Identity in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera

Cristina STAN*

Abstract

Drawing on essays concerning Mitteleuropa, this article attempts to describe aspects of cultural identity in Milan Kundera's novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being. The historical challenges that this particular geographical and cultural area encountered are reflected in relation to a struggle to maintain a certain cultural identity, encumbered by the Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia. A threatened identity relies on its cultural life, but the characters in Kundera's novel also resort to a certain identitary separation and seek for a refuge in love. The Czech writer's novels emphasize an unavoidable obsession with the totalitarian space, seen as a trap for an individual's identity and personal freedom. Combining the essayistic reflection and a philosophical speculation within a narrative frame, the writer succeeds in rendering something more valuable than a beautiful story: a story brimming with ideas.

Keywords: *identity, Mitteleuropa, polyphony, counterpoint, political novel*

Having become an outcast in his own country back in 1968, Milan Kundera has chosen to live in one of Europe's solid democratic states, France, and started writing in French in 1993. This identitary shift was both a free choice and a necessary act, explained the author to the media.

Unlike his countryman, Václav Havel, Kundera preferred an external exile, not an inner one. France allowed the writer a full artistic growth, as well as free speech, without any political interference. He became famous both for his novel and his role as a relevant voice for issues regarding cultural identity in Central Europe. The articles that he signed in British, French and American newspapers have signalled the disappearance of Central Europe, the consequences of the Soviet oppression and Europe's ignorance regarding Mitteleuropa.

* PhD, Faculty of Letters, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania, cristinastan@gmail.com.

Although Kundera is one of the apologists of Mitteleuropa as an identitary concept, his literary success represents to a lesser extent a destiny pertaining to Central Europe, according to Mircea Mihăieş and Vladimir Tismăneanu:

> În această regiune (Europa Centrală), personalitățile sunt judecate în lumina potențialului lor suicidar. [In this region, personalities are judged in relation to their suicidal potential.] (1998: 27)

Mihăieş and Tismăneanu question the real Central-European identity: to whom does it really belong? To the one that leaves (Kundera) or to the one that stays (Havel)? In any case, their view of the world is noteworthy:

> Amândoi au văzut nebunia vieții de fiecare zi supravegheată de Steaua Roşie. Dar unul o vedea cu o întristare pascaliană, pe când celălalt i-a descoperit comicul deşănțat. Pentru cel dintâi, lumea era o glumă fără sens. Pentru celălalt, gluma era însuşi sensul lumii. [They both saw the daily life craziness being watched over by the Red Star. But one of them saw it through a Pascalian sadness, while the other discovered its depraved comic aspects. For the former (Havel), the world was a joke without any meaning. For the latter, (Kundera) the joke was the meaning of the world itself.] (29)

In order to prevent insurgences when they occupied Czechoslovakia, the Russians have attacked Czech culture, not the media, since culture holds the most fundamental human values and has stirred in the past some of the revolts in Europe. A "worn down" culture allows for the dissolution of national identity. This is perhaps why Kundera states in his essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe* that a Central-European identity has to fight hard against the pressure of time, which leaves culture behind, since Parisians, for instance, no longer talk about books and cultural magazines, but about shows:

> (...) doar într-o lume ce-şi păstrează dimensiunea culturală, Europa Centrală îşi mai poate apăra identitatea, mai poate fi văzută drept ceea ce este ea cu adevărat. Adevărata tragedie a Europei Centrale, prin urmare, nu este legată de Rusia, ci de Europa. [(...) only in a world which maintains its cultural dimension can Central Europe defend its identity and be seen as what it really is. The real tragedy of Central Europe, therefore, is not about Russia, but Europe.] (1997: 235)

Václav Havel had stated in an interview that Kundera is not "one of us". Tony Judt asks:

> Ce este, atunci, domnul Kundera? Este – sau a devenit – un intelectual francez. [What nationality is, then, Mr. Kundera? Is he – or has he become – a French intellectual?] (2000: 75)

Judt notes that most of his writings concentrate a series of debates concerning Mitteleuropa, which reveal the French intellectual more than the Czech writer. On the other hand, Michael Heim, Kundera's translator in the US, has a different opinion:

> Acum Kundera îşi spune scriitor european. Ceea ce şi este. Ultimele două cărți le-a scris direct în franceză. Dar, după mine, el continuă să fie un scriitor ceh. Şi e extrem de conştient de rădăcinile sale. [Now Kundera calls himself a European writer. Which he is. The last two books were written directly in French. But, in my view, he continues to be a Czech writer. And he is very much aware of his roots.] (1999: 87)

Just like Elias Canetti, Karel Čapek, Bohumil Hrabal, Czeslaw Milosz, Danilo Kiš and Robert Musil, Kundera defies formal limits regarding literary species and discourses, thus combining the essay, a historical discourse and fiction. Central-European literature could be seen as a space of confessions about a common, real topos, which is reconstructed and multiplied by individual memory:

> Ideea de a insera eseuri în corpul romanului este acum foarte răspândită în literatura postmodernă; în Europa Centrală ea există de multă vreme şi a constituit un mod cât se poate de firesc de expresie literară. Toate acestea, aforismele, variațiunile, romanul filosofic, reprezintă un ansamblu coerent, în sensul că literatura central-europeană se deschide înspre abstract, e o literatură care trăieşte din idei, or acest lucru lipseşte din literatura anglo-americană. Literatura anglo-americană trăieşte din istorisire, din epic (...). [The idea of inserting essays at the heart of the novel is now extremely popular in postmodernist literature; in Central Europe, it has been around for many years, and has constituted a natural means of literary expression. Aphorisms, variations, the philosophical novel – all represent a coherent ensemble, showing that Central-European literature opens itself to the abstract, that it lives on ideas, something that is missing from Anglo-American literature. Anglo-American literature lives through storytelling, through the epic (…)] (161)

For Kundera, a novel could merge together an ironical essay, autobiographical fragments, a narrative discourse, historical facts and fantasy, for the purpose of a unitary polyphony. Keywords also play an important part:

> A theme is an existential inquiry. And increasingly I realize that such an inquiry is, finally, the examination of certain words, theme-words. Which leads me to emphasize: A novel is based primarily on certain fundamental words. It is like Schoenberg's *tone-row*. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the *row* goes: forgetting, laughter, angels, litost, border (2003: 59-60).

These keywords are turned into "categories of existence". In this regard, Michael Heim notes:

> (...) el practică, în mod conştient, un lucru care îl face atractiv pentru mulți cititori. El îşi învață publicul ce anume vrea ca el să citească sau să ştie; îi spune, de plidă, *asta e dragostea* (…) [(...) he consciously professes a thing which makes him attractive for many readers. He teaches his audience what he wants them to read or know; he tells them, for instance, *this is love* (...)] (1999: 107).

The use of keywords also emphasizes essential aspects in the internal structure of a character. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, characters are built around issues concerning weight versus lightness, soul versus body, woman, kitsch, compassion, music. For instance, at one point when Tereza looks herself in the mirror, she recalls her past and her mother's, an opportunity for the narrator to introduce us to the body problem, as part of the complex existential code that defines this character.

Much like *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* offers a complex vision of the terrible atmosphere that followed Prague Spring and Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia. Exploring themes such as love, sexuality, loyalty and betrayal, the story unfolds two couples' destinies: Tomas and Tereza, Franz and Sabina, as well as a perspective on history. The four characters showcase the drama of the intellectual and artist who is obliged to face totalitarianism. They are all forced to split their identity: the social and cultural one hangs upon the grim political context, while the intimate one tries to save itself through love.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being follows a pattern which Kundera seems to prefer in particular: "My novels are variants of an architecture based on the number seven." (Kundera 2003: 62) This type of narrative architecture relies on counterpoint as an equal placement of different elements, which ensures unity. Taken from musical composition, this technique is the basis for alternating polyphonic narrative with a continuous narrative: "Let me return to the comparison between the novel and music. A part is a movement. The chapters are measures. These measures may be short or long or quite variable in length. Which brings us to the issue of tempo. Each of the parts in my novels could carry a musical indication: *moderato*, *presto*, *adagio*, and so on." (63) Polyphony is thus something more pertaining to art than technique, actually. In the novel, dream and fantasy sequences, the narrative and all the philosophical meditations are combined in a seamless, organic form. The sixth part, for instance, tells the story of Stalin's son, Iakov, and includes a theological meditation, while giving an account of Franz's death and of Tomas' burial. Here, the characters become essayistic "resources", examples for the debate on the kitsch problem.

All philosophical meditations in the novel succeed in enriching its gnoseological value. Talking about human condition allows the narrator a more serious and profound inquiry of existence. One of these philosophical themes, Nietzche's thoughts on the eternal return, is formally supported by analepsis, as some scenes and events are recalled from different points of view many times over (Tereza's, Tomas's or through *mise en abyme* by the auctorial narrator).

For an unexperienced reader, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* might seem to be just a love story. A womanizer who prefers erotic friendships without any sentimentality involved, for the sake of sexual freedom, Tomas "is torn" between permanent lovers and fleeting relationships. What Tereza offers him is a love made up of gestures such as holding hands, which threaten his carelessness. Although he remains unfaithful, Tomas falls in love with Tereza. The other couple, Franz and Sabina, is the complete opposite: Franz is totally committed to Sabina, while she's the one being unfaithful.

Nevertheless, on a more careful reading, the novel unveils some political issues. A Czech's identity, his individuality, his freedom of action and freedom of speech take on new social and political dimensions, since

they are either dissolute, or terribly split. In his struggle to resist and survive in a totalitarian space, an individual is constantly threatened by the secret police, who has several functions: "[to] keep an ear out for what people are saying and report it to their superiors", to spread fear and to stage "situations that will compromise us" (2005: 102). Finally, all these steps aim to "turn the whole nation into a single organization of informers" (102).

A man from the Ministry of the Interior asks Tomas to sign a made-up statement for the press, in which he expresses his love for the Soviet Union, his loyalty to the Party, and his so-called hatred for intellectuals. Tomas is thus pressed to lie about some journalists, and when he refuses to do so, he quits his job as a doctor and starts washing shop windows, roaming "the streets of Prague with brush and pole, feeling ten years younger" (121). Many other intellectuals are forced to change their profession, and work as taxi drivers or janitors. Others, like Sabina, who is a painter, choose an aesthetical indignation instead of an ethical position, expressing aversion to forms of Communist kitsch (such as 1 May celebration). Political kitsch is very obvious in the Great March, which annoys Franz – one of the few to actually notice the comical futility of marching.

Great History takes a toll on the individual, vulnerable histories. The political aspects are intertwined with meditations concerning human condition, in a style which reminds of parables:

> Human life occurs only once, and the reason we cannot determine which of our decisions are good and which bad is that in a given situation we can make only one decision; we are not granted a second, third, or fourth life in which to compare various decisions. History is similar to individual lives in this respect. There is only one history of the Czechs. One day it will come to an end as surely as Tomas's life, never to be repeated (138).

An individual forced into exile is actually forced into sadness: "A person who longs to leave the place where he lives is an unhappy person. That is why Tomas accepted Tereza's wish to emigrate as the culprit accepts his sentence, and one day he and Tereza and Karenin found themselves in the largest city in Switzerland" (20).

All the photos that Tereza takes of the Russian invasion could be regarded as an act of moral struggle of the self. The character needs to

confront the events, but also to let the world know about the aggression – the photos are then sent to foreign journalists: "Czech photographers and cameramen were acutely aware that they were the ones who could best do the only thing left to do: preserve the face of violence for the distant future" (43). Tereza captures a terrible "carnival of hate" in her photos. She feels that her identity and nationality are threatened: "As a result, a Czech spa had suddenly metamorphosed into a miniature imaginary Russia, and the past that Tereza had gone there to find had turned out to be confiscated" (103).

Caught between two terrifying options, real exile and internal exile, the characters oscillate between strength and weakness, resistance and compromise. They try to avoid losing their dignity and individual freedom by falling back on love and sexuality, which are turned into ways of escaping the politicized ordinary life. Every intimate experience softens the confusion and tension brought by the political atmosphere.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, new narrative frames, alongside different narrative strategies such as counterpoint and polyphony become means of analysing and studying abstract concepts; these are associated with a series of keywords or "categories of existence". In Kundera's view, an individual could be haunted all his life by a particular word, belief or concept that eventually marks his whole destiny. In a metatextual manner, the narrator unveils the fictional threads behind a character's structure; for instance, Tomas believes in *einmal is keinmal*: "what happens but once might as well not have happened at all." The characters' genesis is exposed as means of linking reality to fiction, or better yet, of showing the way fiction is able to define a hazy feeling, sensation or belief: "It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying *Einmal ist keinmal*. Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach" (26).

Developing its themes in formal variations, the novel is substantially different from traditional ones: it combines mundane topics with abstract, philosophical ideas. Milan Kundera's novel explores both an intimate drama, regarding an effort to crystallize love, and a collective one caused by Great History – the installation of a totalitarian political regime. The two bear down on individuals and oblige them to reconsider their

private and social relationships, their fundamental experiences and their own views of the world they live in.

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