offers is the general time period during which the story takes place, and some of the changes enacted by the Soviet forces. The park benches may have been removed in an attempt to keep loiterers from the parks, or to discourage lovers from doting affectionately upon one another in public— as Tomas and Tereza sat on a park bench in her little town the day they met— or to eliminate one more place for public interaction and thus push people closer to the Party meetings and events for their social interactions, rather than face isolation. Must I know the answer in order to understand the value of the image? According to Kundera, no. Regarding his own work, the author states that “Whatever needs to be known of [history] the novel itself tells” (AN 39). But can I take his word for it? I think so. First, a sense of the historical and political atmosphere of Prague in the late 1960’s and early ’70’s is made clear throughout the novel. Second, I have to ask myself what the image serves to communicate. Am I to further grasp the ridiculousness of the Communist uprising and its effects on Prague? Perhaps, but this is not the primary motive for the image. Tereza has gone to the river to feel the lightness, the dismissability of individual events next to the course of history; hers is to find salvation in forgetting, to let the timeless river wash away her action. What she finds
instead are these benches, and a startling lack of concern on the part of passersby. “But
everyone passed her by, indifferent, for little did they care that a river flowed from
century to century through their ephemeral city” (171). There is no one to share this
moment with Tereza, no one to explain it to her--just as the event remains unexplained to
the reader--and only then, in a moment of confusion, does she finally understand through
her grief what this means. “She understood that what she saw was a farewell” (ULB
171). Farewell to the hope that accompanied her arrival in Prague. Rather than finding
solace next to the flowing river, Tereza’s personal concerns are compounded by the
social changes taking place, leaving her yet more confused. History will not help Tereza
today.

Politics also plays a major role in the book, not because it is a political novel, but
because political actions have major effects on the lives of the characters. First there is
Sabina, whose art had been controlled by the political climate. As a student in the
socialist academy she was taught “the strictest realism,” because “art that was not
realistic was said to sap the foundations of socialism” (ULB 63). In socialist Prague even
modes of expression are determined by the government, and if not by the government
then by the lay-culture, other students and workers who belonged to the Communist Party
and simply by force of numbers could dictate the legitimacy of behaviors and actions.
Sabina was forced to be selective about her artwork, careful what she should show
anybody. “‘Here is a painting I happened to drip red paint on,’” she recalls (63), and she
goes on to discuss her initial disappointment at the accident. Her goal had been to
realistically render a local steelworks building, and she had been fanatic about her style
of painting it to look like a photograph. As she looked more and more at that trickle of red, it took on the appearance of a crack in the structure, and was the only color in an otherwise drab painting. “I began playing with the crack, filling it out, wondering what might be visible behind it . . . . Of course, I couldn’t show [it] to anybody. I’d have been kicked out of the Academy” (63). Sabina discovers, or discovers for Kundera, one of life’s terminal paradoxes: “On the surface, there was always an impeccably realistic world, but underneath . . . lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract.” She pauses a moment after saying this, and then adds “On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth” (63). This epiphany gives rise to Sabina’s sensitivity to kitsch—“the absolute denial of shit”—a sensitivity which might have gone undeveloped were it not for the political climate of Prague when she was a beginning painter.

Tomas’s life is also changed by politics. After publishing an article about ignorance and responsibility inspired by the myth of Oedipus—an article aimed against the cry “My conscience is clear! I didn’t know!” (177), which many communists used in response to information that the Party had, among other things, wrongfully executed innocent people—Tomas is forced into a discouraging situation: either he recants his statement as it appeared in the paper, or he faces losing his position as a doctor. Not pleased at the idea of signing any retraction, and similarly upset at the idea that being fired from his job might be used as propaganda for the party machine—he would make an excellent example of what happens to instigators and dissenters—he decides to resign, and takes work as a window washer. This move is entirely precipitated by the political
atmosphere of the times, and complicates Tomas’s life, making him feel defenseless and without any good recourse. All of this comes down at a time when Tomas is already confused: he returned to Prague after Tereza left him in Zurich, only to be greeted by second thoughts at the prospect of living again with her (yet he knows already that he cannot be happy without her); in choosing to return to the occupied country, he was made to give over his passport and travel papers--now he cannot leave. By portraying Tomas as the victim of both his own internal confusion and the pressures of uncontrollable outside forces, Kundera accomplishes what he asserts the novel must do (AN 5-6)--he reveals a previously unexplored possibility of human existence. Tomas’s uniqueness lies not in the combination of internal and external demands, but in the fact that he, and only he, is Tomas.

VI. “What remains of Franz?
   An inscription reading ‘A Return After Long Wanderings.’”

If Franz seems separate in the story from Tomas, Tereza and Sabina, it is for good reason. His is a foil character to the other three. I suspect, when reading the novel, that Franz is not quite the ladies’ man Tomas is; I take him to be largely free of the self-antagonism Tereza constantly deals with; and he appears less inclined toward creative thinking than Sabina. How, exactly, is Franz important to the novel? Opposite Sabina, Franz makes the section titled “Words Misunderstood” possible. With Franz, Kundera makes a break from the stories of Tomas and Tereza. The author also provides a new light in which to see Sabina--she behaves almost as a motif in the story; while Tomas and Tereza are always inevitably linked (even when they are apart, when Tomas is with other women, or
when Tereza is at work or in the engineer’s flat), Sabina is free of both of them, not inseparably tied to either. With the introduction of Franz, Kundera enables himself to tell Sabina’s story without using Tomas or Tereza to coax certain things out of her. In “Words Misunderstood” and “The Grand March,” details of Sabina’s life unfold in opposition to details of Franz’s life (each of the definitions in “Words Misunderstood” convey this, as does the essay on kitsch that makes up the entirety of “The Grand March”).

While all four of the main characters in The Unbearable Lightness of Being are susceptible to the pressures and strains already discussed, Franz is unique within this context. Notably removed from the other three, he is a remarkably fragile character, fragile not in the same way as Tereza, who has never felt entirely secure, but as an individual who only later in life questions his decisions and his values. Franz’s introduction is well crafted: “Franz had just finished his afternoon lecture. As he left the building, the sprinklers were spouting jets of water over the lawn and he was in a capital mood. He was on his way to see his mistress” (81). Immediately I feel as if Franz is the bumbling and lovable moron, relatively untroubled by life’s daily frustrations. Here he is, strutting across campus, work done, the sun is shining (I imagine), and he is free to frolic. But right away Franz also possesses a certain depth of character; he is about to visit his mistress, but “only as a friend, never as a lover” (81). It is explained from his perspective that if he made love to his mistress (who is later revealed as Sabina) in Geneva, he would have to return from her studio to his home with his wife—from Sabina’s bed to his conjugal bed in the same day, “And that, he felt, would humiliate
both mistress and wife and, in the end, himself as well” (81). Thus he invites Sabina on frequent travel trips to foreign towns, so that he may have her in their own sacred sphere, removed from the sphere he and his wife have long since established in Geneva. This attitude feels a bit conservative at first, but perhaps it makes sense. Were Tomas this conservative, Tereza never would have suffered to smell another woman’s groin in her husband’s hair at night. Franz is right, such impetuousness is only humiliating in the end, as both Tomas and Tereza learn all too well. Within the span of two paragraphs, Kundera introduces Franz, reveals him as lighthearted, and also gives him a little moral astuteness to boost the character’s value.

Kundera classifies Franz as one of the two “dreamers of this novel” (271), the other being Simon, Tomas’s long abandoned son, and describes these dreamers as “people who live in the imaginary eyes of those who are not present” (270). After his break with Sabina, Franz found himself living yet for her, imagining that her eyes recorded each of his actions. Of course, he looked for her approval. In the end this is what gets Franz killed. Motivated by Sabina’s admiration of his physical strength, which he had never given much thought to, Franz stands up to the Bangkok street thugs who accost him for his wallet. The timing of this intrusion, the thieves who aim to take his money, is remarkable--it has the makings, in fact, of tragedy. Here Franz has just come to realize the most important thing he may ever know, when his epiphany is rudely interrupted. Fresh off the bus from the spoiled march on Cambodia, Franz discovers what he senses he was meant to know all along:

Picturing the face with big round glasses, he suddenly realized how happy he was with his student-mistress. All at once, the Cambodia venture struck him as meaningless, laughable. Why had he come? Only now did
he know. He had come to find out once and for all that neither parades nor Sabina but rather the girl with the glasses was his real life, his only real life! He had come to find out that reality was more than a dream, much more than a dream! (273-4).

Irony is at play here as Franz wanders dreamily down the Bangkok streets after dark. No sooner does he have this revelation and seem to find comfort in what he finally sees as his reality, than he is faced with a brutal and harsh element of reality--the ill will of other men. Bolstered, however, by his new found epiphany, and also by the fixed eyes of Sabina, Franz decides to stand up for himself. He fights off two men: “Now he was satisfied with himself. Sabina’s eyes were still on him. She would never see him 
humiliate himself again! She would never see him retreat! Franz was through with being 
soft and sentimental” (274); this makes for trouble, though. Once again he’s dreaming, 
cannot escape his need to dream. Just when it seems he has emerged from a life long 
reverie, he slips uncontrollably back into it. For one dreamy moment he freed himself of 
Sabina’s imagined gaze and accepted the terms of his so called reality with his new 
young mistress. But, thrust back into the real world fray, it is Sabina he first turns to, 
cannot help but turn to, in his mind. Satisfied with his physical prowess at fighting off 
his assailants--“He felt what was almost a cheerful hatred for these men. They had thought to have a good laugh at him and his naivete!” (275)--Franz eyes the remaining 
man, waiting to see the next move. “Suddenly, he felt a heavy blow on his head, and he 
crumpled immediately . . . and he lost consciousness” (275). So much for Franz, so much for overcoming his naivete.

That last sentence may sound flip, but Kundera treats Franz’s death in exactly that manner, caustically even, though not at Franz’s expense but at his wife’s. Again Kundera
displays his aptitude for bringing together internal desires as well as external demands.
The moment Franz emancipates himself from dreams, he is swept down by forces of the
outside world—thugs looking for money, and also his wife, who had engraved upon
Franz’s tombstone “A Return After Long Wanderings” (276). Rather than dealing out
Franz’s demise as conventional tragedy, as Kundera easily could have, the author
maximizes the situation’s potential to reveal some of life’s truisms. “In death, Franz at
last belonged to his wife. He belonged to her as he had never belonged to her before”;
“Yes, a husband’s funeral is a wife’s true wedding! The climax of her life’s work! The
reward for her sufferings!” (275). Each of these statements accurately defines Franz’s
posthumous situation: he belongs no longer to himself but is the returned property of the
wife he abandoned—he is Marie Claude’s social salvation. Franz is left in death to be
manipulated by the pressure of another person’s will.

Kundera is hard on Marie-Claude, though it is not too difficult a step to take to see
Tereza in the same light. I can’t imagine Tereza seeing Tomas’s death as “The reward
for her sufferings,” but there is no doubt that she would feel that singularly proprietary
claim that only a wife, and not a mistress, could feel at her husband’s funeral. (What
Marie-Claude fails to see, however, and what Tereza would most likely suspect, is that
mistresses have their own singularly proprietary claims upon dead lovers, different, but
not unequal to the claims made by wives.) But because Tereza dies with Tomas she does
not attend his funeral, and Tomas’s body is thus relinquished not to his wife or any of his
mistresses but to his son, who sees to Tomas’s tombstone much as Marie-Claude sees to
Franz’s. “He Wanted the Kingdom of God on Earth,” reads the tombstone, although
Simon was “well aware that his father would not have said it in those words” (276). I’m not convinced Tomas would have expressed this at all, but Kundera makes good use of this situation to raise an interesting question. “Hadn’t Simon the right to express his father’s life in his own vocabulary? Of course he had: haven’t all heirs had that right from time immemorial?” (276).

I read in this question the overwhelming concern of Kundera’s later book Testaments Betrayed. What happens when a person’s wishes are not honored in death, even—or especially—by those who believe they are fulfilling or suitably altering the deceased’s requests? Kundera examines the question brilliantly, using Kafka as an example, in “The Castrating Shadow of Saint Garta,” an essay from that book. Kafka requested that upon his death all his manuscripts be destroyed. Rather than granting this wish, Kafka’s friend Max Brod published them. What is the moral here, was Brod right or wrong, did he do good or bad? This is a hard question to answer. Brod’s decision was good for us—we got Kafka. But was it the honorable thing to do? According to Kundera, Brod certainly thought so, just as Marie-Claude and Simon felt righteous in their choices of epitaphs. But what does this mean to the legacies of the deceased? Are these legacies tainted by the wishes of the living? For an answer to this question I turn to the last section of “The Grand March”:

What remains of the dying population of Cambodia?
One large photograph of an American actress holding an Asian child in her arms.

What remains of Tomas?
An inscription reading “He Wanted the Kingdom of God on Earth.”

What remains of Beethoven?
A frown, an improbable mane, and a somber voice intoning “Es muss sein!”
What remains of Franz?
An inscription reading "A Return After Long Wanderings."
And so on and so forth. Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion (277-8).

When Brod published Kafka’s journals, he edited out anything having to do with sex, for fear that it might taint the writer’s virtue and reputation (TB 44-5). What Brod gives us, then, is not the truth, but a lie; this is a good example of Sabina’s observations regarding the “intelligible lie” and the “unintelligible truth”; this is kitsch. In order to reach the world, Kafka was first subjected to kitsch.

One of the things that Franz brings us is an understanding of kitsch, seen fresh in relation to him rather than Sabina, who had previously been the main character to help the reader discover kitsch. Franz and Tomas are both betrayed in death, as Kafka was. And like Kafka, they were betrayed by people who felt a certain closeness to them. It is this closeness which allows friends and family to go against the wishes of the deceased; this is how the living cope, by spinning out a legacy of kitsch which the dead might never have imagined, and certainly would have objected to.

VII. “And suddenly he realized that all his life he had done nothing but talk, write, lecture, concoct sentences, search for formulations and amend them, so in the end no words were precise, their meanings were obliterated, their content lost, they turned into trash, chaff, dust, sand; prowling through his brain, tearing at his head, they were his insomnia, his illness.”

Everything I’ve written over these pages is subject to argument. My own concern with this paper is not for the validity or appropriateness of the passages I’ve looked into, but for all of the passages, the episodes and observations, that I’ve left out. In “The
Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes” Kundera comments that the development of the novel in the Modern Era has been a series of “missed opportunities” (AN 15); certainly the development of criticism in the same period has been similar. I read any number of critical texts and think, “But this writer has missed a crucial point!”; exclamation marks go off in my head, incompetence alarms sound, I feel some sort of intellectual triumph over a critic, find him or her shallow, and allow myself to debunk the integrity of that criticism based on the one or two elements which seem important to me (I stress the word “seem”) that the writer did not address. But what victory is this? The only accomplishment there is that I’ve allowed my focus to be stripped from what observation is available about the novel or poem being discussed; I grant myself an opportunistic “win” over an unknown critic whom I imagine myself in competition with. Such was Doris Lessing’s prediction in her introduction to The Golden Notebook. Of literary critics, and especially students, she writes:

“Why are they so parochial, so personal, so small minded? Why do they always atomise, and belittle, why are they so fascinated by detail, and uninterested in the whole? Why is their interpretation of the word critic always to find fault? Why are they always seeing writers as in conflict with each other, rather than complementing each other . . . simple, this is how they are trained to think” (xxv).

Kundera is also aware of critics’ tendencies to lose sight of the art they evaluate. “My despair at this era befogged with ideas and indifferent to art” (AN 131), he writes in his definition of the word “ideas.” But he recognizes the value of criticism. In an essay on criticism published in Francois Ricard’s La Litterature contre elle-meme5, Kundera writes: “The public is splintered and, hence, silent; no echoes reverberate from it.

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5 Excerpted and reprinted in The Review of Contemporary Fiction, volume 9, number 2, Summer 1989.
Without criticism, the discoveries effected by art go unnamed and thereby remain absent from the history of art, for a work enters history and becomes visible there only if its discoveries, its innovations, are specified and recognized” (13). This is a swell way to look at criticism, if it’s done well. “To define the value of a novel, of a film, is to try to grasp what is new and irreplaceable in what it contributes, to articulate what previously unknown aspects of existence it has discovered. Let us consider the critic, therefore, as a discoverer of discoveries” (13). This is a tough demand to make of critics, but I think appropriate. And it is no less demanding than the call Kundera places on novelists.

Too often the criticism becomes more important than the work upon which it’s based, and this, I think, is what both Lessing and Kundera fear most. In the passage quoted at the top of this section, found in The Unbearable Lightness of Being on p. 94, Kundera examines the fragility and inadequacy of language. This is another of Franz’s epiphanies, that all of his carefully prepared words amount only to imprecision, an inability to capture the essence of what motivates a person to speak in the first place. Language can betray its users, and anyone who uses language as an artistic medium is all too aware of this. Not only might the artist be betrayed by his own inability to capture or express the essence of his thoughts or emotions--his art--he may also be betrayed by the critic who uses the same language. Writing is a unique art form in this way. The artist who paints is not likely subjected to a painted criticism of his work; it is unlikely that a critic would criticize a film via another film (although satire is an exception in both media); but the poet, the playwright and the novelist all see their works criticized by the
same medium which gave life to those works in the first place: language. I find this an interesting paradox, one which has tempered this essay since its conception.

Franz’s realization about language, especially his, the language of an academic, is troubling to me. Troubling because it is so apt, so appropriate and important to realize when working with language. The more I add to this paper, the more concerned I grow that each sentence is an attempt to fill in the holes of the sentences before it, on and again until I’ve either exhausted myself or falsely satisfied my sense of completion. This concern is one which Kundera deals with subtly in many of his works. It is the challenge of fitting the right words to the right meanings, as “Words Misunderstood” highlights. There is also something self aware in Franz’s observation about the inadequacy of his language: not only does Franz consider this, but so too has the author given it some thought. But Kundera also knows, I believe, that his words are sound, that they are bolstered by the convictions of his experiences, and that his writings are not simply sentences filling in the gaps and fissures of previous sentences.

This is one of the less emphasized themes of the novel, but important to look into. Each character is an artist in their own right: Tomas with medicine and eroticism, Tereza with photography and her dreams, Sabina with her paintings and her observations about life and culture, and Franz with his lectures. And each character struggles to match words to their art and their emotions, realizing for themselves the fragility and instability of language. In this respect, Kundera sheds light on the universal experience of fitting words to meanings. As each of the characters works to control language, they reflect the problem facing people everywhere—artists, poets, novelists, critics, politicians, lecturers,
photographers, lovers, and even window washers--of assimilating experiences and emotions into words.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, as in all of his works, Kundera does more than simply reflect real life on the written page. He creates life, he reminds his readers on a page by page basis that life is big, and that enjoyment of it rests in embracing it, not allowing oneself to forget it. He reveals to his readers the terminal paradoxes which haunt each of his characters. We, having really *read Kundera*, can in turn examine our lives with a fresh viewpoint. By reading this novel in conjunction with his nonfiction, I see how this discovery works on a much clearer basis. Turning to the author for his own insight into the heartbeat of his novel is an excellent way to better understand the novel itself.
Works Cited


