

The Notion of Eternal Return in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

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Abstract: Milan Kundera, in his most popular and critically acclaimed novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), contemplates on the idea of eternal return devised by Friedrich Nietzsche and the idea of binary opposition between lightness and weight proposed by Parmenides. The novel sets in motion a set of complicated relationships mostly between Tomas, Tereza and Sabina, which are juxtaposed with the duality of lightness and weight based upon the idea of eternal return. Although Parmenides posits that lightness is positive and weight negative, Milan Kundera, in favor of Nietzsche, observes that the heaviest of weights, such as eternal returns, designates the most intense fulfillment in human life. This paper attempts to show that in spite of the deliberate ambiguity we observe in the novel the attainment of meaning can be compared to weight in the terms of Parmenides. Lightness, the binary opposition of weight, is suggestively denounced by the way the novel is developed along with the narratives, being guided by explanatory digressions. The illustration of Tomas designates a gradual shift from the course of lightness to weight and thus attains the Nietzschean doctrine of human greatness through embracing fate even at the cost of severe sufferings. The portrayal of Sabina in contrast with that of Tomas and Tereza implies Kundera's denouncement of lightness to make a full circle. This essay presents the philosophical background of the idea of eternal recurrence followed by a brief sketch of the story. Then it attempts to show how Kundera explores the Nietzschean ideas through the three central characters and their inter-relationships in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

The Eternal Return

In his celebrated book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche introduces 'the Dionysian' and 'the Apollonian' and then makes an attempt to reconcile them. He implies that to be human is to move between the two aforementioned domains. 'The Dionysian' denotes raw impulse, chaos, and the absurdity of existence. On the other hand, 'the Apollonian' seeks for order and the eternal in the fields of logic and morality, and seeks for beauty. As human beings we are often compromised on mutuality of this dichotomy. It suggests that human beings are contradictory, passionate, and chaotic. However, we cannot sustain in this domain because it is awful, terrifying and absurd. Thus we find

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ourselves in need of making the world inhabitable and ourselves beautiful. Nietzsche attempts to replace the direct opposition between 'the Dionysian' and 'the Apollonian' with a healthy tension between the two. He suggests that without 'the Apollonian', life would be unbearable. He does not advocate a return to the phase of our bestial natures. Nietzsche wants the human kind to live in the tension. He believes one who lives in the sphere of Dionysian is a barbarian. The one who lives in the sphere of the Apollonian is either asleep or exists in the state of dream. To begin to live, we must live in tension, with passion and contradiction, but sublimate and get transfigured through the beauty, being united with the attributes of the Apollonian.

In his work *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche claims, the only original distinction was the non-moral one between good and bad. Good is designated as strength, while bad as weakness. Strength is honored, and so is the enemy.¹ Nietzsche believes that the masters are strong. They love the world and life. In the master morality, dignity is something one has to earn. In contrast, the slaves resent the masters. Thus the word "evil" comes into being. Slaves believe the masters are evils, therefore, they (the slaves) must be good. Their actions are reactions, born in a hatred of the world, which infers with their own moral goodness. Nietzsche believes they are weak, pitiable, meek, and poor in spirit. These characteristics become the virtues in the slave morality. In the slave morality, one receives dignity by virtue of being a slave. Born in resentment and hatred, the slave morality is ultimately unhealthy and destructive. This morality grows stronger and consumes masters who destroy themselves with guilt. However, Nietzsche longs for a return to the healthy world of good and bad, where the virtues of love, respect and honor are truly possible.

Nietzsche identifies law as an Apollonian apparatus. It creates order where there is disorder, sense where there is chaos. All laws, whether religious, social or legal, ultimately infringe on human freedom. They replace the freedom of individual spirit with the systems of law. What is healthy and right become wrong because of universal edict. The law represents the integration of the individual into the universal. As part of the universal, the individual loses his or her ability to act. The individual who has internalized the rules of social life does not really act at all. We are taught what is meaningful, what has value, and what the limits of our endeavor can be. The freedom to create value and meaning consequently disappears.

The artist feels constrained to work within the limits of acceptable art forms. Persons are unable to choose what they feel is right because that decision is already made for him or her within the moral, legal, or social structure. Law gives people the freedom to say 'yes' or 'no'. It does not give people the freedom to express our individuality over its universality, hence it limits our lives.

His contemplations on human condition and the structures of human existence consist of fundamental freedom. No wonder, Nietzsche, like the other existentialists, resists attempts to ascribe human nature that predetermines human life, rather it attributes to flux, and encompasses continuous changes. Human beings are in a constant state of becoming, and there is no prior nature that determines what they become in future. According to him, human nature cannot be uncovered in empirical terms of cells, organs and evolutionary theory, but in phenomenological terms, or in the experience of living. The empirical world is only a shortened version of reality at whose periphery logic "goes in circles and bites itself on the tail."ⁱⁱ

In order to prevent nihilism to become the destiny of human he develops the idea of eternal return or eternal recurrenceⁱⁱⁱ. Nietzsche first introduced the eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science* (1882) and developed it further in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885). Nietzsche asks the reader to consider:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.' (Kaufmann, 341)

Denying all *a priori* absolutes, Nietzsche proposes that religious commandments, categorical imperatives are not well grounded, therefore, should be dismantled. Man must confront the failure of metaphysics and the purposelessness of the universe, in short, nihilism. This is where eternal recurrence becomes relevant. Nietzsche suggests that confronting the heaviest of burdens tests human ability not to be overcome by the world's horror and meaninglessness. Rather than being overcome, one must become self-overcome. It requires an intense and painful self-examination before one can answer the demon's question affirmatively. Nietzsche proposes, given a finite amount of matter and infinite amount of time, life would repeat itself, in identical details, repeatedly. This proposition also entails that this is the only life, which would also allow us to glimpse our own existential posture towards it: "My formula for the greatness of a human being is *Amor Fati*^{iv}: that one wants nothing to be different--not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to bear the necessary, still less to conceal it--all idealism is mendaciousness before the necessary--but to love it." (Kaufman 307)

Milan Kundera expresses his anxiety over the prospect of this idea in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and comments: "In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return 'the heaviest of burdens' (das

schwereste Gewicht). (5) He immediately wonders: "But is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid?" (5) Kundera echoes Nietzsche and holds that significance comes from weight, as the absence of burden causes us to be lighter than air, thus, insignificant:

The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life's most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.

Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. (5)

Kundera ponders the question over which one to decide between lightness and weight? If weight gives significance and lightness insignificance, then it would be safe to say that the need for weight is essential so long as it does not crush us. He reminds us that Nietzsche calls upon his readers to live in a healthy tension.

Against the context of Nietzsche's psychological paradigm of the eternal recurrence, we consider the opposite in the question posed by Parmenides almost 2600 years ago:

Parmenides posed this very question in the sixth century before Christ. He saw the world divided into pairs of opposites: light/darkness, fineness/coarseness, warmth/cold, being/nonbeing. One half of the opposition he called positive (light, fineness, warmth, being), the other negative. We might find this division into positive and negative poles childishly simple except for one difficulty: which one is positive, weight or lightness? Parmenides responded: lightness is positive, weight negative. Was he correct or not? That is the question. The only certainty is: the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all. (Kundera, 5-6)

Kundera wonders if any meaning or weight can be attributed to life, since there is no eternal return: if man only has the opportunity to try one path, to make one decision, he cannot return to take a different path, and hence compare the two lives. Without the ability to compare lives, Kundera argues, we cannot find meaning; where meaning should exist we find only an unbearable weightlessness. The uncertain existence of meaning, and the opposition of lightness and heaviness, the apparently irreconcilable opposition of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, sets the stage for the entire novel.

The protagonist, Tomas, a brilliant Prague surgeon, pursues a philosophy of lightness in his erotic adventures and exploits. Briefly married in the past, he neither sees nor wishes to see his ex-wife or young son and is comfortable as a perpetual bachelor. He meets Tereza, a café waitress in a town he visits, and

realizes when she follows him to Prague that she intends to "offer him up her life."

The two live together, but Tomas is unable to give up his mistresses. For a while, he hides his infidelity from Teresa. Eventually he admits to it, but claims that his sexuality is entirely separate from his love for her. Tereza, unable to accept the promiscuity of her husband adopts a light attitude towards sex, but suffers increasingly from nightmares, and contemplates on suicide. To make her happy, Tomas marries her. He keeps his mistresses, however, including his closest friend and long-term lover Sabina, a beautiful, reckless, but talented painter. Tereza is charmed by Sabina's openness and light-heartedness, and the two women grow friendly. Sabina finds Tereza a job in Prague as a photographer.

Meanwhile, a series of events of the Prague Spring result in the Soviet military occupation of the city. Tomas, who in the past wrote an article condemning the Czech Communists, is warned to leave the country. Sabina flees first, and later Tomas and Tereza join her in Switzerland. Tereza, who found peace in her job as photographer in Prague, realizes that in Zurich she is unemployed and must sit at home while Tomas continues having affairs.

She returns to Prague alone. Tomas attempts to enjoy his newly recovered freedom for a few days, then gives up and returns to Prague too. The return truly means giving up his freedom since there is no chance that the couple will be allowed to leave again legally. In Prague, Tomas's political troubles get intensified. He loses his position as a surgeon for refusing to sign a condemnation of his anti-communist article. Both the Communist regime and underground nonconformists attempt to seduce him to their side. His own son appears as a young dissident and preaches to Tomas with no success.

It appears in the novel that Tomas hates the idea of being used politically in the same way Sabina hates the contamination of kitsch in art. In the end, Tomas quits his medical position and looks for inconspicuousness in a job of cleaning windows. His fame continues, and so does his sexual infidelity.

After many scenes and nightmares, she convinces Tomas to move with her to the country. This means giving up their way of life entirely, and an end to Tomas's erotic adventures. After living peacefully in the country for some time, Tomas and Tereza are killed one night in a driving accident. They die together instantly.

In Geneva, Sabina develops a love affair with Franz, a university professor and idealistic intellectual who has more in common emotionally with Tereza than with Sabina. Sabina loves Franz but their views on betrayal differ dramatically; whereas he hates the idea of betrayal, she views betrayal as the first step towards "going off into the unknown," the most glorious destination she can think of.

Tomas: The Epic Womanizer

Tomas belongs to the Czech intellectual class, which was silenced after the Soviet invasion of Prague. An internationally known surgeon, Tomas is stripped of his career because he refuses to renounce an anti-Czech Communist article he wrote. This single article puts him in grave danger, although he is not a committed political dissident. Ideally, Tomas would like to avoid political parties altogether in favor of remaining a free agent and independent thinker who acts as he chooses. After losing the privilege of practicing medicine, Tomas becomes first a window washer and then a farmer, descending to the lower status of society in search of a peaceful life.

Tomas in the beginning inclines on a life of lightness. He considers sex and love two separate and unrelated entities; he sleeps with many women, and happens to love one (Tereza), and sees no problem with the simultaneous existence of these two dispositions. Tomas is the personification of the libertines. At the outset, neither he experiences redemption, nor romance at the notions of the unfulfilled idealism.

Tomas cannot seriously take the laws on which politics and romantic fidelity are based. His individualism, pragmatism, experience make him unwilling to identify himself as a politically liberal person or as a faithful husband. He is the most misunderstood and misinterpreted character in the novel. His colleagues in hospital and the police department evaluate him as a dissident, and the actual dissidents assess him as a coward. He is the epic womanizer who searches for weight and meaning. In a world oversimplified by stereotypes and binary thinking, identification to effect understanding becomes the mode of choice. Tomas is the personification of the libertines.

Tomas in course of time shifts towards heaviness. Even falling into the category of epic lover^v, soon after meeting Tereza, Tomas seems to have found something compelling in her. The narrator of the novel informs the reader that Tomas' poetic memory gets solely occupied by Tereza. Despite being prompted by the desire to possess the endless variety of the objective female world, Tomas is drawn strongly to Tereza.

The dilemma that Tomas passes through is foreshadowed by the human tendency towards polarized thinking. Tomas is tormented by Tereza's need for mutual exclusivity. Tereza needs to capture Tomas's hand and hold it all night long, even though that ties him to her bed. Every woman has something to teach him; he has to experience them all. He is entangled in the position because he cannot fulfill both wants. The narrator figure makes a digression and comments that fulfilling one of them infringes on the other:

Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite. Love does not

make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman). (Kundera, 15)

The conflict between the conceptions of love and sex in his thinking that subjects him to two sets of demands cannot be reconciled. The answer lies in the examination of the relationship between Tomas and Tereza, where heaviness ultimately overcomes lightness.

Tereza: The Unresolved Conflict

The relation between the body and the soul is a source of wonder as well as of anguish for Tereza. Kundera explores the mind-body duality and Tereza is the focus of this exploration. Kundera makes a statement that human existence lacks opportunity for long-lasting happiness and fulfillment in his portrayal of characters who are victims of mind-body duality, alienated and unsatisfied either by mental pleasure or by physical pleasure. Kundera describes Tereza standing before a mirror looking at her alien body, a body that lacks the power of becoming the only body in Tomas' life. It had disappointed and deceived her during the upbringing under the familial dictatorship of her mother. The mind-body duality and the problems it poses for Tereza go beyond the physical dimension. Kundera plays with the notion that the genesis of the conflict began when humanity (then consequently Tereza) was expelled from paradise, a paradise that human beings yearn to return to. While the human kind yearns for paradise it actually yearns for its lost innocence. Animals, which were not expelled from paradise, may look in the mirror and not see their reflection. Tereza gazes at the mirror and gazes at her souls. The so called Cartesian automata^{vi} do not worry about their reflections hence are in no need of making reconciliation between body and soul. Tereza's secret vice of looking into the mirror was basically a battle with her mother. Tereza resists her mother's understanding of the body. She resists the idea that all bodies are identical in their meaninglessness. She profoundly desires to own a body, which is not identical to other bodies, looks for the section of her face that she thinks reflects her soul. In the character of Tereza, Kundera integrates love as a modality for transcendence, offering a possibility of a union between body and soul. With the longing for individuality, yearning to return to the state of paradise, longing for soul en route arriving at the meaning of life, Tereza unambiguously categorizes herself as a character consistently craving for weight.

John O'Brian in his *Dangerous Intersections: Milan Kundera and Feminism*, argues that Tereza is one of the most finely portrayed female characters in Kundera's fictions whose mental weakness is made most apparent. She expresses her weakness by contemplating suicide. Primarily, she finds herself convinced that she belongs among the weak, in the camp of the weak, in the country of the

weak. We observe that Kundera himself further explains the issue of vertigo and weakness in his book *The Art of the Novel* (1986):

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza lives with Tomas, but her love requires mobilization of all her strength, and suddenly she can't go on, she longs to retreat down below, to where she came from. And I ask myself: What is happening with her? And this is the answer I find: She is overcome by vertigo. But what is vertigo? I look for a definition and I say: "A heady, insuperable longing to fall." But immediately I correct myself, I sharpen the definition: Vertigo is "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." Vertigo is one of the keys to understanding Tereza. (31)

Acting as a counterpoint to Tomas, Tereza's attraction to weakness can be explained well in the lights of Tomas's need for domination over women. Tomas makes women take the role of the weaker erotic partner. With his play on the use of the command "strip," a command used on both Sabina and Tereza, it becomes the command that magically joins them. When Tereza accepts the invitation to Sabina's flat to take her picture, the three are joined, as it were, as one with the imperative to "strip."

Sabina: the Unbearable Lightness of Being

Sabina aims for a life of denial of kitsch. Kitsch- all images of smiling workers, young children in grassy fields playing with no complaints, the contented senior citizens, all the mawkish propaganda, whether Capitalist or Communist in kind, which take a sentimental view ready for human possibility for sugary appreciation manifests in the kitsch art. Kitsch entails hypocrisy and the evasion of the unpleasant truth of our existence from our purview. True artists are the enemy of kitsch because they carry out relentless examination and expose the illusions engaging the aforementioned manifestations.

Sabina's denial of kitsch is essentially connected with her drive for defiance of social authorities. Her life has made vigorous attempts one after another to free itself from the weight of existence. Betrayal, Sabina's main code word, characterizes her entire life. Forced into the early uprising of communist movement in Czechoslovakia, alienated from her family, and compelled to paint only representational paintings of social activism, Sabina attempts to betray everything: her family, communist movement, lovers, states that she resides in, and most importantly the pretentious artistic realism of the period.

In the "Words Misunderstood" section of the novel, Kundera incorporates three chapters^{vii} titled "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words," in which the narrator selects four words for each chapter and elucidates how the words are understood differently by Sabina and Franz, her admirer. They disagree upon the words and through which the narrator voice explores the issue of lightness versus weight. Based on the three short dictionaries we come to realize the nature of conflict between Sabina and Franz, which is the mutually opposite desire for lightness and for weight.

One of the most important narrator's digressions in the novel contemplating on Sabina's character appears in the fourth chapter of part three titled "Words Misunderstood" after she engages a discussion with a circle of Czech émigrés. Here she argues with the main speaker of the group and eventually leaves the circle in anger; the group of émigrés enlarges the list of objects that she betrays. At this point of the novel the narrator's voice stops the representational action of the story in order to ask a few questions about her character and to explore the answers to these questions through a digression of character-observation. Sabina appears to be not quite sure of her psyche, but the narrator clarifies it for the reader:

Then why wasn't she sorry for them [the émigrés]? Why didn't she see them for the woeful and abandoned creatures they were? We know why. After she betrayed her father, life opened up before her, a long road of betrayals, each one attracting her as vice and victory. She would not keep ranks! She refused to keep ranks--always with the same people, with the same speeches! That was why she was so stirred by her own injustice. But it was not an unpleasant feeling; quite the contrary, Sabina had the impression she had just scored a victory and someone invisible was applauding her for it. (Kundera, 97-98)

The short dictionaries are composed in the manner of definition-digression by themselves. Using the subheadings within these chapters, the narrator takes Sabina for close observation and makes her (along with Franz) interpret the words "Fidelity and Betrayal":

Betrayal. From tender youth we are told by father and teacher that betrayal is the most heinous offense imaginable. But what is betrayal? Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown. (91)

The digression on betrayal links the existential code word to the overlying philosophy of the novel. Sabina, contrasting Tereza, desires the unknown through a non-cyclical road of life, and advances by betraying the responsibilities associate with the eternal return and *amor fati*. She continues from the Czech

émigrés to betray Franz, to see Tomas, Switzerland and France, one by one. Whatever move she makes in her life, Kundera's digression clarifies us, is meant for the purpose of lightness, a state which, we are guided to believe, she ultimately achieves. Sabina manages to betray them all, and in the end, betrays herself too.

Tomas and Tereza

Weight slowly overcomes lightness in the relationship of Tomas and Tereza. Tomas sets himself up for a fall by creating the duality of shared sleep versus copulation. Modifying or abandoning the binary opposition would relieve Tomas of his misery. It is important to ask whether Tomas really loves Tereza and wants to sleep by her side, or he desires all women, and wants to make love with other ladies.

The novel implies that our philosophical and theological tradition tells us that love and sex are mutually exclusive, as mutually exclusive as body and soul are. On the other hand, our everyday lives often differ from it. Kundera suggests that our human weakness is prone to words deciphering dilemmas as "Either/Or." By allowing us to re-examine the question we dealt with the very dangerous freedom to explore the possibilities of "Both/And." The question then takes on a whole new dimension: the challenge not only is to keep the binary opposition, but also to change our perspective and ask the question in a different way. Can Tomas both love Tereza and pursue all women? If we use his original premise that love and sex are "not merely different but opposite," then having sex with other women does not affect loving Tereza.

Tereza tries to live within this construct, but she sees it as a contradiction. Tomas cannot be the libertine and the conventional spouse at the same time. Tereza closes the question as she wants an exclusive relationship. The question does not preclude any moralizing by Kundera. He has reconciled the difference through his position in love versus copulation. However, Tomas's dealing with this problem is complicated by Tereza's uncompromising stand in favor of exclusive relationship. Kundera sets individual experiences side by side and allows us to reexamine our traditional values. Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz articulates Kundera's attempts at playing with duality in her book *Critical Essays on Milan Kundera*:

Kundera is always struggling with opposites, with demons and angels, with the light and the heaviness, tragedy and comedy, with life and death, and he is taking these opposites and pitches them against each other. This is what he sees as his task as a writer and that is why he tries to break new grounds. He brings total opposite elements to clash in his text. He does not really dissolve them but lets them boil in their own juice next to each other in a sense. (114)

Tereza interprets Tomas' sexual involvement with others as a negation of her individuality. If the Tereza-Tomas dilemma is examined from the traditional theological or philosophical duality of good and evil, then the characters are stuck in a system of oppositions that evaluates acts on a moral criterion. Teresa and Tomas are stuck with competing values, the type of competing values that allowed for the birth of absolutes. Within the Nietzschean context, Teresa and Tomas are allowed to transcend good and evil.

Stretching our hypothesis by positioning Tomas and Tereza outside this moral system of good and evil, can we possibly consider Tomas to love Tereza and continue sexual relationship with other women without causing problem for Tereza at the same time? Could Tomas sleep beside Tereza every night and yet have sex with other women? It does not appear as a viable option for Tereza. Tomas is in need of distinction while Tereza is in need for individuality in exclusivity.

After Tereza leaves Tomas alone in Zurich and returns to Prague, Kundera describes his apparent feelings: "For seven years he had lived bound to her, his every step subject to her scrutiny. She might as well have chained iron balls to his ankles. Suddenly his step was much lighter. He soared. He had entered Parmenides' magic field: he was enjoying the sweet lightness of being." (30)

No doubt he felt a relief having a break from the beautiful but tiring love of Tereza. However, the narrator clarifies that he does not feel interested in contacting Sabina or other ladies of acquaintances available around him. Tomas' 'curious melancholic fascination' (30) only lasts for two days before he is "hit by a weight the likes of which he had never known. The tonnes of steel of the Russian tanks were nothing compared with it. For there is nothing heavier than compassion." (Kundera, 31) To be specific, it was his compassion for Tereza. At this point and onward heaviness conquers lightness with Tomas who takes resolution on the grounds of "Es muss sein" (it must be). (Kundera, 32)

On the other hand, the relationship between Tomas and Sabina expose no such dilemma. They have a love that does not tie each other by the demand of mutual exclusivity. On the surface, the lack of burden on Tomas (when examined by the way Kundera adopts Nietzsche) would equate the lack of burden (weight) to a lack of significance.

Tomas and Sabina: Meeting of the Two Worlds

Tomas and Sabina appear identical in terms of personality traits, but they eventually choose alternative paths for their lives. While Sabina carries on her path of betrayal and lightness, Tomas eventually decides to stay with a single partner and longs for the bachelorhood of the past. In her book *Terminal Paradoxes*, Maria Nemcova Banerjee presents interesting insight about the relationship between Tomas and Sabina:

As a painter, Sabina often uses the technique of “double exposure,” which she defines by the formula “On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth” (Kundera, 63). The technique was an accidental discovery, revealed to her one day in art school while she was playing with an imaginary crack that a trickle of red paint had suddenly opened in a canvas already filled with the compulsory socialist realist image of a steel factory under construction. Sabina the highly intellectual artist, who sees with the power of two, in mutual contradiction, describes Tomas as the embodiment of her aesthetic paradigm: “The meeting of two worlds. A double exposure. Showing through the outline of Tomas the libertine, incredibly, the face of a romantic lover. Or, the other way, through a Tristan, always thinking of his Tereza, I see the beautiful, betrayed world of the libertine” (Kundera, 22). This brilliant definition reveals a Tomas conditioned by Sabina’s own mentality. What she says is only provisionally true of him. In pursuing Tereza, Tomas will ultimately disappear from Sabina’s field of vision altogether. (209)

Tereza and Sabina: The Two Poles

When Sabina meets Tereza Tomas’s existential dilemma is exposed in two peaks in two parallel streams. Sabina seems to have adjusted with the relationship between Tereza and Tomas. She helps Tomas by finding an employment as a photographer for Tereza. Tereza, on the other hand, decides to overcome her anxiety encircling Sabina. She accepts Sabina’s invitation to her studio. In an attempt to understand Tomas’s terms with Sabina, Tereza begins to develop her friendship with Sabina and offers to engage her in a photo session.

Tereza’s dreams seem to have stemmed later from this encounter. One evening Tereza wakes up moaning, jabbing fingernails into Tomas as she fully experiences the threat of Sabina as well as all women. In a later dream, in a pool with naked women, Tereza remembers her past. In the middle of the night she moans in her sleep. Tomas wakes her up, but when she sees his face she says, with hatred in her voice, “Get away from me!” (Kundera, 17) Eventually she shares dream with Tomas:

The two of them and Sabina had been in a big room together. There was a bed in the middle of the room. It was like a platform in the theater. Tomas ordered her to stand in the corner while he made love to Sabina. The sight caused Tereza intolerable suffering. Hoping to alleviate the pain in her heart by pains of the flesh, she jabbed needles under her fingernails. “It hurts so much,” she said, squeezing her hands into fists as they were actually wounded. (Kundera, 17)

Tomas discovers that Tereza was searching his desk drawers. She does not deny it and asks him to throw her out of his residence. He instead goes on to kiss her. The "child put in a peach-daubed bulrush basket" (Kundera 10) on that point onwards gains permanence in Tomas's mind. The weight of his compassion attains a profound dimension.

Tereza begins to articulate her demand for mutual exclusivity. Her dreams speak her strong resistance that she does not want to be like all the rest in Tomas's life. The author narrates:

Let me return to this dream. Its horror did not begin with Tomas's first pistol shot; it was horrifying from the outset. Marching naked in formation with a group of naked women was for Tereza the quintessential image of horror. When she lived at home, her mother forbade her to lock the bathroom door. What she meant by her injunction was: Your body is just like all other bodies; you have no right to shame; you have no reason to hide something that exists in millions of identical copies. In her mother's world all bodies were the same and marched behind one another in formation. Since childhood, Tereza had seen nudity as a sign of concentration camp uniformity, a sign of humiliation. (Kundera, 57)

In his book *Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs*, Fred Misurella reminds us that the encounter of Tereza and Sabina had a dynamic beyond the latent sexuality, and centers his examination on the theme of nakedness and the loss of individuality. The encounter sequence leads us into an examination of the individuality of Sabina, the bowler hat:

In another variation on the theme of nakedness and individual identity, Tereza visits Sabina's studio to carry out a photo session of the latter. They discuss Sabina's paintings at first, then after an hour of taking shots, Tereza asks Sabina to pose nude. A gulp, a glass of wine and a conversation about a bowler hat belonging to Sabina's grandfather follows. ... Kundera has Sabina keep the hat on a model head usually meant for a wig, and he reports with humble, arresting details what she tells Tereza about its former owner. Her grandfather was a mayor of a small town; he left just two things behind, the bowler hat and a photograph of himself with other dignitaries standing on a platform for some unknown ceremony. With that sketch of her past completed Sabina enters the bathroom to disrobe. (Kundera, 115)

In a change of roles, Tereza comes to terms with her body. They lose their individuality in their nakedness and form the duality of that Tomas has grown in his life lately. However, the duality cannot permanently reconcile and sustain. In *Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs*, Fred Misurella continues:

The scene that follows, short, not very graphic, but memorable because of its latent sexuality, becomes more powerful because of the hat preceding it and the horror of the Russian invasion that Kundera introduces immediately afterward. These elements provide a double exposure in words like those Sabina reveals on canvas. But within that double exposure Kundera places another. The camera, he says, is Tereza's eye to see as well as a veil to hide behind. She can observe a portion of Tomas's life by photographing Sabina, and she hides a part of her own by being the photographer. But then Sabina heightens the situation by issuing Tomas's command to "Strip," a seduction technique with which they are both familiar. Sabina takes the camera as Tereza disrobes. In a variation on the Narcissus myth that we have seen before, the two women, wife and mistress, become united in their nakedness. Reflecting Tereza's dream, they lose their individuality even as they temporarily and without his presence unify Tomas's life. Their laughter and embarrassment, however, show how impossible that unity would be on a permanent basis. After Sabina takes a couple of pictures, both women laugh at themselves and then get dressed. (115)

Conclusion

The relations of Tomas, Sabina and Tereza exemplify different kinds of love. Misurrella places the significance of weight in the relations of Tomas with Tereza and Sabina in terms of their emotional significance:

Extending Kundera's rumination of lightness and weight, we can place the desire for sex (Eros) on the side of lightness and the desire for love (shared sleep and death-or its personification, Thanatos) on the side of weight. Lightness implies movement and energy; weight implies stillness and falling. (109-10)

Tomas lives on both sides of the balance by means of his two principal lovers: Sabina, the artist with whom he shares sex and no obligations; and Tereza, with whom he shares love and desire for rest. Despite the obvious incompatibility and divergent views on sexuality Tomas returns to Tereza again and again mainly because of emotional significance, attributed as "shared sleep" or "weight." Tomas ultimately achieves greater weight and significance with Tereza. On the other hand, Sabina's life has no return, no weight, therefore, bears no significance. Hence Kundera denounces lightness through the portrayal of Sabina.

There are at least two cases where Tomas finds meaning based on gaining weight. The first is his "Es muss Sein"^{viii} in his relationship with Tereza. They are safely in Switzerland after escaping the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia.

However eventually, Tereza, unable to bear the pain of Tomas's promiscuity in Switzerland returns to Czechoslovakia. Tomas follows Tereza to homeland sealing their fate to the oppressive regime leaving behind a promising career in Zurich. Tomas takes up the path of Tereza because he considers it to be his fate. Such a bold and decisive move by Tomas unmistakably makes him a character who complies with the Nietzschean notion of *amor fati*. In a second incident he publishes a letter to the editor of a newspaper which explodes the notion of being responsible for acts whether or not one knows the outcome. Written in the context of the Czech political leadership welcoming Soviet Invasion in 1968^{ix}, Tomas models the case on King Oedipus who had no idea that he acted violating so many social and moral rules of his society. Later on this was taken as a politically subversive act and Tomas was asked to apologize for. He refuses apology on non-political grounds. It causes him to be banned as a physician and condemned to a low-stature manual laborer. He does not show any sign of regret on this professional demotion. Thus Tomas at this juncture of life bravely embraces his fate of suffering caused by the choice he makes. He rises up, rather qualifies himself, to the disposition of a master by transcending good and evil.

Kundera contrasts Sabina's flight into the unbearable lightness with the burdens shouldered by Tomas. The narration of the novel goes in loops instead of a linear continuity of episodes, and hence an effect of Nietzschean eternal return is created in it. It is interesting to observe that the death of Tomas and Tereza is prophesied by the narrator, and the novel ends before it happens. According to the foretold story Tomas drives his truck into a road side ditch, and is crushed in the eternal sleep of true love with Tereza. Sabina, who negates the burden of eternal return, on the other hand, takes flight in the unbearable lightness by following the course of betrayal, and ultimately disappears from the horizon of the story. Nonetheless, the epic lover (Tomas) and the libertine (Sabina) are both crushed in the end. The earlier is crushed by the notion of heaviness in contrast to the latter's, which was crushed by that of lightness. The novel in its totality advocates that in a world of objective meaninglessness one falls into nihilism unless one does acts that recur eternally, thus giving the acts significance. We cannot ignore a strong undercurrent in the novel which suggests that in a world of objective meaninglessness one must fall into the chasm of nihilism unless one acts as if the acts recur eternally, thus furnishing them with "weight."

Notes

ⁱ Nietzsche refers to the mutual outlook between Hector and Achilles. They loved their enemies because they were strong like Hector and Achilles, both honorable persons who loved and respected each other, chased one another around the walls of Troy because they must fight over Helen. However they did not have any resentment against each other.

ⁱⁱ Friedrich Nietzsche, in his *The Birth of Tragedy* writes, "But now science, spurred on by its powerful delusion, hurtles inexorably towards its limits where the optimism hidden in the essence of logic founders. For the periphery of the circle of science has an infinite number of points and while there is no telling yet how the circle could ever be fully surveyed, the noble and gifted man, before he has reached the middle of his life, still inevitably encounters such peripheral limit points and finds himself staring into an impenetrable darkness. If he at that moment sees to his horror how in these limits logic coils around itself and finally bites its own tail- then the new form of knowledge breaks through, tragic knowledge, which in order to be tolerated, needs art as a protection and remedy." (Kauffman, 115)

ⁱⁱⁱ The concept initially inherent in Indian philosophy was later found in ancient Egypt, and was subsequently taken up by the Pythagoreans and Stoics. With the decline of antiquity and the spread of Christianity, the concept fell into disuse in the western world, though Friedrich Nietzsche resurrected it as a thought experiment to argue for *amor fati*.

^{iv} *Amor fati* is a Latin phrase loosely translating to "love of fate" or "love of one's fate." It is used to describe an attitude in which one sees everything that happens in one's life, including suffering and loss, as good. Moreover, it is characterized by an *acceptance* of the events or situations that occur in one's life. The phrase is used repeatedly in Friedrich Nietzsche's writings and is representative of the general outlook on life he articulates in *The Gay Science* (section 276).

^v Kundera locates Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

Men who pursue a multitude of women fit neatly into two categories. Some seek their own subjective and unchanging dream of a woman in all women. Others are prompted by desire to possess the endless variety of the objective female world.

The obsession of the former is lyrical: what they seek in women is themselves, their ideal, and since an ideal is by definition something that can never be found, they are disappointed again and again. The disappointment that propels them from woman to woman gives their inconstancy a kind of romantic excuse, so that many sentimental women are touched by their unbridled philandering.

The obsession of the latter is epic, and women see nothing the least bit touching in it: the man projects no subjective ideal on women, and since everything interests him, nothing can disappoint him. This inability to be disappointed has something scandalous about it. The obsession of the epic womanizer strikes people as lacking in redemption (redemption by disappointment).

Because the lyrical womanizer always runs after the same type of woman, we even fail to notice when he exchanges one mistress for another. His friends perpetually cause misunderstanding by mixing up his lovers and calling them by the same name.

In pursuit of knowledge, epic womanizers (and of course Tomas belongs in their ranks) turn away from conventional feminine beauty, of which they quickly tire, and inevitably end up as curiosity collectors. They are aware of this and a little ashamed of it, and to avoid causing their friends embarrassment, they refrain from appearing in public with their mistress (201).

^{vi} René Descartes is one of the leading lights in this debate on whether animals are automata. His view was that because animals don't have a sophisticated propositional language then animals are mere automata. While he concluded that human bodies are automata, he took the view their soul was not. In the *Discourse on Method* Descartes concluded that through our use of language we can discover humans have mental events, and therefore a soul, since human consciousness can be demonstrated through the ideas and concepts we are able to communicate through language. Animals don't have language. Hence they don't have mental events or thus a soul. Descartes in *his Passions of the Soul* and *The Description of the Human Body* suggested that the body works like a machine, that it has the material properties of extension and motion, and that it follows the laws of nature. The mind or soul, on the other hand, was described as a nonmaterial entity that lacks extension and motion, and does not follow the laws of nature. Descartes argued that only humans have minds, and that the mind interacts with the body at the pineal gland. This form of dualism or duality proposes that the mind controls the body, but that the body can also influence the otherwise rational mind, such as when people act out of passion. Most of the previous accounts of the relationship between mind and body had been uni-directional. Cartesian dualism set the agenda for philosophical discussion of the mind-body problem for many years after Descartes' death.

^{vii} Chapters three, five, and seven of the section titled "Words Misunderstood" in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

^{viii} In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the phrase appears when Tomas debates whether or not to return to Prague after Tereza has left him in Zurich. Once he decides to follow her back, he defends his resignation to new boss: "es muss sein" meaning "it must be". The narrator-voice informs us the origin of the phrase as a motif in one of Beethoven's songs. Beethoven, according to him, is a weighty guy. Additionally, it cannot be ignored that Beethoven is one of the great loves of Tereza; and Tomas, owing to this fact, grows interest of his music.

^{ix} On the night of 20-21 August 1968, the Soviet Union and her main allies in the Warsaw Pact, invaded the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in order to stop Alexander Dubček's Prague Spring political liberalization reforms.

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