

“Disturbing the Tranquility” of Meaning: The Unbearable Lightness of Language in Milan
Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

By
Emma Tomicic

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“DISTURBING THE TRANQUILITY” OF MEANING: THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS
OF LANGUAGE IN MILAN KUNDERA’S *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING*

Emma Tomicic

State University of New York at New Paltz

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Arts in English degree,
hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis

Michelle Woods, Thesis Advisor
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

Cyrus Mulready, Thesis Committee Member
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

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Introduction

Milan Kundera opens his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* with Nietzsche's philosophical theory of eternal return. He gives a brief definition telling us that our lives are infinitely recurring and because of this we define our actions and lives as being light or weighty. For Nietzsche, to put it simply, a life that does not recur is light and meaningless and the lives which do recur have weight, and therefore meaning, to them. Kundera then introduces Parmenides' theory which focuses on the binaries society has constructed and states that lightness is positive and weight is negative. After these introductions, Kundera proposes his own theory—definitions of light and weight are paradoxical. He proves the paradox of thinking these are definitive terms through his characters, Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz. This theory is rooted in language and how we use it. By reading Kundera's novel and its message through a Derridean lens, we can see that they are linked in their theories about language. Through his approach to language and the history of it, Jacques Derrida coined the terms "deconstruction" and "différance." The two are rooted in presenting the fallacies of ascribing neat definitions to words and reading words out of context. A closer analysis of the emotions and actions of these four characters through Derrida's work can show us how Kundera is encouraging readers to re-evaluate the value systems we place on language.

To begin the discussion of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I want to analyze how deconstruction functions in the novel: *différance*; the deconstruction of binaries (and the paradoxes in value systems placed on binaries); and, finally, polysemy and understanding. Two of the novel's main themes, light and weight, are a perfect example of deconstruction and the openness of language. If we read these two words in isolation, we have no way of relating them

to the text. Are we thinking of light as in terms of brightness or as the opposite of heavy? Are we thinking of weight as body weight or the weight of an object or as a heavy weight versus a light weight? When put into the context of the novel and the characters, we can get a clearer grasp of what light and weight are supposed to mean. And given that context is always open because of deconstruction, we as readers cannot be one-hundred-percent sure of how we are meant to read these words. For example, we can get a close enough understanding of what the words mean to Tereza, Tomas, Sabina, and Franz, given what we can deduce from their backstories and personalities. But there is so much more about the characters that we do not know, so how can we grasp what the words mean to them? In order to gain the fullest possible definition of these words, we would have to have a list of all the events in the character's lives and see if they defined them as light or heavy. And there is also so much about Kundera as the author that we do not know. How could we know what he was thinking when creating these characters and their actions? Also, how could we know how he expected us to read and digest these characters? We also have to remember that we are reading and analysing this text in translation.

Derrida would disagree with there having to be a definite meaning to these words. The characters all have different definitions of light and weight, the author has his own definition, and we as readers come into the experience with our own pre-determined definitions depending on our personal context. The book is clouded by this inability to gain a clear meaning. I do not think that this diminishes the value of the book or makes it more confusing. I think that deconstruction adds to Kundera's own theory of the mutability of the values we place on language. I will use the characters Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz, to provide a closer analysis of their "definitions" of these words and how they work in the larger context of the book.

An Introduction to Derrida's Theories of Deconstruction and Différance

An essential comment to preface a discussion of Derrida's theories can be summed up in his own words: "What deconstruction is not? everything of course! What is deconstruction? nothing of course!" (*A Derrida Reader*, 275, capitalization is maintained from source text). Derrida, and the scholars I will be citing in this essay, maintain that there is an unknowability to "deconstruction" and "différance;" it is both nothing and everything. This means that all definitions of these terms are tentative and fundamentally incomplete. John D. Caputo, in his commentary on deconstruction, calls the term "the relentless pursuit of the impossible" and speaks on the "aporia," or the central contradiction, embedded in deconstruction (32). Caputo suggests that we approach the terms and their context with the knowledge of their opaqueness and understand them through their "least bad definition" (33). Moving forward, I am going to do my best to define both terms, but it is important to keep their natural unknowability in mind.

To begin with deconstruction: Derrida has been misinterpreted as saying that language is meaningless and readers can infer whatever they want about words because of this (CW MOOC, "Derrida metaphysics 1"). This is not the case at all. Christopher Watkin interprets Derrida as meaning that language is open, it is not a closed or fixed system. An essential aspect of the working definition of deconstruction is that words and ideas do not have meaning on their own, they cannot be read in isolation. Instead, the context in which words and ideas are presented is essential to our understanding of them; and context is open and changeable, therefore adding another level of openness to language. An element of deconstruction which further clouds its definition is that "we can never exhaust what they [words] mean in the present" ("Derrida metaphysics 1"). Given that context is always open, we cannot be sure that we have the full

context of any given word that we need to understand it. But, this does not mean that words can mean whatever we want them to. To explain how they cannot mean whatever we want, Watkin gives the example of a pole outside of a barbershop with red and diagonal stripes. We would not go into the barbershop expecting a post office or a butcher's shop. There is enough cultural context that we understand the meaning of the red and white pole as signifying a barbershop. To use this example with words - you cannot say that the definition for the word "sink" is "something you can drive." "Something you can drive" would be the definition for a car, but it could also be the definition for a truck, a tractor, a lawn-mower, a bus, etc. This is an example of the openness of definition depending on the context. The meaning of diagonal red and white stripes in general is open and changeable depending on the cultural context of their appearance, as well as one's personal context. To some, they may signal a barbershop and to some, they may signal a candy cane. The association with this image is open. Caputo says correctly that deconstruction aims to "disturb the tranquility" of meaning (32).

Another addition to the definition of deconstruction would be that its goal is to present the fallacy of attempting to assign definitive meaning to a word. Caputo points out that Derrida does not confine deconstruction to text only; he says that it can be used to show how "institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need... exceed the boundaries they currently occupy" (31). Deconstruction's "purpose" is to evade meaning, and it does so through emphasizing polysemy. It pushes us to evaluate words in a way that incorporates the opposite of the word as well in our analysis. It asks us to look outside of the oppositions created by society (masculine/feminine, passion/reason, speech/writing, etc.) (CW MOOC, "Derrida metaphysics 2"). Derrida wants us to embrace the openness of words and to

not rely on our socially pre-determined ways to analyze language. Derrida, in his *Letter to a Japanese Friend*, recognizes the paradoxical nature of the term: “I would say that the difficulty of *defining*... the word ‘deconstruction’ stems from the fact that all the predicates, all the defining concepts, all the lexical significations... are also deconstructed or deconstructible, directly or otherwise, etc.” (*A Derrida Reader*, 274). The complicated nature of the term lies in the fact that “deconstruction” is not exempt from being deconstructed. For the sake of clarity in this essay, I will stick to the definition I have provided, which is that its purpose is to uproot language from its comfortable existence in dictionaries and to question and examine the context in which it lives in order to recognize its polysemy.

Derrida’s term *différance* is the second theory I want to employ in my analysis of Kundera. It links closely with deconstruction in its definition. This word, which Derrida invented, is meant to encapsulate both the difference and deferral of meaning (*A Derrida Reader*, 59). Derrida created a word that recognizes the insufficiency of language and openness of interpretation. We will turn again to Watkin for an example of *différance*: if you take a bishop off of the chessboard and out of context of the game of chess, it does not mean much in and of itself. If you substitute any object which is the right size in the bishop’s place (a figurine of an animal, or a stone for example), you could still play the game with the understanding that the figurine is standing in for the bishop. The bishop’s meaning is not inherent in the materiality of the object; it derives from its connection to the game (“Derrida metaphysics 3”). The meaning of the bishop, which stands outside of itself, is being deferred. Another example of deferred meaning is the act of looking up a word in the dictionary. In order to find the definition, you

need to go outside of the word to a book full of other words (“Derrida metaphysics 3”). To Derrida, there is no present, there is a constant difference and deferral which create *différance*.

1 Différance

1.1 The Différance of Sabina’s Bowler Hat

The most striking and clear example of *différance* in the novel is Sabina’s bowler hat. Outside of the context of the novel, a bowler hat’s meaning is deferred. It may be reminiscent of bourgeois men in their hats and suits or perhaps Charlie Chaplin’s iconic costume or a René Magritte painting. All of these possibilities are within the male spectrum of gender. The bowler hat is defined when read in context of the novel and its characters. Its meaning comes from its connection to the specific characters’ lives.

Sabina’s bowler hat makes an appearance in almost all scenes with her, whether as an active player, constantly present, or as a prop in the corner, not needed for the scene. The bowler hat represents the layers of context which exist and inform how we define objects. And its meaning is closely linked to Sabina’s story, which we see when neither Franz nor Tomas can grasp its meaning. For Sabina, the bowler hat served first as “a vague reminder of a forgotten grandfather... Second, it was a memento of her father... Third, it was a prop for her love games with Tomas... Fourth, it was a sign of her originality... Fifth, now that she was abroad, the hat was a sentimental object... turned into a monument to time past” (87). These layers all exist simultaneously, but, again, they only exist in this way to Sabina. To Franz and Tomas, the meaning is deferred because they cannot understand the context Sabina’s life has given it. Kundera describes these layers of meaning as a “semantic river,” one which flows through all

objects and, as per deconstruction and *différance*, adds multiple definitions to words and their corresponding objects. He says that:

The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina's life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning, and all the meanings flowed through the bowler hat like water through a riverbed... the bowler hat was a bed through which each time Sabina saw another river flow, another *semantic river*: each time the same object would give rise to a new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like a parade of echoes) together with the new one... The reason why Tomas and Sabina were touched by the sight of the bowler hat in a Zurich hotel and made love almost in tears was that its black presence was not merely a reminder of their love games but also a memento of Sabina's father and of her grandfather ... (88)

What Kundera is saying is that there is a constant deferral of meaning associated with all things, one that is overwhelming to characters. Every appearance of the bowler hat signals a different interpretation. For example, there are moments when Franz cannot understand it and disregards its centrality to Sabina, while with Tomas, he has a slightly deeper understanding of its heritage which is why they have an emotional experience in its presence. This "parade of echoes" also flows through Tereza's copy of *Anna Karenina*, which stands for a physical book, a heavy object, a metaphorical weight, a metaphorical path to a light, cultural life, and a trick ending. For us as readers, these meanings literally give rise to each other as we read on and the characters develop. Reading itself can be a literal representation of the semantic river, with meanings flowing and combining as we read forward and relate the novel to our own personal context, which cannot be ignored when creating definitions and understandings.

Tomas's encounter with the bowler hat, while it is more emotional than Franz's, still fails to capture Sabina's personal context. When he puts it on, it is so he can visualize "what he would have looked like as a nineteenth-century mayor" (86). He has a masculine view of the hat, one that is associated with politics and the past. This is his contextual meaning for a bowler hat. But, the meaning is deferred once in Sabina's possession. When they meet in Zurich to have sex, he places the hat on her while she's undressing and, "There they stood in front of the mirror (they always stood in front of the mirror while she undressed), watching themselves. She stripped to her underwear, but still had the hat on her head. And all at once she realized they were both excited by what they saw in the mirror" (86). Their excitement stemmed from a mutual recognition of what the bowler hat represented, "a monument to time past" (87). It is difficult to imagine that Tomas, a character who has a difficult time understanding the instability of strict binaries, can move past his own history into their shared history. Kundera explains that the reason why Franz does not have this same experience when seeing the hat on Sabina is because Tomas and her met while they were young when "the musical composition of their lives [was] still in its opening bars, [and] they can go about writing it together and exchange motifs:" the motif being exchanged here is the bowler hat (89). Franz and Sabina met when they were older, when their "musical compositions [were] more or less complete" which causes misunderstandings because everything has a different meaning to each of them (89). The bowler hat is a "hymn" to Sabina and Tomas's shared past, their relationship, and similar experiences in a Communist country.

For Franz and Sabina, the bowler hat serves as an example of their constant miscommunication. Even though we find out that Sabina and Franz have in fact talked about

their past and their beliefs, Franz still fails to understand what Sabina is saying about her past. He sees the hat as a strange quirk of her artistic life. He does not see it as a part of her or as a significant part of her story, which is why he takes it off before they have sex. This oversight is because of *différance*, the bowler hat's meaning is being deferred because its meaning comes from Sabina's personal context, which he cannot access. What made Franz "feel uncomfortable was its very lack of meaning" (88). When she puts the hat on, he cannot understand it in her context nor the context of their sexual relationship; so he disregards it from their encounter by laying it aside. When she places it on her head, "The image in the mirror was instantaneously transformed: suddenly it was a woman in her undergarments, a beautiful, distant, indifferent woman with a terrible out-of-place bowler hat on her head, holding the hand of a man in a gray suit and a tie. Again he had to smile at how poorly he understood his mistress" (85). Franz sees Sabina as a sexual being here. And given that this is a heterosexual relationship, he has no need for the masculine bowler hat to take part. John O'Brien, who wrote *Milan Kundera & Feminism*, describes the hat as a symbol of "the conflicted, ambivalent double influence of both terms of the opposition in her life" (O'Brien, 113). The hat represents the binaries at work in Sabina's life. The binaries of light and weight, fidelity and betrayal, self and country, masculine and feminine, etc. are all explored in her sections; and these binaries are all questioned by deconstruction. Franz cannot grasp the "tension of opposites" and therefore disregards the masculine side of her femininity (113). Her hat represents the "semantic confluence of contradictory or opposite meanings," which we can see clearly in Kundera's theory of the semantic river (115).

Another example of how Franz does not see the bowler hat as a serious part of Sabina's life or image is how, when removing it, Kundera tells us it was as though "he were erasing the

mustache a naughty child had drawn on a picture of the Virgin Mary” (Kundera, 85). The bowler hat is just a silly stain on her image of beauty. For Sabina, it means something far from the Virgin Mary. I think readers are meant to be unclear on what it means to her. We can infer that perhaps it is a symbol of her betrayals, and how they all delivered her to her present situation. Or it might be an assertion of her feelings on gender expression. It may mean all these things at once; they are, after all, a part of the semantic river flowing through the hat. Franz cannot understand these multitudes of meaning. Proof of this is when Kundera says “Now, perhaps, we are in a better position to understand the abyss separating Sabina and Franz: he listened eagerly to the story of her life and she was equally eager to hear the story of his, but although they had a clear understanding of the logical meaning of the words they exchanged, they failed to hear the semantic susurrus of the river flowing through them” (88). From the “Words Misunderstood” section we can see that Sabina too has difficulty connecting to the context of Franz’s language. It is this semantic river that both connects and disconnects all the characters. Their inability to relate stem from their unawareness of this river of meanings, the river of *différance*.

1.2 The *Différance* of Tereza’s *Anna Karenina*

The second example of the semantic river of *différance* is when Tereza arrives in Prague with a heavy book under her arm, *Anna Karenina*. This moment is weighty in two ways. First, it is weighed down by the symbolic literary reference readers are expected to recognize. Anna Karenina dies by throwing herself under a train, and Tereza arrives on a train to meet Tomas. Assuming the reader has read the novel or at least knows the premise, we are supposed to prematurely assign an end to Tereza’s life. This gives weight to her story because readers are waiting for her to have a symbolic death, which never comes. As a book, it does not have a

specific meaning. It is simply pages with letters arranged in a certain way that has been professionally bound and distributed. Kundera is showing us how the symbolic weight we give to objects in novels does not always define the fate of the character. He has tricked readers into believing that Tereza is going to be killed by a train. This, of course, can only occur if the reader is aware of the plot of *Anna Karenina*. Readers will recognize the significance of *Anna Karenina*, and make the decision that there can be no other reason for Kundera putting this specific book in the novel than warning us of how she dies. But, it is simply a trick from Kundera which proves to us how difference functions and how we place too much symbolic value on language.

Secondly, it is weighty because of the meaning Tereza attributes to books. To her, “books were the emblems of a secret brotherhood;” they were a way to escape from her unsatisfactory life and they marked her as different from the other townspeople (47). Books were meant to show them that she did not belong there, given her superior intelligence. This is yet another example of deconstruction. In Tereza’s personal context, because of her relationship with her mother and wanting to escape her hometown, books signify culture and knowledge. Given this context, she cannot see that everyone else in the town thinks it makes her look old-fashioned (48). The book is also a “ticket” into Tomas’s world. When she first sees Tomas he is reading a book, we never find out which one because it does not matter; books do not have a weighty cultural meaning to Tomas. Tereza places meaning and weight onto this image of Tomas and assumes that he is unlike the people in the village (who do not read, she says that no one has ever opened a book in the restaurant before). But, I think it can also be argued that books have a certain light aspect to Tereza. They open a door to a life that is better than the one she is living.

And the fact that they offer her freedom of imagination is light as well. Of course, I am arguing this coming from a literature-dense background, someone with a different background might argue the opposite.

Another example of *différance* is how outside of the text, Tereza's heavy suitcase does not mean anything; it is simply a suitcase filled with heavy objects, which render it heavy. Once we move outside of the object itself and "read" it in the context of the novel and characters, we recognize that it means so much more than a heavy suitcase. As I will explain, it signifies the physical and metaphorical weight Tereza brings to Tomas's life, as well as the weight of her background and life prior to him. The meaning of both the suitcase and the book is deferred until we read further for context. The paradox of these objects to Tomas is that he does not have the full context to understand what the heavy suitcase and book mean because she has not told him. He has not had the opportunity to look outside of the object at the context in which it lives. I would argue that Tereza's dreams (which I analyze further below) have elements of *différance* as well. Read outside of the context of the novel, they seem like the stringing together of ridiculous events which have no relation to each other. Why would there be naked women dancing and being shot at by a man in a basket? But, when we read the dream in context of Tereza's childhood trauma and her struggle with her identity, it makes sense (to an extent).

2 The Deconstruction of Binaries: Lightness and Weight, Soul and Body

2.1 Paradox of "Light" and "Weight"

The character Tomas has a semantically charged relationship with the words light and weight; his life and actions depend on his definition of them. Tomas prides himself on his light lifestyle. He aspires to live a life where he can have sex with whomever and not be tethered

down by emotional responsibility. This is why he lives by intricate rules to how he is and is not allowed to conduct sexual relations. For example, he does not sleep with his lovers: if he sees a woman three times in a row then he has to end the relationship for fear of it becoming romantic; or the other option would be to maintain a relationship long-term by seeing each other three weeks apart (12). I would posit that while he thinks this lifestyle is a light one, it is in fact weighed down by the rules he has made. Rules delineate what we can and cannot do, they require planning and consequences. Tomas is not having sex without thought, in fact, he is borderline obsessive about keeping these relationships light; but by being obsessed with not catching feelings, he is adding weight to his life. Tomas is fooling himself that he lives a purely light life. We can see this clearly once Tereza is introduced into his life. To bring deconstruction into the conversation, to some readers, Tomas's seemingly light polygamy may be weighty. Given that sex and sexual relationships have varying connotations for everyone, readers will use their personal context to judge and assign meaning to Tomas's situation, deciding for themselves whether it is light or weight. Both his polygamy and his way of controlling it are hard to define because they can be so easily deconstructed, but also because of the social values we as readers place on them.

From their introduction, Tereza adds weight to Tomas's life, both figuratively and literally. She arrives at his home in Prague with a heavy book under her arm, *Anna Karenina*, and a heavy suitcase. He is fixated on this suitcase, calling it "large and enormously heavy" and he keeps looking back at "the enormously heavy suitcase [that] stood by the bed" (10). This suitcase follows her throughout their relationship. It is a clear metaphor for the weight Tereza is bringing into Tomas's life. When she leaves him in Zurich to go back to Prague, he imagines her

“lugging her heavy suitcase” as she leaves; she is literally removing weight from his house and his life (31). The moment she leaves him, Tomas believes it is a beneficial decision she has made for both of them and he can finally go back to the “free” life he lived before her. Yes, he had sex with women while he was with Tereza but her jealousy and his love for her added weight to what he needed to be light. When she leaves he “felt the sweet lightness of being rise up to him out of the depths of the future” (31). Tomas recognizes the weight that Tereza adds to his life, even saying that “she might as well have chained iron balls to his ankles” (30). He is convinced that without her, he will achieve the lightness he craves. Soon enough though, he realizes that the weight Tereza brought to his life was compassion: “On Monday, he was hit by a weight the likes of which he had never known... For there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one’s own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone...” (31). Tomas has done the one thing he has told himself not to - he has gained compassion for another human.

During their break, while Tereza is in Prague, Tomas meets one of his lovers and cannot recognize her (225). He goes through his brain’s rolodex of encounters and feels anxiety about forgetting who this woman is. Once he realizes which one of his lovers she is, he recognizes that this light “holiday” cannot go on forever. He is not getting the same enjoyment from his random sexual encounters as he did before Tereza. His compassion for her has brought weight onto them. He is beginning to see that “his womanizing was also becoming something of an ‘*Es muss sein!*’ - an imperative enslaving him” (234). But this compassion is mixed with an annoyance that the “six fortuities” brought her to him instead of another woman. Tomas’s meaning for compassion can be deconstructed. As we know, Derrida states that language is open and can only start to be understood with context. I would say the majority of people believe compassion is not a weighty

word/sentiment but rather one that evokes light emotions of platonic and/or romantic love. But, once read in the context of his character and his fears of commitment, we can understand why he sees it as a weighty word. But we only have this understanding after gaining context about his personality and past relationships.

2.2 The Six Fortuities

Kundera questions how we identify something as a coincidental event when chance is introduced in Tereza's part. Tomas realizes that "his acquaintance with Tereza was the result of six improbable fortuities" (48). Kundera asks "is not an event in fact more significant and noteworthy the greater the number of fortuities necessary to bring it about?" (48). I think Tomas and Tereza's relationship is a perfect answer to this question. We can see how they are placing emphasis on certain aspects of their relationship by assigning them weight, when in reality they are just synchronous events. The six fortuities in their relationship are as follows: when Tomas is in the hotel restaurant Beethoven begins to play and Tereza starts to believe that he is the person to get her out of her town, as well as the fact that he is reading, the room he is staying in is number six and Tereza's childhood home's house number was six and her shift ends at six, he is sitting on the yellow bench outside that she sat on the day before reading, and the sick doctor who brought him to her town. Tereza holds on to these fortuities and has faith that they are pointing her in the direction of Tomas and they "set her love in motion" (51). Kundera's commentary on chance states how "an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence... into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual's life" (52). This is exactly what is happening with Tereza and Tomas - they are assigning meaning to these chance happenings (which Derrida would warn against) and thinking confidently that they have a

role in their life. An important note to make here is that Kundera does not think we should disregard such coincidence, he thinks they bring beauty to our lives (52). It is funny that someone like Tomas who wants nothing but light in his life ends up playing into chance and fate. He is annoyed by this, but does not work against these fortuities; by the end of their relationship he recognizes that “time and again he will abandon the house of his happiness, time and again abandon his paradise and the woman from his dream and betray the ‘*Es muss sein!*’ of his love to go off with Tereza, the woman born of six laughable fortuities” (239). This “*Es muss sein!*” is a constant throughout the novel for Tomas, and will be expanded upon in a later section.

2.3 Tereza’s Traumatic and Cultural Weight

As for Tereza’s character, it is harder to find moments of light in her story. This may be because Kundera gives us a detailed backstory for Tereza, which we do not get for Tomas, that explains her body dysmorphia. Her life revolves around two things: her traumatic childhood relationship with her mother and her anxiety caused by Tomas’s infidelity. Her mother led a shame-less existence: she farted loudly, spoke about sex in public, and walked around naked. Because of her own trauma, she taught Tereza that all women’s bodies are the same and that nothing sets them apart because youth and beauty mean nothing. Kundera makes it clear that her mother “has left an indelible imprint on her” (46). Because of her childhood trauma, Tereza is afraid that she cannot create or even have her own identity. Tereza thinks that Tomas does not see her as special, that she is just another female body he is having sex with. She wakes up from a dream screaming in Part One, Tomas’s section, and he cannot understand why she is so upset. We get a description of this dream, and since we have not yet gained knowledge of Tereza’s upbringing, we too cannot understand the dream. Its meaning is deferred. In Part Two, when

Tereza is experiencing the dream in her own life, Kundera explains the meaning to us. The dream is of naked women in a pool singing and exercising, and whenever they made a mistake, Tomas, who was in a basket above them, would shoot them (57). This dream harks back to her childhood, with her mother being so open with nudity and believing that all bodies are interchangeable. To Tereza, this dream is confirming her fears by telling her that he does not see her as an individual, she is the same as all the other women in the pool with no defining features: “he had sent her back into the world she tried to escape, sent her to march naked with the other naked women” (58). Tereza’s relationship with Tomas is weighed down by the trauma she has from her childhood. Her insecurity and jealousy prohibit her from having a light relationship with Tomas, (although Tomas is not helping her at all by choosing to remain a womanizer even after she has revealed how unhappy it makes her).

A constantly present example of Tereza’s paradoxical relationship with cultural weight is her love for Beethoven’s music. With his music, for Tomas it means weight. It represents how he is fated to be with Tereza. In the scene where he resigns, he alludes to Beethoven’s sixteenth string quartet by telling the hospital director “*Es muss sein!*,” meaning it must be (32). Kundera tells us that this is not a meaningless, or light, allusion. Instead it is Tomas recognizing his compassion for Tereza, who introduced him to the piece, and the impact she has on his life. This moment is his “difficult resolution” (32). Just by saying “*Es muss sein!*,” Tomas is giving in to the notion of fate: he is recognizing that he is fated to be with Tereza, and this adds weight to their relationship.

To Tereza, who introduced Tomas to his music, Beethoven is the key to a cultural life. She is convinced Tomas is a part of this life because Beethoven plays while she is serving him in

the restaurant. For her, Beethoven, similar to books, has light and weighty meanings. It is light because it is an escape to a life she wants to have, one where reading is the norm and there are opportunities for culture. It is also weighty because she recognizes this coincidence as a message from fate; she sees it as one of the fortuities bringing them together. Another layer of paradox is added to Beethoven's music's meaning when Kundera tells us that Beethoven believed that weight was positive, unlike Parmenides' theory.

Beethoven sees weighty things as having value, and therefore being good. "*Es muss sein!*" was born as a joke. Beethoven was owed fifty florins by Dembscher and when he reminds him of the debt, Dembscher replies "*Muss es sein?*" and Beethoven replied, "*Es muss sein!*" (195). Then, when Beethoven is using the statement in his quartet, "*Es muss sein!*" acquires "a much more solemn tone; they seemed to issue directly from the lips of fate" (195). Kundera tells us that German is "a language of *heavy* words" and therefore "*Es muss sein!*" became heavy (195). By revealing to us, later in the novel after the term had already been introduced, that "*Es muss sein!*" was originally a joke, Kundera is reversing our weighted reading of it to a light one. Then by telling us that it evolved into a heavy word for Beethoven he further subverts our reading. He is giving us this paradox to emphasize our divorce from having decisive meanings to concepts. This is another example of deconstruction. The context in which we read "*Es muss sein!*" is essential to its meaning. Even after learning that it was a joke to Beethoven (meaning that Tomas interpreted it incorrectly), we still read it as a weighted sentiment for Tomas given his personal context and relationship with Tereza. By having Tomas, Tereza, and Beethoven give different meanings to the interpretation of music, Kundera is showing readers the ambiguity of language and how it is futile to definitively say that a moment holds the same value in every

character's life. Derrida's theory of deconstruction is working here to help Kundera show how the values we have placed on these words are not as concrete as we think.

The paradox of "*Es muss sein!*" is elaborated on by John O'Brien in his book *Milan Kundera & Feminism*. He argues that Kundera reverses the meaning later on in order to present how the motif can suggest "two opposite but equally plausible interpretations, a kind of 'double exposure,'" (112). By showing that something can "simultaneously express both heaviness and lightness, Kundera offers a paradigm that counters Tomas's either/or instincts with a double vision that denies the separability of the lightness/weight opposition in the first place" (112). This duality of meaning relates to our previous analysis of Tereza, how there is more of a combination of lightness, weight, soul, and body in her story, instead of what Tomas sees as clear weight.

Tomas's inability to recognize the nuances of Tereza's life is because his "perception of women lies so strictly within this framework of either/or oppositional extremes" (O'Brien, 109). This oppositional thinking leads him to believe that "Tereza and Sabina represented the two poles of his life, separate and irreconcilable, yet equally appealing" (Kundera, 28). Of course, he assigns weight to his relationship with Tereza and sees his relationship with Sabina as light. But what he does not recognize is that this oversimplification negatively affects his relationship with both women. He cannot see them as having both light and weight aspects, his either/or thinking gets in the way. After reading both women's sections, it is clear how "Kundera shows that the lives of these two women are not defined as much by oppositional extremes as by the struggle with and against *both* lightness and weight" (O'Brien, 111). Tereza and Sabina grapple with their own definitions of the two terms, as well as the terms which define their sections. Kundera

begins with Tomas's section and establishes light and weight as central themes, but "then he deconstructs the opposition by shifting the perspective of the women" in their sections (O'Brien, 111). Kundera uses his female characters to show how the values we place on language, in the form of motifs, can be deconstructed and have paradoxical meanings.

Another example of this paradox in the futility of definition and understanding is how the end of both Tomas's and Tereza's first parts is the same event, but we get entirely different views of it. After Tomas returns to Prague to be with Tereza, as mentioned before this is because he recognizes that he feels compassion for her, he regrets his decision. He gets a stomach ache, which is a recurring symptom of his stress and despair (35). He is recognizing that he is back in the cycle of weight which will always be connected to Tereza. For Tereza, his return has "cured her of her depression and imbued her with a new will to live... There were tears in her eyes, and she was unutterably happy to hear him breathing at her side" (78). Tomas being back has brought light and happiness to her life. These endings are paralleled to show that the same moment can have different weights and interpretations. This seems obvious to us but Kundera is using parts like these to counter Nietzsche and Parmenides' theories which have fixed definitions for "light" and "weight." This could also be seen as an example of *différance*. This event, Tomas's return to Prague, gets its meaning once we look beyond the event and see how it affects each character through their reactions. The majority of moments in their relationship can be used as examples of *différance*, given that their reactions are usually on opposite ends of the emotional spectrum.

I mentioned previously how an aspect of deconstruction is that we can never know the definition because we will never have the full context. Tomas will never know the true meanings of the heavy suitcase and the book to Tereza because he does not have her personal context.

Even if he did ask her and she explained it to him, how could the context and meaning be fully conveyed given how the language they use is being constantly deconstructed? And, to bring my theory on Kundera into it, both of their personal contexts cannot be the same or be interpreted the same way because the value systems they have placed on language are not the same. To further deconstruct and complicate things, we as readers understand the characters in different ways than Kundera has presented them to us given our personal contexts. As mentioned before, I do not believe that either Derrida or Kundera believe this is a negative situation to be in. Derrida would say it is in an inevitable one, given the obscurity of meaning and language. For Kundera, it is necessary to have this confusion and contradiction to show how the value systems we place on things should not be fixed, that they are capable of change depending on the person and the context.

2.4 Sabina Through the Binaries of Light and Weight

Sabina's thinking towards sexual and romantic entanglements is similar to that of Tomas. Sabina privileges the privacy of her affairs, and in the same way as Tomas, she feels that "once her love had been publicized, it would gain weight, become a burden" (115). When Franz confirms to his wife that he has been having an affair, Sabina decides that their relationship no longer has the same meaning for her. She recognizes that she would now have to take his wife's place in the marital bed and "she would be forced to playact before them all; instead of being Sabina, she would have to act the role of Sabina, decide how best to act the role" (115). This would be a betrayal to herself, for it is far from the life she lives and enjoys. As stated before, betrayal meant going off into the unknown. And so, when she makes love to Franz for the last time, "she heard the golden horn of betrayal beckoning her in the distance, and she knew she

would not hold out. She senses an expanse of freedom before her, and the boundlessness of it excited her” (116). She moves away from the weight Franz has placed on their relationship and towards the lightness of her betrayal and the unknown future.

After moving on from Franz and leaving for Paris, Sabina becomes melancholic. Kundera tells us at this point, reiterating what has been said before, that “When we want to give expressions to a dramatic situation in our lives, we tend to use metaphors of heaviness. We say that something has become a great burden to us. We either bear the burden or fail and go down with it, we struggle with it, win or lose” (121). This is clear in Tomas’s situation - Tereza’s arrival is a dramatic change in his bachelor lifestyle, so he plucks weight from his memory (the heavy book and suitcase) and assigns it to the beginning of their relationship. And for Sabina, it seems clear enough that established, public relationships are burdensome. O’Brien reminds us that Kundera wants readers to recognize what Tomas does not, the oppositions that live inside the female characters. He states that Kundera “ultimately unsettles the simplicity of the initial assumptions that Sabina represents lightness and Tereza represents weight, as well as the notion that lightness and weight are ‘separate and irreconcilable,’ as Tomas believes” (O’Brien, 110). Tomas thinks that lightness and weight have clear and stable meanings, and therefore he can not differentiate between the nuances of the women in his life. For Sabina, it becomes harder to delineate which of her emotions and actions cause weight and which cause lightness. This is because “she herself knows that her life most paradoxically combines both lightness and weight” (112). We are influenced by Tomas’s reading of her as the “most unalloyed embodiment of lightness” (112), yet as we read further we can sense the inherent inconsistencies in these definitions.

To go back to the scene of her melancholy in Paris, she recognizes that her “drama was a drama not of heaviness but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being” (Kundera, 122). She feels the emptiness this most recent betrayal has left her with, while all the ones before had been an exciting new opportunity for exploring the unknown future because “they opened up new paths to new adventures of betrayal” (122). All of Sabina’s betrayals, starting with the one towards her father, led to the next. She ponders what she actually expects from the neverending betrayals. She asks, “what if that emptiness was the goal of all her betrayals,” what if it was the unbearable lightness of being she was chasing (122)? Kundera, as the narrator, interjects and provides his insight, saying that, “the thing that gives our every move meaning is always totally unknown to us. Sabina was unaware of the goal that lay behind her longing to betray. The unbearable lightness of being - was that the goal? Her departure from Geneva brought her considerably closer to it” (122). This unknowability of our innermost goals and dreams can be linked back to the deconstruction of language. If we cannot even succinctly define the terms we strive for and build our lives towards, then how can we attempt to reach them as goals? If Sabina feels emptiness after this last betrayal, and only now realizes that all her betrayals are moving towards this emptiness, that means she did not have a clear understanding of what betrayal meant to her from the beginning. Perhaps this is because of the malleability of definition and language, the influence from outside informs us to the point of confusion.

2.5 Tereza’s Soul Versus Body

In Tereza’s second part, “Soul and Body,” we realize that the words soul and body have a stronger grasp in her life than light and weight, although they are still relevant. I believe that this

is because of her aforementioned traumatic childhood causing a fixation on her body which leads to her grappling with her identity. A major moment in this part is when Tereza decides to attempt flirtation with someone other than Tomas. Her anxious relationship with her body is constantly present when she talks about Tomas, and her anxiety creeps back in when she smells another woman's groin on his hair, confirming his affair(s). She feels that her body "lacked the power to become the only body in Tomas's life" (139). When looking at her body in the mirror she fantasizes about her body morphing into someone else's and asks herself if she could ever escape the "Tereza" that she is. She answers herself saying "Even if Tereza [the new body] were completely unlike Tereza [the old body], her soul inside her would be the same and look on in amazement at what was happening to her body" (139). Her disgust with her body and its inability to keep Tomas monogamous causes her to want to "dismiss her body" and remain with Tomas as a soul, sending her body "into the world to behave as other female bodies behave with male bodies" (139). Tereza wanting to flirt is actually her wanting to experience "the lightness and amusing insignificance of physical love" that Tomas experiences (or believes he does) (143). She decides to use her body, not her soul which is reserved for Tomas, and flirt with other men.

If we were to deconstruct flirtation, to most readers, we recognize that flirtation is meant to be light and airy, the whole point is to go into it without weighty intentions. But there is an open context to flirtation which is dependent upon both the situation and the person flirting. For Tereza, she goes into flirtation giving "everyone the impression of being there for the taking," when that end goal is not what she wants (143). When she decides to go home with the engineer she flirted with, she has a strange out-of-body sexual experience with him. While her body is doing the actions, her soul is standing by, observing and not participating. And her excitement is

coming from her soul not participating, because her soul participates only when she is having sex with Tomas. She cannot send “her body out into the world, and [refuse] to take any responsibility for it” with Tomas because her soul is involved in their relationship, I would say more so than her body (154). To deconstruct the words “soul” and “body” in isolation would be arguably more challenging than with “light” and “weight.” Just trying to pin down the definition of soul would take ages, people have been arguing what a soul is and is not for hundreds of years. And body, while one may think it can be easily defined, is just as elusive. The polysemy of language is what causes this difficulty. When put into the context of the text, these terms get easier to understand. Although they still remain puzzling because our own personal contexts for them get in the way of creating a “pure” definition, or as close to “pure” as deconstruction gets us.

3. Polysemy

3.1 The Misunderstandings of Sabina and Franz

Sabina and Franz’s relationship suffers a similar fate as Tomas and Tereza’s; it becomes one of irreconcilable misunderstandings. We are introduced to Sabina in her section, Part Three, entitled “Words Misunderstood.” Not only does the title of this section perfectly encapsulate the deconstructive nature of language, but it also describes Sabina and Franz’s relationship. This section focuses on everyday miscommunications between the two. It proves that we can never one-hundred-percent know what a word means to another person, because we have not lived their life which informs their context of the language they use. For example, when someone expresses emotion by saying “I love you,” it does not mean the same thing as when you say it back. Perhaps, to you, love means a romantic companionship proved by flowers, chocolates, and spontaneity. And to someone else, love could mean showing affection in simple ways, with no

need for physical goods to express romance. With Sabina and Franz, maybe why their relationship does not read as a very passionate and emotional one is because of this disconnect in their language. They move further away from connection each time they speak because of these misunderstandings. I want to explore this concept of unknowability through an analysis of the section on fidelity and betrayal and parades.

In Chapter Three of the third part Kundera offers “A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words.” In the section on “Fidelity and Betrayal,” we learn that Franz prides himself on his fidelity. He feels that fidelity “gave a unity to lives that would otherwise splinter into thousands of split-second impressions” (91). When speaking to Sabina about his love for his mother, saying how faithful he is to her, he assumes that she will be “charmed by his ability to be faithful, that it would win her over” (91). Kundera reveals, in an expected reversal, that Sabina is much more intrigued by betrayal than fidelity. What Franz is missing here is Sabina’s personal context of why she feels this way. To her, fidelity is a reminder of her puritan father who forbade her from being with a boy whom she loved, and how he instead tried to occupy her mind with a critique of how ridiculous Picasso’s cubist art is. Sabina clung onto Picasso and his radical cubism and planned to study it at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague as a betrayal to her father, who “spent his Sundays painting away at canvases of woodland sunsets and roses in vases” (91). While to readers, and we can assume Franz, betrayal has negative connotations. Kundera recognizes this confusion, saying: “From tender youth we are told by father and teacher that betrayal is the most heinous offense imaginable. But what is betrayal? ... Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the

unknown” (91). We can see this need for the unknown in the majority of Sabina’s characterization; she always seems to be working against the grain.

Another layer of understanding that lives in her definition of betrayal is how when she studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, she is not allowed to paint like Picasso because “socialist realism” was the art movement of Communist Prague, not cubism. Because of this, “her longing to betray her father remained unsatisfied” and this delayed betrayal influenced many of her later life decisions (91). Sabina, because of her relationship with her father and with Communism, has an oppositional view towards betrayal that Franz has. All of this personal, academic, and political context defines the words “fidelity” and “betrayal” for Sabina. Given that we do not get as deep of a background to Franz’s definition of fidelity and we do not see an explanation for his definition of betrayal, we cannot get as clear of an understanding of his personal context behind these words. But, I want to stress that even with Sabina’s backstory, we as readers cannot create finite definitions out of these concepts because they are innately deconstructed.

The second section of misunderstandings in the short dictionary I want to discuss is “Parades.” Kundera gives us a bit more context for Franz’s feelings towards parades than towards betrayal and fidelity. Franz’s love for parades begins while studying in Paris. To him, parades represent the opposite of his academic life where he feels confined in libraries. The gathering of people in demonstration on the streets is a symbol of the freedom to “celebrate something, demand something, protest against something; to be out in the open, to be with others” (99). He sees Europe as “the Grand March from revolution to revolution” (99). Sabina does not feel the same fascination towards comradeship. She is forced at an early age to join the Communist Youth League by her father and therefore has to participate in the “obligatory May

Day parades [where] she could never keep in step... When the time came to sing, she never knew the words of the songs and would merely open and close her mouth. But the other girls would notice and report her. From her youth on, she hated parades” (99). Sabina details no definition or memory of parades similar to Franz’s.

Sabina’s dislike of parades probably stems from her wish to betray her father; perhaps an unwillingness to perform the Communist routine was a betrayal to both her father and her country. When questioned why she does not feel the patriotism of “the Grand March,” she replies that behind all regimes, like Communism, was “a more basic, pervasive evil,” which was “a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison” (100). Her strong personal history of relationships and views influence her reaction towards parades and marches, and given that Franz has had a completely different upbringing than her, a different image comes to mind when he thinks of parades. Franz says it himself that they live in “two different dimensions” (102). Later on, upon the news of Tereza and Tomas’s death, Sabina reminisces about the “gulf of misunderstanding” between her and Franz, the semantic river (124). She feels nostalgic and comes to the conclusion that “Perhaps if they had stayed together longer, Sabina and Franz would have begun to understand the words they used. Gradually, timorously, their vocabularies would have come together, like bashful lovers, and the music of one would have begun to intersect with the music of the other. But it was too late now” (124). Derrida would argue here that we can never fully know each other’s personal context, and we can therefore not expect and create “pure” definitions of the language we use. This is not a reason to cut oneself off from society because all conversation is hopeless. Instead, we need to actively recognize the deconstruction of language, that it is not static and changes from person to

person, day to day. I think Kundera would playfully question here if lovers are ever truly on the same wavelength. But he would also encourage readers to not despair. Rather, he would display this information as a fact of life which we must all recognize.

3.2 The Polysemy of Translation

Yet another layer of deconstruction in this novel which we have to consider is that it was not originally written in English; we are reading and analyzing a translation. Kundera wrote this book originally in Czech. He expresses the difficulties of translation in his collection of essays, *The Art of the Novel* (originally written in French). In the introduction to the sixth part of this book, "Sixty-three Words," he writes about his frustrating experiences with translators in the late 60's taking liberty with his text, and essentially rewriting his books by doing so (121). Between word changes, section removals, and other results of unfaithful translators, Kundera decides to go through and edit all foreign editions of his novels in the languages he spoke. Michelle Woods explains this issue of deconstruction and translation in her book *Translating Milan Kundera*. She argues that, "Writing as an act is a form of translation – by making a choice in placing a word in a certain context with a certain meaning, even though it may contain the trace of other meanings and possibilities of future meanings, the writer acts as a mediator of meaning in much the same way as a translator might" (Woods, 104). When Kundera uses the words "light" and "weight," for example, he is perfectly aware of the multitude of meanings that can be applied to them. Kundera not being able to know for sure if his words are going to be understood in the way he means them to be, both by the translator and then the reader, "suggests an instability of original meaning in any one language even before transferring that language into another one becomes an issue" (104). This inconsistency in language is exactly what Derrida is arguing: that language

does not exist in a closed system, and all the contexts involved influence our creation of definitions. And his translators, in the case of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Michael Henry Heim, are making the same decisive choices in the words they are using. The issue with translation is that cultural context is not transferable. It is difficult to imagine that an English translation can be entirely faithful to a Czech one, when the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts are vastly different for both authors.

As I have stated before, this is not cause to throw our hands in the air and never read a book, translated or not, again. We just have to be aware of the author and translator's relationship with language. Kundera explains this universal predicament of the novel in the chapter "Sixty-three Words," which is as a dictionary of key words in his novels. For the word "Definition" he writes:

The novel's meditative texture is supported by the armature of a few abstract terms. If I hope to avoid falling into the slough where everyone thinks he understands everything without understanding anything, not only must I select those terms with utter precision, but I must define and redefine them. (See: BETRAYAL, BORDER, FATE, LIGHTNESS, LYRICISM.) A novel is often, it seems to me, nothing but a long quest for some elusive definitions. (Kundera, 127)

Even though language can be deconstructed, Kundera attempts to bypass this by giving readers constant reminders of how he wants his characters and these "abstract terms" to be understood. This is why we get so many instances of him explaining what these terms mean to the characters. Woods recognizes this as a connecting theme in his novels, that "this instability of meaning in language is a preoccupation of Kundera's work, constantly in tension with his search for

precision and constantly exposed by the translation process” (Woods, 104-5). Kundera can only give his readers and translators so much material before they are left to their own devices to come up with definitions. He can only hope that he has given them enough material and explained the polysemic nature of language well enough that they do not fall into the “slough” by being overly confident in their pure definitions.

Conclusion

The difficulty in applying Derrida to any text is how playful he is with his theories. It is hard to give clear definition to the terms he creates because these theories are based on the insufficiency and openness of language. Deconstruction and *différance* are working to show how we cannot give strict meanings to words when they are read outside of context. And even when they are read in their context it is equally as difficult to be confident in our definitions. We encountered this with the themes of light and weight in the novel, with Tereza and Tomas’s decisions and emotions, with Sabina and Franz’s miscommunications, and Sabina’s bowler hat. By taking a closer look at the context of their situations, it becomes clearer how they define the motifs in their lives. With *différance*, an analysis of the motifs in the novel allowed a clearer definition of the term. If *différance* is based on the deferral of meaning and the openness of interpretation, then we can see how a bowler hat, a heavy book, and a heavy suitcase lend themselves to this theoretical reading. Kundera’s own central theory of the necessary re-evaluation of the value systems we place on language fits in with Derrida’s work because it asks us to take a closer look at how we use and interpret language. Both authors are asking us to question the stereotypical beliefs and definitions of language in order to understand the levels of meaning to our lives. Kundera achieves this by “focusing on the inconsistencies and paradoxes

of each act's meaning in human life" (Misurella, 60). He presents to us details of his character's lives and their inner thoughts in order to explain how erratic human connection is through these fallacies of language. As I have explained before, this does not mean we should isolate ourselves because there is no hope in creating meaningful relationships. He, and I would argue Derrida, is only asking us to question the values we place on language so as to better understand the misunderstandings we experience. Kundera is successful in this by the end of this book because he gives multiple opportunities for us to examine scenes from different points of view in order to investigate how we want to analyze them.

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