

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Narration in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

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Abstract

Milan Kundera had defined the novel as a genre as "the great prose form in which the author thoroughly explores, by means of experimental selves (characters), some great themes of existence," thus taking an apparently solipsistic view of authorship, in which characters are "experimental selves" of the author. The present paper deliberates upon how this can be reconciled with Kundera's departure from classical realism in his *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and argues that the novel's insistence on the ineffable phenomenological otherness and contingency inherent in human experience amounts to an ethical as well as aesthetic stance against totalizing discourses, politically the foremost among them being Russia's Stalinist communism, Kundera's native country Czechoslovakia had suffered for decades under whose imperialist yolk. By coalescing the heterological and heterodox Bakhtinian function of critique through comic subversion with this diaphanous quality of ineffability, Kundera attains a feat unparalleled in the history of the novel. His achievement perhaps provides a direction towards what Habermas would call a "reflective understanding" of human as well as non-human (animal) experience.

Keywords: Kundera, novel, ethics, aesthetics, heterology, kitsch, Habermas, justice.

In spite of his émigré status and the recurrent references to the Communist occupation of his motherland in his works, Milan Kundera has always insisted that "[t]he novelist is neither historian nor prophet : he is an explorer of existence" (*Art*, 44). His novels, consequently, consist of an intricately ordered sequence of philosophical cogitations which comment upon, and are in turn illustrated by, the events in the characters' lives. This helical arrangement allows the narrator to engage in what Kundera calls "[m]editative interrogation (interrogative meditation)" (*Art*, 31). In his art, the narrator can very well be considered an exceptional character — one who meditates upon and mediates between the other characters' being and nothingness.

In a chapter titled "Sixty-three Words" in *The Art of the Novel*, the author defines the novel as "[t]he great prose form in which the author thoroughly explores, by means of *experimental selves (characters)*, some great *themes of existence*" (142, my emphasis). This foregrounding of the fact that characters exist inasmuch as they serve the author's ends or inquiries takes place also in the text of the work this paper deals with, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: "characters are not born like people [...] ; they are born of a situation, a metaphor, containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about. *But isn't it true that an author can write only about himself ?*" (116 ; my emphasis).

This solipsism of seeing characters as "experimental selves" has epistemological as well as ethical underpinnings. He says, "To apprehend the self in my novels means to grasp the essence of its

existential problem. To grasp its *existential code*. As I was writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words" (*Art*, 29). Such a structured inquiry into human life would be insupportable to Kundera if undertaken through an omniscient and invisible narrator, because, as D. A. Miller writes, it is the "faceless gaze [that] becomes an ideal of the power of regulation" (*The Novel and the Police*, 24), the power Kundera associates with totalitarianism. Instead, his narrator declares himself on the very first page, and keeps contradicting each decision he reaches in his philosophical speculation. Hana Pichova argues that the author "chooses an open-ended structure for the narrative", so that "the choice of narratological techniques enables him to free the characters on the structural level" (217). The story is begun with the narrator stating, "I have been thinking about Tomas for many years" (3). This suggests the ongoing and contingent nature of the narrator's deliberation. Complexity of plot, affective investment in the events and suspense are absent ; the narrative shifts focus in an arbitrary and apparently desultory manner, such that the characters seem to "develop on their own throughout" (Pichova 222) the novel. Proleptic interventions, though covert, might suggest an overarching authorial intentionality, but the device, like others in the novel deriving from traditional realist tradition, is "*turned over*" (Barthes, quoted in Scarpetta 118). Its intention is anticlimactic.

"Chance and chance alone has a message for us", says the narrator in Part Two (24). This at once gives the characters' thoughts and actions a dimension outside of reason, and makes them indeterminate. The narrator's position is that of a commentator, who the reader may or may not believe : "*The only explanation I can suggest* is that for Franz, love was not an extension of public life but its antithesis" (56 ; Pichova's emphasis). The most telling example is the admission : "... *even I find it difficult to explain* what she had in mind when she compared a nude beach to the Russian invasion" (34 ; Pichova's emphasis). This explicit lack of understanding not only invests Tereza here with hypothetical autonomy, but more fundamentally, when considered in tandem with the formulation that the author can write "only about himself" (116), suggests that the author does not know his own mind, thus bearing upon the basic "theme" Kundera addresses : against Descartes, he posits that "... man is no longer master... The planet is moving through the void without a master. There it is, the unbearable lightness of being" (*Art*, 41). His art acts as an antihumanist critique of the unity of the subject, of Cartesian *cogito*. In a section titled "Beyond Causality" in the same book he lauds *Anna Karenina*, a book Tereza carries when she comes over to Tomas's, for "bringing into light the causeless, incalculable, even mysterious aspect of human action. . . . It is rather the decision that takes Anna. That overtakes her. . . . Which does not mean that her act is senseless. But its sense lies outside rationally apprehensible causality" (*Art*, 57-8). All this applies to his own work, to wit Sabina's decision to leave Franz.

The impact of his musical training on his art has attracted much comment, not least from himself. It is with reference to this parallelism that he talks about "polyphony" (*Art*, 73) and "equality of voices" (*Art*, 75). These ideals, however, are evidently pillars of the antihumanist conception of the novel in a more obvious sense. The ethical commitment to "equality" and the subaltern (i.e. voiceless) in human or animal experience, for instance to the dogs massacred by the Communist state (149), is inseparable from an aesthetic sensibility, encapsulated in music, which demand the same. Sabina is a succinct embodiment of this : "Sabina's initial inner revolt against Communism was aesthetic rather than ethical in character" (130), but this inheres in a revulsion for pretentious dishonesty, an ethical revulsion : "What repelled her was not nearly so much the ugliness... but the mask of beauty it tried to wear" (130). It is possible to extrapolate from this and infer that the experience of artistic hegemony, censorship and unethical infringements on privacy as well as the right to self-expression under totalitarianism could have led to an amalgamation in Kundera of these two "spheres of knowledge" (Habermas, *Modernity*) — the aesthetic and the ethical. As far as the novel's claim to knowledge is concerned, however, he holds that "the novel examines not reality but existence... the realm of human

possibilities" (*Art*, 42). This circumscribing of the claim to 'reality' allows the narrator to examine "existential codes" and binaries like 'lightness/weight', 'soul/body' and 'light/darkness' without subscribing to Manichaeism. One dualism, though, is of interest. He says, "A theme is an existential inquiry. And increasingly I realize that such an inquiry is, finally, the examination of certain words, theme-words" (*Art*, 84) ; and Franz postulates, "Music was the negation of sentences, music was the anti-word !" (47) This could well be read as Franz's subjective viewpoint, but again adducing the author's words, "I don't show what happens inside [a character's] head, I show what happens inside my own" (*Art*, 30), it is possible to read the two prerogatives of the text — the epistemic exercise of philosophical inquiry into binaries articulated in language, and the aesthetic-ethical one manifest in the music-inspired "variation, counterpoint, interval and restatement" in the narrative that Guy Scarpetta writes about (109) — as deconstructing each other in an ambivalent gesture of textual "justice", a justice that is perpetually "im-possible, that is, unconditional" (Derrida, quoted in Royle 300). A more typical gesture of undermining is found in Sabina's paintings: "On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth" (31).

Two of the novel's binarised "theme-words" are "kitsch" and "shit", such that "kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word" (130). In an elaborate exposure and reversal of the Communist regime's discursive denial of dissent, he traces the tendency to bypass the excrement, the "uncomfortable truth" (Scarpetta, 118), to the "categorical agreement with being" enshrined in the Bible itself. His undertaking corresponds perfectly with George Bataille's idea of "heterology".

... the intellectual process automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element. Heterology is restricted to taking up again, consciously and resolutely, this terminal process. ... In this way it [heterology] leads to the complete reversal of the philosophical process, which ceases to be the instrument of appropriation, and now serves excrement; it introduces the demand for the gratifications implied by social life. (Bataille 275)

Guy Scarpetta divides the characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* into three categories: those who "accept [original] sin but reject shit", those who "accept shit but reject [original] sin", and the "libertine", who accept "both shit and the idea of sin... [It] involves acknowledging that the consciousness of a stain is necessary, if only for the sake of transgressing it, for example in the erotic" (Scarpetta, 115). It is through the third category of characters, consisting of Tomas and Sabina, that the narratorial heterology is channelized. Sure enough, it erupts in elaborate sexual activity, the "gratifications" mentioned above.

Time and again in the text, the narrator first gives cogent reasons for a character's actions before putting his own reasons to unanswerable questions: "Yes, it was unbearable for him to stay in Zurich imagining Tereza living on her own in Prague. But how long would he have been tortured by compassion? All his life? A year? Or a month ? Or only a week ? How could he have known?" (19) This undecidability he attributes to the unrepeatable nature of life — to human inexperience; "The Planet of Inexperience" was an early title for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (*Art*, 132). The same effect of obfuscation of 'reason' is achieved by "ellipsis", i. e., condensing the narrative by mentioning only the outlines of events. Falling in love, emigrating etc. seem to happen almost entirely by dint of vacillating 'feeling' and "fortuity". "*Einmal ist keinmal*", the proverb Kundera adduces to counter Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence, also bears upon this anti-rational position, which actually serves to discount the monolith of historical factuality. Focusing on a few micronarratives, and those too replete with slippages, the novel apparently endorses a politics of withdrawal. Tomas, Sabina and Tereza all choose to counter the pervasive kitsch of social prototyping by a series of demotions or escapes. While a

statement like "I have no missions... Nobody has. Missions are stupid" (166) succeed in emancipating the trajectory of a human life from any overarching "*es muss sein*", any grand narrative, it limits the speaker within a pale of "idyllic" privacy. For Kundera, the only means to evade the totalitarian and other collectivist regimes of truth like "the Grand March" of European politics with their associated epistemic violence is to withdraw from "the trap the world has become" (107) into a sphere of personal and 'apolitical' ethics, where the most there can be is "therapeutic knowledge" and "reflective understanding" (Hebermas, *Justification* 22-23).

This 'apolitical' imperative leaves its mark in the text in the form of an engagement with "vertigo" : "the insupportable longing to fall" (30). It is a gesture of humility, of unconditional submission to the other within oneself. For instance, Tereza's empathy for her motherland, apparently a feeling very consistent with nationalism, is described in highly intimate and bodily terms:

The very weakness that at the time had seemed unbearable and repulsive, the weakness that had driven Tereza and Tomas from the country, suddenly attracted her. She realized that she belonged among the weak, in the camp of the weak, in the country of the weak, and that she had to be faithful to them precisely because they were weak and gasped for breath in the middle of sentences. (36-37)

The discursive association of nationalism with strength is thus subverted, while the personal ethics or 'value' is preserved by narrating its impetus as apolitical, i.e., animistic.

Animals, and human interaction with them, are central to the narrator's ethical calculus. "Mankind's true moral test, its fundamental test (which lies deeply buried from view), consists of its attitude towards those who are at its mercy: animals. And in this respect mankind has suffered a fundamental debacle, a debacle so fundamental that all others stem from it" (150), concludes the narrator after an elaborate indictment ranging from the Genesis to Descartes. Karenin the dog is referred to by the narrator as "he" throughout, and his death is key to the novel's final part. Tomas epigrammatically declares, "It is much more important to dig a half-buried crow out of the ground than to send petitions to the president" (115). There is no attempt to rationalize this empathy; instead, as Joseph Mai observed, the novel is "a fallen idyll in which those who step out of the anthropogenic tradition receive a hearing" (Mai 114). Mai points out how Tereza's close approximation to the visceral — the animistic — opens up the possibility for the aesthetics of vertigo and of the fallen idyll in the novel.

Privacy is one of the central concerns of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and its lack, whether in Tereza's former home or in the Communist state apparatus, inspires in the characters as well as the narrator a commingled sense of injustice and ugliness, i.e., of an outrage against the two aforementioned "spheres of knowledge" — the subjective ones. The intrusion of privacy, at its most telling, is focused on language and writing: the public reading of Tereza's diary, Tomas's continuous suffering for his "Oedipus article" condemning Communist crimes against humanity, the prepared texts he is pressed upon to sign by both the government and the rebels, and the public broadcast of Prochazka's private use of swear words that Tomas describes as "absolutely without precedent" (68). The repressive agenda behind this intrusion is always masked by a pretension of unity, of being "one big family" (*Art*, 110). It is in this respect that the ethics of privacy espoused by the narrator assumes a reconstructionist claim to knowledge. Kitsch is the "intelligible lie" which the "unintelligible *truth*" (133 ; my emphasis) implicitly given voice in the novel is to rip through. This implied truth-claim indicates how the epistemic, the aesthetic and the ethical imperatives of the narrative voice are intertwined; so much so, that they are practically indistinguishable.

These truths are, however, never objective; the Habermasian "scientific sphere of knowledge" (Habermas, *Modernity*) is identified by Tomas as finally a "mission" (166), an "*es muss sein*", that he had to give up to be "happy" (166). Rather, an event is portrayed 'truthfully' inasmuch as it is 'read' by the narrator in concurrence with a particular character's life-world and his/her "existential code". Frequently the narrator describes or comments upon a situation or event twice — differently from the viewpoint of two participants. Tereza's impression of and reasons for her own departure from Zurich are narrated much later than Tomas's, when the situational mood has completely altered. Instead of giving any 'authentic' narratorial version of any event, the narrator attempts to "think [a character's] attitudes, his way of seeing things" (*Art*, 79). Franz's interpretation of Sabina's state of mind during their last intercourse is completely mistaken, yet it makes perfect sense when narrated from his perspective. This powerful device moves the reader into an understanding of and respect for the pervasive nature of interpersonal differences — a justification for the narrator's statement that "the brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch" (131). On the other hand, proleptic sentences, while suggesting the presence of a 'plot' and the narrator's foreknowledge, are employed only to foreshadow death: Tereza's (25) and Tomas's (32). Thus, the narrator foretells that which is inevitable. This threnodic motif produces a tremendous yet totally silent effect at the end: the foreknowledge of the protagonists' imminent death compels the reader to maintain the interpretative ambivalence necessary for appreciating the novel's deceptively simple conclusion.

Joseph Mai, summarizing the basic philosophical leitmotif and affective impact of the novel, remarks :

The Unbearable Lightness of Being opens a perspective in which human life is "reduced" to the meat that is absent in the Cartesian tradition. But in meat and feces it issues an unjustified moral appeal concerning both human and animal suffering, to readers who must acknowledge their own vulnerability in order to hear it. (Mai, 114)

The entire novel can be read as an appeal, an address, from a narrator who aims for almost total transparency, and who thinks and exists only in the dynamic of that address. It is perhaps in this "unjustified", non-theorized, 'humane' element in the work's conception that the key to its incidental, almost ineffable aesthetics should be sought. By coalescing the heterological and heterodox Bakhtinian function of critique through comic subversion with this diaphanous quality of ineffability, Kundera attains a feat unparalleled in the history of the novel.

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