



2003

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Recommended Citation

Barnard, John, The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Repetition, Formal Stancture, and Critique, *Kunapipi*, 25(1), 2003.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol25/iss1/13>

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Abstract

The power of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1985) springs from a constant exchange between his sceptical critical intelligence and his belief in the autonomy of his fictional characters. The novel persistently draws attention to its fictiveness. It is divided into seven named parts. Part One, 'Lightness and Weight', opens with an ironic self-contained section on Nietzsche's 'idea of the eternal return' (the first of many interpolated 'essays' on 'philosophical' topics). There is an avoidance throughout of interior monologue. The narrator insistently reminds us in propria persona that what we are reading is a fiction: 'I have been thinking about Tomas for many years' (6). Tomas, the novel's central male character, is a Prague surgeon, long divorced and a latter-day Don Juan. He is at once separate from the narrator and the narrator's creation: He could no longer quite remember what had prompted his decision.

JOHN BARNARD

The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Repetition, Formal Structure, and Critique

The power of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1985) springs from a constant exchange between his sceptical critical intelligence and his belief in the autonomy of his fictional characters. The novel persistently draws attention to its fictiveness. It is divided into seven named parts. Part One, 'Lightness and Weight', opens with an ironic self-contained section on Nietzsche's 'idea of the eternal return' (the first of many interpolated 'essays' on 'philosophical' topics). There is an avoidance throughout of interior monologue. The narrator insistently reminds us *in propria persona* that what we are reading is a fiction: 'I have been thinking about Tomas for many years' (6). Tomas, the novel's central male character, is a Prague surgeon, long divorced and a latter-day Don Juan. He is at once separate from the narrator and the narrator's creation:

He could no longer quite remember what had prompted his decision.

And once more I see him the way he appeared to me at the very beginning of the novel: standing at the window and staring across the courtyard at the walls opposite.

That is the image from which he was born. As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about. (221)

Here the gap between Kundera's fiction and his critical writings in *The Art of the Novel* (1988), written between 1983 and 1987, is invisible. It might be more accurate to say that Kundera's meditations on the nature of the novel grow out of the extremely self-conscious way in which his own novels are written. Tellingly, he describes the essays in *The Art of the Novel* as 'a practitioner's confession' (vii). Creative and critical intelligence go hand in hand. Kundera's thinking, both in his novels and essays, looks for example and support to his European forebears, Cervantes, Sterne and Diderot — all writers of 'metafiction' *avant la lettre*.

Kundera has a fierce conviction that the novel is its own kind of knowing. As he says in *The Art of the Novel*, 'the novel cannot breach the limits of its own possibilities, and bringing those limits to light is already an immense discovery, an immense triumph of cognition' (25), and later, 'the novel is, by definition, the ironic art: its "truth" is concealed, undeclared, undeclarable' (134). Both these accounts suggest that the sceptical, quizzical and playful rationality of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* will achieve some kind of affirmative, if ironic

and concealed, resolution, as indeed seems to be the case. Yet the novel frames itself within a wider pessimism: '*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is 'an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become' (221). Its characters are faced with 'the profound moral perversity of a world ... [in which] everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted' (4).

If the contemporary world has 'become' a 'trap', as the narrator of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* asserts, that must mean the world was not always so. An earlier short story, 'Symposium' (1975), makes clear why. There the womanising Dr Havel denies that his own serial affairs can in any way be likened to those of Don Juan, the 'Great Conqueror':

'how can you be a conqueror in a domain where no one refuses you, where everything is possible and everything is permitted? Don Juan's era has come to an end. Today, Don Juan's descendant no longer *conquers*, but only *collects*. The figure of the Great Collector has taken the place of the Great Conqueror, only the Collector is no longer really Don Juan at all. Don Juan was a tragic figure. He was burdened by his guilt. He sinned gaily and laughed at God. He was a blasphemer and ended up in hell.'

(140–41)

This is not simply nostalgia. Kundera writes as the intellectual inheritor of a European tradition rooted in the Enlightenment; he is an admirer of Mozart, Beethoven, European literatures, and the Western philosophical tradition (Plato to Nietzsche via the Church Fathers). It is Kundera's deft and witty deployment of this inheritance which informs much of the novel's intellectual playfulness, but that same inheritance informs a discomfort with twentieth-century deracination. What is missing for the entirely secular Dr Havel is not God and Hell, but any meaningful ethical dimension against which he can measure his acts.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* there are three Don Juan figures, two of whom, Tomas and Sabina, exemplify the differing forms taken in their lives by 'lightness' ('positive' — fineness, warmth, being, freedom) and 'weight' ('negative' — cold, non-being, the burden of responsibility). Which are they to choose? At the start of the novel Tomas and Sabina are a perfect match. Both represent Don Juan as collector (in the twentieth-century, according to Kundera, women are equally able to live as libertines). They are therefore free of the burden of love (a 'lightness' which in Communist Czechoslovakia represents a space for private existential freedom).

Sabina is a painter who rejects socialist realism and conventional morality; Tomas is a dedicated surgeon, whose pursuit of women is driven by a desire to discover the nature of the precise individuality of each one. By the novel's end, Tomas, willingly or unwillingly, has conformed to the Rake Reformed pattern (or, in Sabina's words, is a Don Juan who has become a Tristan), and is burdened by heaviness through his compassionate ('co-feeling') love (19–21) for Tereza, who is tortured by her jealousy of his affairs. The novel, in consequence,

foregrounds questions about sexuality, jealousy, love and personal relationships, and these issues (along with the question of whether or not the novel is misogynistic) have tended to be the foremost concern of critics.

This emphasis is understandable, but can lead to an undue narrowing of the novel's wider questionings. These come to the fore when its formal structure is examined, even though what is most striking on a first reading of the book is the impression of spontaneous free-flowing playful inventiveness, following up and working out an initiating image or idea. The narrative continually trips the reader up. What seems real is suddenly revealed to be a dream. On occasions we cannot be sure of what is or is not true. There are re-tellings of the same events by different characters, and the chronology continually leaps backwards and forwards. Despite its apparent playfulness and spontaneity, the novel is extremely tightly structured (in that respect it is quite unlike Cervantes, Sterne or Diderot), and its patterning reveals the wider issues involved in the characters' personal dilemmas. These are precisely the issues leading to the tension between affirmation and doubt which characterise the novel's conclusion.

Kundera's own explanation of the novel's overlapping and interrupted structure is, in important ways, misleading. *The Art of the Novel* (77–78 ff.) describes the fragmented time structure of *The Unbearable Likeness of Being* through a musical analogy: the novel's repetitions are polyphonic, utilising motifs and themes as does a composer. This analogy, however, is more useful as an enabling mechanism for the writer than it is accurate. Here Kundera's criticism provides a cover for his creative practice.

Reading a novel differs in significant ways from listening to a musical performance. First, reading is a private activity whereas music originates in a communal experience, a response to a specific performance. (In consequence, reading a long novel is a discontinuous activity, while music is bound by the time of its performance.) Second, words are referential, bringing with them ideas and concepts. Third, polyphony depends upon simultaneity, an effect only possible through analogy in a novel. Finally, the reader of a novel is at once the performer (as interpreter) and the audience. More evidently than most novelists, Kundera continually foregrounds the reader's performative role — he assumes that we are all knowing readers of fiction, and that we create the fiction along with the novelist.

If we do not decide to put the novel aside (it is easy to give up a book, hard to leave a musical performance before the end), the immediate energies of the reader will be taken up, not with listening for the variations, repeats, modulations, and inversions, occurring within a known musical genre, but with following each sentence, distinguishing characters and voices, and keeping hold of, and up with, the narrative. On a first reading, we will note in passing possible patterns, themes, symbols and motifs, but that cannot be our primary concern. It is only at the second (and subsequent) readings of a novel that the formal structure of a novel begins to become clear.

The key principle of the structure of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is repetition. Repetition is also a governing thematic concern announced at the outset of the novel. There Nietzsche's 'mad myth' of the 'idea of eternal return' and the 'German adage', *Einmal ist keinmal* ('What happens once might as well not have happened at all'), are set against the 'one-thing-after-another' actuality of human experience, where repetition is impossible, to ask whether our day to day experience can have any kind of meaning at all (1–8). The importance of repetition to the novel is apparent in the list of contents: working in order through the title for each part, briefly linking it to the novel's chronology and parallel narratives demonstrates this.

Part One, 'Lightness and Weight', gives the story of Tomas's erotic life ('light'), his long-standing relationship with Sabina, and Tereza's arrival in his life. This covers the years between 1962 and 1969, and the novel includes the Prague Spring of 1968; the subsequent invasion by Russian, whose tanks and soldiers, photographed by Tereza, appear in the Western press; Dubcek's return; and the brief period Tereza and Tomas spend in exile in Zurich.

Part Two, 'Soul and Body', cover the same years and events, but from Tereza's viewpoint. The resultant repetition of the same events differently perceived (the first night Tomas and Tereza spend together is described on at least three separate occasions) give them a thickness (indeed, weight) caused by re-imagining what had previously seemed the authoritative account. Fiction can in this way create not the 'myth of eternal return' but a formal structure which embodies the repetition.

Part Three, 'Words Misunderstood', follows Sabina's life as an exile, first in Geneva (1968 to 1972), then in Paris (1972 to 1975 at least). This section also tells the story of her affair with the married Swiss academic, Franz, which she breaks off abruptly. In 1975 Sabina learns in Paris from Czechoslovakia that Tomas and Tereza have been killed in a road accident while working on a collective farm.

Part Four is, like Part Two, entitled 'Soul and Body' and is also told largely from Tereza's perspective. It is set in Prague between 1969 and 1973, the period during which the Communists re-established a police state in Czechoslovakia (seen here as a concentration camp). Tereza has to work in a bar, is still suffering from Tomas's philandering, and makes love to an engineer, who may or may not be an agent of the secret police. She also has surreal experiences, which may or may not be dreams.

The next section repeats the title of the very first part, 'Lightness and Weight', and, like that, is written from Tomas's perspective. It covers exactly the same years, 1969 to 1973, which have just been narrated from Tereza's viewpoint. However, this re-telling additionally gives details of Tomas's refusal to disavow a newspaper article he had written (using the example of Oedipus who took the blame on himself for a deed done unwittingly) to attack the Communist

apparatchiks, who refuse to admit responsibility for their past. Deprived of his post as a surgeon, he is eventually reduced to working as a window cleaner, a job which enables him to renew his erotic adventures.

Part Six, 'The Grand March', might have been called 'Kitsch', which Kundera defines as 'the aesthetic ideal' of 'a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist' (248). This is easiest to understand in terms of Sabina's experience. What she objected to as a student was the 'Communist kitsch' of the May Day ceremony, in which 'Long live Communism!' was an 'idiotic tautology ("Long live life!")' which attracted people indifferent to the theses of Communism to the Communist parade' (249); hence 'the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions' (254). In this view, unthinking American patriotism is as much kitsch as those leftist intellectuals, like Sabina's Swiss lover, Franz, to support the 'Great March' by campaigning against the occupation of Cambodia by Communists (249–51, 261–62). Franz's punishment is an undignified death at the hands of petty thieves. Sabina is last seen growing old as a painter in the USA, hiding the fact that she is Czech — her alienation is 'the unbearable lightness of being'.

The final part, 'Karenin's Smile', is set on the collective farm to which Tomas and Tereza escape from Prague. It recounts first, the death of Karenin, the female dog, which was Tomas's wedding gift to Tereza, and named after the book she was carrying when she first arrived at Tomas's flat. (Kundera ironically appropriates Tolstoy's tragic European Russian novel written in the nineteenth-century into a novel written about the diminished possibilities of life under East European Communism). The seventh and last part concludes with the final evening of Tomas and Tereza's life. As Kundera says in *The Art of the Novel*, because we already know they are dead, the novel's final part, 'despite its idyllic quality, is flooded with a melancholy that comes from the knowledge of what is to happen' (77). This is clearly the case, yet it does insufficient justice to the ambiguities and ironies of the novel's final section which, more than any other part, is concentrated on the private life of Tomas and Tereza, half-willingly exiled in their own country.

It is clear from this outline that *The Unbearable Likeness of Being* is not only an astonishingly capacious work, but one engaged in a critique of the dominant ideologies of East and West. Very deftly, by quick touches here and there, the novel calls up the full range of Czech history, one dominated by subjection to other nations. This begins with the Hussite wars of the fifteenth century, followed by the Prague uprising of 1618, which led to the Thirty Years' War and the re-imposition of Habsburg rule. The eventual founding of the Czech republic in 1918, was overthrown by Hitler in 1938, who was replaced by the Communist, President Novotny, ruling the country as a Russian dependency (97, 222–23). The novel comes right up to the Prague Spring of 1968. Mention of Kafka, Janacek and Dvorak, along with Frantisek Hrubin and Jan Prochazka

(12, 97, 229, 133, 229) are reminders of Czech literary and musical achievements. Geographically, the novel's settings range from Prague and Czech provincial towns and countryside to Geneva, Paris, Cambodia and the USA. Intellectually, the novel assumes the reader's knowledge of the whole of European and classical history, literature, music and philosophy (a flattering illusion created by wittily encapsulated summaries of the thinking of Erigena, St Jerome, Descartes, Beethoven or Nietzsche). This assumption is coupled with another — that, unlike the reader who understands *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, none of this is meaningful to anyone taken up in the 'Great March', whether of the Communist or American variety, since both ideologies are driven by their own differing (un-ironic) versions of kitsch. This implicit readership excludes both sides in the Cold War. The novel's implicit rejection of both dominant ideologies exactly reflects the position taken throughout by *The Art of the Novel*, which recalls, or reaffirms in a hostile environment, the specifically European tradition of the novel — ironic, humanist, and informed by a knowledge of its own past.

In this context, the inward swerve of the final pages of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* turns away from the larger cultural and political issues raised by the rest of the novel to the personal lives of Tomas and Tereza. How should this be read?

Kundera himself suggests that this part of the novel should be seen as an 'idyll', though one to be read in a melancholic light. 'Karenin's Smile' can be read in this way: Tomas and Tereza escape to a run-down collective pastoral world (which most people wish to leave for the city), where, because they represent no threat to the larger community, they are free from the attentions of the secret police. Tomas, now with neither opportunity nor ability to engage in erotic adventures, is finally able to live together with Tereza in happiness and mutual love. Their idyll culminates in a final night spent dancing in a small rural hotel before their accidental death the following day in Tomas's ill-maintained truck. The very last section of the novel's concluding seventh part supports this upbeat conclusion — 'Happiness filled the space of sadness'. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* concludes with an ending at once light and heavy, recalling the sufferings and ultimate satisfaction and happiness of the late classical myth of Cupid and Psyche, in which Psyche, the soul figured as a butterfly, finally finds eternal happiness with Cupid (Eros as physical love). In Kundera's novel the lovers' mutual recognition is to be followed by death, not a transformation into eternal godhead:

Tomas turned the key and switched on the ceiling light. Tereza saw two beds pushed together, one of them flanked by a bedside lamp and table. Up out of the lampshade, startled by the overhead light, flew a large nocturnal butterfly that began circling the room. The strains of the piano and violin rose up weakly from below. (304)

This consolatory ending, in which the mutuality of heterosexual love somehow overcomes and escapes the 'trap' of the modern world and the 'concentration

camp' of Czechoslovakia's police state, is a repetition with a difference of the immediately preceding section. Both begin with exactly the same words: '[Tomas] was sitting at the desk where he usually read his books' (307), and end similarly. This penultimate section provides what could be a surreal alternative ending to the novel.

Tomas, sitting at his desk, shows Tereza an official letter telling him 'to report that day to the airfield of the neighbouring town.' They do so, and board a small empty aeroplane. When it eventually lands they find three hooded men with rifles waiting, one of whom shoots Tomas. Here, the narrative dissolves into one of Tereza's proleptic dreams — the shot Tomas turns into a rabbit, which runs off, is caught by the man with the rifle, and returned to Tereza, who is happy to hold it. She takes the rabbit back to her old childhood home in Prague, where she sits alone in her room:

It had a bed, a table, and a chair. The table had a lamp on it, a lamp that never stopped burning in anticipation of her return, and on the lamp perched a butterfly with two large eyes painted on its widespread wings. Tereza knew she was at her goal. She lay down on the bed and pressed the rabbit to her face. (306)

The conclusion of this section is a close prefiguration of the final scene and final paragraph of the whole novel, and both call the Cupid and Psyche story to mind. However, Tereza's dream forces her into a reevaluation of their idyllic retreat to the country: 'Now they were in a place that led nowhere' (310). Worse, 'Her weakness was aggressive and kept forcing [Tomas] to capitulate until eventually he lost his strength and was transformed into the rabbit in her arms' (310). (This is a repetition of her much earlier wish in Prague that Tomas was much older, 'As weak as I am' (73).) Tereza's last minute re-reading of their love story threatens to undercut the consolatory fiction of the conclusion. Tomas has been forced to give up his career as a surgeon, a defining force in his life, as well as his erotic life. His life with Tereza on the collective farm is perhaps less an idyll than a radical diminishment: the Cupid and Psyche myth is an illusion.

What this account omits is the death of Karenin, paradoxically the most moving death in the novel. It also brings Tomas and Tereza closer together than at any other point, though Tereza comes to ask 'whether the love that tied her to Karenin was better than the love between her and Tomas', because it was 'a completely selfless love': 'Tereza accepted Karenin for what he was; she did not try to make him over in her image' (297). Karenin, the female dog with the male name, is a hermaphroditic figure, through whom Tomas and Tereza are brought together in their mutual compassion for his/her suffering. Karenin also serves a key example in the debate about the division between body and soul which runs through the novel. Descartes believed animals had no soul, and were therefore automatons, which 'made man "*maître et propriétaire de la nature*"' (288). Cartesian arrogance is intimately linked to the totalitarianism of the 'Grand March'. The connection is made explicit by the narrator: 'I love Tereza with the

mortally ill dog resting his head in her lap. I see them one next to the other: both stepping down from the road along which mankind, “the master and proprietor of nature”, marches onward’ (290).

Stepping outside history, retreating to the personal, may here be the only possible way of escaping the ‘trap’ of the immediate pressures of history and ideology. Although the formal structure of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and its repetitions endorse the ‘heaviness’ of Tomas’s compassionate love for Tereza as opposed to the ‘lightness’ of Sabina’s ‘betrayal’ of parents and country, the novel refuses any secure affirmation of its humanist beliefs. The critical intelligence which informs Kundera’s fiction and his writings on the novel questions itself even as it discovers a fictional resolution.

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