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(De)Presenting the self| Milan Kundera's deconstruction of the public persona through paradox

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(De)Presenting the Self:
Milan Kundera's Deconstruction of the Public Persona Through Paradox

by
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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Date
The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how Milan Kundera deconstructs the public persona in his novels through the use of paradox. Kundera, a Czech writer who has lived in France for the past twenty-two years, uses the personae of his characters to establish the binary nature of human vision and to deconstruct these absolute poles by drawing them together to a point at which they become indistinguishable or interchangeable. Kundera achieves this deconstruction through the use of paradox. Rather than creating an emptiness where nothing is true, Kundera reveals a world of excess — the excess of human possibility, as well as the excess inherent in the postmodern sign.

Kundera focuses on the public persona to achieve this Derridean deconstruction and the demystification of received ideas. The persona is created as a bridge and a bar between the interior life of his characters and the exterior world of the Other and of history. This study focuses on four principal areas — that of the plurality of the persona and its fissure in the face of these deconstructionist tactics; the interplay between the body, as used by the persona, and the soul; the historical interplay of the persona, particularly the events in Kundera’s native Czechoslovakia; and the realm of communication, both written and verbal, as used to convey the persona, an effort that results in miscommunication and the revelation of the multiple interpretations inherent in every sign.

Kundera uses this deconstruction of the public persona as a critique of absolute truth — constructing a world of relativity and excess in which a pile of contradictory truths, each bearing an infinite number of shifting and ever-changing traces, emerges.

The works studied include Kundera’s eight novels to date, as well as his play Jacques and His Master, and his two critical works, The Art of the Novel and Testaments Betrayed. These works are studied in their original French, when written in that language, or in their French translations, along with the wealth of critical materials available on Kundera’s works.
Preface

Milan Kundera, the novelist, playwright, poet, and critic, has written extensively on the tradition of the novel and the enigma of the self as contained between its covers, ideas which complement the themes of persona and paradox which will be examined in the study which follows. It is with this in mind that I offer the following extract of an interview with Milan Kundera, published in the Winter 1987 edition of Salmagundi:

All novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self. As soon as you create an imaginary being, a character, you are automatically confronted by the question: What is the self? How can the self be grasped? It is one of those fundamental questions on which the novel is based. . . . The quest for the self has always ended, and always will end, in a paradoxical dissatisfaction. I don't say defeat. For 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.

. . . What possibilities remain for man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that internal impulses no longer carry weight? . . . That life is a trap -- well, that we've always known. We are born without having asked to be, locked in a body we never chose, and destined to die. On the other hand, the wideness of the world used to provide a constant possibility of escape.

. . . Suddenly, in our century, the world is closing in around us. The decisive event in that transformation of the world into a trap was surely the 1914 war, called (and for the first time in history) a world war. Wrongly "world." . . . But the adjective "world" expresses all the more eloquently the sense of horror before the fact that, henceforward, nothing that occurs on the planet will be a merely local matter, that all catastrophes concern the entire world, and that consequently we are more and more determined by external conditions, by situations no one can escape, and which, more and more, make us resemble one another. (119-23)
# Table of Contents

Abstract ..................................................................................................................... ii  
Preface ..................................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Illustrations ............................................................................................... v  
Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1  
Chapter One: Plurality of the Public Persona ......................................................... 7  
  I. Deconstruction Becomes Demystification ......................................................... 9  
  II. Derridean Différence ....................................................................................... 13  
  III. Pairs of Being: Borders Between States ..................................................... 18  
  IV. Creation of the Self by the Other ................................................................. 21  
  V. False Unity: The Interchangeable/Exchangeable Persona ......................... 35  
  VI. Man’s Triviality: Lightness, Weight, and Eternal Return ......................... 39  
Chapter Two: The Human Body — Persona Personified ....................................... 47  
  I. The Face: “The Individualism of Our Time” .............................................. 50  
  II. The Body: Revolt Against Unity ................................................................. 56  
  III. Death and the Body .................................................................................. 69  
Chapter Three: History — The Persona’s Parallel — “An Investigation of Human  
  Life in the Trap the World Has Become” ...................................................... 72  
  I. Man in History ........................................................................................ 74  
  II. Loss of Memory: The Totalitarian State .................................................. 77  
  III. The Idyll: Heaven or Hell ..................................................................... 80  
  IV. Circles and Lines .................................................................................... 84  
Chapter Four: (Mis)Communication — (De)Presenting the Public Persona .... 88  
  I. Misinterpretation: The Multitude of Meanings ........................................... 90  
  II. Graphomania: The Worded Persona ......................................................... 98  
  III. Life on the Outside: Tamina and Lucie ................................................... 105  
  IV. Truth in Communication: A Relative Proposition .................................... 109  
Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 113  
Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 117
Illustration

1. Diagram from L’immortalité ................................................................. p. 66
**Introduction**

Mais c’est toujours ce qui se passe dans la vie: on s’imagine, jouer son rôle dans une certaine pièce, et l’on ne soupçonne pas qu’on vous a discrètement changé les décors, si bien que l’on doit, sans s’en douter, se produire dans un autre spectacle.

From “Edouard et Dieu,” *Risible Amours*, 287

Milan Kundera has lived his life stretched between the poles of existence, torn between East and West, wavering between pessimism and optimism, responding to ideology with irony, and expressing the inherently binary nature of human existence with a world view whose lines are blurred by paradox, absolute relativism, and the Derridean excess of post-structuralist deconstruction. Kundera, who is most well-known as the author of *L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être*, sets his novels in the jousting arena of paradox and focuses all of the contradictions, uncertainties, and existential struggles on the public persona with the characters testing their mettle and transforming themselves or being transformed on the constantly changing stage that is the world at the end of the twentieth century. Paradox, the sworn enemy of absolutes, serves as Kundera’s method of deconstructing existential “truth,” but instead of resulting in a vacuous landscape where nothing is true, Kundera fills the space with typical Derridean excess. In the end, meaning is constantly shifting and changing, emerging with different interpretations and traces for different individuals, resulting in a world view where almost everything is true some of the time.

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1 Kundera’s works will be referred to in parenthetical citations by the following abbreviations: *Risibles amours*, *RA*; *La plaisanterie*, *LP*; *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli*, *LRO*; *La vie est ailleurs*, *VEA*; *La valse aux adieux*, *VAA*; *L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être*, *ILE*; *L’immortalité*, *IM*; *L’art du roman*, *AR*; *Les testaments trahis*, *TT*; *La lenteur*, *LL*; *Jacques et son maître*, *JM*.
“In Kundera’s own fiction, one strongly senses a deconstructionist view of the modern world and an example of Kundera’s attempt to deal with the concept of identity in this deconstructed world of his novels,” writes Vicki Adams in “Kundera’s Search for Self in a Post-Modern World” (235). According to Kundera, “... au lieu d’une seule vérité absolue, un tas de vérités relatives qui se contredisent (vérités incorporées dans des ego imaginaires appelés personnages), posséder donc comme seule certitude la sagesse de l’incertitude, cela exige une force non moins grande” (AR 17). It is Kundera’s deconstruction of the public persona through paradox, visible in Kundera’s works from his earliest novel, La plaisanterie, to his most famous L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être and his most recent novels L’immortalité and La lenteur, that will be examined in this study. An outspoken Czech writer deprived of earning a livelihood in his homeland as a result of the Soviet occupation of his country in 1968, Kundera has resided in France since 1975 and acquired French citizenship in 1981.

Much has been written on Kundera’s works as a paradigm of paradox — the intellectual jousting which takes two contradictory statements and proves them both true. The paradox is always caught up in the dialectic; challenging orthodoxy and criticizing absolute judgement or absolute conventions. Kundera’s most well-known and copiously

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2 The interpretation of Kundera’s novels as a forum for deconstructing absolute truth is widely accepted, although not agreed upon in all critical circles. A debate among several scholars has emerged with the critic Nina Pelikan Straus charging in her article “Erasing History and Deconstructing the Text: Milan Kundera’s The Book of Laughter and Forgetting” that Kundera’s works provide an anti-deconstructionist message and demand that the individual search for absolute truths. On the other side of the argument, John O’Brien has published an article entitled “Milan Kundera: Meaning, Play, and the Role of the Author” which favors a deconstructionist reading of Kundera’s novels and specifically refutes Straus’s contentions.
studied paradox, found at the heart of _L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être_, is that of the lightness and heaviness of existence. This study will focus on the use of paradox to deconstruct the public persona, the external facade of human existence, in Kundera's works. Deconstruction, a critical paradigm created by the French critic Jacques Derrida, will be studied in four broad areas: the plurality of the self, the role of the body in establishing the persona, the persona in historical context, and the persona's use of communication. The persona serves as a paradox in itself, creating an illusion of unity that is then deconstructed as Kundera shows the inherent fissures within it. This illusory unity is ruptured by the gaze of the Other, who creates a different view of all that is exterior to himself. The role of the Other is further magnified through communication, which in Kundera's novels results only in miscommunication and infinitely variable interpretations of each message, verbal or written. The persona is further destroyed by the world of images which acquire more and more substance and overtake what one perceives to be the real essence of one's being. The question of whether the true self rests in the realm of the body or soul creates a further division that splits the self in two.

A world of relativism emerges from the multitude of paradoxes as applied to the public persona in Kundera's works. "To take Descartes' "thinking self" as the basis of everything and to be alone before the universe is to adopt an attitude which Hegel was right to call heroic. To take the world as relative, as Cervantes did, to be obliged not to face a single absolute truth but a heap of contradictory truths (truths embodied in imaginary thinking selves called characters), to have as one's only certainty the wisdom of uncertainty, requires no less courage," according to Kundera ("Czech Wager" 21). It
is this view of the world through the tradition of Cervantes, a world comprised of a heap of contradictory truths, that is the essence of paradox. Kundera has been said to avoid the pitfalls of the extremities of the paradox to keep “a foothold on the cliff overhanging the modern abyss of nothingness” (Adams 233). This foothold rests in his post-structuralist view which hinges on the beauty of the uncertainty of the self and its ever-changing landscape in a world in which certainties destroy. Kundera’s characters, whether situated in Western or Central Europe, are no less susceptible to the gravitational pull of the poles of existence between which Kundera maneuvers them with his deconstructionist use of paradox.

Kundera has frequently been accused of subjugating his characters to situation and, more precisely, to his philosophical, existential themes, creating a narrative in which the world and the self become inseparable. Such subjugation of self to the external factors of situation demonstrates the very essence of the public persona, highlighting the facade created for the audience, as an actor in classical Greek drama might have donned a mask on the stage. Men and women don these masks, and Kundera uses them interchangeably to show the paradox of human existence. The characters are tools manipulated by the fickle hand of History, tools the author uses to demonstrate his primary themes which include the weight and lightness of being, the loss of individuality in a world of increasing uniformity, the loss of memory, the desire and inability to communicate, and the slide of humanity into a kind of perpetual, destructive, youthful lyricism.

Milan Kundera is one of the most influential francophone voices to emerge from
the wave of writers and intellectuals who fled Central and Eastern Europe during the era of Soviet oppression. Milan Kundera left Prague in the tumult that followed the student revolts and the subsequent arrival of Russian tanks during the Prague Spring in 1968. Until the recent opening of the borders of the former Czechoslovakia, Kundera was long condemned to the odd fate of writing only for translators. In a 1978 interview, Kundera said, “I write my novels in Czech. But since 1970, I have not been allowed to publish in my own country, and so no one reads me in that language. My books are first translated into French and published in France, then in other countries, but the original text remains in the drawer of my desk as a kind of matrix” (Kundera, “Kundera on the Novel” 40).

Kundera has won numerous francophone prizes, including that of the Académie Française, and says that his residency in France is permanent. “I . . . have no hope whatever of returning. My stay in France is final, and, therefore, I am not an émigré. France is my only real homeland now” (Carlisle 74).

His first novel, La plaisanterie, is the only one to have first been published in the original Czech before his self-imposed exile. Kundera had his Czechoslovakian citizenship revoked in absentia after the 1979 publication in Paris of Le livre du rire et de l’oubli. He has since published several critical works in French, including L’art du roman in 1986 and Les testaments trahis in 1993. In 1995 he published his first French novel, La lenteur. Nonetheless, some of Kundera’s most enduring and philosophically-oriented works, such as L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être, L’immortalité, La vie est ailleurs, La valse aux adieux, and Le livre du rire et de l’oubli were written in Czech. Kundera worked from 1985 to 1987 to personally revise the French translations of these works,
which will be cited in this study, thus giving them the same authenticity as the Czech versions. He is continuing to revise the English versions, some of which he expressed great dissatisfaction with, to give them the same authenticity. Kundera is also the author of two volumes of poetry, *Man: A Broad Garden* and *Monologues*, which will not be considered here, and several plays. *Jacques and His Master: An Homage to Denis Diderot*, is the only one which will be considered in this study.

To understand Kundera's deconstruction of the persona through paradox in these works it is first necessary to define the term persona and to understand how it functions in the world of Kundera's novels. A brief study of the tradition of the persona, symbolized by the mask, will reveal the (de)presentation of the self in Kundera's works. This (de)presentation occurs through Kundera's multi-faceted deconstruction of the persona, which in turn becomes a deconstruction of the self, illuminated in every instance in which one presents oneself to the world.
Chapter One: The Plurality of the Public Persona

Plus qu’ailleurs, dans cet espace historique, national et géographique morcelé de l’Europe centrale, l’homme ne retrouve plus ses anciennes valeurs, ne se reconnaît plus dans son ancienne image; son “moi” se fissure, son récit se brise de multiples façons, sa perspective devient plurielle.

— Eva Le Grand, “L’Esthétique de la Variation Romanesque Chez Kundera” 56

The origin of the term “persona” leads back to ancient Greece and Rome to one of the most complex histories known to philologists and etymologists. The Latin persona, meaning mask, referred specifically to the mask that an actor wore on the stage. The philosopher Emmanuel Kant later incorporated the self behind the mask into his existential definition of persona, drawing on the “moral essence of human beings.”

“Whatever the uncertainties about derivation, there is no question that, in Latin, persona refers originally to a device of transformation and concealment on the theatrical stage,” according to Robert Elliott, writing in The Literary Persona (27). In ancient Rome, Cicero spoke of the persona as the human element “as one appears to others (but not as one really is); the part someone . . . plays in life; an assemblage of personal qualities that fit a man for his work” (Elliott 27). The idea of persona will be approached in this study primarily through its external aspects, regardless of their veracity, as the individual comes into contact with the world. The focus in this study will rest on the multiplicity and transformation of the persona, its contact with the Other, the roles played on the stage of the world in the second half of the twentieth century, the body’s conflict with the soul, and the persona’s communication or miscommunication with others in Kundera’s works.
Kundera deconstructs the public persona not in eliminating facets of truth but in multiplying them exponentially to create an atmosphere of excess — a plurality of the self that emerges through the repetition and variation of elements of the persona, thus deconstructing its oppositional logic. Kundera whittles away at the identity that each character constructs for himself, setting out to prove that man is never what he thinks he is. The excess inherent in the individual makes him at once more than what he thinks he is — he is light and heavy, angel and devil, simultaneously — and less, turning him into a mere shadow, an imitation, nothing more than a distorted image in an old, dusty mirror.

Czech writer Antonín Liehm has called this technique of paradox Kundera’s anti-poetic posture, a stance which “grows out of the conviction that between what we think about ourselves and what we actually are there exists an infinite distance, just as there is an infinite distance between what we wish things were and what they are, or between what we think they are and what they are” (Liehm, “Milan Kundera: Czech Writer” 31).

Man is the butt of the joke and only can laugh at himself and the inherent paradoxes of his tragi-comic life in rare and illusory moments of epiphany usually preceding his death. Kundera imagines God, too, laughing at man:

Parce que l’homme pense et la vérité lui échappe. Parce que plus les hommes pensent, plus la pensée de l’un s’éloigne de la pensée de l’autre. Et enfin, parce que l’homme n’est jamais ce qu’il pense être. (AR 191)

Man’s carefully-crafted personae dissolve under the Other’s glance or misinterpretation. The aging Don Juan is unmasked as an all-too-common “Grand Collectionneur,” a pale simulacrum of the historic and literary conqueror of women (RA 143). Jakub, in La valse aux adieux, sees the old friend who betrayed him as both oppressor and victim and
assumes both of these roles himself simultaneously. Ludvik, the vengeful victim of life's tragic joke in *La plaisanterie* sees his plans for retribution disintegrate before his eyes and becomes both tragi-comic lover and forgotten victim, a victim whose entire plight resulted from a misinterpreted post-card, from miscommunication.

I. Deconstruction Becomes Demystification:

Deconstructionist Jacques Derrida created perhaps the most unstable of postmodern signs, with an excess of meaning, in which the signified and the signifier continually break apart and reattach themselves in new combinations, thus revealing the inadequacy of the stable Saussurean sign. The Derridean sign refers not only to what is present in the tenuously attached signifier and signified but also to what is absent, the traces and inferences behind the sign itself. Kundera approaches the construction of the novel and its characters from a similar viewpoint -- using the form of the novel as a forum to explore certain themes and work through a series of repetitions with variations, a form often labeled as polysemic, polyphonic, rhizomic, archipelagic (Eiland 722) and, to borrow a musical term, contrapuntal (Said 172). His narrative voice slides continuously from one character to another, and in his later works even Kundera's own persona in the novel shifts without warning from that of Kundera the author to Kundera the narrator to Kundera the character within his own novel.

The structure of repetition and variation that has been well-documented by scholars around the world contributes to the deconstruction of the persona and then of the unequivocal nature of truth itself. As critic Glen Brand wrote of *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*: 
Kundera develops the concept of repetition as a dialectic between two opposed kinds of repetition. One pole of the dialectic is based on stability and identity which is affected and strengthened by repetition; and the other pole emphasizes the discrepancy between the "repetition" and the "original" and reveals the instability of truth and of any essence on which identity is based. (Brand, “Kundera and the Dialectic of Repetition” 227)

Paradox, a method of showing two contradictory facts as both true, becomes Kundera’s primary method of showing the range of possibilities inherent, not only in human existence, but within each individual. Kundera has spoken of the time since World War I as the era of “terminal paradoxes,” in which the ultimate paradox occurs as the individual laughs at himself in the act of criticizing the world through the technique of paradox (Banerjee, Terminal Paradox 3). If Kundera can depict man, for example, as both the oppressor and the victim simultaneously, as well as the shades of being between the two poles, he has achieved the ultimate deconstruction through paradox. Although Kundera focuses in on the poles of existence by creating binary pairs, such as lightness/weight, body/soul, angel/devil, circles/lines, good/evil, individual/society, he does not limit himself to these extremities, nor create a purely mythological, fabled world. Rather, these established poles serve as the ends of the tightly-stretched line on which the tightrope walker strides, demystifying the taut opposition of these extremes and of unequivocal truth.

Antonin Liehm has written on Kundera’s passionate longing to demystify myths, using irony as his primary tool. Kundera allows the reader to spit on myths, such as those of revolution, youth, motherhood, poetry, and the idyll, while still remaining their captive, Liehm says (“Milan Kundera: Czech Writer” 31-34). Liehm credits Kundera
with being one of a handful of true dramatists whose works appeared on the stages and
screens of Czechoslovakia during the 1960's which "became an important platform for
the intellectual destruction of myths and taboos, and at the same time a focus and a
departure point for cultural ferment [in the 1960's in Prague]. . . " (Liehm, The Most
Important Art 289).

Kundera, who was himself a lyrical poet in his youth, constructs the youthful
lyricism of the poet Jaromil of La vie est ailleurs as a mythology which crosses the
boundaries of time and country. The myth launches itself from the first page of the novel
as Jaromil is labeled a poet from the point of conception onward, first by the
narrator/author himself and then by Jaromil's mother who idealizes her unborn son as the
son of Apollo whose statue stands beside her bed. Jaromil's originality is undermined as
he adopts others' attitudes, mimicking their speech to win attention and applause. He
draws men with dogs' heads not out of the originality admired by the older painter but
out of an inability to draw the likeness of a human face. In this way, Kundera builds up
the poetic myth before attempting the young poet's demythification through Jaromil's
political conversion, the denunciation of his lover, and manipulation of poetry as an art
which serves the most oppressive political ends. The merger of the established poles in a
single individual allows the wearing away of time-honored myths.

Kundera has acknowledged the role of history in allowing this unification of
opposites and thus, demystification. "There are historical situations which open up the
human soul like a can of sardines," Kundera said. "Without the can-opener which
history so recently handed my own country I would not have been able to uncover that so
improbable symbiosis of the Poet and the Stoolpigeon in the soul of my hero Jaromil”

(Liehm, “Milan Kundera: Czech Writer” 31).

Kundera attempts a similar demythification with his numerous characters, created in the mold of Don Juan -- Tomas in L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être, Martin in “La pomme d’or de l’éternel désir” of Risibles amours, Doctor Havel in Risibles amours, and the trumpeter Klima in La valse aux adieux. Early in L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être, Tomas stares out the window and wonders whether he should contact Tereza, the woman he has just met and the protagonist of the novel. He wonders whether he is in love or is just imagining and simulating a love he has never known and is perhaps incapable of knowing. He continually evokes this erotic persona, defining himself through his sexual encounters with countless women. Tomas, whose life is one of lightness, longs for weight. Martin, the Don Juan of “La pomme d’or de l’éternel désir,” crams an afternoon of picking up women into his schedule so that he can be home by 9 p.m. to play cards with his wife, whom he loves and doesn’t want to disappoint. The Don Juanesque Doctor Havel rejects Elizabeth, the nurse who performs the erotic striptease in the hospital lounge, for no other reason than to aid the cause of freedom by throwing disorder into a system that assumes he will take any woman, given the opportunity. The mythological conquistador of women has been transformed in the twentieth century into a collector, stripped of his rebel’s persona and now no different from the man who pastes postage stamps into an album, a collector full of incongruous traits and self-doubt.

Renowned Latin American writer Carlos Fuentes praises this deconstructive demystification, as does critic Vicki Adams, for allowing the reader to “discover the yet
unknown avenues that depart from history and lead us to realities we had hardly suspected" (Fuentes 267). Adams adds, “What is pleasing about this goal is that it celebrates our very post-modern condition; instead of wallowing in the hopelessness of it all, it celebrates our very lack of connection to external codes, to institutions, and heralds the yet unknown possibilities for me -- unconnected, demystified, and deconstructed” (245).

Paradox allows Martin to be both a womanizer and a faithful husband, allows Jaromil to be a true poet and an impostor at the same time. Kundera achieves the demystification of these extremes by proving them all true via paradox. Kundera’s demystification of time-honored values does not degrade the individual but rather elevates the human condition. “Instead of arriving at the modern conclusion that life has less and less meaning in a post-Derridean world, he celebrates those very weaknesses that make us human (angst, confusion, hopelessness, uncertainty, and especially, man’s simplicity) as synonymous with beauty” (Adams 233).

II. Derridean Différance:

Kundera states that his characters are born out of several “key words” or core beliefs in an attempt to decipher each character’s “existential code” (AR 42-43). Kundera crafts the personae of his characters through their existential struggles, their philosophical underpinnings, such as Nietzsche’s eternal return and Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world,” filtering in external traits only as they relate to the core concepts of each character. However, both the external details of the individual’s life, his actions and reactions, as well his existential grappling imply an element of difference as man finds
he can only define himself by establishing his differences and/or similarities with others. Derrida’s concept of difference, like Kundera’s, stretches beyond the plane of physical, written, auditory or existential difference to what Derrida calls “diffère/ance,” drawing on the sense of a deferment or postponement. Meaning is always deferred and can only be seen in relation to other signs. “Diffère/ance” pushes itself out into time, as meaning is tenuously established in a diachronic world. Meaning, which should in no way be confused with truth, is flexible and constantly changed by time, by the moments that follow. No straight line proceeds through time toward some unequivocal truth or meaning. As Kundera illustrates in L’immortalité and in his best-known play, Jacques and His Master, the direction called “forward” is everywhere.

Rubens, the painter in the sixth section of L’immortalité entitled “Le cadran,” imagined all the great painters of the world advancing on the same path leading from Gothic painting up to Picasso. But suddenly, in the course of the twentieth century, the road disappeared although painters held on to the ineffable desire to go forward.

Mais où est l’ “avant” s’il n’y a plus de chemin? Dans quelle direction chercher l’ “avant” perdu? . . . ils [les artistes] se mettaient tous à courir dans tous les sens, se croisant sans cesse les uns les autres comme des passants agités sur la même place d’une même ville. Tous voulaient se distinguer et chacun s’évertuait à redécouvrir une découverte que l’autre n’avait pas redécouverte. (IM 425)

A similar scene is enacted in the final lines of the final scene of Jacques and His Master, as the two characters of the title, drawn from Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste, seek to continue their journey and try to find the “forward” direction. Jacques demands that his master lead him forward.
MASTER (looking around highly embarrassed): Very well, but where is forward?
JACQUES: Let me tell you a great secret. One of mankind's oldest tricks. Forward is anywhere.
MASTER (turning his head round in a circle): Anywhere?
JACQUES (making a large circle with one arm): Anywhere you look, it's all forward!
MASTER (without enthusiasm): Why, that's splendid! That's splendid! (He turns around slowly in place.)
JACQUES (melancholy): Yes, sir. I find it quite wonderful myself.
MASTER (... sadly): Well then, Jacques, forward! (JM 89-90)

Kundera strikes this paradoxical note through the combination of stage notes that express irony and sadness and dialogue expressing joy at the thought that everywhere is forward.

Difference has been eliminated at the end of the twentieth century, a time in which, Kundera says, progress and decline are inextricably linked and in many ways indistinguishable (Eiland 709).

In this age of (in)difference, Kundera's characters desperately seek to establish their differences and/or similarities from each other as a means of establishing their persona, often to comical effect. Like Jacques and his master, they are constantly performing on the stage, performing to establish themselves in the social order.

Recounting the conversation between a group of women in the sauna of a Parisian health club, the narrator of *L'immortalité* recalls one woman's fervent attempts to define herself to the others:

Elle était venue faire savoir à toutes les femmes présentes 1) qu'elle aimait transpirer, 2) qu'elle adorait les orgueilleux, 3) qu'elle méprisait les modestes, 4) qu'elle raffolait des douches froides, 5) qu'elle détestait les douches chaudes. En cinq traits elle avait dessiné son autoportrait, en cinq points elle avait défini son moi et l'avait offert à tout le monde. Et elle ne l'avait pas offert modestement (après tout, elle avait dit son mépris des modestes), mais à la manière d'une militante. Elle employait des
Defining oneself through one's taste for hot saunas and cold showers in a health club may be Kundera's 1980's version of the older struggles for self definition that were fought over art and freedom in the Stalinist Czechoslovakia of the 1960's. Jaromil, the poet of _La vie est ailleurs_, comes to define himself first through his attachment to the artist, a father figure whom he and his mother meet during their vacation at the spa, and then through his opposition to the same poet's ideas. He is no different than the young woman in the Parisian health club -- establishing his persona through similarity or difference as suits him to define his being in the world as an actor would take up a mask. In Jaromil's case, the theatrical allusion is particularly apt as he challenges the older poet's ideas during a gathering at the poet's apartment. The desire to revolt, to show difference, to throw off the mask of youth, informs Jaromil's rebellious comments and the action holds more meaning than the words themselves. He is not only rejecting the poet's world but that of his controlling mother and his bourgeois home, which is itself at odds with the surrealist and the counter-revolutionary stance of the poet. In listening to the poet, Jaromil "était envahi par le désir de révolte" (*VEA* 223).

Jaromil, wearing the metaphysical mask of the mother who wants to separate him from the world he longs to belong to, is transformed into the poet who runs, the poet of the book's fourth section who in turn becomes "every poet" -- Arthur Rimbaud, Frantisek Halas, Vladimir Maiakovski, Percy Shelley, and the French students writing their slogans on the walls of the Sorbonne during the cultural revolution in Paris in 1968 (*VEA* 222).
The differentiation of one's self through revolution or rebellion denotes the underlying presence of violence — violence against society, family, a regime, or oneself — a theme that carries over to the ever-present realm of the erotic in Kundera’s works.

The bowler hat, more often associated with laughter and levity in Kundera’s novels, at one point comes to signify the violence inherent in rupture and the creation of difference, specifically sexual difference. Sabina, Tomas’s mistress in *L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être*, juxtaposes her femininity with her masculinity in wearing her grandfather’s bowler hat during her erotic experiences with both Thomas and Franz.

“... le chapeau melon n’est plus un gag, il signifiait la violence; la violence faite à Sabina, à sa dignité de femme. ... Les sous-vêtements soulignaient le charme de sa fémininité, et le chapeau d’homme en feutre rigide la niait, la violait, la ridiculisait” (*ILE* 129-130). Tomas, the Czech doctor of *L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être*, defines others through their sexual difference, particularly the differences in the expressions on the faces of the women he makes love to, the differences in their moans and cries, through the unimaginable “one-millionth part dissimilarity” that he can perceive.

Thomas est obsédé du désir de découvrir ce millionième et de s’en emparer et c’est cela, à ses yeux, le sens de son obsession des femmes. ... On est évidemment en droit de se demander pourquoi il n’allait chercher que dans la sexualité ce millionième de dissemblable. Ne pouvait-il le trouver, par exemple, dans leur démarche, dans leurs goûts culinaires ou dans leurs préférences esthétiques? Bien entendu, ce millionième de dissemblable est présent dans tous les domaines de la vie humaine, seulement il y est partout publiquement dévoilé, on n’a pas besoin de le découvrir, on n’a pas de scalpel. ... C’est donc non pas le désir de volupté (la volupté venait pour ainsi dire en prime) mais le désir de s’emparer du monde (d’ouvrir au scalpel le corps gisant du monde) qui le jetait à la poursuite des femmes. (*ILE* 286-88)
Renowned writer Italo Calvino aptly poses this “epic obsession” against the “lyrical obsession” of other characters, such as Jaromil in *La vie est ailleurs*. The lyrical “seeks among many women the unique and ideal woman,” whereas, the epic fixation “seeks a universal knowledge in diversity” (Calvino 55). The unveiling of difference -- which Tomas, the surgeon, sees in surgical terms -- reveals not only the identity of the self via his own difference from others but results in a kind of elemental exploration of the world. Tomas believes that revealing the minute differences not between himself and others but between those others will create an understanding of the world which continues to mystify Tomas and all Kunderean characters.

**III. Pairs of Being: Borders between States**

As I have said, Kundera works through binary pairs, poles of existence which emerge in his writing as pairs of beings, and he explores the borders that separate them, what one critic calls “the shifting sands that constantly alter the point of reference” in a “universe firmly grounded in polar opposites” (Jefferson 125). The tension between the poles shows something of the *mimesis* of the distorted fun-house mirror, in which sameness is reflected as difference and the image becomes the supplementary double.\(^3\)

> Everything would then be played out in the paradoxes of the supplementary double: the paradoxes of something that, added to the simple and the single, replaces and mimes them, both like and unlike, unlike because it is -- in that it is -- like, the same as and different from what it duplicates. (Derrida, *Acts of Literature* 139-40)

Kundera’s double beings need not be human, as Tereza and Sabina, the diametrically

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\(^3\) This idea of distorted mimesis is explored further using the image of the mirror which reflects sameness and difference simultaneously in John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* and provides an interesting parallel to Kundera’s work.
opposed women of *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être*, the wife and the mistress, or the sisters Agnès and Laura of *L'immortalité*, alike in their love for the same man but unlike in their relations with their own bodies. The oppositions of Tereza and Sabina in *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être* and Agnès and Laura in *L'immortalité* will be discussed later as part of the irreconcilability of body and soul. Kundera also explores binary figures beyond the terrestrial through the oppositions of the angel and devil, specifically the opposition of an angel’s laughter with a devil’s laughter in *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli*. The opposition of Man and God similarly emerges from this novel and through Edouard’s theological persona and pretense in “Edouard et Dieu” in *Risibles amours*. Kundera deconstructs these pairs, tearing at what each “thinks he is” in showing the equally-present presence of the flip side of the persona and the inability to distinguish differences between the two sides.

The deconstruction of the binary opposition of angels and devils in *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli* can be seen through the distorted lens of similarity -- with devils, who were originally angels, serving as the mimetic, negative representation of the original angelic being. Kundera rejects their traditional “good” and “evil” categorization to place the two elements on the same, equal footing. Angels for Kundera are on the side of “la création divine” and devils on the side of “un sens rationnel.” In Kundera’s essay on two kinds of laughter, the two sides are as similar as they are different. Their laughter, which differs completely in meaning, at the level of the signified, rests undifferentiated at the level of the signifier, the word “laughter,” and at the auditory level of the “sons entrecoupés, saccadés, dans les intervalles supérieurs de son registre vocal.” At the level
of the signified, the two kinds of laughter are diametrically opposed with that of the devil
pointing out the meaningless and absurdity of the world and aiming its mockery at the
alleged wonder of it all, while the angels’ laughter, which followed the devils’ and came
in reaction and response to it, rejoiced in the world’s rational organization and showed
camaraderie in the inherent goodness of it (LRO 101-02). The angels’ response to the
devils’ laughter causes the extreme ends of human expression paradoxically to pull
together to become indistinguishable. As Kundera states:

Il s [les anges] nous ont trompés avec une imposture sémantique. . . .
Aujourd’hui on ne se rend même plus compte que la même manifestation
extérior recouvre deux attitudes intérieures absolument opposées. Il y a
deux rires et nous n’avons pas de mot pour les distinguer. (LRO 101-02)

The same lack of signification penetrates Édouard’s relationship with a non-
existent God and with Édouard’s girlfriend Alice in the final story of Risibles amours.
Édouard adopts the religious attitude of Alice as a means of seducing her, although he
views religion only as a mindless justification of suffering. In Alice’s pious gestures, he
sees only “des signes sans signification, des billets de banque sans couverture, des poids
en papier . . .” (RA 299). Édouard is separated from God, from Alice and, in the end,
from himself as everything progressively becomes a cheap imitation of something else,
especially Édouard himself. The paradox which ties Man to his invisible God, in the
end, turns man into an empty shadow, as absent as his God and perpetually longing for
substance.

. . . il [Édouard] se dit que tous les gens qu’il côtoyait dans cette ville
n’était en réalité que des lignes absorbées dans une feuille de papier
buvard, des êtres aux attitudes interchangeables, des créatures sans
substance solide; mais ce qui était pire, ce qui était bien pire (se dit-il
ensuite), c’est qu’il n’était lui-même que l’ombre de tous ces personnages-ombres... une imitation, même malveillante, est encore une imitation, même une ombre qui ricane est encore une ombre, une chose seconde, dérivée, misérable. (RA 299-300)

Edouard becomes Plato’s third copy, the palest imitation as a copy of a shadow. Kundera juxtaposes him with his paradoxical God, the God who is existence itself and yet, for him, does not exist. “Non, soyez sans crainte,” Kundera, the narrator, tells the reader. “Edouard n’a pas trouvé la foi. Je n’ai pas l’intention de couronner mon récit par un paradoxe aussi flagrant.” Edouard turns his head nostalgically toward the idea of God, while Kundera completes the paradoxical, oppositional logic with the following thought:

Dieu c’est l’essence même, tandis qu’Edouard... n’a jamais rien trouvé d’essentiel ni dans ses amours, ni dans son métier, ni dans ses idées. Il est trop honnête pour admettre qu’il trouve l’essentiel dans l’inessentiel, mais il est trop faible pour ne pas désirer secrètement l’essentiel (RA 302).

Edouard’s sad life where nothing is true and nothing can be taken seriously, where all is appearance and game, requires its opposition in God. God becomes the antithesis of the human concern with persona and is defined by Kundera as the only one who is not concerned with appearing (with persona) and, unlike humans, can merely be (RA 302-03).

IV. Creation of the Self by the Other

The establishment of a persona requires witnesses, an audience, in other words a living mirror to take in the individual’s every action and message. The oppositions between angels and devils and man and God are supplanted by the relation in Kundera’s works between the individual and his audience, the implied recipient of the persona’s external expression. Derrida, in analyzing the works of the philosopher Emmanuel
Levinas, explains that there is no exteriority except in the Other, that "la vraie extériorité n’est pas spatiale, qu’il y a une extériorité absolue, infinie — celle de l’Autre — qui n’est pas spatiale, car l’espace est le lieu du Même" (Derrida, *L’écriture et la différence* 165).  

In a sense it is the constant tugging and shoving between the individual and his audience that creates the need for persona, the persona itself, and perhaps divides the individual between his internal and external selves. The presence of witnesses — actual or implied, present or future — creates a bar, a hymen, both joining and separating the persona from its audience.

"Hymen" (a word, indeed the only word, that reminds us that what is in question is a “supreme spasm”) is first of all a sign of fusion, the consummation of a marriage, the identification of two human beings, the confusion between two. Between the two, there is no longer difference but identity (Derrida, *Acts of Literature* 161)

In *La lenteur*, Kundera’s most recent novel published in 1995, Kundera alludes to the plurality of the persona created by the idea of the Other, an Other that is at once an audience, a participant, and the public body which causes the individual to see himself as its representative. Vincent, who keeps the story-telling aspect in the back of his mind during his erotic chase, conjures up the following image of himself recounting his tale:


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4 These ideas closely parallel those of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Kundera’s works have a psychoanalytic side, especially *La vie est ailleurs*, and would profit from such a reading.
But is this identity, this persona created by rapport with others, the true self as Levinas would have us believe? Or is the persona itself inherently a lie, as Cicero believed, a false side of the individual that vanishes when the curtain is drawn across the stage? Sabina, Tomas’s lover in *L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être*, would agree with Cicero’s conclusion. Sabina is also Franz’s lover and Franz decides to tell his wife Marie-Claude about his nine-month relationship with Sabina in order to finally “live in truth.” Franz, like the tyrannical Socialists in *La plaisanterie*, believes that any separation between public life and private life is only a lie and that the two spheres must be unified. For Franz, “living in truth” entails the complete destruction of the barrier between private and public, whereas, for Sabina, “living in truth” is just the opposite. Sabina’s truth is rooted in the individual, while Franz’s is anchored in society, in the world of the ever-present Other.

Pour Sabina, vivre dans la vérité, ne mentir ni à soi-même ni aux autres, ce n’est possible qu’à la condition de vivre sans public. Dès lors qu’il y a un témoin à nos actes, nous nous adaptons bon gré mal gré aux yeux qui nous observent, et plus rien de ce que nous faisons n’est vrai. Avoir un public, penser à un public, c’est vivre dans le mensonge. *(ILE 164-65)*

For Sabina truth rests in the impossibility of utter solitude and freedom, freedom from the Other’s gaze which inherently changes the self. Franz’s truth entails the equally impossible complete destruction of private life, in which every action and thought would be exposed to public scrutiny and judged by a vast pool of witnesses.

Man has always lived with this constant eye -- in the form of the camera’s lens, the image of an all-seeing God, the watchful eyes of society, or the perceived eye of future biographers -- a gaze for which he either performs or from which he tries to hide.
Kundera has established two kinds of relationships between the persona and its audience -- the consciously-established one, created by the individual as an external facet of himself, and the unintentional one, established by the Other as a response to the individual's persona. These two facets, equally external to the self, may merge, but more often they conflict. This second gaze in Kundera’s novels, that of the audience back upon the individual, echoes Kafka’s bureaucratic nightmare or the Orwellian “Big Brother.” Ann Jefferson, author of “Counterpoint and Forked Tongues: Milan Kundera and the Art of Exile,” points out that Czech national identity has always had to construct itself in relation to a national Other because of its successive occupations by the Germans, Russians, etc. (118).

The French public in L’immortalité wants cameras installed in every hospital operating room to catch errors, such as the one made by an anesthesiologist that resulted in a young woman’s death during routine surgery.

This image echoes Michel Foucault’s writing on the pan-optikum, the use of the lens or eye to discipline the population by creating the sense that one is potentially being watched and stands to be punished for his actions. Kundera, a private person himself, writes with hatred of this “Actualité Historique Planétaire,” which illuminates the scene for a brief, shining moment or replays the film for the hungry crowd. Although the
camera is not essential for the perception of the view of the Other to exist, the twentieth century has been dominated by its lens. “C’est là que l’époque fondée sur l’invention de la photographie vient en aide avec ses stars, ses danseurs, ses célébrités dont l’image, projetée sur un immense écran, est visible de loin par tous, admirée par tous et à tous inaccessible” (LL 55).

Agnès, the main character of L’immortalité whose youthful waving gesture sparks the novel, searches for solitude, the “douce absence de regards.” For Agnès, the presence of others turns into “des fardeaux écrasants, des baisers vampirique” which strip away her self (IM 50). As a child she took the opposite stance. When her mother told her that God was watching her in order to get her to stop picking her nose, biting her nails or lying, Agnès began to perform for God, miming her bad habits for his gaze. Agnès felt pleasure and excitement in being constantly spied upon, especially in intimate moments, and against her will. But God’s eye, Agnès tells herself, has been replaced by the eyes of all and life has transformed itself into one, big orgy in which everyone participates. This public orgy no longer leads Agnès on the path to jouissance, only to the recognition that no one can hide himself and that each individual is at the mercy of everyone else (IM 54-55).

Even after death. Yes, even after death, as Ernest Hemingway is unhappy to learn in the world beyond as he strolls and talks with the German poet Goethe in L’immortalité. Immortality is an eternal trial at the hands of the Other, Goethe tells him (IM 126). The public becomes Hemingway’s God, the judge for the supreme and unending trial, from which there’s no escape. The scene becomes Kundera’s version of
Sartre’s *Huis Clos*, which Kundera said had a profound impact on his life and work (Liehm, *The Politics of Culture* 136). Sartre’s Hell, the eternal presence of other people in a confined world of unbearable presence (everyone lacks eyelids), is transformed by Kundera. The hellish presence in Kundera’s world is that of an eternal public, which need not be present to twist and mar one’s immortal persona. This is Hemingway’s plight as he complains to Goethe:

> Au lieu de lire mes livres, ils écrivent des livres sur moi. Il paraît que je n’aimais pas mes épouses. Que je ne me suis pas assez occupé de mon fils. Que j’ai cassé la gueule à un critique. Que j’ai manqué de sincérité. Que j’ai été orgueilleux. Que j’ai été macho. Que je me suis vanté de deux cent trente blessures de guerre, quand j’en avais seulement deux cent six. Que je me suis masturbé. Que j’ai été méchant avec maman. (IM 126)

Many men waste their lives playing into the hands of this public, trying to carefully shape their immortal personae, believing they can cast it in stone and it will last for eternity. Man thinks of his immortality, which is beyond his grasp because it is the Other or others who control it. Only the old man, approaching death, frees himself from the grasp of immortality, tearing himself away from the Other’s gaze. “L’immortalité, le vieil homme fatigué n’y pense plus du tout,” the narrator says (IM 113). Goethe, in his final years, forgets about the image he will leave behind after his death and calls Bettina, the woman who flutters about in order to attach his immortality to her wings, an “intolerable gadfly.” For Goethe, these words alone, and nothing he has written or spoken before this moment, represent pure liberty. Like Sabina, Goethe finds freedom only in escaping the Other’s gaze.

Kundera turns immortality, which many men long for as a way of enshrining
their persona, into a plague that robs him of his freedom and has the ability to transform him into a buffoon both during his life and posthumously. Society’s gaze robs man of his dignity, as the real or imaginary camera catches him drooling and records the image for posterity. Kundera recounts the story of Tycho Brache, a great astronomer, who attended a dinner given by the Czech emperor Rodolphe. Ashamed of his need to urinate and refusing to excuse himself, Brache died when his bladder burst. Today he is only remembered as “a martyr to shame and to urine” (IM 82). Just as God laughs at the man who thinks he possesses the truth, history laughs at man, playing jokes on him to prove that he cannot control the gaze of the public, nor his immortality.

The individual who worked diligently to craft his own persona soon finds that this distorted reflection of himself, the image created by others, becomes more real than the “true” self that he believes he is. While Hemingway does not accept the public’s image of him as a wife-abusing masturbator, not all of Kundera’s characters prove so strong in standing up to their images. The image becomes what is real, and the individual begins to accept and transform himself into this image, even as he is haunted by its horrible face. Bernard in L’immortalité receives an award from Professor Avenarius declaring, “Bernard Bertrand est promu âne intégral.” Not knowing what to do, he thanks the professor and shakes his hand. “Quand on est promu âne, on agit en âne,” a friend tells him, and Bernard can think of nothing else from that moment onward (IM 190-91).

This acceptance of one’s image is especially true of Ludvik, the ardent Communist of La plaisanterie who finds himself ousted from the Party because of the sarcastically-worded postcard to his cold and distant girlfriend Marketa. He initially
rejects his designation as an enemy of the Party. He wrote, “L’optimisme est l’opium du
genre humain! L’esprit sain pue la connerie. Vive Trotsky!” to wound and to shock
Marketa and in response to her glowing reviews of a Party conference. But he soon
begins to see the three sentences on the card through the eyes of his accusers.

... ces phrases me devinrent un sujet d’effroi: sous leur masque
canularesque, peut-être allaient-elles révéler quelque chose de vraiment
très grave, à savoir que je ne m’étais jamais fondu tout entier dans la chair
du Parti, que jamais je n’avais été un authentique révolutionnaire
prolétarien ... m’accusant de maintes vilenies, je finissais par admettre la
nécessité d’un châtiment; mes efforts ne tendaient plus désormais qu’à
ceci: ne pas être chassé du Parti et, par là, marqué comme son ennemi;
vivre en ennemi reconnu de ce que j’avais choisi dès mon adolescence, de
ce à quoi je tenais vraiment, me semblait désespérant. (LP 74-75)

Sylvie Richterova, in her study of the problems of communication in Kundera’s early
works, alludes to this internalization of guilt that plagued those accused under the
Stalinist regime in the former Czechoslovakia. The Czech philosopher Karel Kosik
wrote a letter to Jean-Paul Sartre describing his own tendency to transform himself into
what he had been accused of without his ever having committed a single crime in the era
of total, general suspicion. Kosik asks Sartre, “Suis-je coupable?” Richterova points
out, “La conscience de n’avoir commis aucun délit ne lui suffit pas et ne peut pas lui
suffire; on ne se libère de cette question angoissante que si l’on est convaincu d’avoir
raison du point de vue de l’histoire, ou si l’on croit en Dieu” (35).

Images take on the glow of reality and permanently change the perception of the
individual. His view is exteriorized and turned on himself. Ludvik abandons his role in
society and even finds a certain happiness in the simplicity of day-to-day existence
outside of politics before allowing his desire for revenge to consume him. This process
of self-accusation, seeing oneself as one's image and therefore as an object, is part of
“men’s mineralization,” according to Jean-Paul Sartre, writing on Kundera and other
notable Czech writers.

The men of the system, those products of fetishized production, are
suspect by essence; in fact, doubly suspect because they are turned into
things and because they are never completely mere things. Robots can be
manipulated and are, therefore, potential traitors; since those in power
know how to work their controls, why couldn’t foreign agents find out
how to work them, too? And how does one know who is pulling the
puppet’s strings in that case? But to the very degree that men’s
mineralization is not complete -- and it never is, for these mineral bipeds
are men who live their mineralization in a human way -- their very
existence constitutes a danger to the regime. To laugh, weep, die, or even
sneeze is to give proof of a lurking spontaneity that is perhaps of
bourgeois origin. (Sartre 14)

In “Le jeu de l’auto-stop” in Risibles amours, an assumed image rather than an
imposed one breathes life into the external interpretation of the persona. A young couple
setting off on vacation decides to play the roles of a young woman hitchhiking and the
man who gives her a ride. The young man loves the woman for her rare purity. She
blushes easily, even at the thought of blushing, and wishes she could escape her modesty
to be more at ease in her body. The young man, who works long hours and meticulously
plans every minute, regrets not living a more carefree life. In the course of the story, the
two become what they fantasize and the other comes to hate him for it. She plays the
whore and he, the macho womanizer, and when the game is over neither can see the
other in the same way. He rejects her, and she is left crying, “Je suis moi, je suis moi, je
suis moi . . .” (RA 116). The reader, and one imagines the young woman herself, wonder
which self she is referring to -- the pure self that she longed to shed or the easy self that
she longed to be and had just found in her prostitute's persona. The plurality and fissures of the self wrap themselves together in the word “moi” in a world in which distinctions between internal and external selves, images and actions, feelings and ideas, are obliterated through their very emphasis.

Kundera asserts, through the character of Paul in L’immortalité, that the inner self and the image of the self, the persona, are in fact indivisible.

Les philosophes peuvent bien nous expliquer que l'opinion du monde importe peu et que seul compte ce que nous sommes. Mais les philosophes ne comprennent rien. Tant que nous vivrons parmi les humains, nous serons ce pour quoi les humains nous tiennent... Mais entre mon moi et celui de l'autre, existe-t-il un contact direct, sans l'intermédiaire des yeux?... C'est une illusion naïve de croire que notre image est une simple apparence, derrière laquelle se cacherait la vraie substance de notre moi, indépendante du regard du monde. (IM 193)

A bitter Paul tells us that the imagologues are right, in spite of the ironic fact that he is just about to lose his law show on the radio to their reductive ideas. Paul has become the “brilliant ally of his own gravediggers.”

Il comprit soudain que les gens le voyaient autrement qu’il ne se voyait lui-même, autrement qu’il croyait être vu... Car c’est ainsi, et la loi vaut pour tout le monde: nous n’apprenons jamais pourquoi et en quoi nous agaçons les autres, en quoi nous leur sommes sympathiques, en quoi nous leur paraissions ridicules; notre propre image est pour nous le plus grand mystère. (IM 189)

The persona created for oneself by others bears an infinite number of traces, changing over time and as shaped by a vast number of individuals. Therefore, it is not surprising that not all individuals reject the Other’s gaze -- as Agnès, Sabina, Goethe, and Hemingway all do at some point as characters in Kundera’s novels. Some seek out the gaze as an affirmation of their persona or existence. The Other’s gaze can be one of
admiration, affirming one's place in the world and creating the illusion of immortality. It is assumed by the individual to be non-threatening and reinforces the persona created by the individual instead of refuting it. Kundera, a great admirer of Cervantes's Don Quixote, creates several pairs of beings which mimic the relationship of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza — the master and the protégé/servant. In Kundera’s “La pomme d’or de l’éternel désir,” Martin’s unnamed sidekick narrates the tale of their amorous adventures. The sidekick narrator is “the mirror whose surface will return a reassuring image of his [Martin’s] own fabulous potency” (Banerjee, “The Impossible Don Juan” 38). Writing in “The Impossible Don Juan,” Maria Němcová Banerjee speaks of the lack of a servant to accompany the modern Don Juan persona through his adventures. “He is reduced to being his own accountant, but he requires a secondary male presence at his heels to witness the actuarial function that rivals and ultimately overwhelms the primary activity for which Don Juan’s sword once stood as guarantor and metonymic emblem” (Banerjee 38-39). The mimetic function of the true mirror cannot hold in the post-modern world, nor in Kundera’s novels, as we shall see. The perception of the persona via the witness may prove flattering, charming and affirming, even as it lies.

In “La pomme d’or ou l’éternel désir,” Martin and the narrator set out to meet two off-duty nurses in a town in the country for an afternoon of erotic adventure. Martin and his friend approach numerous women en route, arranging rendez-vous that they don’t intend to keep and being stood up by one young girl. The sidekick willingly subordinates all of his personal interests and desires for Martin’s “game,” but silently and without his companion’s knowledge, betrays his role by losing his belief in Martin and in the divine
power of endless womanizing, finding only the poor substitute of sympathy for the aging
philanderer at his side. However, the sidekick puts aside his treasonous thoughts to grasp
once more his Sisyphean outlook. He finds the strength to pursue the game once more,
offering the image of an imaginary student that he dangles in words before Martin’s eyes.
This image of the potential conquest becomes the golden apple of eternal desire of the
title, the continuation of the realm of human possibility. Possibility, whether it is that
which the individual creates for himself in the form of persona or the possibilities in the
world before him, constitutes the essential plane of human existence. As Kundera
himself wrote in his critical work, *L’art du roman*:

> Et l’existence n’est pas ce qui s’est passé, l’existence est le champ des
possibilités humaines, tout ce que l’homme peut devenir, tout ce dont il
est capable. Les romanciers dessinent la carte de l’existence en
découvrant telle ou telle possibilité humaine. Mais encore une fois:
exister, cela veut dire: “être-dans-le-monde.” Il faut donc comprendre et
le personnage et son monde comme possibilités. (AR 57)

Kundera’s sidekicks silently or publicly revolt against their friends, showing the illusion
inherent in the complete unity of such a relationship in which one individual serves as a
mirror to affirm the unity and perfection of the other’s persona. The relationship
between Jacques and his master in the play of the same name parallels that of Martin and
his womanizing companion. Jacques is the servant, the witness, and the story-teller.
When he is sent off to the gallows on account of his master’s deeds, the master laments
the loss: “Jacques! Jacques, my boy! Ever since I lost you, the stage is as bare as the
world and the world is as bare as an empty stage . . . What I wouldn’t give to hear you
tell the tale of the Knife and the Sheath again” (JM 88). The exploits of both the master
and servant prove worthless without the mirror in which they are reflected back in illusory, yet reaffirming unity.

This external facade created by the individual is subordinated in Kundera’s world to the revised version of the persona as perceived by the Other. Identity in Kundera’s works “is more deeply tied up with others, and who we are is dependent upon what others make out that we are. Because for Kundera we do not exist as a ‘real self’ behind the mask of someone else’s image” (Jefferson 132-33).

It is important to note that the men and women of Kundera’s novels respond differently to this need for an audience, the need for witnesses. Men seek out others to fill this role, whereas, women often become their own witnesses through the filter of the mirror. Martin, typical of this male persona, uses his sidekick to affirm his youth and the infinite possibilities in the world. He is both pathetic in his obsessive self-deception and sympathetic, assuming an optimistic attitude despite the rejections and failures. On a more bitter note, the reader of La plaisanterie finds a parallel in the applause-seeking Pavel Zemanek, the arch-enemy of Ludvik. Ludvik holds Zemanek responsible for his dismissal from the Party and seeks revenge by sleeping with his wife Helena. The desperate seeking of approval, a trait often found among only sons of overly-protective mothers in Kundera’s novels, becomes a drug. Helena tells us:

. . . tout le monde l’applaudissait, Pavel a toujours été applaudi, dès son enfance, fils unique, sa mère dort avec sa photo, enfant prodige mais homme simplement moyen, ne fume pas, ne boit pas, mais incapable de vivre sans vivats, c’est son alcool, sa nicotine, si bien qu’il jubilait de pouvoir empoigner le cœur des auditeurs qu’il haranguait sur l’horreur des procès staliniens avec un élan tel qu’un peu plus les gens auraient éclaté en sanglots, je sentais comme il était heureux dans son indignation,
et je le haïssais. (LP 36)

The men of Kundera’s novels—such as Pavel Zemanek, Ludvik, Martin, and the master of *Jacques and His Master*—rely upon the eyes of society to affirm their carefully-crafted personae. Jaromil, the poet of *La vie est ailleurs*, uses poetry and politics simultaneously to win affirmation.

The women in Kundera’s novels turn inward to find this witness. The division between actor and audience ruptures like a fault-line within the self, and the reaction is frequently one of critique rather than one of acclaim. This division will be further developed as part of the study of the division between body and soul that falls almost exclusively into the woman’s domain in Kundera’s novels.

In *L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être*, Tereza longs to discover the division between love and sex that Tomas so easily distinguishes. She sleeps with an engineer whom she has met in the bar where she works and discovers not the division between love and sex, but the division between body and soul. Her soul serves as her witness, and her body remains passive during the sexual act. Tereza’s incredulous soul watches her body make love to the stranger. Rather than bringing the body and soul together, the action irrevocably separates them, despite the soul’s excitement in its role as witness. “Car ce qui excitait l’âme, c’était justement d’être trahie par le corps qui agissait contre sa volonté, et d’assister à cette trahison,” according to the narrator (*ILE 225*).

Agnès in *L’immortalité* strikes a similar pose in her extramarital sexual encounters with Rubens. The reader, unaware that the woman is Agnès, watches her as a young woman dancing with her partner in a nightclub, her eyes gazing into the void as
if she didn’t want to see the world but wanted to concentrate on herself. She dances as if she is looking at a mirror reflecting only herself. Later, she stands between her two lovers, covering her breasts with her hands and gazing at the mirror as if she “s’observait dans un grand miroir imaginaire” (IM 442-43). Agnès assumes the role of her own witness to her aging body, the body she manipulates and yet has always tried to escape. This difference between how men and women seek out witnesses and admirers becomes integrally tied to the way in which they view their bodies as extensions or as essential components of their selves.

V. False Unity: The Interchangeable/Exchangeable Persona

Critic Howard Eiland contrasts Kundera’s thematic unity with the resulting atmosphere -- a discontinuous, aphoristic flow of masterful ambiguity or “double exposure” with a sense of the interchangeability, if not reconcilability, of opposites (722). It is important to note that the characters in Kundera’s novels are not tied to their personae as by a chain. They realize only how little difference exists between the poles which they use to plot their location in themselves. Massive external upheaval can occur even in the absence internal transformation. Lives are turned upside down, and individuals are transformed into their binary opposites. Their personae are deconstructed by the ability of something to be its opposite. Both poles come to be true at the same time, showing through each other like a light shining through a sheer piece of fabric.

In “Le jeu de l’auto-stop” of *Risibles amours*, the young man and woman have not changed at all, yet each cannot see the other except through his opposite. The young man can no longer see the pure, modest young woman, except through her whorish
persona, and perhaps more importantly, through his own desire. Kundera undertakes his existential interrogation without providing any easy answers. Do the two images of the woman exist in herself or do they exist only as the other perceives them? Where is the uniqueness of the individual found?

Les deux images superposées apparaissaient, toujours en transparence, l'une au-dessus de l'autre, et le jeune homme comprenait que la différence entre son amie et les autres femmes était une différence toute superficielle, que, dans les vastes profondeurs de son être, son amie était semblable aux autres femmes, avec toutes les pensées, tous les sentiments, tous les vices possibles, ce qui justifiait ses doutes et ses jalousies secrètes.... Il lui semblait que telle qu'il l'avait aimée, elle n'était qu'un produit de son désir, de sa pensée abstraite, de sa confiance, alors que telle qu'elle était réellement, elle se tenait là, devant lui, désespérément autre, désespérément étrangère, désespérément polymorphe. Il la détestait. (RA 111)

Kundera ties this amorphous nature of humankind to the individual's search for unity in the midst of chaos. The young man in “Le jeu de l’auto-stop” sees this conflicted side of his girlfriend’s persona revealed to him through the game and rejects it, as he has always rejected the disorderly side of life. He clings to the illusion of unity and hates everything that reveals its illusory nature to him.

Helena, the tragi-comic lover of La plaisanterie, is not unlike this young man. She, too, clings to illusions of unity of self and explicitly rejects the division of private and public selves. Helena sees the human creature as indivisible and believes that the false division between the private and public man was created by bourgeois society. Helena is a tragic character, courted by Ludvik who only sleeps with her to mete out his revenge on her husband. She clings primarily to the unity of love and sex and fears that she would no longer be herself if she lost her hold on this certainty. Kundera deprives
Helena of her tragedy via her suicide attempt. Rejected by Ludvik, she tries to commit suicide by taking a tube of pills that she believes are analgesics but which are laxatives, and Ludvik finds Helena, still alive, sobbing in the outhouse.

The meshing of opposites — such as excrement and love, rejection and privilege, happiness and sorrow — comes together in Kundera’s story of Stalin’s son Yakov in L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être. The son of privilege found himself a prisoner of the Germans at the outset of the war and accused by them of repeatedly leaving the latrine smeared with his own shit. Unable to stand the humiliation, Yakov throws himself against the camp’s electrified fence and dies. The narrator, in explaining Yakov’s plight, offers the following explanation:

Personne n’a senti concrètement à quel point ces oppositions sont interchangeables et combien le marge est étroite entre les deux pôles de l’existence humaine... Quand le pôle Nord se rapprochera du pôle Sud presque au point de le toucher, la planète disparaîtra et l’homme se retrouvera dans un vide qui l’étourdira et le fera céder à la séduction de la chute. (ILE 350-51)

Vertigo, according to Kundera, is more than the fear of falling, it is “la voix du vide audessous de nous qui nous attire et nous envoûte, le désir de chute dont nous nous défendons ensuite avec effroi” (ILE 93). Vertigo becomes the symbol of the weak who, confronted with disunity, long to fall. Yakov, the son of Stalin, is confronted with the division between power and humiliation. Tereza, who is haunted by vertigo, is confronted with the divisions between body and soul and love and sex. Critic John O’Brien, who argues for a deconstructionist interpretation of Kundera’s work, sees in the words used to describe Yakov’s demise the very essence of deconstruction — “binary
oppositions, which are then hopelessly blurred in a typically deconstructionist fashion (16).

Ludvik in La plaisanterie also finds that twenty years after his expulsion from the Party the difference he perceived between himself and his arch-enemy Pavel Zemanek has disappeared. "Ludvik et Zemanek se ressemblent. Ou mieux, ils sont devenus, après vingt ans, interchangeables: jadis ils étaient d'importants fonctionnaires du parti et des étudiants prometteurs. Aujourd'hui, ils sont l'un et l'autre des témoins d'événements passés qui ne sont plus intéressants" (Richterova 41). Ludvik's encounter with Zemanek at the Ride of the Kings festival leads Ludvik to muse that the members of his generation have merged together into a single, amorphous mass (LP 401).

Perhaps the most striking example of two extremes coming together in a deconstructive paradox comes in La valse aux adieux. This poignant novel deals with the destabilization of meaning in a story of death and birth, exile and, as the title implies, a wide array of farewells, in which everyone is "consigned to a life of farce" in the end (Pochoda 313). It is the last book Kundera wrote in Czechoslovakia, and critics have called it a sort of farewell to his homeland, immediately preceding his 1975 immigration to France.

"Je vais te dire la plus triste découverte de ma vie," says the character Jakub, who is also about to leave his homeland. "Les persécutés ne valaient pas mieux que les persécuteurs. Je peux fort bien imaginer les rôles inversés" (VAA 105). Jakub reveals this discovery to Olga, the daughter of a comrade who had been executed. Olga asks Jakub if her father hadn't committed the same cruelties that had been inflicted on him,
and Jakub hides the truth that her father had in fact sentenced Jakub to death but had
been executed himself before the sentence could be carried out. Jakub’s conviction that
the roles of persecutor and persecuted can be easily reversed proves true, as he in turn
becomes responsible for the death of a young woman who unwittingly swallows the
suicide pill he has been carrying with him for years, but Jakub leaves the country before
he knows it has occurred. This ability to change roles does not mean that “right” and
“wrong” have lost their meaning, Jakub insists, adding that losing hold of that crucial
difference would cause one to lose all hope and sink into hell.

VI. Man’s Triviality: Lightness, Weight, and Eternal Return

Perhaps the most important binary opposition which Kundera constructs and,
consequently, deconstructs is that of lightness and weight, a theme which traverses all of
his novels. Kundera proves the paradox that life is both heavy and light simultaneously.
The theme is the central preoccupation of both L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être and Le
livre du rire et de l’oubli, but to grasp this opposition it is first necessary to understand
the concept of eternal return/eternal recurrence as set forth by the German philosopher
Friedrich Nietzsche and interpreted by Kundera.5

Nietzsche speaks of eternal recurrence and calls it life’s heaviest burden. Life is
heavy because every action must be lived as though it shall recur countless times without

5 Some critics take exception with Kundera’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s eternal
return. Howard Eiland, for one, claims that “Nietzsche does not say that the transience of
a thing would make it insignificant or unjudgeable, but rather that everything in its
transience implies everything else. It is this cosmic conspiracy of occasions, this
spatiotemporal connectedness, that is the heaviest burden. Nietzsche does of course
seek, in Kundera’s words (applied suggestively to Parmenides) ‘to make heavy go light’
. . . that is, to dance.” (Eiland 720).
change. Nietzsche demonstrates the concept with the following example from his book, *The Gay Science*, published in 1882:

> What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: 'This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live again and again, times without number; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and all the unspeakably small and great in your life must return to you, and everything in the same series and sequence -- and in the same way this spider and moonlight among the trees, and in the same way this moment and I myself. The eternal hour-glass of existence will be turned again and again -- and you with it, you dust of dust!' -- Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment in which you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never did I hear anything more divine!' If this thought gained power over you it would, as you are now, transform and perhaps crush you; the question in all and everything: 'do you want this again and again, times without number?' would lie as the heaviest burden upon all your actions. Or how well disposed towards yourself and towards life would you have to become to have no greater desire than for this ultimate eternal sanction and seal? (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 341)

For Nietzsche this burden is what gives life meaning. Without it, one wonders if life would have any importance, but such a burden can also place such great emphasis on every action that the individual is crushed beneath the weight and moved only to inaction. Kundera, on the other hand, focuses on the opposite pole of the lightness of being as he questions the applicability of Nietzsche's theory of eternal return.

Kundera's interpretation of Nietzsche's idea is clearly laid out in the first pages of *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être* in a philosophical essay entitled "La légèreté et la
pesanteur. He explains Nietzsche’s “mad myth” in this way:

... la vie qui disparaît une fois pour toutes, qui ne revient pas, est semblable à une ombre, est sans poids, est morte d’avance, et fût-elle atroce, belle, splendide, cette atrocité, cette beauté, cette splendeur ne signifient rien. (Kundera, ILE 13)

The Italian writer Italo Calvino also perceives this weight of eternal return in a world in which “every fact becomes dreadful if we know that it will repeat itself infinitely,” a world in which “every act is irrevocable, non-modifiable for eternity” (54).

In contrast, the idea of lightness allows us to speak of history with nostalgia, to idealize the French revolution, the guillotine and war heroes, and to use words to discuss ideas and theories in an atmosphere as light as a feather, that is to say, without eternal repercussion. The idea of weight, inherent in Nietzsche’s eternal return, Kundera says, robs all of life’s experiences of their inherently transitory nature. The mitigating factor of time is removed, and man is condemned to the ultimate sentence -- not of life but of eternity.

Si chaque seconde de notre vie doit se répéter un nombre infini de fois, nous sommes cloués à l’éternité comme Jésus-Christ à la croix. Cette idée est atroce. Dans le monde de l’éternel retour, chaque geste porte le poids d’une insoutenable responsabilité. C’est ce qui faisait dire à Nietzsche que l’idée de l’éternel retour est le plus lourd fardeau (das schwerste Gewicht). (ILE 15)

In exploring this binary opposition, Kundera grounds his ideas in opposition to the fifth

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6 These pages were omitted from the first publication of The Unbearable Lightness of Being in the United States in the New Yorker magazine. The editors considered the passage too philosophical for an American audience. Kundera defends the inclusion of these pages saying, “Yet, in my eyes, what I say about Nietzsche’s eternal return has nothing to do with philosophic discourse; it is a continuity of paradoxes that are no less novelistic (that is to say, they answer no less the essence of what the novel is) than a description of the action or a dialogue” (Oppenheim 9).
century B.C. Greek philosopher Parmenides, as well as in opposition to Nietzsche’s eternal return. Parmenides divided the world into opposites, such as lightness/darkness, warmth/cold, being/nonbeing, establishing one pole as the positive and the other as the negative. For Parmenides, lightness was positive and weight, negative. Kundera states no such conclusion, saying only that this opposition is the most mysterious and ambiguous of all (ILE 16). The paradox that life is both heavy and light simultaneously illuminates Kundera’s novels. We will explore the way in which this paradox functions in creating the personae of Kundera’s characters through the positive and negative attributes of lightness and weight. The heaviness of Nietzsche’s eternal return can be positive, even in Kundera’s world, as it comes to signify remembrance and all the meaning and joy and sorrow that both personal and historical memory entail. And memory lends an immortal or eternal quality to an otherwise quotidian existence. Heaviness gives meaning to life, a sense of importance and a serious side that is necessary in some measure for every existence. On the other hand, too much existential weight can prove negative, creating a life that is only lived in the past without any sense of living for the present or future. Kundera evokes this eternal anguish in L’immortalité, recounting Rubens’ vision of the frozen grimaces in the park of the Villa Borghèse at the top of the Spanish Steps in Rome. The sight of the busts brings back the memories of two stories — a childhood fairy tale in which a sorcerer casts a spell over guests at a feast, freezing them with their mouths open over half-gnawed bones, and the people of Sodom fleeing their city and unable to look back lest they be turned into pillars of salt. Kundera writes: “Cette histoire de la Bible illustre sans équivoque qu’il n’y a pas pire châtiment,
pire horreur que de transformer un instant en éternité, d'arracher l'homme au temps et à son mouvement continu” (IM 431-32). The heaviness of existence also implies an absence of the body and sexuality in Kundera’s novels. For Kundera, love is heavy; whereas, sexuality is light. Life becomes weighed down in seriousness, without any reprieve in levity. In the world of existential weight, meaning is everywhere, even where it’s not intended, and cannot be escaped.

Many of Kundera’s characters long for lightness but find themselves unhappy when they achieve this existential state. They long for the lightness of levity and laughter, a life lived in the present without any regard for the present or future, the lightness lived through the body without concerns for their imperfect physical forms. But what they find in lightness instead is a world in which nothing can be taken seriously, a world devoid of meaning. This absence of meaning adheres to this state of being, which like that of a new-born infant, comes from the creation of a new life without memory, without a past and without the knowledge of love. Every being perceives life as leaning toward one of the two poles of this paradox. Although many of Kundera’s characters long for existential weight or lightness, most long to possess the two simultaneously and to find the impossible harmony of this paradox instead of living with its ever-present conflict. This is man’s longing for Paradise, for the idyll of a garden of Eden. “La nostalgie du Paradis, c’est le désir de l’homme de ne pas être homme,” Kundera tells us (ILE 431). In Kundera’s world, these perceptions and longings serve to craft the individual’s persona. Man’s longing for the idyll and its social and historical ramifications will be explored in greater detail later in this study.
In true existential fashion, it is man’s knowledge of and confrontation with his own impending death that raises the conflict between the lightness and weight of existence. “In contrast to nature, man has a particular gift, the gift of consciousness. But this gift is a Trojan horse; man’s self-awareness is at the same time the consciousness of the inevitability of his death; it is a path of no return,” writes Květoslav Chvatik in his essay, “Milan Kundera and the Crisis of Language” (35). Tomas, the central character of L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être, understands this lightness. Tomas’s character exemplifies this concept but his existential struggle rests in his desire to hold ultimate lightness and true weight in his being simultaneously and in perfect harmony. Tomas vacillates between these two poles in his own version of “humanity’s attempt to reach an equilibrium between these diametrically opposed but equally unbearable epistemological attitudes” (O’Brien 13). Kundera forgives man’s indecision, exemplified in Tomas’s stance by the window weighing his desire to be with Tereza for the lightness of being alone.

The world, as perceived by Tomas, is finite, functioning with mathematical precision, and the human being alone lives his life only once, without repetition or improvement, highlighting the difference between the existence of nature and the being of man.
Tomas's true test, pitting his longing for lightness against his desire for a weightier existence, arrives when Tereza independently returns to their Soviet-occupied Prague. Unable to maintain his post as a surgeon under the Soviet regime, Tomas had accepted a position in Zurich, and he and Tereza moved to Switzerland. Troubled by nightmares and unable to continue her life in Zurich, Tereza one day leaves Tomas a note and returns to Prague with their dog, Karenin. What does Tomas do?

First, he enjoys a period of heady lightness, reveling in his new found freedom. Then, an unbearable longing for Tereza and fatalistic sense of their love overtakes him, and he returns to Prague. "Why does he do it?" Calvino asks. "Because despite professing the ideal of the lightness of living and despite the practical example of his relationship with his friend, the painter Sabina, he has always suspected that truth lies in the opposing idea, in weight, in necessity" (55). Tomas's internal struggles are translated into external actions. His womanizing persona and relations with his mistress Sabina assume the qualities of lightness, while his relationship with his wife Tereza takes on the properties of weight.

Kundera personifies the lightness-weight division not only in Tomas but also in the characters of Tereza and Sabina. Fred Misurella, a well-known Kunderean critic, poses Sabina and Tereza as the Eros and Thanatos of the novel, respectively. Sabina, the artist and mistress, enters the novel with the images of sexuality, movement and energy — that is to say, the lightness of life. Tereza, who arrives via the metaphor of an abandoned baby in a bulrush basket washed onto Tomas's shore, takes on images of love and death,
sleep and stillness, vertigo and its ensuing fall -- all that is heavy (Misurella 105). She arrives in Tomas's life with her heavy suitcase and returns to Prague bearing the same load. Tereza and Tomas reunite and escape the weight of history and the lightness of Tomas's sexuality in their life in the country, far from Prague's oppression. Their idyllic life in the country which ends with their deaths in an auto accident provides a brief respite from the binary oppositions which tug incessantly at Tereza in Prague -- namely, the opposition of lightness and weight and the age-old division between body and soul.
Chapter Two: The Human Body — Persona Personified

... son image s'est séparée de lui et a pris la direction opposée, pour vivre ses propres aventures, accomplir son propre destin. On peut se cacher derrière son image, on peut disparaître à jamais derrière son image, on peut se séparer de son image: on n'est jamais sa propre image. (IM 465)

As Tereza stares at her image in the mirror in L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être she tries to glimpse her soul beneath her body's image, but her soul anchors itself in the depths of her bowels and cannot be so easily summoned. The soul “can be coaxed out only by the presentation to herself of her self, of her own ‘I,’ whether by a glimpse in the mirror of what is hers alone in her features or by the appeal in Tomas’s voice,” critic Howard Eiland writes (718). The body and the voice that emanates from it are the only physical representations of the self, the only ways that one can communicate with others, and therefore, the ultimate tools of the public persona. In spite of this physical presentation of the self, the body fails to arrange a union of body and soul, a merger which Kundera calls “the lyrical illusion of science” (Eiland 719). Rather, it is the irreconcilable duality of body and soul that arises from contact with the human body and augments the deconstructive tone of Kundera’s work by adding a new dimension to the plurality of the self. In Kundera’s works the presentation of the self essentially becomes a (de)presentation through the progressive deconstruction of the illusory unity of human

7 Art and language are, of course, primary means of communicating with others, ways which still emanate from the body. The human body is the inescapable point of origination for all means of human expression, intentional or unintentional. Tereza in L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être is forced to permit the body to intrude on her political photographs, if they are to be sold. Even the Czech leader Dubček, speaking on the radio to announce his compromise with the Soviet regime, finds his body intruding as he stutters, stammers, and gasps for air (ILE 45).
existence.

Kundera’s world — and that of the “modern” era\(^8\) — is one of the body, of persona, rather than of the soul. Just as postmodern critics have eliminated the stability of the Saussurean sign, shifting the emphasis onto the signifier, Kundera has moved the emphasis from the soul to the outward shell of the body, the visible representation of the self in the world. The body belongs to the realm of lightness — of images rather than being, faces rather than souls, and sex rather than love. But the universe of the body also contains numerous paradoxes which Kundera reveals, thus further deconstructing the persona. The face, for example, is part of the only visible self and yet has no connection with the self at all, arising as it does from the pure chance of parentage and genetics. Kundera also clearly achieves the demystification of the lovers’ lyrical illusion that the body and soul are inherently bound together (Le Grand 63). In *La valse aux adieux*, the mouth, the lover’s utensil for kisses and other expressions of love, is revealed as a gaping maw for mashing cauliflower and cabbage in the early stages of the digestive process. Kundera unrolls the demystification as Klima kisses Ruzena, the pregnant nurse he is trying to persuade to have an abortion:

Il se pencha sur elle et posa sa bouche sur la sienne . . . c’était un fait qu’il avait succombé à la tentation, deux mois plus tôt, de baiser ces lèvres. Mais justement parce que cette bouche le séduisait alors, il la percevait à travers le brouillard du désir et ne savait rien de son aspect réel: la langue y ressemblait à une flamme et la salive était une liqueur enivrante. C’est seulement maintenant, après avoir perdu sa séduction, que cette bouche était soudain la bouche telle quelle, la bouche réelle, c’est-à-dire cet orifice assidu par lequel la jeune femme avait déjà absorbé des mètres

\(^8\) Kundera refers to the modern era as the time from World War I through the present.
cubes de knödels, de pommes de terre et de potage, les dents avaient de minces plombages, et la salive n’était plus une liqueur enivrante mais la sœur germaine des crachats. (VAA 76)

Similarly, Kundera attempts the demystification of the act of sexual intercourse using this body/soul division, allowing the mechanization and repetition of this function to shine through seemingly-magical moments. Sex falls on the side of the persona, the external action used by the individual to communicate, whether it be the lightness of promiscuity, the heaviness of love, the Don Juan’s everlasting youth, or power and control over another individual. Kundera ties together the seemingly-disparate functions of the body -- sexual intercourse and defecation -- in scene after scene. These strange couplings allow body and soul to separate and rebel against each other, with each serving as an obstacle to the other, and a reminder that sex inherently rests in the world of the body, not that of the soul.

The body itself serves as a barrier which separates the self from the world, an obstacle to true expression and communication. The unified subject becomes an object, or one could say objects, divided as it is into these two distinct realms. Perhaps this division does not leave Kundera’s questioning-world quite as far from Plato’s original body/soul division as one would imagine. As Plato envisioned, man uses his eyes and hands as a shoemaker uses shears or a musician uses an instrument.

A man therefore is a being different from his body . . . Since then neither the body, nor the compound of soul and body together, is the man, it remains, I think either that a man’s self is nothing at all, or, if it be any thing, it must be concluded that the man is no other thing than soul. (Plato 83-84)

In explaining Plato’s thoughts, Paul Shorey states: “The user and the thing used are twain
The oracle that bade us ‘know yourself,’ then, bids us know the soul. The practitioners of the ordinary arts do not know themselves. They are concerned with the body which is a possession of the self" (417). The individual of the modern era is still concerned with the body -- perhaps more than ever -- although Kundera might contest the assertion that the true self is the soul alone and that the body is a possession over which one has control.

I. The Face: “The Individualism of Our Time”

Kundera calls the face “the individualism of our time” in L’immortalité (IM 56), the ultimate image of difference that allows us to distinguish ourselves from each other. Faces, external and superficial, have become the late twentieth-century obsession. Agnès in L’immortalité opens a magazine and counts two-hundred and twenty-three faces including five photos of the president of France, smiling faces of astronomers and faces in advertisements selling furniture, typewriters, and carrots. The surfeit of faces, each with their minute differences, when multiplied becomes its opposite, indifference. The deconstructive excess in the chain of faces or chain of signifiers turns presence to absence, turns one thing into its opposite, as Agnès says:

Quand tu places côte à côte les photos de deux visages différents, tu es

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It is interesting to read Kundera’s ideas of the modern obsession with human faces in relation to Roland Barthes’s essay, “Le visage de Garbo” in Mythologies. Barthes speaks of the “visage-objet” of Garbo, the “visage de totem” of Charlie Chaplin, and the individualized face of Audrey Hepburn. His ideas on the face, as it is seen as showing the essence of the person, are particularly applicable. “Le visage de Garbo représente ce moment fragile, où le cinéma va extraire une beauté existentielle d’une beauté essentielle, où l’archétype va s’infléchir vers la fascination de figures périssables, où la clarté des essences charnelles va faire place à une lyrique de la femme” (Barthes 71).
frappé par tout ce qui les distingue. Mais quand tu as devant toi deux cent vingt-trois visages, tu comprends d'un coup que tu ne vois que les nombreuses variantes d'un seul visage et qu'aucun individu n'a jamais existé. (*IM 57*)

Agnès’s husband Paul is convinced that the more indifferent man becomes to politics and the interests of others, the more he becomes obsessed with his own face, sinking into his own narcissistic universe. Paul sees the magnification of the signifier as the signified shrinks and loses interest for the world. The images become all, and the face, the outward representation of the self, takes on greater significance as his soul recedes. Paul tries to console Agnès -- secretly distraught because someone has captured her face and that of her lover on film -- by telling her that her face is like no other. If you love someone, he says, you love his face and it becomes different from all other faces, but Agnès finds no consolation there. Kundera thus arrives at the following paradox: one’s own face, the only existing image of the self, becomes that which is most foreign. Even since the advent of mirrors, man can only perceive his own face as a flat, two-dimensional image. But Agnès imagines a world without mirrors, in which one’s own face would remain the most unrecognizable, and she becomes deflated by Paul’s inability to grasp the fundamental fact that “mon visage ne soit pas moi” (*IM 57*). For Agnès, faces are only disconnected images, nothing more, and bear no connection to the individuals destined to live through them. The face paradoxically becomes the chief tool of the persona and yet bears no connection to the self the persona seeks to express.

The face becomes a diachronic image as well in Kundera’s works. Kundera stretches the synchronous face across the generations to show that faces hold nothing of
the individual, no more than an inherited vase exhibits one’s individuality. The face is an inherited collage of traits, and every trait could theoretically be traced to show a genetic link to a father, mother or other ancestor. Not only does Tereza in L’insoutenables légèreté de l’être resemble her mother, but Kundera, the author/narrator tells us, “j’ai parfois l’impression que sa vie n’a été qu’un prolongement de la vie de sa mère, un peu comme la course d’une boule de billard est le prolongement du geste exécuté par le bras d’un joueur” (ILE 67). Her face and her actions function as a continuation of her mother’s life, despite her conflicts with her mother.

Tereza confronts the division between body and soul through imagined changes in her face. Faces continually change, expressing the difference not only between ourselves and others but demonstrating diachronic difference, the imperceptible changes in our physical selves that occur from moment to moment. Tereza studies this body/soul division from the starting point of her nose:

Elle s’examinait et se demandait ce qui arriverait si son nez s’allongeait d’un millimètre par jour. Au bout de combien de temps son visage serait-il méconnaissable? Et si chaque partie de son corps se mettait à grandir et à rapetisser au point de lui faire perdre toute ressemblance avec Tereza, serait-elle encore elle-même, y aurait-il encore une Tereza? Bien sûr. Même à supposer que Tereza ne ressemble plus du tout à Tereza, au-dedans son âme serait toujours la même et ne pourrait qu’observer avec effroi ce qui arrive à son corps. Mais alors, quel rapport y a-t-il entre Tereza et son corps? Son corps a-t-il un droit quelconque au nom de Tereza? Et s’il n’a pas ce droit, à quoi se rapporte ce nom? Rien qu’à une chose incorporelle, immatérielle. (ILE 200-01)

The individual seeks a unity that will tie the persona, the body, and the soul together, yet this unification is ever elusive and merely results in further deconstruction of the self. In the extract above from L’insoutenables légèreté de l’être name and body draw together as
parallel signifiers in the same chain of Tereza’s existence. Despite her obsession with her body, it holds no superiority over her name. These questions that Tereza asks about the relation between her name, her self, and her body are child’s questions, Kundera tells us, and yet the only sort of questions that have any meaning. The questions with no answers, such as these that explore the division of body and soul, become “une barrière au-delà de laquelle il n’y a plus de chemins . . . les questions auxquelles il n’est pas de réponse qui marquent les limites des possibilités humaines et qui tracent les frontières de notre existence” (*ILE* 201).

The name, like the body, becomes a part of the persona with no integral connection to the self, an external aspect assigned by another. The presence or absence of names, real or assumed, emerges as a recurring theme in Kundera’s fiction, as his characters seek to express some aspect of their character through this artifice. Names serve to communicate and yet serve as another stumbling block to communication.

Caught in the act of slashing tires at random on the streets of Paris in *L’immortalité* and accused unjustly of wanting to rape a woman, Professor Avenarius proclaims in a strong voice, “Je suis le professeur Avenarius!” “Ces mots, comme la dignité avec laquelle ils avaient été proférés, firent grande impression sur l’agent de police . . .” (*IM* 387). Rubens, who called his wife by the wrong name on their wedding night, pledges thereafter to call women only by “de banals surnoms affectueux, que toute femme à tout moment peut accepter sans méfiance” (*IM* 458). In *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli*, a parallel distancing of name and body occurs in the story “Maman,” in which Karel makes love to his wife Marketa and lover Eva in an orgiastic scene heightened by his fantasies
of another woman. Marketa separates herself from her body and separates her husband
from his body while he makes love to her. Karel at the same time evokes the name of the
chess champion Bobby Fisher to express his sexual victory and separates the women he
is making love to from their identities by immersing himself in his fantasies.

À l'instant où elle [Marketa] lui ôta la tête du corps, elle sentit le contact
inconnu et enivrant de la liberté. Cet anonymat des corps, c'était le
paradis soudain découvert. Avec une curieuse jouissance, elle expulsait
d'elle son âme meurtrie et trop vigilante, et elle se métamorphosait en
simple corps sans mémoire ni passé, mais d'autant plus réceptif et avide.
Elle caressait tendrement le visage d'Eva, tandis que le corps sans tête se
mouvait sur elle avec vigueur. Mais voici que le corps sans tête
interrompit ses mouvements et, d'une voix qui lui rappelait
désagréablement la voix de Karel, proféra une phrase incroyablement
idiote: “Je suis Hobby Fisher! Je suis Hobby Fisher!” (LRO 83)

Like Tereza, these characters rupture the unity of the self by rupturing the unity of body
and soul expressed in a name. Tereza, born of the irreconcilable duality of body and soul,
exemplifies the most fundamental human experience for Kundera. Even as a child,
Tereza would stand in front of the mirror aching to see her soul through her body.

Ce n'était pas la vanité qui l'attirait vers le miroir, mais l'étonnement d'y
découvrir son moi. Elle oubliait qu'elle avait devant les yeux le tableau
de bord des mécanismes corporels. Elle croyait voir son âme qui se
révelait à elle sous les traits de son visage. (ILE 66)

What is the relationship between the face and the self? Science would have us believe
that the face “n'est que le tableau de bord auquel aboutissent tous les mécanismes
physiques: la digestion, la vue, l'ouïe, la respiration, la réflexion” (ILE 64). The body
becomes a mere object with functions ranging from the inhalation of oxygen to the
excretion of waste. In both the physical and linguistic senses, the subject simultaneously
serves as an object. Tereza stares at the mirror, bewitched in seeing her body as an alien
entity, yet one assigned to her, and her alone.

Unable to perceive the self except in terms of the human physiognomy,\textsuperscript{10} the soul or inner self is given bodily attributes. In spite of this exteriorization of the soul, Olga, the young, modest woman of \textit{La valse aux adieux}, clearly distinguishes her external, bodily self from the image of her internal self-portrait. Like Agnès, Olga paints the division with the image of a world without mirrors, as she tells Jakub:

\begin{quote}
J’imagine mon âme avec un menton en galoche et des lèvres sensuelles, et pourtant j’ai un petit menton et aussi une petite bouche. Si je ne m’étais jamais vue dans la glace et si je devais décrire mon apparence extérieure d’après ce que je connais intérieurement de moi, le portrait ne ressemblerait pas du tout à ce que tu bois quand tu me regardes!
\end{quote}

\textit{(VAA 100-01)}

Like Tereza, many individuals begin by trying to glimpse the inner self through their faces, transposing inner qualities onto the outer shell and vice versa, but many end by experiencing a profound alienation from their bodies and from their personae, an alienation inherent in the postmodern universe. What has been said of the divisions created by the face applies equally to the body with its more diverse existence. Kundera tells the story in \textit{Le livre du rire et de l’oubli} of a Czech vomiting in the street shortly after the Soviet invasion of his country. Another Czech wanders by and says to him, “I know exactly what you mean.” Critic Terry Eagleton, writing of estrangement and irony in Kundera’s works, interprets this scene in much the same manner as Kundera analyzes Tereza’s musings before the mirror. “The joke here, of course, is that the second Czech

\textsuperscript{10} It is interesting to note that the word “physiognomy,” in addition to referring to outward appearance, also refers to the practice of trying to judge character and mental qualities by observation of bodily, especially facial, features, according to \textit{Webster’s New World Dictionary}.\n
reads as *significant* what is in fact just a random event. In the post-capitalist bureaucracies, even vomiting is made to assume some kind of instant symbolic meaning” (Eagleton 25).

**II. The Body: Revolt Against Unity**

One of the body’s essential functions in Kundera’s works is to show the breakdown of the barrier between the individual and society, resulting in the loss of the unique. Kundera mourns the loss of the unique and individual in all spheres, as his characters either delight in the solidarity with other bodies or reject their intrusiveness. “For it is exactly from the irresolvable conflict between the unique and the necessarily repeatable, the fragility of the particular and the comedy of the collective, that his fiction draws part of its formidable strength,” critic Terry Eagleton writes. “To collapse that tension on either side is the real banality; and if Kundera’s writing is valuable, it is among other reasons because he makes any such erasure of conflict harder to effect” (32).

Tereza’s nightmares arise out of Tomas’s infidelities and her inability to be the only body for Tomas’s sexual fulfillment. Confronted with Tomas’s womanizing, Tereza longs to dismiss her body “like a servant” and to be alone with Tomas as a soul. This longing comes in her defeat in the struggle for individuality that Tereza’s body had been waging all of its life. Deprived of this Platonic ideal, remaining stranded in the world with her own body and the scent of other women’s genitals in her husband’s hair brings on violent nightmares for Tereza. The continuing conflict between Tereza and Tomas revolves around the concrete opposition of sexual fidelity and infidelity that amplifies
itself in the sphere of individual versus the collective. Both Tomas and Tereza prize individuality, but Tomas longs to know all variations of individuality among countless women, while Tereza wants Tomas to hold her uniqueness in exclusivity above all others.

Like Tereza, Ludvik in *La plaisanterie* prizes individuality even as he takes his turn having sex with an unknown woman on the seat of a tractor during a furlough from the mining camp. He releases himself through the sexual act, indulging his lust for any woman, "while his mind scrambles desperately for some illusion of personal uniqueness," according to Maria Němcová Banerjee. She writes, "Once the alcoholic glamor is stripped from the event, it shows itself in all the bleakness of a serialized mechanical transaction" (*Terminal Paradox*, 29). The excess inherent in the chain of repetition in which all actions become mechanized replications leads to a loss of meaning and deconstructs the illusion of individuality and self. The persona may seek to exert its individuality but cannot escape the intrinsically serial nature of the postmodern sign. In the end, commonality becomes a curse for these Kunderean characters.

This deprivation of uniqueness becomes Tereza's unhappy fate. Tereza is "born" into Kundera's *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être* through the rumblings of her stomach, the uncontrollable functions of the body common to all bodies. She revolts against this commonality that her mother holds up for admiration as, much to her dismay, her mother insists on exposing her bodily functions to the world.

*La mère se mouche bruyamment, donne aux gens des détails sur sa vie sexuelle, exhibe son dentier... Tout son comportement n'est qu'un seul brusque geste par lequel elle rejette sa jeunesse et sa beauté. Au temps où*
les neuf soupirants s'agenouillaient en cercle autour d'elle, elle veillait avec un soin anxieux sur sa nudité. C'était à l'aune de sa pudeur qu'elle jaugeait le prix de son corps. Si elle était impudique à présent, elle l'est radicalement comme si elle voulait, par son impudeur, tirer un trait solennel sur sa vie passée et crier bien haut que la jeunesse et la beauté qu'elle a surestimées n'ont en fait aucune valeur. (*ILE* 73)

Tereza’s mother accuses her blushing daughter of not wanting to admit that the human body “pisses and farts.” “What’s so terrible about that?” her mother asks, letting out “des pets sonores” (*ILE* 72). What is so terrible is that these common functions deny Tereza’s individuality, which is the recognition she seeks and believes will solidify her relationship with Tomas, as well as the rapport between her body and her soul. Guy Scarpetta, writing of Tereza’s desire, says, “She does not desire her partner, but rather ‘her own body, suddenly revealed’ through him” (112). In drawing the curtains of the house to hide her mother’s nudity, Tereza is seeking to protect more than her mother’s reputation. The denial of the uniformity of naked bodies is her method of asserting her uniqueness."

Nudity, as a tool of the public persona, is both a uniform of solidarity and a means of guarding some individuality, the unique quality of beauty. Kundera has long spoken out as a staunch advocate of individuality in an epoch in which this idea has been threatened in his eyes both by fascism and by the mass media. Olga, the strident young

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*11 A similar scene highlighting the transitory nature of any union between body and soul is that in *L'immortalité* in which Salvador Dali’s wife Gala feeds him their beloved pet rabbit. The literal ingestion of the loved one, Kundera points out, makes all other unions pale in comparison. However, this union is also transitory as evidenced by Salvador’s vomiting the rabbit’s remains into the toilet when he learns what he has just eaten. Gala, on the other hand, is content to feel the loved one pass through her entrails and become a part of her body (*IM* 146).*
woman of *La valse aux adieux*, refuses to be filmed nude while in the pool at the spa. She covers her breasts, wraps herself in a towel and leaves in a rage when the cinematographers arrive. The other women in and around the pool, whom the narrator tells us resemble toads, cry after her, “Elle est pudique! Elle a peur qu'on la lui vole, sa beauté! Vous l’avez vue, la princesse! Nous n’avons pas de honte, nous autres! Nous sommes de belles femmes” (*VAA* 165)! Their cries echo with the universal “nous,” even as they exclude Olga from their ranks. Ruzena, the pregnant nurse who cannot count on the love of the married trumpet player whom she believes impregnated her, joins in the women’s cry against Olga. Although more attractive than Olga, Ruzena feels abandoned by her lover and believes that the solidarity with the old, fat women is all she has left, a solidarity anchored in the abandoned body.

Et ces femmes, dans la piscine, représentaient justement la féminité dans ce qu’elle a d’universal: la féminité de l’enfancement, de l’allaitement, du dépérissement éternels, la féminité qui ricane à la pensée de cette seconde fugace où la femme croit être aimée et où elle a le sentiment d’être une inimitable individualité. (*VAA* 167)

This sad solidarity of nudity recalls for Kundera images of concentration camps, images of humanity’s most forced solidarity, when every trace of individuality is obliterated (*LRO* 341).

The characters Jan and Edwige, the lovers of the seventh part of *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli* entitled “La frontière,” find themselves holding opposing, although not conflicting, ideas on almost everything, including nudity. Jan is slightly uncomfortable undressing before others on the nude beach, while Edwige is completely natural in this element. Edwige rejects the idea that a bare face is chaste while a bare buttock is
obscene, that tears are considered exalted and poetic while urine is foul, but she carries the idea so far that nudity becomes a sort of mandatory uniform (LRO 340). Like all uniforms, this invisible one also banishes individuality and replaces it with solidarity, for Edwige, a solidarity devoid of gender and sexual characteristics.

Elle [Edwige] était même beaucoup plus naturelle nue qu’habillée, comme si en rejetant ses vêtements elle rejetait du même coup sa difficile condition de femme pour n’être plus qu’un être humain sans caractères sexuels. (LRO 340)

Jan reacts to the countless bodies on the beach — "des mères nues avec des enfants nus, des grand-mères nues et leur petits-enfants nus, des jeunes hommes et des vieillards nus" — with an indifference that parallels that of Agnès in L’immortalité on seeing the hundreds of faces in the magazine. Jan’s melancholy arises, Kundera tells us, from the contiguity of the old and young breasts, a series that made all of them seem "pareillement bizarres et insignifiants," (LRO 340-41) and the “spectacle of so much undifferentiated, ‘meaningless flesh’” (Pifer 93). Seriality results in a loss of individuality, which for Jan, as for Derridean deconstructionists, is a loss of meaning. Meaning in Kundera’s world is found in the realm of the individual, the unique — far from the solidarity of ideologies and uniforms. The nudity on the beach is no different in Jan’s mind than the nudity of the Jews being led to gas chambers. In both, “la nudité est l’uniforme des hommes et des femmes . . . Que la nudité est un linceul” (LRO 341).

When Kundera pronounces the uniform a shroud, nudity takes on several meanings: lost individuality because, when naked, everyone looks the same; lost civilization, because, at concentration camps, barbarism reigned and its regime required nakedness; finally, it means human surrendering to chaos because nakedness obliterates any signs of individual distinction. (Misurella 45)
Terry Eagleton captures the dilemma of this loss of individuality and the political overtones of bodily solidarity in Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia, political undercurrents which permeate all of Kundera’s work, and like Kundera, Eagleton poses it in the form of a question. “The political problem of all this is apparent: how is one to use the fleshy solidarity of the human species as a powerfully demystifying force while avoiding the brutal erasure of differences which is Stalinist uniformity?” (Eagleton 29).

Jan associates the naked bodies with death, the death of the individual which Kundera sees as the hallmark of the twentieth century, whereas, Edwige believes that all the bodies are beautiful, beautiful as nature is. Edwige revels in the body, stripped of all its accouterments, whether vestiary or metaphysical. A body without clothes, a body that is only a body like all others, is beautiful in Edwige’s eyes. This is the paradox of bodily persona, the trap of trying to demonstrate the self with a tool which all humans possess. Kundera, the narrator, cuts Edwige’s elation to the core in the final sentence of the book. The story ends with a group of naked people, including Jan and Edwige, standing on the beach discussing the decline of Western civilization and the need to free themselves from Judeo-Christian culture. “L’homme parlait, tous les autres, écoutaient avec intérêt et leurs sexes dénudés regardaient bêtement et tristement vers le sable jaune” (LRO 344).

Calvin Bedient captures the public sense of alienation of the human body by going so far as to accuse Kundera of possessing a loathing of sex and the body, and asking, “Has any male writer made male genitalia seem more alien to the women in his fiction?” (106). This separation of body and soul carries with it a loss of excitement as the body carries on in its own mechanized fashion while the soul seeks higher ground elsewhere.
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is the deconstruction of the illusion of love, and thereby that of any illusion... His [Jan's] soul is so empty that the relation between love and sexuality is undone to the point of rendering desire boring, and he can no longer see in the act of love anything but the ridiculous movements of two bodies with no heads — no consciousness, no soul. (Very 86)

Kundera adopts a similar tone in writing of Jan’s orgy experience. Engaged in intercourse with one woman while watching a couple that appears as their mirror image, Jan cannot control his laughter and is asked to leave. Everything becomes a mirror image, with minor variations, of something else and thus loses all meaning and, thereby, the aura of excitement. The serialization of the self destroys the self, and one wonders as Goethe does, “Est-on vivant quand vivent d’autres hommes?” (LRO 166; Molesworth 73-74).

Sex is the tool of the persona which Kundera’s characters wield with widely varying intentions. Sexual intercourse comes to signify the eternal youth of his Don Juans, a woman’s rapport with her body (as with the young woman of “Le jeu de l’auto-stop”), a young man’s freedom, success or adulthood; the ability to separate the body from the soul (as in Tereza’s encounter with the engineer); or a multitude of other messages that are nearly always misunderstood by the oblivious partner. “... men and women pursue each other to recapture a sense of their own centrality by escaping the dull anonymity of their social condition into the illusion of a privileged sexual moment” (Banerjee, “The Impossible Don Juan” 44).

The search for uniqueness via sexual encounters and/or the naked body, a quest that results only in the discovery of sameness, is particularly clear in the three striptease
scenes of *Risibles amours*. Each scene provides a call by the body for individual recognition, a call which fails to hit its intended mark, yet becomes a sort of exorcism of what weighs the self down. Roland Barthes alludes to the paradox inherent in striptease in *Mythologies*: “Le strip-tease — du moins le strip-tease parisien — est fondé sur une contradiction: désexualiser la femme dans le moment même où on la dénude” (147). The young woman of “Le jeu de l’auto-stop” seeks to shed her own physical modesty in order to offer her whole self to her lover for once, but he only perceives the absence of the woman he has known and the presence of the multitude of whore-like women. In losing her modesty, she loses her individuality and takes her place among in the anonymous collective. Elisabeth, the nurse of “Le Colloque,” performs a mock striptease before her colleagues in order to draw attention to her attractive body and away from her ordinary face. She seeks to seduce Dr. Havel, the womanizer who randomly rejects her as a means of establishing his own individuality:

> La croupe d’Elisabeth, sur laquelle se tendait l’étoffe blanche du tablier d’infirmière, croisait à travers la pièce comme un soleil magnifiquement rond, mais un soleil éteint et mort (enveloppé dans un linceul blanc), un soleil que les regards indifférents et gênés des médecins présents condamnaient à une pitoyable inutilité. (*LRO* 136)

By seeking to belong to the collective of bodies that Dr. Havel has made love to, Elisabeth is placing her self on the side of death. Elisabeth is one of a series of female protagonists in Kundera’s novels who appears as a headless body in moments of intimacy as the Other’s gaze wanders over her naked body. In physically separating the body from the head, using the Other’s gaze like a surgical scalpel, Kundera marks the existence of a bar between body and soul, at the same time emphasizing the body’s domain.
The bodily life, weighing in on the side of lightness in Kundera's books, implies a life of action without meaning, a life of forgetting, erasing the past, the childlike existence of those who never look back. One hears the echo of Nietzsche's eternal return filtered through Kundera's own version of *Einmal ist keinmal*, depriving the life, lived only once, of any meaning at all. In *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être*, Tomas's erotic adventures boast of lightness, while Tereza's love weighs her existence down. But Tereza, like many of Kundera's characters, experiences a transformation, induced perhaps by the move to the country that she and Tomas make shortly before their deaths, perhaps by the figurative fall induced by her vertigo.

... voilà qu'elle se met à "tomber" et que dans cette chute se fait jour une autre vérité du personnage, qui désormais ne sera plus ni tout à fait dans sa naïveté ni tout à fait dans sa lourdeur, mais dans les deux à la fois, dans le va-et-vient entre le haut et le bas, entre son âme qui s'élève et son corps qui gargouille, dans son corps délesté par son âme, dans son âme lestée par son corps, dans leur co-existence, dans leur brouillage réciproque. (Ricard, *La littérature contre elle-même* 78)

Ricard finds here not a Hegelian synthesis but rather a means of co-existence for the slivers of the fractured, divided self. The tearing that occurs within Tereza is reflected in another of Kundera's novels, *L'immortalité*, in the form of two sisters. Kundera positions Agnès and her sister Laura as opposite poles of the self's use of the body to establish the persona.

... if Agnès and Laura in *L'immortalité* are opposed to Paul who lives without consciousness of his body, the two sisters are then revealed as polar opposites in the way they live the consciousness of the body that unites them: Agnès seeking an impossible transcendence over hers, Laura an impossible fulfilment within her bodily being. (Jefferson 124)

Both of the sisters use the body as a plane from which to launch the quest for the
demonstration of their true selves. This section of the book is subtitled “L’addition et la soustraction” and falls within the chapter entitled “La lutte.” Agnès is the master of subtraction, whereas Laura uses addition to create her persona. Agnès strips her being down to the point where it comes as no surprise that her former lover cannot even remember her name when he meets her on the street some years later. Laura on the other hand, transforms her cat into the image of her soul, wears dark glasses as a symbol of her grief (allegedly hiding her tears), and gives her sister a tremendous white piano, a metonymic substitute for her own body which nobody wanted.12

Dans notre monde où apparaissent chaque jour de plus en plus de visages qui se ressemblent toujours davantage, l’homme n’a pas la tâche facile s’il veut se confirmer l’originalité de son moi et réussir à se convaincre de son inimitable unicité. Il y a deux méthodes pour cultiver l’unicité de moi: la méthode additive et la méthode soustractive. Agnès soustrait de son moi tout ce qui est extérieur et emprunté, pour se rapprocher ainsi de sa pure essence (en courant le risque d’aboutir à zéro, par ces soustractions successives). La méthode de Laura est exactement inverse: pour rendre son moi plus visible, plus facile à saisir, pour lui donner plus d’épaisseur, elle lui ajoute sans cesse de nouveaux attributs, auxquels elle tâche de s’identifier (en courant le risque de perdre l’essence du moi, sous ces attributs additionnés). (IM 151)

In either case, the greatest risk is losing the individual — or at least losing the meaning of the persona that the individual has intentionally tried to craft through one method or the other. The one who subtracts fades away or disappears while the other, in Kundera’s words, becomes a propagandist for the external attributes (Kundera, IM 153). Kundera, 12

12 Laura’s method of defining herself, particularly through the use of dark glasses, bears a striking similarity to that used by celebrities. Like Greta Garbo, described by critic Roland Barthes, “... l’essence de sa personne corporelle, descendue d’un ciel où les choses sont formées et finies dans la plus grande clarté” (71). However, while Garbo uses the dark glasses to hide her troublesome aging, the degradation of her image, Laura uses her glasses more to parade her persona than to hide.
the narrator of *L'immortalité*, and his friend Professor Avenarius, diagram Laura and Agnès as unified, yet conflicted individuals as follows:

**Illustration 1**

![Diagram](image)

*(IM 357)*

The diagram on the left, made by Avenarius, shows Laura's situation: "Voilà Laura: sa tête pleine de rêves regarde vers le ciel. Mais son corps est attiré vers la terre . . ."

Kundera, the narrator, then sketches Agnès's plight in the diagram on the right: " . . . chez elle, le corps s'élève comme une flamme. Mais la tête sceptique qui regarde la terre" *(IM 357)*. No thinking being can live without the conflict that comes from the tearing or colliding of body and soul — no one except for the lyrical lover who temporarily finds an ever-ellusive unity through his illusions.

Like Tereza in *L'insoutenable légereté de l'être*, Tamina experiences the pull of both heaviness and lightness in *Le livre du rire et de l'oubli*. Having found herself trapped in the quicksand of each realm, respectively, Tamina becomes one of those tragically isolated characters who achieves resolution only in death, the only hope for achieving some freedom from the persona's domain.

Tamina, whom Kundera has dubbed his favorite character of all, retreats from the heavy world of memories to the dream-induced island of children. She initially lives in a weighty kind of silent isolation following the death of her husband. In a kind of mental exercise, Tamina tries to visually reconstruct the features of her husband's face, only to find that his likeness has become as dim as her memories of their life together. This
inability to remember weighs greatly on her. Unable to forgive herself for forgetting, she longs to forget the forgetting, going “quelque part où les choses sont légères comme une brise. Où les choses ont perdu leurs poids. Où il n’y a pas de remords” (LRO 251). Led by the mysterious Raphaël, who offers her this solution to life’s problems, she finds herself on the mysterious island of children.

This place of bodily life -- indeed of “secret sensuality” -- in the absence of soul, the absence of memory, is the island of children. (‘Children, never look back,’ cries the Communist chief to a ‘Pioneer’ organization, having triumphed over the world of the fathers). (Eiland 716)

Tamina alternately clings to and rejects this bodily life on the island of the children. Like so many of Kundera’s characters, the lightness becomes too light. Tamina tires of the sexual adoration and then her abuse at the hands of the children, the vicious games of hopscotch and public ceremonies assisting her to use the toilet. In the end, unable to stand the “lightness of being” she swims away from the island and drowns while the children watch. Having moved from the world of heaviness to that of lightenss and on to a death which rejects the two, Tamina becomes Kundera’s “vision of redemptive interiority” (Mollesworth 71). Kundera does not value the internal self over the external -- he seems to regard the two as inseparable -- although he does appear to hold in esteem those characters who reject the public’s eye and the domain of appearances. Even Nina Pelikan Straus, who reads Kundera’s works as an anti-deconstructionist diatribe and a call for universal truths, sees Tamina as an integral element of the built-in deconstruction within Kundera’s text:

For Kundera, the strategies by which Soviet discourse imposes its centralization and uniformity on Czech history are those that structuralist
and deconstructionist discourses impose upon chosen texts. Tamina, for instance, enters a part of Kundera’s text that is also that text’s in-built deconstruction. That is to say that Kundera, as critic-novelist, experiments within his text by offering an allegory which defaces the humanistic meaning he intends. (Straus 74)

On the island of children Tamina’s body takes pleasure for the first time in the absence of the soul, which Kundera tells us had quietly left the room. But a hard pinch of her nipple by one of the children brings Tamina back to the other, parallel earthly domain of the flesh which can inflict and receive pain. The lightness of life in the realm of the body does not come without a price.

The body, in Kundera’s novels, regularly revolts as if to show that it is not one with the self. The longed-for persona which expresses the soul is betrayed by the persona of appearances which is dominated by the body. The stomach grumbles in the act of making love, nerves send characters scampering to the bathroom to relieve themselves, and the penis fails to stand erect at the most inopportune moments, as though the body is diffidently announcing its disharmony with the self. The body acts, in this sense, as the Platonic prison from which some element of the self cannot wrench itself free. The trap of the world of which Kundera speaks in L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être finds a parallel in the trap of the body. Writing in an essay on La valse aux adieux, Fred Misurella says of Kundera’s novels: “ . . . for everyone in his novels, men and women, appearances are false and inner feelings are profoundly suspect, turning us into prisoners, not only of a country or a provincial small town but of our own bodies as well” (Misurella 92).

Professor Avenarius, speaking again of the character Laura in L’immortalité, gets more to the point:
"Aux yeux d’un esthète, poursuivit-il, son derrière doit sembler trop volumineux et un peu bas, ce qui est d’autant plus gênant que son âme désire s’envoler vers les hauteurs. Mais dans cette contradiction se résume pour moi toute la condition humaine: la tête est pleine de rêves, et le derrière telle une ancre nous retient au sol.” (IM 356)

III. Death and the Body

Judging from the agony caused by the division between body and soul and the inherent difficulties of conveying one’s persona through the human body, one might imagine that many of Kundera’s characters seek death as an escape from this universe. This, however, proves the exception rather than the rule.

It is true that Tamina swims from the island with some sort of suicidal ambition; however, her initial goal is to swim to the other side which seems close but recedes as she swims toward it. Tamina also seems shocked when the children row out in a boat and watch her drown without offering any assistance, so her swim falls a few paces short of suicide’s door. It is also true that Jaromil, the poet of La vie est ailleurs, allows his own death to take place in the wake of his own humiliation and the rejection of his body. He catches cold and dies of a fever after humiliatingly being tossed onto the balcony during a party and subsequently watching a woman — he believes she is the woman he has been pursuing — making love with another man. Rather than parade his humiliation, both intellectual and physical, and amorous rejection before all the world, Jaromil accepts death. Helena, the journalist and rejected lover of La plaisanterie, unsuccessfully pursues death following the rejection of her body by Ludvik. Suicide in Kundera’s novels becomes an escape from the vagaries of the body and/or a response to the world’s rejection of that body.
However, many of Kundera’s characters agonize over death and the fate of the dead, abandoned body. The objectified body — objectified initially through the body/soul division — achieves its greatest exemplification in death. The individual who sees the soul continuing along one path and the body along another, although intimately tied to the two, feels great distress at the treatment of the body-object. Imagine the body being dragged out the door, the head bumping over the threshold. Some would end it all but for the body left behind.

Tamina’s death fleeing from the lightness of the island of children was not her first encounter with suicidal thoughts. The heaviness of her previous life, clinging to memories of her dead husband, had previously driven her to attempt suicide. Both lightness and weight in Kundera’s novels give rise to the desire to abandon life, and thus the human body. For Tamina the fact that death leaves the body behind like trash for others to dispose of, makes death equally untenable:

Être un cadavre, c’était l’outrage insupportable. Voici encore un instant on était un être humain protégé par la pudeur, par le sacré de la nudité et de l’intimité, et il suffit que vienne la seconde de la mort pour que notre corps soit soudain à la disposition de n’importe qui, pour qu’on puisse de le dénuder, l’éventrer, scraper ses entrailles, se boucher le nez devant sa puanteur, le foutre à la glacière ou dans le feu . . . Et quelques mois plus tard, quand elle avait pensé au suicide, elle avait décidé de se noyer loin en pleine mer pour que l’infamie de son corps défunt ne fût connue que des poissons, qui sont muets. (LRO 263)

The scenario is equally oppressive for the living who must watch over the dead one’s remains for eternity, and the situation becomes especially precarious in European countries where cemeteries regularly clear out non-paying residents to make room for other, newer remains. This guardianship over the dead one provides the existential angst
at the center of the tale “Que les vieux morts cèdent la place aux jeunes morts” in
*Risibles amours.* The female protagonist of the tale has returned to the city where her husband is buried, only to discover that his remains have been exhumed and discarded. Her guilt mounts as she envisions the accusatory face of her son. Kundera tells us of her shocking visit to the cemetery where she discovers another’s name engraved on the spot where her husband’s had been:

> Elle leur reprocha de ne pas l’avoir avertie qu’il fallait renouveler la concession, et ils lui répondirent qu’il y avait peu de place au cimetière et que *les vieux morts devaient céder la place aux jeunes morts.* . . . ils n’avaient ni sens de la dignité humaine ni respect pour autrui, mais elle ne tarda pas à comprendre que la discussion était inutile. De même qu’elle n’avait pu empêcher la mort de son mari, elle était sans défense devant cette deuxième mort, cette mort d’un *vieux mort* qui n’avait même plus droit à une existence de mort. (*RA* 179-80)

The two deaths of her husband — that of the self strangely followed by that of the body — divide the being, as the persona is torn between its attempt to express the soul via the concrete form of the body. As Hemingway learns from Goethe in *L’immortalité* that death is “an eternal trial,” the reader learns here that, in Kundera’s world, individual unity does not exist, even after death. But perhaps, the persona lives on even after these two deaths, through love, guilt, immortality, or history.
Les personnages de mon roman sont mes propres possibilités qui ne se sont pas réalisées. C'est ce qui fait que je les aime tous et que tous m'effraient pareillement. Ils ont, les uns et les autres, franchi une frontière que je n'ai fait que contourner. C'est cette frontière franchie (la frontière au-delà de laquelle finit mon moi) qui m'attire. Et c'est de l'autre côté seulement que commence le mystère qu'interroge le roman. Le roman n'est pas une confession de l'auteur, mais une exploration de ce qu'est la vie humaine dans le piège qu'est devenu le monde. (ILE 319)

The historical situation of Kundera's native Czechoslovakia serves as the backdrop for all of Kundera's works, although his two most recent novels La lenteur and L'immortalité are set primarily in his adopted homeland, France. The paths of the individual and history run parallel to each other, weaving their themes into a single rich fabric, which in turn becomes a snare for man. In Kundera's novels the world becomes a trap when the individual is subordinated to the will of the collective and the dream of an idyllic society, when the private is erased and all is public, and when the world forms itself into a circle of exclusion. The trap results in man's inability to rationally choose a path in a world in which the imagined link between cause and effect has been severed and the past has been forgotten, if not intentionally erased. This is the atmosphere that pervaded Czechoslovakia during the early part of this century, an atmosphere that bred the a-political and a-historical tendencies that Kundera and the deconstructionists have come to espouse.

While the structuralists do not always assert their a-historical bias, the deconstructionists do. Deconstruction carries the strategies of nullifying, erasing, airbrushing, revising, and what must now, in the Kundera-Orwell context, be called "doubletalk," to an obvious extreme. While the "boa-
deconstructors" (the term is Geoffrey Hartman's) take over mere texts when they write, the Strong Poets of communism's most angelic discourses take over nations. That their strategies mirror each other becomes clearer when a particular deconstructionist's analysis interprets a text that itself articulates the theme of memory and forgetting. (Straus 77)

Kundera uses deconstruction at the level of the symbolic to accomplish his attack on the dismantling of history that was accomplished in Central and Eastern Europe at the hands of the Soviets. Kundera's deconstruction of the public persona in his novels is made possible by this particular political world in which his characters are placed. Kundera's work has been compared, in this regard, to that of Franz Kafka, who also resided in Prague, and George Orwell.

To understand Kundera's works it is first essential to grasp the tumultuous historical background of his native Czechoslovakia, his disillusionment with the communist-controlled brand of state socialism, the purges of intellectuals, and the ensuing conflicts that ended with Czech independence through the Velvet Revolution only in 1989. The struggle to maintain the Czech language and culture have survived successive invasions during this century -- first, at the hands of the Germans and then the Soviet Union. Kundera views his small country as history's unique laboratory. In a 1985 interview published in the New York Times, Kundera said:

13 "Hartman writes in the preface to Deconstruction and Criticism that 'Derrida, de Man, and Miller are certainly boa-deconstructors, merciless and consequent, though each enjoys his own style of disclosing again and again the 'abyss' of words' (Straus 85).

14 Since 1989, following the Velvet Revolution, the country formerly known as Czechoslovakia has been divided into nations -- the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Kundera was born in Brno, which is now part of the Czech Republic. Kundera often refers to his homeland using the older term "Bohemia."
If you think about Central Europe, what a prodigious laboratory of history. In a period of sixty years, we have lived through the fall of an empire, the rebirth of small nations, democracy, Fascism, the German occupation with its massacres, the Russian occupation with its deportations, the hope of Socialism, Stalinist terror, emigration . . .” (Carlisle 85)

In March 1939, German troops under Hitler’s control occupied Bohemia and Moravia, parts of the former Czechoslovak Republic. In February 1948, Czechoslovakia, whose fate had been already decided at Yalta, became “a people’s democracy” as the first step toward socialism. However, as the Communist Party took control, dissidents were purged and liberties were increasingly limited under direction from Moscow. Student protests erupted in Prague in 1968 calling for reform in what has come to be known as the Prague Spring. Although some of the students’ demands were met and the reformer, Alexander Dubček, was put into power, the jubilation of the Prague Spring quickly turned to horror as Soviet troops rolled in to occupy their country that same year. Dubček was arrested and capitulated to Moscow’s demands, allowing the occupation of Kundera’s small Central European country to continue. New purges of reformist elements ensued, and it was not until the 1985 election of Mikael Gorbachev as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that a new era of perestroika and glasnost was ushered in and the vice grip of the Soviet Union loosened (U.S. Library of Congress, Federal Research Division; Lodge 105). In 1989, the Czech and Slovak people decided, in what has come to be known as the Velvet Revolution, to divide the former Czechoslovakia into two independent nations.

1. Man in History

The history of Czechoslovakia during the twentieth century has been, first and
 foremost, an epoch of paradoxes for Kundera. Giving a speech at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union in June 1967 just prior to the events of the Prague Spring, Kundera alluded to the paradoxes of the history he and homeland were then living through:

. . . the miraculous soil of art turns suffering into gold. It even turns the bitter experience of stalinism into a paradoxical, indispensable asset. . . . stalinism was heir to a great humane movement which even amidst the stalinist malaise, preserved some of its attitudes, its thoughts, its slogans, language and dreams. To see such a movement degenerate in front of everyone’s eyes into something quite contrary and strip itself of every human virtue, to see it turn love for humanity into cruelty toward people, turn love for truth into denunciation and the like -- this was to witness unbelievable aspects of basic human values and qualities. What is history? What is Man in history? [emphasis added] What, indeed, is Man at all? No one could give the same answer to any of these questions after experiencing such changes as before. No one left this episode of history the same man as he entered it. (Kundera qtd. in Hamšík 175-76)

This question of what man is within history’s folds is critical to the deconstruction of the persona in Kundera’s works. Man is a fractured individual, prey to history’s arrows and fickle desires. Kundera himself was a victim of these times, much like Ludvik, the protagonist of La plaisanterie and Tomas in L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être. Kundera was twice expelled from the Communist Party, in which he had been active. He lost all means to earn a living, working either under the names of others or relying on his wife Vera who gave English lessons for support. Kundera was unable to publish in his native Czechoslovakia after La plaisanterie, and the publication in France of Le livre du rire et de l’oubli caused the ruling powers to revoke his citizenship (Lodge 105; Kramer 47; Misurella, Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events: Private Affairs, xi-xv).

The history of his country and his own personal involvement in those tumultuous
events demonstrate the existential absurdity of the postmodern condition, in which man can no longer believe that he controls the world or even his own destiny.

Brought up by Descartes to be the “master and possessor of nature,” man becomes a mere thing before those forces (technology, politics, history) which pass his understanding, exceed his grasp, and grasp him. For those forces, man’s concrete being, his “living world” (*Lebenswelt*) has no value and no interest: it is eclipsed and forgotten.” (Kundera, “The Novel and Europe” 15)

This faulty perception of man as the one who controls nature emerges as one of Kundera’s key paradoxes. Man, again, has been transformed from subject to object. This is the ultimate joke of the persona -- man is never whom he thinks he is. As critic Eva Le Grand states, Kundera uses his novels to “favoriser la méditation sur l’essence de la situation humaine et sur ses rapports avec l’Histoire. Par ce jeu synthétique, Kundera réussit à condenser en un seul mot -- celui de la plaisanterie -- la spécificité de la connaissance centre-européenne: l’expérience individuelle et collective d’une Histoire devenue ‘système de plaisanterie’ ” (58).

In Kundera’s works, the life of the individual moves parallel to history as two dancers move symmetrically together. Tamina’s painful forgetting of the features of her husband’s face in *Le livre du rire et de l’oubli* is paralleled by the erasure from documented history of Clementis. The scene which opens the book occurs in February 1949 at the birth of Czechoslovakian Communism. The real-life Communist leader Klement Gottwald steps onto the balcony overlooking Prague’s Old Town Square to address the crowd. Clementis, in a gesture of solicitude, takes off his own fur hat and sets it on Gottwald’s head. Four years later Clementis, charged with treason and hanged,
was airbrushed out of Czech history. “La section de propagande le fit immédiatement disparaître de l’Histoire et, bien entendu, de toutes les photographies. Depuis, Gottwald est seul sur le balcon. Là où il y avait Clementis, il n’y a plus que le mur vide du palais. De Clementis, il n’est resté que la toque de fourrure sur la tête de Gottwald” (LRO 13-14). All that remained of Clementis was the image of his hat, as his own image had been brutally erased. The hat, the famous shifting symbol of the persona in Kundera’s works, remains a witness to a vanished history.

II. Loss of Memory: The Totalitarian State

For Kundera, history is synonymous with memory. Historical memory parallels personal memory. History, like the persona, ties the individual to the world, the interior to the exterior. In Kundera’s works, this link is especially strong although not without conflict. Tamina longs to obtain her old letters and journals to provide substance to the disappearing image of her late husband. Mirek, another character in Le livre du rire et de l’oubli, tries desperately to obtain some old love letters from a woman he is ashamed of having slept with, while leaving incriminating political papers in his apartment for the police to read. Mirek goes to prison, along with his son and a dozen of their friends, because of this significant decision to destroy his personal history while maintaining that of the Czech resistance. Ann Stewart Caldwell compares “Mirek’s desire to erase Zdena from his mind by destroying the tangible evidence of their love” to the intentional erasure of history. “He brushed her out of the picture in the same way the Party propaganda airbrushed Clementis from the balcony where Gottwald gave his historic speech” (51). History always provides the spark which sets off a chain of seismic events.
of a more personal nature in the lives of Kundera’s characters. Antonin Liehm quotes Kundera, speaking in interview in _Le monde_, as saying:

> We are accustomed to blame it all on the regime but this prevents us from seeing that in fact the regime only sets into action a mechanism which has already existed in ourselves. The task of the novel is not to pillory manifest political reality, but rather to expose scandals of a more anthropological character. (Liehm, “Milan Kundera: Czech Writer” 31)

Those who do not seek to maintain or regain their memories, personal or historical, become substitutes in Kundera’s novels for the totalitarian state. In Kundera’s eyes nothing is more unforgivable, it seems, than turning one’s back on history, and the quickening pace of the modern world enhances this forgetting. He writes in _La lenteur_:

> Quand les choses se passent trop vite personne ne peut être sûr de rien, de rien du tout, même pas de soi-même . . . le degré de la vitesse est directement proportionnel à l’intensité de l’oubli. De cette équation on peut déduire divers corollaires, par exemple celui-ci: notre époque s’adonne au démon de la vitesse et c’est pour cette raison qu’elle s’oublie si facilement elle-même. (134-35)

In _La vie est ailleurs_ Kundera turns two mythic historical ideals -- the Mother and the Poet -- into incarnations of the evil, totalitarian state that seeks to erase all traces of the individual. “The connection between the oppressive maternal principle which does not permit the separation of the infant and the new communist state which does not tolerate the opposition and autonomy of its subjects looms in the depths of Kundera’s own abjection” (Longinovic 158). The mother seeks to mold her child, not in her own image, but in her idealized image. This idealization brings the child into the world in direct opposition to her abjection but at the same time undeniably united with her.

> Jamais elle ne s’était abandonnée pareillement à un autre corps, et jamais un autre corps ne s’était abandonné à elle pareillement. . . . Ah,
l’allaitement! Elle observait amoureusement les mouvements de poisson de la bouche édentée et s’imaginait que son fils buvait, en même temps que son lait, ses pensées, ses fantaisies et ses songes. (VEA 20-21)

Motherhood is a paradox in and of itself — at once an authoritarian institution, especially so in the case of Jaromil’s mother, but also situated at the farthest distance from the persona in terms of its inherent interiority. Describing the body of Jaromil’s mother during her pregnancy, Kundera writes, “. . . il avait cessé d’être un corps pour les yeux d’autrui, il était un corps pour quelqu’un qui n’avait pas encore d’yeux. La surface externe n’en était plus si importante; le corps touchait un autre corps par sa membrane interne, encore jamais vue de personne. Les yeux du monde extérieur ne pouvaient donc en saisir que l’apparence inessentielle . . .” (VEA 19). The myth of motherhood, in all of its grandeur, is deconstructed through this unexpected turn, mixing the sublimity with totalitarianism. The fetus in the womb, never seen by the eyes of another, resides in the true idyll beyond the world of persona, the domain of appearance. It is no wonder that Kundera’s characters, as we shall later see, construct their personae around the longing for this lost paradise.

None of this is to say that Kundera believes the interior world is superior to the external world of the persona — particularly not in the case of the poet Jaromil whose epitomization of the internal self-absorption that echoes outward into the political realm, rings particularly hollow. Jaromil’s transformation from child poet to supporter of the totalitarian regime blossoming in Czechoslovakia is easier to fathom, as he uses his poetry for purely political means in order to win praise and in the end righteously denounces his lover and her brother to the authorities.
Kundera gives a number of reasons why living with a revolutionary romantic has much in common with life in a totalitarian state. We might condense them, however, into one: the weak sense of self in the passionate revolutionary, who carries through life the terrors of an infant, screwing up his eyes at the brightness of the day and reacting with panic to the otherness of the world about him. Existence becomes a struggle to find a substitute for the womb — the safe, the known, the absolute -- and politics and poetry may equally conduce to that comfort. . . . For only total revolution can promise us a world shaped to our own ego, yet ratified by history and sanctified by our unity with other life. Only revolution can return us to paradise lost, our undifferentiated existence before birth. (Rosslyn 209-10)

The desire to belong — whether to the world of the Surrealists that Jaromil initially approaches, to the political world, to the realm of sexuality and adulthood, or that of the attractive cinematographer -- dominates the book. Because he never achieves this long sought after unity of body and soul, dream and reality, Jaromil creates an alter-ego in the form of Xavier. The super-hero persona of Xavier provides the much-needed mask to hide Jaromil’s inadequacies and give him a sense of control over the world where none truly exists. But in the last moments before his death, Jaromil’s flawless persona betrays him as all personae eventually do. The ability to see oneself gloriously through the creation of a fictional alter-ego is no less strained than Tereza’s ability to glimpse her soul through the features of her face. Both are masks — invented, imagined, or interpreted — that bestow concrete, physical attributes on internal desires.

III. The Idyll: Heaven or Hell

Most of Kundera’s characters, confronted with a world where their dreams never materialize, long to create a utopian oasis where this dream of perfection, constantly interpreted through the persona, can finally be realized. François Ricard calls this the
"idyllic conscience" (Ricard, "The Fallen Idyll" 19). Perhaps this idyll is the restoration of a unified reality in which the signified and signifier are again merged into a cohesive sign unquestionably anchored in reality, that is to say, that the referential relationship is restored and the world of images is banished.

The world of paradox arises in finding the illusion of the idyll turned upside down. Kundera’s demystifies the idyll, the imaginary Garden of Eden, a paradise, albeit a paradise deprived of knowledge. François Ricard refers to Kundera’s “ruthless critique of the Idyll, the careful dismantling of its promised marvels,” saying:

A leitmotiv reappearing throughout Kundera’s work, the Idyll, is in fact one of its central myths and, as such, becomes a means of understanding, if not our existence and our world, at least their horizons. But this myth inverts all enchantments, repelling rather than seducing, threatening, not beckoning. (Ricard, “The Fallen Idyll” 21)

The idyll becomes Kundera’s hell, rather than his paradise. The establishment of a paradisical world in the human realm entails a communal conformity which closes upon itself and destroys or exiles all others. As Sartre writes, quoting the French revolutionary Honoré Mirabeau, “The road that leads from Evil to Good is worse than Evil” (Sartre 17). Ludvik’s persona, his identification of himself as a devout member of the Communist Party in La plaisanterie, is shattered by the crowd which raises its hands against him, excluding him. Tamina in Le livre du rire et de l’oubli is unable to live in the world of “idyllic” lightness on the island of children, a world that is anything but idyllic for her. Jaromil seeks the idyll of belonging to the world far from his mother’s

15 It is interesting to consider the fact that the Sausurrean sign is drawn as a circle, particularly in relation to Kundera’s constant use of the image of the circle, as we shall later explore, in Le livre du rire et de l’oubli.
skirts, while his mother's idyll entails an unattainable oneness with her son. Therein lies
the inherent destabilization of the idyll's image as it becomes both its representation and
its negative at the same time.

For each, happiness resides in the concretization of his or her singular
idyll, unhappiness in its destruction. But let us go back to Jan and
Edwige, naked on the beach. Each feeds within a certain image of the
idyll, each imagines in his or her own way Daphnis's universe wherein
conflict has no place. But their mutual incomprehension is deeper than it
seems, for their respective images of the idyll are more than merely
different: they are contradictory. (Ricard, "The Fallen Idyll" 19)

The deconstruction of the persona defined through the longing for the idyll is achieved
by showing the images of heaven and hell simultaneously showing through each other
and becoming its opposite. Tamina in Le livre du rire et de l'oubli and Jaromil in La vie
est ailleurs demonstrate most clearly the first side of the coin -- that the supposed
heavenly realm of the idyll is hell:

The attempt to realize the dream of paradise in political reality will tend
toward the gulag (this too a classical liberal argument with roots in
Aristotle's critique of Plato). "The evil is already present in the
beautiful," Kundera proclaims in the Afterword to The Book of Laughter
and Forgetting. "hell is already contained in the dream of paradise and if
we wish to understand the essence of hell we must examine the essence of
the paradise from which it originated." Such is the task of his own fiction.
(Eiland 711)

And, likewise, hell can be heaven. Those characters exiled from their lives in society
expect to find only misery, but what they find instead is the only peace they ever know
within the covers of Kundera's novels. Ludvik unexpectedly finds happiness in the
everyday life of the mining camp and his relationship with Lucie, the simple girl whose
voice is never heard in the novel and comes to represent life outside of the symbolic
order. François Ricard labels this idyll, outside of life in the political spotlight, paradoxically, “the anti-idyllic idyll” or “the idyll of experience” (Ricard, “The Fallen Idyll” 22). For Ludvik, this respite falls precisely between his expulsion from the Communist Party which left him in despair and his quest for revenge against Pavel Zemanek, as “vengefulness is but another way of consenting once again to History and of remaining its prisoner” (Ricard, “The Fallen Idyll” 23). Recalling the point at which he had been working in the Ostrava mining camp for one year, Ludvik recalls, “j'étais heureux; c’était pour moi un bel été” (LP 131).

Happiness, if it exists at all, exists outside of History which Kundera denounces as the playground of budding Neros and Napoleons parading their imitation passions and simple roles and turning them into the most tragic realities (LP 140). Kundera nestles his paradoxes like wooden Russian dolls, one inside the other. For Ludvik, happiness is found with Lucie in the life of a simple, homely girl. This is noteworthy for two reasons -- first, this love exists outside of the physical, sexual realm which results in mounting frustration, a rupture, and even violence for Ludvik, and secondly, Ludvik’s love of the girl he considers pure and chaste is based entirely on his own illusions of her which are later revealed as a grand misconception. Like the biblical Garden of Eden, happiness only exists in Kundera’s books in a vacuum of misconception and ignorance which is
always revealed in the end.

IV. Circles and Lines

Kundera’s books repeatedly return to the symbol of the circle — the Central European circle dances, circles of angels, golden rings, and the more metaphorical circles of inclusion and exclusion. The circle, traditional symbol of inclusion, unity, and belonging, is turned on end to become the ultimate symbol of exclusion. The students who dance in a circle during the Prague Spring in Le livre du rire et de l’oubli “ont l’impression que le cercle qu’ils décrivent sur le sol est un cercle magique qui les unit comme une bague” (LRO 103). The world of the circle is that of the persona, where one demonstrates oneself in relation to others and seeks to craft the perfect image of perfect unity and solidarity that always reveals itself as an illusion. Kundera writes:

Moi aussi j’ai dansé dans la ronde. ... Puis, un jour, j’ai dit quelque chose qu’il ne fallait pas dire, j’ai été exclu du parti et j’ai dû sortir de la ronde. C’est alors que j’ai compris la signification magique du cercle. Quand on s’est éloigné du rang, on peut encore y rentrer. Le rang est une formation ouverte. Mais le cercle se referme et on le quitte sans retour ... je n’en finis pas de tomber. Il y a des gens auxquels il est donné de mourir dans le tournoiement et il y en a d’autres qui s’écrasent au terme de la chute. Et ces autres (dont je suis) gardent toujours en eux comme une timide nostalgie de la ronde perdue, parce que nous sommes tous les habitants d’un univers où toute chose tourne en cercle (LRO 106-7).

Man’s fall from the circle, like the original sin derived from his fall from the Garden of Eden, leaves him longing to restore the paradise lost.

The circle is the symbol of belonging, which inherently implies its opposite, exclusion. Kundera’s novels evolve as a Borromean knot with its three overlapping circles providing inclusion and exclusion simultaneously. Kundera harshly criticizes the
French poet Paul Éluard as a circle dancer, mouthing poems about unity and peace while ignoring those who were dying, particularly the Czech surrealist Zavis Kalandra. André Breton called on Paul Éluard to protest the accusation that Kalandra was a traitor of the people. "Mais Éluard était en train de danser dans une ronde gigantesque entre Paris, Moscou, Prague, Varsovie, Sofia et la Grèce, entre tous les pays socialistes et tous les partis communistes du monde, et il récitait partout ses beaux vers sur la joie et la fraternité" (LRO 108). Those who dance in the political circle betray the words they speak, betray the persona they have donned, and become hypocrites by their participation in the circle of exclusion. The only circle in Kundera’s works that attains any sort of true magic and nobility is that of the folk dancers, whose dance is one of friendship, tradition and, above all, memory.

The circle normally is that of belonging, a belonging that Kundera and Kalandra couldn’t attain. Madame Raphaël, the professor leading the class on Eugène Ionesco’s Rhinocéros, seeks the circle at all costs:

Danser dans une ronde est magique; la ronde nous parle depuis les profondeurs millénaires de la mémoire. Mme Raphaël, le professeur, a découpé cette photo dans le magazine et elle la regarde en rêvant. Elle voudrait, elle aussi, danser dans une ronde. Elle a toute sa vie cherché un cercle d’hommes et de femmes auxquels elle pourrait donner la main pour danser une ronde, elle l’a d’abord cherché dans l’Église méthodiste (son père était un fanatique religieux), puis dans le parti communiste, puis dans le parti trotskiste, puis dans le parti trotskiste dissident, puis dans le mouvement contre l’avortement (l’enfant a droit à la vie!), puis dans le mouvement pour la législation de l’avortement (la femme a droit à son corps!), elle l’a cherché chez les marxistes, chez les psychanalystes, puis chez les structuralistes, elle l’a cherché chez Lénine, dans le bouddhisme Zen, chez Mao Tsé-toung, parmi les adeptes du yoga, dans l’école du nouveau roman, et, pour finir, elle veut être au moins en parfaite harmonie avec ses élèves, ne faire avec eux qu’un seul tout, ce qui signifie qu’elle
Like Jaromil's ideological switch from that of the older, surrealist artist to that of those who opposed him, Madame Raphaël transforms her poses and opinions from one pole to its opposite with similar ease. The signified, the concept, be it abortion or politics, becomes insignificant and dominated by the effect it is able to produce -- self-identification of the persona through belonging or exclusion. The signifier and the circle remain.

The ability to transform one thing to its opposite is especially facile in an epoch noteworthy for its organized forgetting and a speed that induces a general forgetting.

Ludvik in La plaisanterie reaches the following, sad epiphany:

Oui, j'y voyais clair soudain: la plupart des gens s'adonnent au mirage d'une double croyance: ils croient à la pérennité de la mémoire (des hommes, des choses, des actes, des nations) et à la possibilité de réparer (des actes, des erreurs, des péchés, des torts). L'une est aussi fausse que l'autre. La vérité se situe juste à l'opposé: tout sera oublié et rien ne sera réparé. Le rôle de la réparation (et par la vengeance et par le pardon) sera tenu par l'oubli. Personne ne réparera les torts commis, mais tous les torts seront oubliés. (LP 422)

The persona has placed man in a world in which the gaze of the Other turns everything into image. This transformation from individual to collective and from essence to image has made erasure all the more achievable. Kundera would deny that man can be separated from his place in history, that he can he be separated from his image, and, as we shall explore in the following chapter, that he can truly separate himself from language.
Cela semble un paradoxe: chaque personnage de Kundera est précisément décrit du point de vue de sa situation historico-sociale (chacun représente un type socialement représentatif du milieu concret donné à voir dans les romans) et, simultanément, montré en train d’essayer de définir sa place dans la société et dans l’“Histoire.” Le résultat de cette tentative est toujours le même: les mécanismes dans lesquels l’“Histoire” avait plongé l’individu se reproduisent dans chaque histoire personnelle en conservant toutes leurs caractéristiques. Ou peut-être convient-il d’intervertir l’ordre de la cause et de l’effet et de constater que les mécanismes qui régissent les histoires personnelles sont perpétrés dans les instances sociales supérieures? À la vérité, Kundera ne nous permet pas d’arriver à une conclusion univoque. Le caractère concret de ses personnages nous oblige à prendre acte de l’essentielle homologie entre les mécanismes qui régissent les vues individuelles dans leurs aspects même les plus intimes et les lois de l’histoire. Au centre de son attention se retrouvent justement les mécanismes propres de l’activité sociale de l’homme, des mécanismes d’ordre sémiotique, mais qui agissent à un niveau existentiel. (Richterova 33-34)

The nature of history deprives man of unequivocal meaning in much the same way language does. The persona expressed through language and through socio-historical events always breaks down in the face of this pervasive equivocality in Kundera’s novels.

In so far as we have “lightness of being” we have neither future nor past, neither story nor character. Because in terms of lightness Einmal ist keinmal, all the bloody events of man’s history “have turned into mere words, theories and discussions, frightening no one.” (Bayley 91)
Chapter Four: (Mis) Communication — (De)Presenting the Public Persona

Ils ne se comprenaient jamais, Edwige et lui, pourtant ils étaient toujours d’accord. Chacun interprétait à sa façon les paroles de l’autre et il y avait entre eux une merveilleuse harmonie. Une merveilleuse solidarité fondée sur l’incompréhension. Il le savait bien et s’y complaisait presque. (LRO 342)

The foundation of history and memory exists only through words and images. If the body is the ultimate tool of the persona, its blade is the human capacity for self-expression, either written or oral. Nearly all of Kundera’s novels begin with an oral or written act of self-expression whose meaning will haunt the character throughout the story as its meaning metamorphoses from one pole to its opposite. Depriving man’s primary form of expression of concrete meaning deconstructs his persona. He and his words become the unexpected vehicles — the signifiers — for a multitude of meanings attributed to his utterances. The excess of meaning inherent in man’s speech frequently leads, in Kundera’s novels, to a Kafkaesque conclusion where man becomes the tragic clown, his life turned upside down by unexpected meaning. His persona simultaneously multiplies and dissolves under the excess meaning of the signifier, and man finds himself unable to assign unequivocal meaning to his words. Sylvie Richterova in “Les romans de Kundera et les problèmes de la communication” says that Kundera has raised the struggle between the subject and language to epic proportions, exposing the drama and farce of the certitudes and incertitudes of language (31). Language is the tool that man never masters — either as its sender or receiver. One could apply Kundera’s description of the relationship between the worker and his hammer — a metaphor for the sexual relationship between man and woman — just as well to language. “Le maçon est le maître

88
du marteau, pourtant c’est le marteau qui a l’avantage sur le maçon, parce que l’outil sait exactement comment il doit être manié, tandis que celui qui le manie ne peut le savoir qu’à peu près” (LRO 316). Man can never master language, as language cannot be mastered because the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. Meaning remains open and constantly shifting and allows Kundera to turn this struggle of expression into the farce of human tragedy.

Au début de tous les romans et de presque toutes les nouvelles de Kundera se trouve un acte verbal; le temps de l’action et de la narration commence à un moment où l’on attribue une signification à une chose. Et il s’agit à chaque fois d’une signification arbitraire: dans les premières proses de Kundera, dans les récits de Risibles Amours, l’action jaillit de la parole; la dynamique des récits suit la logique suivante: le personnage adresse aux autres un message, un mot, un geste, raconte une histoire inventée; il le fait uniquement pour jouer ou pour plaisanter, mais le signe, une fois né, acquiert toujours une autonomie inattendue, dépasse qui l’a exprimé et, travaillant “pour son propre compte,” suscite erreurs et malheurs. En termes de sémiotique — ou de psychologie lacanienne — le “signifiant” l’emporte sur le “signifié.” (Richterova 37)

This breakdown in communication emerges in several ways -- through the multiplicity of interpretations inherent in the postmodern sign, the obsession with self-expression which turns a deaf ear on the Other, and the domination of images over meaning. This essential failure to communicate also emerges as a by-product of the lyricism of youth, the reductionism of the mass media, and the erasing and forgetting of history. While some rare individuals manage to exist outside of the symbolic order or near its periphery, they are no more understood than those who remain firmly inside of it. For all of these individuals, the Lacanian lack of any supreme truth and the lack inherent in the transcendental signifier result simultaneously in Derridean excess and lack of meaning.
I. Misinterpretation: The Multitude of Meanings

As Richterova has said, almost all of Kundera’s stories revolve around a message — be it a postcard, an evasive comment, or a joke — whose meaning, as intended by the sender, is twisted and turned until it becomes its opposite in the eyes of its intentional or unintentional recipient. The meaning plays somewhere in the gap between the words and the recipients’ interpretation, between the signifier and the signified, while the signifier magnifies itself and takes on a life of its own. “Entre la chair trop vive de l’événement littéral et la peau froide du concept court le sens,” writes Jacques Derrida in L’écriture et la différence. “C’est ainsi qu’il passe dans le livre. Tout (se) passe dans le livre. Tout devra habiter le livre. Les livres aussi. C’est pourquoi le livre n’est jamais fini. Il reste toujours en souffrance et en veilleuse” (113). The struggle over the spoken and written word appears in numerous forms — Ludvik’s postcard to Marketa in La plaisanterie, Tamina’s desire to obtain her lost letters in Le livre du rire et de l’oubli, Mirek’s desire to destroy his old love letters in the same novel, the narrator’s offhand promise of a letter of recommendation in “Personne ne va rire” in Risibles amours, or the biographical writings of Bettina on Goethe in L’immortalité. Although the misunderstandings resulting from differing interpretations of messages occur in the realm of politics, most of them concern amorous relationships. As Ann Jefferson states in her article “Counterpoint and Forked Tongue: Milan Kundera and the Art of Exile”:

Most of Kundera’s stories are love stories in one form or another, and the subject of love has always been presented in his work as, amongst other things, a clash of perspectives. Love is always laughable — although in the most serious way — because it seems inevitably to entail
misunderstandings. In the case of characters like Jan and Edwige, or Sabina and Franz misunderstanding is systematic and sustained and while they hear the same words and see the same things, each sees them as part of a completely different value-system." (133-134)

Ludvik sends his message to Marketa -- “L’optimisme est l’opium du genre humain! L’esprit sain pue la connerie. Vive Trotski! Ludvik” -- to wound her, shock her, and disconcert her, he tells the reader (LP 55). The card is read by the Communist Party leaders as a political attack, a sign of Ludvik’s true political stance, and a sign of his unacceptable individualism and pessimism. Ludvik declares, “. . . j’avais été exclu du Parti pour intellectualisme et cynisme . . .” (LP 81). The card takes on a life of its own which determines the entire course of Ludvik’s life -- his imprisonment in a forced labor mining camp, his desire for simplicity in his relations with Lucie, and, finally, his tragi-comic search for revenge against those who expelled him from the Party. The misreading -- which Ludvik begins to wonder if it was a misreading at all -- calls his persona into question. Ludvik asks if he would have sent an open postcard with such a message to Marketa at a Communist camp if not as a joke. The Communist Party leaders are not interested in his intentions, only in their own interpretation of the message, their determination of an unequivocal meaning (Chvatík, “Milan Kundera and the Crisis of Language” 29). The first persona is destroyed and another, the persona created by the Other, takes its place. As we have already discussed elsewhere in this study, the image crafted from outside the self becomes more real than the self or the self-crafted image.

For Jacques Derrida, the post card is the epitome of miscommunication -- open to
the eyes of the Other but destined never to be understood. It is “a minuscule yet deconstructive text” which plays on Derrida’s Postal Principle, “differential relay, that regularly prevents, delays endispatches the depositing of the thesis, forbidding rest and ceaselessly causing to run, deposing or depositing the movement of speculation” (Restuccia 161). In The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond, Derrida writes of the inability to ensure understanding, the impossibility of direct, linear comprehension:

Would like to address myself, in a straight line, directly, without *courrier*, only to you, but I do not arrive, and that is the worst of it. A tragedy, my love, of destination. Everything becomes a post card once more, legible for the other, even if he understands nothing about it. And if understands nothing, certain for the moment of the contrary, it might always arrive for you, for you too, to understand nothing, and therefore for me, and therefore not to arrive, I mean at its destination. . . . If you had listened to me, you would have burned everything, and nothing would have arrived. I mean on the contrary that something ineffaceable would have arrived, instead of this bottomless misery in which we are dying. (Derrida, The Post Card 23)

Ludvik is the victim of miscommunication and a political regime in which each word’s meaning takes on an intensified meaning, but he cannot escape the impenetrable and constantly shifting world of signs and gestures himself. In watching the traditional folk parade, the Ride of Kings, in his hometown in Moravia Ludvik explains the incomprehensibility of human symbols -- due to the passage of the message across time, the lack of a proper decoding tool and, perhaps more importantly, the lack of patience

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16 In The Post Card, Derrida plays on the words “carte postale” and “écart postale” as the post card becomes a symbol of the gap inherent in communication. The sender is never sure that the reader, intentional or unintentional, will understand. Also, as a two-sided document, the recipient is never sure of the importance allocated to the image versus the words. The numerous layers of incomprehension illustrate the inherent ambiguity in any form of communication.
among those who would decode the message.

... à mon esprit réapparut le roi masqué avec sa Chevauchée et je fus ému par l'inintelligibilité des gestes humains... Des hommes très anciens ont certainement voulu dire quelque chose de très important et ils renaissent aujourd'hui en leurs descendants, semblables aux orateurs sourds-muets qui haranguent le public avec des gestes splendides et incompréhensibles. Jamais on ne décryptera leur message, non seulement faute de clé, mais aussi parce que les gens n'ont pas la patience de l'écouter, en un temps qui voit une telle quantité de messages antiques ou neufs que leurs teneurs, qui se recouvrent l'une l'autre, ne peuvent être perçues. Aujourd'hui déjà, l'Histoire n'est plus que le grêle filin du souvenu au-dessus de l'océan de l'oubli...” (LP 420-421)

Gestures, no less than words, become indecipherable, as evidenced by the wave which launches the novel L’immortalité, a gesture used by Agnès and by Laura and, previously, by their father’s mistress, each time signifying something different and yet indescribable.

The worst of “final solutions,” without limit, this is what we are declaring, you and I, when we cipher everything, including our clothes, our steps, what we eat, and not only messages as they say, what we say to each other, write, “signify,” etc. And yet the opposite is not less true. (Derrida, The Post Card 16)

In Kundera’s world, as in Derrida’s, everything is ciphered and nothing truly deciphered, posing the problem of communication. Yet, man still longs for the unity inherent in the representational sign. Ludvik, returning to the peaceful world of folk music, “longs for the dream world of folk song ‘where love was still love and pain was still pain, where natural feelings were not yet out of joint and values still unspoiled...’ In other words, where things and words still formed an original unity that had not yet been manipulated and destroyed by forces alien and inimical to humanity” (Chvatik, “Milan Kundera and the Crisis of Language” 29). The individual manipulates language to form the persona -- the persona of the lovelorn young man — but ruin only follows as evidenced by the saga
that follows the writing of Ludvik’s postcard.

Kundera’s books capture the excess of meaning through the use of paradox. Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author in 1968, and Kundera’s books play on this diminishment, if not death. The importance of the reader or listener has been magnified. Kundera paradoxically diminishes and degrades the role of the author or speaker while amplifying his own voice as author and narrator within his novels. In spite of the vociferousness of Kundera’s own narrative voice, and occasionally because of it, the gap between the self and the other seems only to widen with each utterance or written word on the page.

Si elle [l’écriture] n’est pas déchirure de soi vers l’autre dans l’aveu de la séparation infinie, si elle est délectation de soi, plaisir d’écrire pour écrire, contentement de l’artiste, elle se détruit elle-même. Elle se syncope dans la rondeur de l’œuf et la plénitude de l’Identique. Il est vrai qu’aller vers l’autre, c’est aussi se nier et le sens s’aliène dans le passage de l’écriture. (Derrida, L’écriture et la différence 113)

Both Kundera and Derrida allow meaning to play in the obfuscated void between the self and the Other. The words become objects –- sent out into the world on their own like a child -- with an existence that cannot be fully grasped either by those who created them nor by those for whom they were intended. Derrida captures the duplicity of man and his message, writing: “I have, I am, and I demand a keen ear, I am (the) both, (the) double, I sign double, my writings and I make two . . .” (Derrida, The Ear of the Other 21).

Kunderean characters seek to manipulate language to define their personae and reveal themselves, their true essence, or some aspect of it to the Other, but the paradoxes inherent in Kundera’s deconstruction of the persona reveal to them only the impossibility
of such communication. They are the victims, not only of History, but of language.

Květoslav Chvatík asserts that Kundera’s essential critique is an anthropological one of language, rather than of an ideological sort (Chvatík, “Milan Kundera and the Crisis of Language” 28). As the story revolves around misinterpreted, contradictory, or excessive meaning, Kundera’s novels begin at the point when meaning is assigned by an individual or group to the signifier. To Derrida, the word becomes both “a term and a germ, a term that disseminates itself, a germ that carries its own term within it” (Derrida, Dissemination 325). The written word in particular takes on a life of its own as an object in the world separate from its author. As Richterova writes, “seul compte dans l’histoire la signification qui lui est attribuée” (38).

A situation similar to Ludvik’s in La plaisanterie, although far more comical and Kafkaesque, develops in “Personne ne va rire” in Risibles amours. The professor/narrator agrees to write a letter to the publishers of a review, La pensée plastique, for Monsieur Zaturecky, who tells him that such a letter supporting his work is the only condition under which the review has agreed to publish the study to which he has devoted himself for three long years. The narrator, unwilling to praise a work he finds abominable and unwilling to be the metaphorical executioner for the enthusiastic researcher, evades Zaturecky by every means possible, including moving his courses and failing to post the changed time and accusing Zaturecky unjustly of making sexual advances toward the narrator’s girlfriend. The narrator’s unwillingness to write the letter or refuse to write it leads to the ultimate destruction of his life — the loss of his job and his girlfriend. The presence of words or their absence leads equally to misunderstanding.
Therein lies the paradox, every word of gesture or absence of these can be read as one thing or its opposite, thereby shifting the locus of the persona one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. Every action, word, or gesture can be read through these two polar lenses. And man’s desire for unity of action, unity of symbols, and unity within himself makes these extreme polar reading all the more likely. A colleague warns the narrator of “Personne ne va rire” of this fact.

Toute vie humaine a d’incalculables significations, dit le professeur. Selon la manière dont on le présente, le passé de n’importe lequel d’entre nous peut aussi bien devenir la biographie d’un chef d’État bien-aimé que la biographie d’un criminel. Examinez seulement à fond votre propre cas. On ne vous voyait guère aux réunions, et même quand vous y veniez, la plupart du temps vous vous taisiez. Personne ne pouvait savoir ce que vous pensiez au juste. Je me souviens moi-même, quand on discutait de choses sérieuses vous lancez tout d’un coup une plaisanterie qui suscitait des doutes. On oubliait ces doutes sur-le-champ, mais aujourd’hui, quand on va les repêcher dans le passé, ils prennent soudain une connotation précise. Ou bien, rappelez-vous toutes ces femmes auxquelles vous faisiez répondre que vous n’étiez pas là! Ou bien, prenons votre dernière étude, à propos de laquelle n’importe qui peut affirmer qu’elle est écrite à partir de positions politiquement suspectes. Bien sûr, ce ne sont que des faits isolés; mais il suffit de les examiner à la lumière de votre présent délit pour qu’ils forment un ensemble cohérent qui illustre avec éloquence votre mentalité et votre attitude. (RA 38-39)

Everything can be read as one concept or its antithesis, and the sexual arena provides no less ambiguity of meaning. Edwige and Jan, the masters of perfectly agreeable misunderstanding, take up the familiar stereotype of women saying no to sexual intercourse when they really mean yes. "Edwige répondit qu’elle ne disait jamais non. Pourquoi dire une chose qu’elle ne pensait pas? ‘Quand une femme dit non, elle veut dire oui. Cet aphorisme de mâles m’a toujours révoltée. C’est une phrase aussi bête que l’histoire humaine’" (LRO 319). The same action, according to Jan, carries similarity
and difference within its folds of meaning. Jan poses rape and castration as two poles of sexual existence.

--- Je veux dire par là, répondit Jan, que quand un homme et une femme font la même chose, ce n’est pas la même chose. L’homme viole, la femme castre.

--- Tu veux dire par là qu’il est immonde de castrer un homme, mais que c’est une belle chose de violer une femme.

--- Je veux seulement dire par là, répliqua Jan, que le viol fait partie de l’érotisme, mais que la castration en est la négation.

--- Edwige vida son verre d’un trait et répondit avec colère: “Si le viol fait partie de l’érotisme, cela veut dire que tout l’érotisme est dirigé contre la femme et qu’il faut en inventer un autre.” (LR 318)

The same action can, in Jan’s opinion, be eroticism or its polar opposite of violent destruction. Edwige and Jan become, like the professor in “Personne ne va rire,” examples of a world in which silence, as well as words can be misinterpreted. The excess of meaning lies in the words, the gestures, and the Derridean traces that emanate from them even in their absence. This agreement through silent misunderstanding appears most clearly in the scenes involving two couples — Franz and Sabina in L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être and Jan and Edwige in Le livre du rire et de l’oubl.

Franz and Sabina stare at Sabina’s bowler hat, a familiar prop in her erotic encounters, but Franz finds himself frustrated with his inability to understand Sabina’s game because he does not have access to the constantly changing multitude of traces, each bearing part of the hat’s meaning, connected with this prop. Kundera refers precisely to these Derridean traces of meaning, built up over a lifetime of experiences:

Le chapeau melon était devenu le motif de la partition musicale qu’était la vie de Sabina. Ce motif revenait encore et toujours, prenant chaque fois une autre signification; toutes ces significations passaient par le chapeau melon comme l’eau par le lit d’un fleuve. Et c’était, je peux le dire, le lit
du fleuve d'Héraclite: “On ne se baigne pas deux fois dans le même fleuve!” Le chapeau melon était le lit d’un fleuve et Sabina voyait chaque fois couler un autre fleuve, un autre fleuve sémantique: le même objet suscitait chaque fois une autre signification, mais cette signification répercutait (comme un écho, comme un cortège d’échos) toutes les significations antérieures. Chaque nouvelle expérience vécue résonnait d’une harmonie plus riche. (LRO 131)

François Ricard, in his article “Des fleuves d’un chien,” adds that any great book is, in one word, a river -- “Un fleuve formel et un fleuve sémantique. Un fleuve héraclitéen, lourd en même temps que léger. Lourd, il s'impose, il s'étend, rien ne le contient ni ne l’interrompt; léger, il court, est toujours ailleurs, plus loin que là où je croyais le saisir, et pourtant toujours le même” (75).

The same semantic river, overflowing with meaning and interpretation, fills the lives of Jan and Edwige. Jan longs for the world of Daphnis, an image taken from the story of Daphnis and Chloë and their love without knowledge of jouissance. He desires desire – mysterious, incomprehensible, miraculous sexual excitement. But his evocation of Daphnis’s name, Jan’s symbol of excitement without climax, calls to mind for Edwige a world of liberation of the senses, a natural paradise before its destruction by Christianity. The two muse over Daphnis’s island, immersed in their mutual incomprehension. “Ils ne se comprenaient jamais, Edwige et lui, pourtant ils étaient toujours d’accord. Chacun interprétait à sa façon les paroles de l’autre et il y avait entre eux une merveilleuse harmonie. Une merveilleuse solidarité fondée sur l’incompréhension. Il le savait bien et s’y complaisait presque” (LRO 342).

II. Graphomania: The Worded Persona

Beyond Kundera’s characters who express themselves to one another, only to find
themselves misunderstood by their intentional receivers and also by the always-attentive eye of the Other, Kundera fills his books with communicators of the more traditional variety -- those who write for the vast public of unknown readers. Kundera labels these individuals -- whose numbers appear to be on the rise -- "graphomaniacs" (LRO 91).

Kundera explains graphomania as follows:

Une femme qui écrit quatre lettres par jour à son amant n'est pas une graphomane. C'est une amoureuse. Mais mon ami qui fait des photocopies de sa correspondance galante pour pouvoir la publier un jour est un graphomane. La graphomanie n'est pas le désir d'écrire des lettres, des journaux intimes, des chroniques familiales (c'est d'écrire pour soi ou pour ses proches), mais d'écrire des livres (donc d'avoir un public de lecteurs inconnus). En ce sens, la passion du chauffeur de taxi et celle de Goethe sont les mêmes. Ce qui distingue Goethe du chauffeur de taxi, ce n'est pas une passion différente, mais le résultat différent de la passion. (LRO 146)

The taxi driver who survived a shipwreck only to spend his sleepless nights writing his life story, the character of Bibi who is bursting to set down the tale of her inner odyssey in Le livre du rire et de l'oubli, Jaromil the poet of La vie est ailleurs, and Bettina in L'immortalité, who is obsessed with setting down an account in letters of her (fictitious) love affair with Goethe all qualify as graphomaniacs. Tamina, Kundera's beloved character of Le livre du rire et de l'oubli, is one of the few who emerges as the polar opposite.

The world of graphomania is one in which everyone writes and no one reads, everyone speaks and no one listens. It is the world of self-expression, the world of the persona. Bibi, Tamina's friend in Le livre du rire et de l'oubli, wants to meet a writer who lives in the neighborhood. When Tamina asks her what he has written, Bibi
responds, "Je n’en sais rien. Il faudrait peut-être que je lise un truc de lui" (LRO 130).

Bibi only longs to write about the world as she sees it, caring little for what others have to say. Graphomania, this malaise of the late twentieth-century, proves a central paradox in Kundera’s works. Graphomaniacs long to express their point of view, to expose their “true” persona to others, but as the world becomes filled with graphomaniacs one finds that everyone is speaking and no one is listening. Communication becomes paradoxically ineffective. Again, the signifier is all. Kundera summarizes the paradox in the following passage:

L’isolement général engendre la graphomanie, et la graphomanie généralisée renforce et aggrave à son tour l’isolement. L’invention de la presse à imprimer a jadis permis aux hommes de se comprendre mutuellement. À l’ère de la graphomanie universelle, le fait d’écrire des livres prend un sens opposé: chacun s’entoure de ses propres mots comme d’un mur de miroirs qui ne laisse filtrer aucune voix du dehors.17 (LRO 147)

The concept metamorphoses into the ostrich metaphor through Tamina’s experience as she stops at a zoo on the grounds of a country château and she watches six ostriches with Hugo, a man from the bar whom she has slept with in the hope of getting him to cross the border to obtain her old letters and journals.

Ils passèrent un loup, un castor, un singe et un tigre et ils arrivèrent à une grande prairie entourée d’une clôture de fils de fer derrière laquelle il y avait des autruches. Elles étaient six. En apercevant Tamina et Hugo, elles accoururent vers eux. Maintenant, elles formaient un petit groupe qui se pressait contre la clôture, elles tendaient leurs longs cous, elles les fixaient et elles ouvraient leurs larges becs plats. Elles les ouvraient et les

17 I cannot help but think of the Internet, specifically the World Wide Web, as the perfect extension of the printing press, as well as the concept of graphomania. Everyone has a voice, all voices are equal, and yet they are drowned out by all the other voices “speaking” at the same time.
Tamina dreams of the ostriches after her trip to the zoo. The image of ostriches -- a familiar metaphor of the unwillingness to perceive the meaning of something, pictured with their heads buried in the sand -- pervades the novel. Man can parade his persona, as graphomaniacs do with increasing persistency, but the Other is not forced to see it or interpret it as the individual wishes. “In a world overloaded with communications systems, in which almost everybody writes and gives interviews, no one really listens to anyone else” (Chvatik, “Milan Kundera and the Crisis of Language” 33).

One can further explore this question of why humans write or, more precisely, why most of Kundera’s characters desire to write of the events, mostly mundane, of their lives. The taxi driver, speaking of his passion to write, reveals for Kundera “l’essence de l’activité de l’écrivain.” “Nous écrivons des livres parce que nos enfants se désintéressent de nous. Nous nous adressons au monde anonyme parce que notre femme se bouche les oreilles quand nous lui parlons” (LRO 145). Graphomania also carries a certain authoritarianism, according to Kundera. Defining the term graphomania further in L’art du roman, Kundera writes that it “n’est pas la manie de créer une forme mais d’imposer son moi aux autres. Version la plus grotesque de la volonté de puissance” (AR
Unable to institute the self-envisioned persona as one’s self for the world, one sets to writing of one’s one life in an attempt to create an unequivocal “moi” on the page. It is again man’s struggle for control, a struggle that continues to elude him.

The self, as set forth on the page by graphomaniacs, and the novel both provide the illusion of presence, the presence of an immutable essence of the individual which Kundera consequently deconstructs through the use of paradox.

This scission, this opening, this pure appearance through which the present seems to free itself from the textual machine ("history," numbers, topology, dissemination, etc.) in fact denounces itself at every moment. The operation puts "illusion" into play as an effect or product. "Presence," or "production," is but a product. (Derrida, Dissemination 308)

The book is the tool of the graphomaniac — usually the autobiography rather than the novel. Banaka, the writer of Le livre du rire et de l’oubli, urges Bibi away from the novel in favor of a more autobiographical study.


Kundera, writing his dictionary of key words in the essay "Soixante treize mots" in L’art du roman, defines the expression “mon livre” as “l’ascenseur phonétique de l’autodélectation” (AR 164). The autobiography is the by-product of the persona which is nothing more than a form of masturbation for Kundera’s writers and proves no more true than the fiction that Banaka condemns, as further evidenced in L’immortalité.

The poet Jaromil in La vie est ailleurs is himself a graphomaniac of the worst
order, one who puts stock in his words and seeks to use them to assure his power in the world and create an idyll for himself. He is narcissistic in his verse and yet his insecurity prohibits him from gazing too long into that mirror. Uncomfortable with himself, he crafts his alter-ego and tries to live out his life until, at death's door, his image is split in two and his alter-ego Xavier betrays him. From his first words, Jaromil uses his words, his "poetry," to win a response from others. He mimics and mutates what he hears to win praise, and his mother posts the words on the wall of his room. When, as a young adult, he no longer receives a response in the world of self-absorbed graphomaniacs, Jaromil takes the following symbolic action. The famous poet to whom he has sent his verse has failed to respond. His love letters to a young woman have gone unanswered.

Une lettre (pleurnicharde et suppliant) tomba dans ce tunnel et s'y perdit sans éveiller d'écho. Jaromil songeait à l'écouteur du téléphone accroché au mur de sa chambre; hélas, cet écouteur prit soudain un sens: un écouteur au fil coupé, une lettre sans réponse, une conversation avec quelqu'un qui n'entend pas... Il voulait encore une fois se signaler à l'attention de l'illustre poète. Mais pas par une lettre, par un geste chargé de poésie. Un jour, il sortit avec un couteau tranchant. Il tourna longtemps autour d'une cabine téléphonique et quand il fut certain qu'il n'y avait personne à proximité, il entra à l'intérieur et coupa l'écouteur. Il réussit à couper un écouteur par jour et au bout de vingt jours (il n'avait pas reçu de lettre, ni de la jeune fille ni du poète) il eut vingt écouteurs avec le fil coupé. Il les mit dans une boîte, fit un paquet avec du papier et de la ficelle et inscrivit le nom et l'adresse de l'illustre poète et le nom de l'expéditeur. Tout ému, il apporta le paquet à la poste. (VEA 230-32)

The graphomaniac Jaromil must impose his persona even on those -- or especially on those -- unwilling to listen. Sylvie Richterova cites Kundera's comment that the poet is, in reality, an individual who offers his self-portrait to the universe, wanting his face, glimpsed through his verse, to be loved and adored (43). But he, like all others, butts his
head up against the same world in which voices are manipulated, misunderstood, and often ignored.

La vie est ailleurs, which Kundera originally wanted to title L'âge lyrique, concerns itself with lyrical writing, the writing of the young poet. According to Kundera, lyricism is the disease of the persona, a state of drunkenness that man seeks in order to more easily confuse himself with the world (AR 165). The lyric persona seeks to escape the inherent isolation of the human condition by belonging, much like the professor teaching Rhinocéros in Le livre du rire et de l’oubli, and willingly sacrifices his individuality in the name of the totalitarian collective. “La révolution ne veut pas être étudiée et observée, elle veut qu’on fasse corps avec elle . . . . L’innocence avec son sourire sanglant” (AR 165). Lyricism assigns unequivocal meaning to every symbol, word and gesture to shore up the unstable territory of the self. Writer Carlos Fuentes comments that the young are the messengers of the absolute and the lyrical and that the poet reigns with the hangman not in spite of his lyrical talent but because of it (19-21). Kundera says, “But I, when I was young, lived in a period of terror. And it was the young who supported terror in great numbers, through inexperience, immaturity, their all-or-nothing morality, their lyrical sense” (Carlisle 85).

“The lyrical perspective is very subjective; it is the outlook of the poet, the youth, the immature person, who ‘creates’ his own truth in order to avoid seeing the reality of his own miserable self” (Caldwell 48). Kundera’s writing is above all an attack on the lyric persona through irony, defined by François Ricard as “a distrust of all forms of lyricism, as the radical critique of innocence, in a word, as a form of philosophical
Stalinism manifesting itself above all in destruction, derision, and a subversive, gutter-level scrutiny undermining all values, political and poetical ones especially” (Ricard, “The Fallen Idyll” 17). Kundera counters the lyrical illusion with what he calls the “anti-poetic posture,” a point of view which allows man to see the abyss between his vision of himself and the world and the uncertain reality of both (Liehm, “Milan Kundera: Czech Writer” 31).

III. Life on the Outside: Tamina and Lucie

Although many of Kundera’s characters find themselves excluded from their circles, only two of Kundera’s characters live outside the world of language in some manner. Tamina, the heroine of Le livre du rire et de l’oubli lives outside the realm of the graphomaniacs in a world of silence, whereas Lucie, one of Kundera’s most unusual characters, appears in La plaisanterie as the rare character who survives, albeit bruised and battered, outside of the symbolic order. Tamina and Lucie are different in this respect. Tamina intentionally chooses silence over speech and the private over the public, but she still longs to regain her cache of letters and journals and uses the symbolic as a tool to restore her memories of her dead husband. Kundera poses Tamina’s silence, without admitting its attentive or inattentive nature, in opposition to the constant combat that is conversation.

Assis au bar, sur un tabouret, il y a presque toujours quelqu’un qui veut bavarder avec elle. Tout le monde l’aime bien, Tamina. Parce qu’elle sait écouter ce qu’on lui raconte. Mais écoute-t-elle vraiment? Ou ne fait-elle que regarder, tellement attentive, tellement silencieux? Je ne sais, et ça n’a pas beaucoup d’importance. Ce qui compte, c’est qu’elle n’interrompt pas. Vous savez ce qui se passe quand deux personnes bavardent. L’une parle et l’autre lui coupe la parole: “c’est tout à fait
comme moi, je . . .” et se met à parler d’elle jusqu’à ce que la première réussisse à glisser à son tour: “c’est tout à fait comme moi, je . . .” Cette phrase . . . semble être un écho approuveur, une manière de continuer la réflexion de l’autre, mais c’est une leurre: en réalité c’est une révolte brute contre une violence brute, un effort pour libérer notre propre oreille de l’esclavage et occuper de force l’oreille de l’adversaire. Car tout la vie de l’homme parmi ses semblables n’est rien d’autre qu’un combat pour s’emparer de l’oreille d’autrui. (LRO 128)

Tamina remains in the world of the symbolic but hers is a world of heaviness until, even in the end, the life of lightness on the island of children becomes so light that it is infinitely heavy and unbearable for her.

Instead of wishing to forget, she wishes to remember her dead husband through his letters, but she is surrounded by graphomaniacs, as Kundera calls them, writers self-centered and deaf to others, who affirm their existence in an indifferent universe by forcing themselves on the people around them. . . . Like progressive states and graphomaniacs, Tamina’s utopia absorbs the individual into itself, and her attempt to escape the past leads her only to obliteration of her mind, her soul, and ultimately of herself. (Gill 127)

The only one of Kundera’s characters who can truly be said to live outside of the symbolic is Lucie, the simple, homely girlfriend of Ludvik in La plaisanterie. Lucie does not speak in the novel and lives in a realm reminiscent of Julia Kristeva’s semiotic space, a pre-verbal state of poetic purity. Kundera himself has called Lucie “pure poetry” (Restuccia 162-67). Although all of Kundera’s characters are abandoned by history, loved ones, the brotherhood of mankind, their credos, God or fate, as Aron Aji contends, Lucie is the only one whose abandonment takes place in a pre-verbal register (Aji 170-71). The novel and Lucie’s character, Kundera insists, were drawn from a small newspaper article talking about the arrest of a woman caught stealing flowers from a cemetery. Lucie gives the flowers to Ludvik through the fence of the forced labor camp
where he works, sharing a bit of her a-historical, natural existence with the man who is tormented by history. She lives beyond the world of words and even that of images, surrounded by religious imagery yet failing to recognize its meaning or the representational nature of the Biblical scenes on the wall of the cottage where she and Ludvik meet.

This is her persona, unwitting as it may be; she is the woman locked inside herself by the tragic events of her life, living a tortured yet saintly existence comparable to that of Flaubert’s Félicité in Un cœur simple. Lucie is a sort of selfless angel who comes to free Ludvik from the world of the symbolic where he had been labeled an enemy of the party and from History’s reigns. Ludvik asks himself:

Que pouvait-elle connaître, Lucie, de cette grande aile de l’Histoire? A peine si le bruit assourdi en avait jamais frôlé son oreille; elle ignorait tout de l’Histoire; elle vivait au-dessous d’elle; elle n’en avait pas soif; elle ne savait rien des soucis grands et temporels, elle vivait pour ses soucis petits et éternels. Et moi, d’emblée, j’étais libéré; il me semblait qu’elle était venue me chercher pour m’emmener dans son paradis grisâtre . . .” (LP 116)

But even Lucie, a simple girl who lives outside of history’s fold, is subject to its laws and oppression and remains misunderstood. Her being emerges in the story only through the first-person accounts of two other characters -- Ludvik and the devoutly religious, Kostka. Lucie’s story emerges first through Ludvik’s account of her as a simple, plain-looking woman who brings him flowers and rejects his sexual advances, he believes, to protect her virginity. Kostka, a friend of Ludvik, however, later meets Lucie and learns of her sexual initiation by way of gang rape, although she only reveals for him his own marital infidelity, cowardice, and the hole in his religious faith.
Oui, j’ai réussi à amener Lucie à la croyance en Dieu. Je suis parvenu à la tranquilliser, à la guérir. Je l’ai débarrassée de son horreur des choses de la chair. . . . J’affectais de lui apporter le pardon alors qu’elle seule avait à me pardonner. (LP 358-59)

The persona and every action of the individual can only be viewed by the Other through the narrow tunnel of his own experience. While Ludvik finds justification for his quotidian existence and life beneath History’s wings in Lucie’s gaze, Lucie also later provides similar assurance for Kostka’s religious fervor. She “serves to supply the external proof for his otherwise abandoned existence” (Aji 180). He saves her after she is found living like a fairy in the woods, becoming a legendary character, taking milk and food the children have left for her. She is tied to the natural world apart from humans and comes to exemplify the essence of man’s abandonment. Perhaps it is Lucie’s silence that points out Kostka’s own religious abandonment. Does he merely interpret his own will as that of God? He wonders:

J’avais interprété les machinations politiques contre le directeur de la ferme d’État comme un appel chiffré de Dieu pour que je parte. Mais entre tant de vois, comment reconnaître celle de Dieu? Et si la voix alorscaptée n’était que la voix de ma lâcheté? . . . Subitement, l’idée me vient que j’ invoque de prétendus appels divins comme simples prétextes pour me dérober à mes obligations humaines. (LP 358-59)

Again, even in religion, one voice is drowned out in the others, and Kostka agonizes over the fear that the only voice he can truly hear is his own, filled with fear of warmth, women, and prolonged human contact.

Kundera has been criticized for his depiction of women as sexual objects or

18 Kostka later loses his religious faith, as it demands the same “depersonalized commitment” that Communism does for Ludvik.
victims, but the same can be said for the men in Kundera’s prose. Even Lucie, who lives outside of history and outside of the symbolic, falls prey to the negative forces that envelop her, but this is not her plight alone. Frances Restuccia claims that “Lucie Sebetka’s charming inability (or perhaps lack of desire) to insert herself into the symbolic order leads to her mistreatment” (Restuccia 162). “More insidiously, Kundera’s alignment of women with the very indeterminacy that covers over the hypothesis that sadomasochism is universally inherent forces women — insofar as they remain outside of the symbolic order, in the aesthetic space of ambiguity — to veil their own oppression. The very textual obfuscation that enacts a celebration of the feminine simultaneously ensures women’s powerlessness” (Restuccia 168-69). Women are certainly not alone in facing this inherent human sense of powerlessness, as Ludvik, Kostka, and Jaroslav all suffer the same existential malaise in La plaisanterie. As Aron Aji says, La plaisanterie is at the core a novel about “the depersonalization of individual existence, the impossibility of self-definition in the post-1948 Communist Czechoslovakia” (Aji 170).

IV. Truth in Communication: A Relative Proposition

Kundera rejects the idea of the existence of an unequivocal, communicable truth. Hardened by the false truths of the Soviet regime that occupied Czechoslovakia for more than two decades, truth takes on a negative side in Kundera’s works. The person that longs to express some inalienable truth via the persona will only become a buffoon or a victim in the end. Guy Scarpetta describes how Kundera’s Czechoslovakia mocks the very idea of truth:
It is a universe where, for example, the thousands of photos taken in Prague in 1968 to witness the militarily imposed Soviet order end up being used by that very order to identify those who oppose the regime; where it is useless to oppose “truth” to official lies, so long as truth itself can be manipulated, or turned aside to contribute to repression; a universe, in short, where there is no longer any logical link between an act’s intentions and its effects. (115-16)

Kundera abandons the singularity of truth as he abandoned the illusory unity of the persona and of the Communist Party. What is left is only the individual and the plural, and these shards of the persona hold more truth than any imaginable, illusory totality that can be constructed. More truth remains in the void that exists once ideology, truth, and God have been tossed out than in all of their illusions. It is a void of relativity with a sense of fullness of being -- neither heavy nor light -- but full.

The experience of Kundera’s generation was quite different. Its members became writers at a time of the total relativization of all values, both national and social, and they themselves are to a certain extent constituent parts of a new “absolute evil” in the name of “absolute good,” they have been given to experience the relativization of “absolute evil” and the grotesqueness of “absolute good,” they have the good fortune that they “were not aware from the start,” but had to cut their way through to truth at the cost of destroying their own illusions, their own “happiness,” with all the risks which such a radical revolution against the self entails. (Liehm, “Milan Kundera: Czech Writer” 30-31)

This revolution against the self, achieved with such grace in Kundera’s novels, results in the (de)presentation of the self with paradox working consistently as the author’s deconstructive tool to displace meaning, truth, and thus, the self. Edouard’s discourse on truth in “Edouard et Dieu” in Risibles amours depicts Kundera’s relativization of truth at its most extreme point, where Edouard discards every hint of truth and even the most fractured, personal truth is abandoned. Edouard communicates everything -- his belief in
God, his declarations of love, his state of mind -- only as pretense to gain what he desires.

Truth is not an essential element of his discourse. His brother, who holds honesty as the ultimate good and claims to always say exactly what he thinks, presents the polar opposite picture. Chastised by his brother for failing to adhere to the truth in adopting his constantly changing persona, Edouard questions society’s need/demand for truth:

Je sais que tu as toujours été un type droit et que tu en es fier. Mais pose-toi une question: Pourquoi dire la vérité? Qu’est-ce qui nous y oblige? Et pourquoi faut-il considérer la sincérité comme une vertu? Suppose que tu rencontres un fou qui affirme qu’il est un poisson et que nous sommes tous des poissons. Vas-tu te déshabiller devant lui pour lui montrer que tu n’as pas de nageoires? Vas-tu lui dire en face ce que tu penses? . . . Si tu ne lui disais que la vérité, que ce que tu consens à avoir une discussion sérieuse avec un fou et que tu es toi-même fou. C’est exactement la même chose avec le monde qui nous entoure. Si tu t’obstinais à lui dire la vérité en face, ça voudrait dire que tu le prends au sérieux. Et prendre au sérieux quelque chose d’aussi peu sérieux, c’est perdre soi-même tout son sérieux. Moi, je dois mentir pour ne pas prendre au sérieux des fous et ne pas devenir moi-même fou. (RA 298-299)

The paradox demonstrated by Edouard and his brother positions truth-telling and lying as two poles, both of which preserve man’s integrity. Kundera demystifies and deconstructs truth in the novelistic rather than philosophical forum of his works, particularly as affiliated with journalists. Journalists, in Kundera’s works, are on the side of the totalitarian leaders, reducing facts to clichés, demanding the truth from their subjects, and creating a false sense of unity. Ann Jefferson writes that in L’immortalité Kundera:

. . . draws a parallel between the methods of the secret police in Eastern bloc regimes and investigations of Western journalists, since both rely on the invocation of what Kundera calls an “eleventh commandment” which requires everyone to tell the truth, particularly the trivial, positivistic truth (where were you yesterday? what do you talk about with A?) in response to questions that in the West are put by journalists and in the East by the men from the Ministry of the Interior. (Jefferson 127)
Kundera asserts that journalism has changed, that it is no longer the journalism of an Ernest Hemingway, a George Orwell, or an Egon Erwin Kisch, but a realm dominated by the Oriana Fallacis of the world, journalists who have replaced conversations with their gun-fire questions as a means of asserting their power rather than obtaining information.

"Dis la vérité!" exige le journaliste, et nous pouvons bien sûr nous interroger: quel est le contenu du mot "vérité" pour qui gère l’institution du onzième commandement? Afin d’éviter tout malentendu, soulignons qu’il ne s’agit ni de la vérité de Dieu, qui a valu à Jan Hus le bûcher, ni de la vérité scientifique qui plus tard a valu à Giordano Bruno la même mort. La vérité qu’exige le onzième commandement ne concerne ni la foi ni la pensée, c’est la vérité de l’étage ontologique le plus bas, la vérité purement positiviste des choses: ce que C a fait hier; ce qu’il pense vraiment au fond de lui-même; ce dont il parle quand il rencontre A; et s’il a des rapports intimes avec B. Pourtant, quoique située à l’étage ontologique le plus bas, c’est la vérité de notre époque et elle recèle la même force explosive que, jadis, la vérité, jadis, la vérité de Jan Hus ou de Giordano Bruno. (IM 169)

The lowly and the high are equal in this search for truth. Everything is relative. This idea can be further applied to the persona in its deconstructed, (de)presented state. The possibilities of human existence are infinite, and the external and internal facets emerge with an equality that holds that one is no more true than the other.

If, as Kundera has said, the novel explores the possibilities of human existence, where does freedom for the human character lie? . . . Probably Kundera would answer: Nowhere, freedom, like truth, is relative, lying partly in all of them, yet wholly in none of them. As a result, all we have to depend on is ourselves, our individual points of view, reputation, and memory (Misurella 92)

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19 Egon Erwin Kisch was a Czechoslovakian journalist known for his reporting on Prague’s prostitutes (Kundera IM 165).
Conclusion

It is necessary to ask once more, in light of this assumed relativity and the absence of any supreme truth, the recurring question that haunts Kundera's fiction. If all poles of existence, all deities, and all values have been deconstructed or demystified, where is the self situated? Like Kundera's invisible, perhaps non-existent God, the self is nowhere and everywhere at once — in the soul and the body, in the perceptions of others, innately tied to language though unable to create any true expression through it, and both in and under history's obscuring wings. The self resides in the hazy, ambiguous world of paradox. This is where Kundera situates his characters, where the novel presents only questions and every question is answered with another question, where meaning is constantly shifting along the infinite chain of signifiers with no resolution in sight, not even after death.

The persona, tenuously grounded in this world of paradox, is an essential component of the self as the only vehicle for breaching the barrier between oneself and the world through the membrane of the skin which separates the rich interior world from the infinitely vast exterior one. The lines of these two domains blur together in Kundera's work as he paradoxically achieves a kind of hazy unity grounded in uncertainty between man and the world while breaking down all illusions of unity, such as the idyll, revolution, the unity of body and soul, and the ability to unite oneself with others through communication, sex, or friendship.

Kundera sketches the poles of existence, as human perception focuses in on these binary pairs, alluding to man's essentially binary vision, in order to draw the poles
together, and then, like a magician, he makes them disappear in their excess. Man becomes lost in the crowd, he disappears, only to find himself, or some crucial aspect of his fractured existence, in the fall into the abyss of nothingness.

Paradox proves two oppositional ideas true at the same time. By showing that the self is both present and absent in every expression of the self through the persona, Kundera achieves the (de)presentation of the self. One presents his face, his persona, to the world in manipulating the tools available to him -- his physical presence, written and oral expression, his role in society and history -- while seeking to expose his "true" inner self which he perceives to be his soul. Kundera forces his characters to glimpse what lies beyond the immense hurdle and trap that is man's desire to discover unity, to find cohesion in the absurdity and relativity of life and in his struggles with "l'incapacité de supporter la relativité essentielle des choses humaines, l'incapacité de regarder en face l'absence du Juge suprême" (AR 18). He loses himself in discovering his own illusions and watching his received ideas break down before him, only to find something more obscure, but far more valuable and infinitely more grand in the resulting haze. "... l'unique Vérité divine se décomposa en centaines de vérités relatives que les hommes se partagèrent" (AR 17).

Man can not find or express himself through the limited channel of his body. He cannot infallibly communicate himself to the Other yet longs to do so. He cannot control the changing scenery of history. Nor can he truly be understood by living outside of history and its inherently symbolic world. He cannot throw his autobiography into the void, as all others do the same, and expect to be heard and understood. But these
stumbling blocks do not, oddly enough, result in an overwhelmingly pessimistic view of
the world. Kundera turns these handicaps on end to find the infinite possibilities open to
man in his uncertain world. Locating and expressing the self through the persona
becomes man’s Sisyphean task in the world of Kundera’s novels.

Kundera winds the threads of the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida with the
Central European brand of existentialism and the discovery of the absurdity of human
life. Man’s existence is absurd because, as he moves toward death with only one life to
live, the scenes and rules keep changing. The poles of existence become
interchangeable. It is this shifting, this constant stream of change, which echoes
Derrida’s deconstruction with its magnified signifier and infinite number of traces tied to
each infinite sign. Nothing is stable. Kundera’s world of uncertainty is one of relativity
in which the individual opens himself up to this infinite world of codes and signs, which
appears in the shifting narrative voices of his works:

In particular, the intrusive and inimitable voice of Kundera as author stirs
up the text. Take out this intrusive dynamic, and the text is far less radical
because it is precisely this “I” that rips away the facade of versimilitude,
that questions the possibility of meaning, and that carries through a
recognizable disgust for any system that refuses to play with codes —
whether political (Communist or Western), linguistic, or literary.
Literature that only provides answers would be as totalitarian as the
regime Kundera left behind . . . (O’Brien 5-6).

This playing with signs through paradox allows Kundera to assemble and disassemble his
characters at will, working on their own perceptions of themselves and their place in the
world. Those who play with the signs and codes that man’s possibilities offer him find
only an infinite chain of more possibilities both painful and pleasurable.
Kundera’s use of paradox to deconstruct the public persona, therefore, becomes pure subversion by instituting a demand for ultimate relativity. François Ricard writes of Kundera’s subversion:

To read Kundera is then to adopt Satan’s point of view on politics and history, on poetry and love, and in a general way on all knowledge. And it is really for this reason that Kundera’s work is not only pure subversion, but also pure literature. For it offers no knowledge except that of the relativity, and I would almost say the theatricality, of all knowledge, even the knowledge of poetry and dreams. (Ricard, “Satan’s Point of View: Toward a Reading of Life is Elsewhere” 63)

Kundera’s subversive tone leads one to question poetry, love, politics, etc. and “to question the very thing that, once all the rest was deemed unreal, and all the masks revealed, seemed to be the naked face of reality” (Ricard, “Satan’s Point of View: Toward a Reading of Life is Elsewhere” 62).

Those who cannot accept a world robbed of the illusion of a uniting force find themselves pessimistically facing a future where their own triviality, lack of control, and often their own longing for death looms over them. Those who can accept this ambiguity and lack of truth move on to new discoveries within this realm. “This moment of uncertainty, like Descartes’s moment of doubt, is the brief moment of the human mind breaking with any kind of consensus of belief and living the only truth it can be sure of -- the truth that it cannot really know anything, that all it can do is play and wonder” (Gaughan 9).
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