eurozine

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Twenty–two years later

A second reading of Milan Kundera's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being"

First published in Czech in 1985 by the Toronto–based '68 Publishers, illicitly imported copies of Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* first circulated on a strictly hand–to–hand basis. Now, when it is freely available on the shelves of bookshops, what does it mean to the Czech reader? Twenty–two years later, literary critic Jiri Travnicek discovers a newfound appreciation for Kundera's narration, characterization, and above all wisdom.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being elicited considerable interest after its publication (in French in 1984, in Czech in 1985) and ultimately became Milan Kundera's best–known novel. A major discussion took place in the exile journal *Testimony*, in which Milan Jungmann reproached Kundera for pandering to his readers, for dealing too loosely with the details of real life under the normalization regime,[1] and for his "method of beautiful fabulation." After the critical Jungmann, some voices spoke out defending Kundera (including Kvetoslav Chvatik, Petr Kral, Ivo Bock, and Josef Skvorecky), pointing out that irrational anti–Kundera positions were determined by something "essential to the whole Czech character" (Kral). In 1988, Jaroslav Cejka added salt to the wounds with another criticism of Kundera, calling the novel "third–generation kitsch". In essence, Cejka repeated Jungmann's reproaches to the effect that Kundera merely wanted to gratify his readers, as well as (and here he was also in accordance with Jungmann) rebuking him for his erotic scenes and meditations on defecation. How strange: Jungmann, a dissident writing unofficial *samizdat*, and Cejka, an official critic from the very top of the Communist establishment who wrote for the principal cultural–political weekly, both managed –– where Kundera was concerned –– to agree.

How does *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* look more than twenty years after its original publication? Answering this question means hunting through our memory to track down just what Kundera's novel did to us in the mid–1980s.

Then...

It travelled from hand to hand. I myself had less than 24 hours to read it: I borrowed the Sixty–Eight Publishers edition[2] from a friend at three p.m. on Wednesday, and I had to return it to him in front of the university dining hall on Thursday at one. I made it; in those days, the nights were long, especially the ones spent reading. But I also made it because the novel pulled me in, even if not solely because of its plot; it was an excellent read.

Interest in Kundera's novel came from very high places. In 1987, in absolute privacy behind closed doors, the wife of a highly placed bigwig of contemporary literary scholarship asked me if I could lend her the novel. I would have liked to, but I didn't own a copy. From the later reactions of her husband (who said something about Kundera's anti–humanism), however, I realized she had secured a copy of the novel through other means. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* bewitched Czech readers –– from the Central Committee of the Communist Party to soldiers in their first year of military service. As a soldier in the Czechoslovak People's Army, I personally witnessed how widely it was read in the barracks of unit 6158 in Presov, and unit 3829 nearby was eventually hit as well.

What was so fascinating about it? The author's name? No, that wouldn't have been enough. The bravura of the narrative? Not by itself, since it was also read by people who liked to "find out something" from a novel. Was it, then, the description of events during the August 1968 invasion and the portrayal of normalization? The erotic scenes? The philosophizing? The theme of the book –– its setting in Czechoslovakia before and after the August invasion –– definitely played a significant role in the way it was read. Besides, in his earlier novels, Kundera had always relied on the "epic" level of great historical events. This epic level plays an important role in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, but not the only one. The epic of great history is woven together with the epic of a love story. The fascinating thing was how seamlessly Kundera managed to fit these two lines together: history was not just an attractive backdrop for the love story, and likewise the love story was not merely a pretext for informing the reader about recent historical events.

For me personally, the most bewitching thing was the theme of Eastern and Western (or better: Central European) experience, and the ways in which these two experiences didn't fit together. The section that stayed in my memory was the "Dictionary of Misunderstood Words," where the Western (mildly leftwing) intellectual Franz and his companion, the Czech exile Sabina, attribute completely different meanings to the same words (fidelity and betrayal, parades, and so on). For me, Kundera was casting into doubt that universal humanist standpoint on which Western rationality rests –– the view that basic values are everywhere the same. He did so in the name of historical and cultural contingency. There are many things we cannot communicate. Kundera even called into question whether love could be such a universal, unifying constant.

For me, the key character seemed to be Franz, the Swiss academic living in a world without events, and desperately seeking some kind of exciting diversion. Over and against him was Sabina, who has escaped from the world of such events to devote herself to painting, protected in her Swiss shelter from the winds of great history. When she shows her paintings in Germany, however, she realizes that she won't be permitted to escape completely. In the catalogue, she is portrayed as a warrior against totalitarianism, someone who has suffered and has had to leave her homeland. "She protested, but they did not understand her. Do you mean that modern art isn't persecuted under Communism?" [Trans. Michael Henry Heim.] I confess that, on a first reading, Franz seemed to me like a caricature; on a second reading, not at all. Is it because we now have gone through our own experience of "boring" capitalism without history (that is, empty of epic)?

A further realization I made at the time was that a novel had to be narrated in a manner that simultaneously generates illusions and breaks them down.

Through *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera equipped us with the conviction that you can't tell a love story any old way, even if it is integrated into major historical events. You have to make your narrative method one of the themes of the narrative itself. The 1988 film version, directed by Philip Kaufman, merely followed the trail of the colourful story. It was a great disappointment –– as if what was flickering on the screen were a mere shadow of the original (or perhaps, even worse, an unintended parody of it). At the same time, this discovery was in some ways consoling: look, here is a novel that has defended itself against its own adaptation, is still somehow bound to the manner of its presentation, in other words, to its narrator and its narration. I thought of the film version of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, which ultimately is similar to Kundera's novel in many respects –– here, too, there is a love story in the whirlwind of great historical events. But while it was clear, with the film adaptation of Pasternak's novel, that the film simply hadn't succeeded in technical terms, with Kundera it was clear that the adaptation never could have succeeded.

...And now

For a novel to arise, a story isn't enough –– that's what we told ourselves when we read Kundera's novel in the mid–1980s. Now, on a second reading, we ask ourselves what good all the narrative conjuring, self–reflection, shifts, and multiplication of perspectives would be if the novel had no story. Back then: love alone won't sustain a novel. Now: what would a novel be without love?

In *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), Lionel Trilling sees the novel as a search for reality through the study of human beings, especially their morals. Moral realism is the novel's determining mode. Only in this form, according to Trilling, does a novel have any hope of reaching readers and encouraging them to find themselves in it, to prove who they are. For Trilling, the problem with the modern novel is that it tears apart the moral and the realism. Realism is thereby deprived of its moral aspect, and the novel heads either toward pure description or –– as a counter–reaction –– toward formalization and intellectualization. The attempt at further distillation of realism (that is, to get rid of the moral aspect) drains the novel of its narrative potential. So says Trilling. On the one hand, we have, say, Joyce's *Ulysses* or the French *nouveau roman* as extreme cases of hypertrophied descriptiveness; on the other, Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* as an extreme case of hypertrophied reflection, where the act of thinking generally overshadows the act of narration.

Reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* today lets us see, among other things, how Kundera managed to sail between both extremes. No matter how powerful the temptation toward intellectualization, in particular (the temptation to break up the logic of narration with the logic of meditation), Kundera never gave up, never removed his characters from the bonds of time and place. All four of his protagonists are children of their time: history intervenes the most in Tomas's and Sabina's fates; Tereza is shaped by her complicated relationship with her parents; Franz finds the source of his dissatisfaction in the boring normality and tolerance of Western society.

In Kundera, narrative is redeemed by death –– three of the four main characters die tragically. In short, for a story to be a story, it must follow its own rules. So is the novel, ultimately, a romance or a tragedy? Ever since his first works of prose, Kundera has been resisting the urge to let himself be carried away by a sweeping story. He does so by weakening the epic level until the work becomes a kind of philosophical symposium (some of the stories in

Laughable Loves; Immortality), by multiplying narrative points–of–view (*The Joke*), or by the method of variations (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*).

A second way in which the epic is disrupted is that the reader finds out about the death of Tomas and Tereza (their pickup truck crashes) before the halfway point of the novel (Sabina receives a letter from Tomas's son). The final section of the book, when Tomas and Tereza leave for the countryside (among other reasons, so that Tomas will no longer be exposed to the ever–repeating erotic temptations of other women), finds both protagonists happy. This is the most moving part of the novel (its main theme is the dying of their dog Karenin), in which Kundera seems to have forgotten his reflective interruptions and philosophical "alienations". The author has set a great narrative trap for us: the plot leaves the heroes at their moment of deepest contentment, while the story leaves them dead. Death, in short, doesn't belong to this illuminated ending; that's why the reader had to get it over with earlier on.

The novel –– an art of the centre

Which is it, then? Did Kundera succumb to the force of a strong story, as well as to the emotional demands of his characters (or his readers)? Or did he manage to suppress the demands of both, and so exert his power over them, the power of the sovereign mover and lord of the plot as well as of the characters' fates? Should we put *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* on our bookshelves next to *Daphnis and Chloe, The Sufferings of Young Werther*, and *Pierre et Luce* –– or next to *Tristram Shandy*, *The Man Without Qualities*, and *The Sleepwalkers*?

À propos of *The Sleepwalkers*: Kundera has expressed his allegiance to this 1931–1932 novel by Hermann Broch several times, as a work that is permeated with the passion for a new form, and he devoted a chapter of *The Art of the Novel* (1986) to it. But it has always seemed strange to me that this allegiance remained at the level of an essayistic confession; Kundera's novels themselves hardly reveal Broch's influence at all. In other words, Kundera, already an exile in Paris, associated himself with Broch more as a famous native (and co–exile) of Central Europe. As a novelist, however, he never accepted the radical narrative techniques of Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* or *The Death of Virgil*. He never managed to be as uncompromisingly ascetic and story–defying as the Austrian novelist. Where Broch decided to serve experimentation and nothing else, Kundera remains more moderate, more compromising in his narrative. If Broch is obsessed with composition and style, Kundera manages to pay more attention to story and characters. While Broch puts himself wholly at the service of the modern novel (with an emphasis on the word *modern*), Kundera's writing remains more in the service of the *novel* as such. And *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* reveals that the novel cannot be ordered around from the outside, that it has its own needs, tradition, methods of establishing contact with its readers. In other words: its own wisdom. Aesthetic imperatives belong to programmes; to the novel belongs a search for the centre, for balance –– between narrator and characters, story and composition, narration and thought.

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[1] The repressive regime established after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 –– trans.

[2] Sixty–Eight Publishers: an exile publishing house in Toronto –– trans.

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