

# Desire and its Vicissitudes

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Why is the "lightness of Being" so "unbearable"? Is the "heaviness of being" any more tolerable? Is there such a thing as human being that is not a mix of both? And what business is it of psychoanalysis anyway? That is the kind of question I would like to pose in this piece.

I am making reference, of course, to Milan Kundera's 1984 novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, that Phillip Kaufmann has made into a movie which played on local screens in 1988. I speak of the novel, not the film. The film can boast of good direction, fine acting, beautiful photography and a great Janacek score, but despite some rave reviews (e.g., Pauline Kael's in *The New Yorker*) it is not for everyone's taste. Kaufmann himself tells us that he had to make a selection of possible themes—"it's like a drawing by Paul Klee taken from some literary source" (*Boston Globe*, Feb. 26, 1988). The theme he chose to emphasize was eroticism, and some may be uncomfortable with that. For my part, I am interested in the book for purely heuristic reasons, for it offers a vivid contemporary context in which to reflect on the nature of desire precisely as distinct from eroticism, and suggests certain perspectives that permit us to see how desire may be thought to function in the process of the psychoanalytic discourse.

But first, who is Milan Kundera? This 56 year old, twice-banished Czech expatriate has been writing and teaching in Paris since 1975. Son of a well-known pianist who had a special interest in Beethoven, Kundera thinks of his novels as a kind of polyphonic "counterpoint"—a mix of different styles of writing (essay, dream and disjointed narrative). His characters "are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility. . . . The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. . . . Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own "I" ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins

the secret the novel asks about." Part of that secret in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is, I suggest, the nature and vicissitudes of desire.

Kundera subtitles the book "A Lovers' Story." It tells of how four characters' lives are intertwined like the parts of a string quartet. The characters are: Tomas (a 40-year-old surgeon) who is an "epic" womaniser and remains so even after he meets, falls in love with, and even marries Tereza; Tereza (the hotel barmaid become photographer) who falls deeply in love with Tomas and, wisely or not, commits herself to him body and soul forever; Sabina (an artist), who is and remains Tomas' most understanding and empathetic mistress; Franz (a Swiss academic) who plays a minor role as sometime lover to Sabina.

The title of the book also suggests part of the secret that it asks about. "Lightness" here, as opposed to "heaviness" refers to Kundera's reading of Nietzsche's notion of eternal return:

What does this mad myth signify? Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity and beauty mean nothing. . . . [But] if every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make . . . , [whereas] the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, . . . his movements as free as they are insignificant. [Which], then, shall we choose? . . . The lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all. (3-6)

In the novel, Sabina (the artist) is the symbol of lightness, Tereza (the devoted wife) the symbol of heaviness, and the surgeon Tomas (a cross between the esthetic man and the ethical man Kierkegaard talks about in *Either/Or*) is strung out between the two. "I have been thinking about Tomas for many years," Kundera tells us, "but only in the light of these reflections did I see him clearly. I saw him standing at the window of his flat and looking across the courtyard at the opposite walls, not knowing what to do" (6). For Tereza had come into his life quite accidentally. "He had come to feel an inexplicable love for this all but complete stranger; she seemed a child to him, a child someone put in a

bulrush basket daubed with pitch and sent downstream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed" (6). But was it love? Desire? Or simply some form of hysteria? How is one to know?

Tomas was bothered by this sort of question until he realized that not knowing what he wanted was quite natural:

We can never know what we want [desire?], because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come. Was it better to be with Tereza or remain alone? There is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold. And what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself? . . . *Einmal ist keinmal*, says Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. (8)

Kundera tells us that he originally thought of entitling the book simply *The Planet of Inexperience*.<sup>1</sup>

But Tereza does come to live with Tomas. They do marry, and Tomas buys her a puppy as a wedding gift. How will they name it? After the book she was carrying when she came to him the first time in Prague, *Anna Karenina*, or rather after Anna's husband, Karenin. The dog was very affectionate with Tereza and Tomas would whisper to it: "Well done, Karenin! That's just what I wanted you for. Since I can't cope with her myself, you must help me" (24). He knew from the beginning of their marriage that he would never be faithful.

The rest of the storyline is quickly unfolded. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 changes, or seems to change, their lives. With Tereza's encouragement (it would at least break Tomas' ties with his mistresses), Tomas accepts a position as surgeon in Zurich. Sabina is in Switzerland, too, but in Geneva. In fact, Tomas and Sabina do resume their liaison, and Tereza, hurt, depressed and homesick for Prague, leaves for home alone—alone, i.e., except of Karenin. For a few days Tomas revels in his new found freedom/lightness, but then he, too, feels the tug of his love for Tereza and decides to rejoin her in Prague, realizing, when he surrenders his passport at the border, that he will never leave Czechoslovakia again.

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<sup>1</sup>Milan Kundera, "Key Words, Problem Words, Words I Love," *The New York Times Book Review*, 3/6/88, p. 24.

Back in Prague, Tomas' political past (such as it was) catches up with him. During the heady days of the Prague spring of '68 before the Russian tanks bulled their way through the Czech border, Tomas' intellectual reveries had gotten him into trouble. He was enchanted by the "child in a bulrush basket" metaphor with which he had thought of Tereza, and which he associated with other analogues, like Romulus (founder of Rome) and Oedipus (another abandoned child). Oedipus was ignorant of killing his father and marrying his mother, but when he discovered what he had done he accepted responsibility for it and dug out his eyes. This led Tomas to think that the Czech Communist leaders who claimed ignorance for what they had done in the past should nonetheless accept responsibility for it now and take Oedipus' example to heart. In a rash moment he wrote a rhetorical letter to this effect to the editor of a local paper. The letter had been innocent enough in intention but obviously a tad indiscreet, and now upon Tomas' return from Switzerland the same Czech Communist leaders were supported by Russian tanks. He was told, then, that he must retract the letter. This man who could not be faithful to his wife felt obliged to be faithful to his word and refused to retract. Thus he was demoted from his post as hospital surgeon to that of an attendant in an out-patient clinic, and eventually to that of a simple window-washer.

Of course Tomas had liked surgery, but now that he was relieved of the weight of responsibility it involved he delighted in the lightness of his new-found freedom. Freedom for Tomas meant womanizing and he would often drink with his clients before making love to them. Alcohol on his breath became a sure sign to Tereza of another infidelity. Finally in desperation, Tereza suggests moving away from Prague to a small village in Bohemia where (she reasoned) there simply would be no other women around. Eventually Tomas agrees. There they eke out their lives, tend Karenin (symbol of their marriage) as he dies of cancer, find simple pleasure in an occasional overnight in a nearby hotel where they would wine and dance with friends, and finally, on returning from one of these excursions, find death together when the brakes of their pickup truck give out and both are crushed under its unbearable weight.

But what has all this to do with psychoanalysis? Well, all three of the principals are interesting, but Tomas, in particular, has a real problem. To retain a limited focus I shall speak chiefly of him. Clearly he loved

Tereza, but the weight of commitment to her was, until the very end, simply too heavy to bear. He was, then, a compulsive womanizer without knowing precisely why. Add to this the fact that he claimed to be afraid of women, afraid, too, to encounter his own son from a former marriage, whom he had in effect abandoned after the divorce but who nonetheless yearned to be recognized by Tomas and kept reaching out to him through letters without a return address. For Tomas, at least, we have the right to raise the analytic question: what really was his desire?

How do we go about understanding him, then, in psychoanalytic terms. That depends, of course, upon the terms, but I shall take mine from the lexicon of Jacques Lacan. Why Lacan? Because for Europeans, at least, he is arguably the most creative force in psychoanalysis since Freud himself. If American analysts are generally more skeptical about his contribution, one reason certainly is the fact that he is so difficult to understand. But if we could understand him, he might indeed have something to teach us, or, at the very least, he might help us to rethink traditional ways of doing things in a manner that could be very stimulating. In any case, it seems to me altogether appropriate to try to understand what Lacan has to offer concerning the nature of desire.

To grasp what Lacan means by desire, we must start by recalling his fundamental thesis that the unconscious, as Freud discovered it, is "structured like a language." A close reading of Freud's early work (*The Interpretation of dreams* [1900], *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* [1901], *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* [1905]) reveals that Freud's great creative insight was into the way that language works outside of the control of conscious thought. What characterizes the experience is that there is some other dimension beyond our awareness that comes to expression in our slips of the tongue, dreams, parapraxes, etc. This is "the self's radical excentricity to itself," as Lacan puts it).<sup>2</sup> In other words, there is in human beings a center of which we are not aware, by reason of which we speak without realizing it, and therefore say more than we know.<sup>3</sup> This center is ex-centric to the center of conscious life.

In this ex-centric center there are "signifying mechanisms" by reason of which this center may legitimately be said to have "thoughts," to

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* 1 and 2 (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 171.

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, *Seminaire xx* (1972-73), (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 108.

"think."<sup>4</sup> Hence, Freud's *id* is for Lacan an "it" that thinks, that speaks (*ca pense, ca parle, c'est ca*). Lacan's word for the "it" of Freud is simply the "Other."

This Other, for Lacan, is essentially the Other of language. From Saussure's linguistics, he took, in particular, such things as the distinction between language as system of signs and speech as act, and, in signs, the distinction (and arbitrary relation between) signifying component (signifier: the speech sound) and signified component (mental concept). From Roman Jakobson he learned how signifiers relate to each other either by contiguity, thus grounding metonymy (e.g., Tereza's puppy is named "Karenin" by metonymy), or by a principle of substitution, thus grounding metaphor (e.g., Tereza seemed "a child someone had put in a bulrush basked daubed with pitch and sent downstream for Thomas to fetch at the riverbank"). Putting it all together, Lacan was able to argue that the laws Freud discovered to be governing the formation of dreams were essentially laws of language; what Freud called "displacement" was essentially the movement of metonymy; what he called "condensation" had essentially the form of metaphor. Thus the laws that govern the unconscious are the laws that govern language. For example, Kundera tells us that Tereza's jealousy, tamed by day, "burst forth all the more savagely in her dreams, each of which ended in a wail [that Tomas] could silence only by walking her. . . . For example, she repeatedly dreamed of cats jumping at her face and digging their claws into her skin. We need not look for an interpretation: in Czech slang the word "cat" means a pretty woman. Tereza saw herself threatened by women, all women. All women were potential mistresses for Tomas, and she feared them all" (18). Here we have a dream in the form of the classic rebus of Freud. You can see, at least, how Lacan arrived at the thesis: "the unconscious is structured like a language."

The Other of language, conceived in this way, manifests what Lacan calls "the symbolic order." Because of its constancy and universality, he also calls it "Law," and since one function of fatherhood is to establish law, the symbolic order becomes "the Law of the Father," where "Father" is understood as the "Dead Father" of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. But it is not just an abstract Law. Rather, it is embodied in the

<sup>4</sup>*Ecrits*, pp. 165-166.

concrete conditions of human history and culture, both individual and collective. An infant is bathed in it, like amniotic fluid, from its very first moment. The turbulent events in Prague, 1968, for example, were symptomatic of an entire political and social history of Middle Europe that helped give shape to the symbolic order into which both Kundera and Tomas.

Tomas certainly had his own sense of the symbolic order, though it would not have occurred to him to call it that. For despite all his talk about "*einmal ist keinmal*" and the "planet of inexperience," he had an implicit faith in some kind of pattern of meaningfulness, however obscure, that governs the play of chance happenings in our lives. His meeting with Tereza was a case in point:

A complex neurological case *happened* to have been discovered at a hospital in Tereza's town. They called the chief surgeon of Tomas' hospital in Prague for consultation, the chief surgeon of Tomas' hospital *happened* to be suffering from sciatica, and because he could not move he sent Tomas to the provincial hospital in his place. The town had several hotels, but Tomas *happened* to be given one where Tereza was employed. He *happened* to have enough free time before his train left to stop at the hotel restaurant. Tereza *happened* to be on duty, and *happened* to be serving Tomas' table. It had taken six chance *happenings* to push Tomas towards Tereza, as if he had little inclination to go to her on his own. (35)

Their relationship, then, was the result of six improbable fortuities. "But is not an event in fact more significant and noteworthy," writes Kundera, "the greater the number of fortuities necessary to bring it about?" (48) Clearly he is presupposing some overall pattern of things that makes the significance of chance events possible:

Our day-to-day life is bombarded with fortuities or, to be more precise, with accidental meetings of people and events we call coincidences. . . . We do not even notice the great majority of such coincidences. . . . [But] human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion.

What distinguished Kundera's way of talking about a universal patterning of things is the metaphor he resorts to in order to describe it—a musical one:

[These coincidences] are composed like music. Guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence . . . into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of [that] individual's life. . . . [like the meeting of Tomas and Tereza against the background music of Beethoven]. . . . It is right to chide a man for being blind to such coincidence in his daily life. For he thereby deprives his life of a dimension of beauty. (52)

There is, then, a universal pattern that makes the significance of our lives (such as it is) possible. A religious person would speak of "the hand of God" or divine providence here. Lacan, taking the term from Levi-Strauss and conceiving it as a kind of aboriginal Logos that is particularly discernible in the structuring of language, calls it "the symbolic order." Kundera thinks of it as a law of harmonics, to which Beethoven is a special witness. Beethoven was being played in the hotel bar when Tomas and Tereza met, and for each he was identified with the other. This was especially true of the *Quartet Opus 135*. This *Quartet* had crystallized in Beethoven's mind allegedly as a musical echo to the words that popped out of a banal conversation with someone about the payment of a small debt: *Muss es sein? Es muss sein! Es muss sein!* (Must it be? It must be! It must be!) At first the words were light, taking the form of a playful canon, but when they were transformed into the theme of the final movement of *Opus 135*, they became heavy indeed. "To make the meaning of the words absolutely clear, Beethoven introduced the movement with the phrase, *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*, which is commonly translated as "the difficult resolution" (32, 195). In any case, *Es muss sein!* ("It must be!") became one of the motifs in Tomas' head that gave weight to the light-hearted celebration of chance.

So much for the Other as symbolic order, but where is the desiring subject in all this? The subject for Lacan is precisely the subject of, because subjected to, this Other. Lacan occasionally describes it as a "subject without a head" (*acephale*). "If there is an image which could represent for us the Freudian notion of the unconscious," Lacan tells us, "it is indeed that of a subject without a head, of a subject which no longer



has an *ego* . . . de-centered with regard to the *ego*, which does not belong to the *ego*. And yet it is a subject that speaks".<sup>5</sup>

Lacan takes as starting point for his conception of the ego an obvious ambiguity in Freud that became apparent in the paper "On Narcissism" (1914). There the ego, instead of being considered an agency, a substructure of the personality (as normally thought of in what has come to be called "American ego-psychology") begins to be considered a love object. Basing his own case on empirical data taken from child psychology and animal ethology, Lacan argues that sometime between the ages of six months and eighteen months the infant, fragmented by the turmoil of its anarchic urges, perceives a reflection on itself, whether in a counterpart (e.g., the mothering one) or in an actual mirror, as a form (*Gestalt*) by which it anticipates a bodily unity still to be achieved in fact. This reflected (and alienated) image becomes the ideal of eventual unity, the basis of all subsequent identification, and its citadel of defense.<sup>6</sup>

The infant, caught up in identification with its mirror image, is locked into a bipolar image of unity, i.e., in the register of what Lacan calls the imaginary. What characterizes it is its one-to-one correspondence between image and imaged. I think we find an example of this in Tereza:

Tereza tried to see herself through her body. That is why, from girlhood on, she would stand before the mirror so often. . . . It was not vanity that drew her to the mirror; It was amazement at seeing her own "I." She forgot she was looking at the instrument panel of her body mechanisms; she thought she saw her soul shining through the features of her face. She forgot that the nose was merely the nozzle of a hose that took oxygen to the lungs; she saw it as the true expression of her nature. (41)

This type of narcissism took another form in Sabina, for her preliminaries to love-making involved a long look at herself in front of a mirror, wearing an old bowler hat. Franz, at least, didn't quite under-

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<sup>5</sup>Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in The Technique of Psychoanalysis*, 1954-1955, Book II, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 200.

<sup>6</sup>*Ecrits*, pp. 1-7.

stand, and the first time it happened, when he thought that the caper had gone on long enough, "he gently took the brim of the bowler hat between two fingers, lifted it off Sabina's head with a smile, and laid it back on the wig stand. It was as though he were erasing the mustache a naughty child had drawn on a picture of [the Mona Lisa]" (85). It would be different with Tomas, but for the moment let us just notice the imaginary character of Sabina's narcissism.

I have spoken about Lacan's categories of the symbolic and the imaginary, but there is a third one, equally essential to his conception of the desiring subject, that he calls the "real." The real is not "reality," for "reality" is already structured by the imaginary and the symbolic, whereas the real is not yet captured by any form of representation. The real is the impossible, i.e., the impossible to symbolize, impossible to image—like the holocaust, or the undiscovered reaches of science, or perhaps that place where we encounter God. In the novel, we get a sense of the real when the Russian invasion erupts. For example: Dubcek, as head of an independent state, had been arrested by foreign soldiers on his own soil, held for four days in the Ukranian mountains, told he was to be executed, then shipped to Moscow, told to bathe, shave and consider himself head of state once more, then placed at a table opposite Brezhnev and forced to comply.

He returned humiliated, to address his humiliated nation. He was so humiliated he could not even speak. Tereza would never forget those awful pauses in the middle of his sentences. Was he that exhausted? Ill? Had they drugged him? Or was it only despair? If nothing was to remain of Dubcek, then at least those awful long pauses when he seemed unable to breathe, when he gasped for air before a whole nation glued to its radios, at least those pauses would remain. Those pauses contained all the horror that had befallen their country. (72).

The real is what lurks in those voiceless pauses of Dubcek. At any rate, the real combines with the symbolic and the imaginary in psychoanalysis to form a knot—a "Borromean" knot—so that if one element is missing, the whole knot falls apart.

Given these categories, how does the subject—and its desire—emerge? We have some idea of this from the way Lacan interprets Freud's famous anecdote of his grandchild, who, with the "oh" and *da* of the *fort da* ("away"-"here") experience of making a toy reel disappear and

return, plays the game of making his mother disappear and return. What is striking in this for Lacan is not the fact that by this game of substituting a toy reel for his mother the child learns to control his libidinal urges, but that through the exercise of these primitive phonemes the child discovers the marvelous secret that what is absent can be rendered present through signifiers, for he thereby enters into the symbolic order. Up to now he has experienced himself as "me" (as object). Now at last he is able to say "I" (as subject).

But this is also the moment when desire emerges. From the very beginning, the infant has been caught up with the mother in an imaginary totality in which the mother is the infant's All. But with the *fort-da* experience, that imaginary union is ruptured, and this rupture is the infant's first bitter experience of finitude, its loss of imagined wholeness, its lack of being—its *manque à être*. This lack is a "want" (*manque*) of being, a want-to-be, and this wanting of the lost object is what Lacan understands by "desire." Desire, then, differs from "need," a purely physical requirement; it differs, too, from "demand" (*demande*: "petition," "request"), which is always specific, articulated in words and, for Lacan, implies a request for love from some other subject. Desire is what remains lacking after need and demand are met. Do you remember the old Peggy Lee song, "Is that all there is?"? Such is the signature of desire.

Now the symbol of desire for Lacan is the phallus (for understandable, historico-cultural reasons), but on the imaginary level of union with the mother it is thought of as a "copula." In the words of Serge Leclaire, "it is even, one might say the hyphen [*trait d'union*] [that unites them]; the phallus is the signifier of the impossible identity" with the mother (cited in Lemaire, p. 145). But when the imagined union with the mother is severed, the imaginary phallus is cut off—and this is what Lacan understands by "castration." It is the radical sign of finitude upon the child, a wound that never heals, indeed a mark of death—and Lacan relies upon Heidegger's language to articulate it. "This limit is death—not as the eventual coming-to-term of the life of the individual, nor as the empirical certainty of the subject, but, as Heidegger's formula puts it, as that 'possibility which is one's ownmost, unconditional, unsurpassable, certain and as such indeterminable (*unüberholdare*),' [possibility] for the subject—'subject' understood as meaning the sub-

ject defined by its historicity" (1966, p. 103). The subject enters into the symbolic order, then, bearing this unhealable wound and Lacan writes it by putting a bar/slash through the letter "S," referring to it henceforth as the "barred/slashed" subject. Call being "heavy," call it "light"—being human means being castrated, that is the simple ineluctable fact.

The subject of desire is slashed, then, and bears the scar of castration. The scar will mark every effort of the subject to retrieve its lost object, an effort that will be mediated by the demands of the symbolic order which will henceforth filter its action. The model that Lacan suggests here is that of the Hegelian dialectic of desire, where the subject seeks to restore its lost fullness by desiring to be the desired of the mother. We get a sense, then, of what Lacan means by saying that desire in a human being is desire of the Other: it is desire of the Other (objective genitive), because the subject desires to be the desired of the Other; it is desire of the Other (subjective genitive), because the Other is the subject's ex-centric center, determining the subject through signifying chains. In any case, desire can never be satisfied, for it bears the sign of human finitude—the indelible marl of castration.

What, then, is it that desire seeks, the object that "causes" desire? Lacan conceives this object as that which falls away when the infant is separated from the mother. He studies it in terms of a notion he finds in Freud but has been generally ignored by Freudian scholarship, i.e., *das Ding* ("the thing"). He makes such of it in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960), Here we can settle for the results of the analysis: the object that causes desire is, in effect, a little piece of the real, so to speak, that cannot be symbolized (though signifying chains will become intertwined around it), nor can it be imaged (though it will become the magnetic pole of all phantasms). The best we can do is designate it by an algebraic symbol, and Lacan suggests the lower-case letter "a" for *autre*, meaning the "other" of all objects. In French this becomes *l'objet petit a*, which eventually gains the sense for Lacan of a consecrated formula. This does not translate well into "little o object," so I suggest we call it by a more recognizably algebraic name: object *alpha*. The poignancy of the analytic enterprise, then, is to discover that object *alpha*, cause of desire, is in fact the "thing" that is no-thing.

All this becomes clearer, I think, if we examine the business of the bowler hat. After Franz left:

Sabina was now by herself. She went back to the mirror, still in her underwear. She put the bowler hat back on her head and had a long look at herself. She was amazed at the number of years she had spent pursuing one lost moment.

Once, during a visit to her studio many years before, the bowler hat had caught Tomas's fancy. He had set it on his head and looked at himself in the large mirror which . . . leaned against the wall. He wanted to see what he would have looked like as a nineteenth-century mayor. When Sabina started undressing, he put the hat on her head. 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. . . .

. . . A moment before, the hat on her head had seemed nothing but a joke. . . . But suddenly the . . . bowler hat no longer signified a joke; it signified violence; violence against Sabina, against her dignity as a woman . . . The lingerie enhanced the charm of her femininity while the hard masculine hat denied it, violated and ridiculed it. The fact that Tomas stood beside her fully dressed meant that the essence of what they both saw was far from good clean fun; . . . it was humiliation. But instead of spurning it, she proudly, provocatively played it for all it was worth, as if submitting of her own will to public rape; and suddenly she pulled Tomas down to the floor. The bowler hat rolled under the table, and [they made love] at the foot of the mirror.

But let us return to the bowler hat:

First, it was a vague reminder of a forgotten grandfather, the mayor of a small Bohemian town during the nineteenth century.

Second, it was a memento to her father. After the funeral her brother appropriated all their parents' property, and she, refusing out of sovereign contempt to fight for her rights, announced sarcastically that she was taking the bowler hat as her sole inheritance.

Third, it was a prop for her love games with Tomas.

Fourth, it was a sign of her originality, which she consciously cultivated. She could not take much with her when she emigrated, and

taking this bulky, impractical thing meant giving up other, more practical ones.

Fifth, now that she was abroad, the hat was a sentimental object. When she went to visit Tomas in Zurich, she took it along and had it on her head when he opened the hotel-room door. But then something she had not reckoned with happened: the hat, no longer jaunty or sexy, turned into a monument to time past. They were both touched. . . . This was no occasion for obscene games. For this meeting was not a continuation of time, a hymn to their common past, a sentimental summary of an unsentimental story that was disappearing in the distance.

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. I might call it Heraclitus' ("You can't step twice into the same river") riverbed: the bowler hat was a bed through which each time the same object would give rise to a new meaning, though all the former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like a parade of echoes) together with the new one. Each new experience would resound, each time enriching the harmony. 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 . . . grandfather, who lived in a century without airplanes and cars, [and of the father who betrayed her by suiciding after the mother's death].

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.

And so when she put on the bowler hat in his presence, Franz felt uncomfortable, as if someone had spoken to him in a language he did not know. It was neither obscene nor sentimental, merely an incomprehensible gesture. What made him feel uncomfortable was its very lack of meaning (86-89).

Notice here that the bowler hat had meaning that was spun out in a chain of signifiers through which the desire of Sabina was mediated. It was profoundly inscribed, then, in the symbolic order. But at the same

time it served as an object that, crystallizing all images, polarized their desire. As such, it deserves the algebraic code name of object *alpha*. This is the way that symbolic and imaginary complement each other as they determine, on one hand, and motivate, on the other, the flow of desire.

There is a lot more to say about Sabina. She will survive the others and will eventually ask that her own ashes be scattered to the four winds—the ultimate consummation of the lightness of being. But to retain a limited focus, let us restrict our attention to Tomas and try to understand desire as it functions in him.

When the Swiss doctor who had brought him to Zurich was told of Tomas' decision to return home, he said: *aber muss es sein? Ja, ja* said Tomas, *Es muss sein, es muss sein!* But no sooner had he crossed the border of Czechoslovakia than he began to wonder whether it actually did have to be, given the absurd fortuities that let him to Tereza in the first place. Even so:

[Did] that mean his life lacked any "*Es muss sein!*," any overriding necessity? In my opinion [writes Kundera], it did have one. But it was not love, it was his profession. He had come to medicine not by coincidence or calculation but by a deep inner desire.

Insofar as it is possible to divide people into categories, the surest criterion is the deep-seated desires that orient them to one or another lifelong activity. . . . A doctor [for example] is one who consents to spend his life involved with human bodies and all that they entail. . . .

Surgery takes the basic imperative of the medical profession to its outermost border, where the human makes contact with the divine. . . . When Tomas first positioned the scalpel on the skin of a man asleep under an anesthetic, then breached the skin with a decisive incision, . . . he experienced a brief but intense feeling of blasphemy. [But] then again, that was what attracted him to it. That was the "*Es muss sein!*" rooted deep inside him, and it was implanted there not by chance, not by the chief's sciatica or by anything external [to himself].

But [eventually he would give it up. How] could he take something so much a part of him and cast it off so fast, so forcefully, and so lightly?

Could [the decision] perhaps conceal something else, something deeper that escaped his reasoning? (193-194).

In other words, was there a deeper cause of his desire—an object *alpha*—that really moved him other than his wish to play God?

Was object *alpha* for him, perhaps, the gratification of his sexual appetite? Up until he met Tereza it was a central part of his life-style. Love-making was not love, in fact it excluded love. The most that could be said for his liaisons was that they were "erotic friendships" with their own very strict rules. He would never spend a whole night with a woman. If they met at her place, he would leave when they were finished; if at his, he would drive her home after midnight; he just didn't want to wake up with someone alongside him. Of course, life could get complicated at times, but he considered his basic method flawless. "The important thing is to abide by the rule of threes," he told his friends. "Either you see a woman three times in quick succession and then never again, or you maintain relations over the years but make sure that the rendezvous are at least three weeks apart." Thus he was able to maintain long-term affairs with some lovers (e.g., Sabina) without foregoing brief divertimentos with many others at the same time. (11-12)

All this changed, of course, after meeting Tereza—though not completely. She knew of his infidelities and she would be tortured by them, particularly in her dreams from which she would awaken screaming in pain. For example, once after intercepting one of Sabina's letters, she dreamed that Tomas forced her to stand in the corner of the room and watch him make love to Sabina. "The sight of it caused Tereza intolerable suffering. Hoping to alleviate the pain, she jabbed needles under her fingernails. 'It hurt so much,' she told him when he waked her, squeezing her hands into fists as if they actually were wounded" (16). Tomas took her into his arms and comforted her until she fell asleep again, for he felt great compassion for her pain.

Was he genuinely incapable of abandoning his erotic friendships? He was. It would have torn him apart. . . . Besides, he failed to see the need. No one knew better than he how little his exploits threatened Tereza. Why then give them up? He saw no more reason for that than to deny himself soccer matches. (21-22)

After seven years of marriage, when he became a window-washer, "it was his grand holiday. He had reverted to his bachelor existence. Tereza was suddenly [for all intents and purposes] out of his life" (198) again. But:

What did he look for in [these women]? . . . Isn't love-making [on this scale] merely an eternal repetition of the same?



Not at all. There is always the small part [of it] that is unimaginable. . . . Between the approximation of the idea and the precision of reality there was a small gap of the unimaginable, and it was this hiatus that gave him no rest. . . .

What is unique about the "I" hides itself exactly in what is unimaginable about a person. All we are able to imagine is what makes everyone like everyone else. . . . The individual "I" is what differs from the common stock. . . . Using numbers, we might say that there is one-millionth part dissimilarity to nine hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine millionths parts similarity.

Tomas was obsessed by the desire to discover and appropriate that one-millionth part; he saw it as the core of his obsession. He was not obsessed with women; he was obsessed with what in each of them is unimaginable.

(Here [then] his passion for surgery and his passion for women came together. Even with his mistresses, he could never quite put down the imaginary scalpel. Since he longed to take possession of something deep inside them, he needed to slit them open.) . . .

So it was a desire not for pleasure (the pleasure came as . . . a bonus) but for possession of the world (slitting open the outstretched body of the world with his scalpel) that sent him in pursuit of women. (199-200)

He was, then, according to Kundera, a womanizer of "epic" (as opposed to "lyric") proportions. The "lyric" womanizer seeks some ideal of woman and is therefore inevitably disappointed, whereas the "epic" womanizer seeks "to possess the endless variety of the objective female world" and, therefore, cannot be disappointed—he is insatiable. Tomas was obviously the "epic" type. (201)

But time takes its toll, and eventually Tomas's stomach began to act up. On one occasion, the pain became so intense that he could not speak. "It occurred to him that his womanizing was also something of an *"Es muss sein!"*—an imperative enslaving him. He longed for a holiday. But for an absolute holiday, a rest from all imperatives, from all *"Es muss sein!"* If he could take a rest (a permanent rest) from the hospital operating table, then why not from the *world* operating table, the one where his imaginary scalpel opened the strongbox women use to hide their illusory one-millionth part dissimilarity.

In the middle of one of these nights, he woke up and realized to his surprise that he had been having one erotic dream after another. Then there was this one in particular that seems to me decisive:

Several . . . women were trying to wind themselves around him, but he was tired, and to extricate himself from them he opened the door leading to the next room. There, just opposite him, he saw a young woman lying on her side on a couch. . . leaning on her elbow, she looked up at him with a smile that said she had known he would come.

He went up to her. He was filled with a feeling of unutterable bliss at the thought that he had found her at last and could be there with her. . . .

But just then the dream began its slide back to reality. He found himself back in that no-man's land where we are neither asleep nor awake. He was horrified by the prospect of seeing the young woman vanish before his eyes. . . . He tried desperately to remember who she was, where he'd met her. [Was she from Prague?] Could she be from Switzerland? It took him quite some time to get it into his head that . . . she wasn't from Prague or Switzerland, that she inhabited his dream and nowhere else.

He was so upset he sat straight up in bed. . . . The woman in the dream, he thought, was unlike any he had ever met. . . . [But] she was the one he had always longed for. If a personal paradise were ever to exist for him, then in that paradise he would have to live by her side. The woman from his dream was the "*Es muss sein!*" of his love.

He suddenly recalled the famous myth from Plato's *Symposium*: People were hermaphrodites until God split them in two, and now all the halves wander the world over seeking one another. Love is the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost.

Let us suppose that such is the case. . . . Tomas' other part is the young woman he dreamed about. The trouble is, man does not find the other part of himself. Instead, he is sent a Tereza in a bulrush basket. . . .

[Tomas] tried to picture himself living in an ideal world with the young woman from the dream. He sees Tereza walking past the ideal window of their ideal house. She is alone and stops to look in at him with an infinitely sad expression in her eyes. He cannot withstand her glance. Again, he feels her pain in his own heart. . . . He leaps out of the window, but she tells him bitterly to stay where he feels happy. . . . he grabs her nervous hands and presses them between his own to calm

them. And he knows that time and again he will abandon the house of his [ideal] happiness, time and again abandon his [imagined] 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. (237-239)

This is what I take to be the heart of the matter. "Tomas' other part is the young woman he dreamed about. The trouble is, man does not find the other part of himself." The notion of an aboriginal wholeness to which we can return is a myth—even for Plato it was a myth. Transposed into these psychoanalytic terms, it becomes the phantasy of some primal union with the mother that was never anything but imaginary. As real, it is nothing more than the always already irretrievably lost object. The fact that "man does not find the other part of himself" is exactly what Lacan, for his own reasons, means by saying "*qu'il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*": that there is no rapport (i.e., perfect complementarity/harmony) between the sexes—one more testimony to castration. If Tomas has really understood this, he has discovered the secret of object *alpha* and the real meaning of desire. That is why, I suspect, he could make peace with incompleteness and frustration—even call himself "happy," despite the growing stomach pains—when he and Tereza finally decided to eke out their lives in the Bohemian countryside.

Of course that leaves us with a problem or two that it's only fair to mention by way of conclusion.

1. First there is the philosophical problem. Though Lacan himself renounces all philosophical claims, that does not dispense us from the obligation of asking how are we to conceive the structure of human beings in such a way as to account for categories like symbolic, imaginary and real, and, more pertinently tonight, the structure of desire as desire of the Other. Paul Ricoeur has made recourse to the Hegelian paradigm in giving a philosophical reading to Freud, but I don't think that will work for Lacan. For my own part, I have tried to think the matter in Heideggerian terms and can do no more than allude to that fact now. His bravado notwithstanding, Lacan, in my judgment, can no more dismiss the Being-dimension from his thought than he can get along without "is." Moreover, if we take Being as the Other of Heidegger's thought, then we may think of human being as desire of the Other. For human being is a wanting (*Mogen*) of the Other born of

the Other's want (*Mogen*) that as such empowers (*Vermogen*) human being's power-to-be-in-want (*Seinsvermogen*) (1947, p. 196; 1954, p. 3).

2. The second problem, more pertinent for us this evening, is the psychoanalytic one: how are we to conceive the functioning of Lacan's basic categories in actual psychoanalytic discourse? The task of analysis is to provide the analysand with space (and time) to talk through rather than walk through the kind of quest for object *alpha* that Tomas eventually lived out. This means that the analyst listens to the patient's discourse about Beethoven, puppy dogs and bowler hats as essentially the metonymy of his/her desire. Thus, the Lacanian analyst is inclined to understand differently than ego-psychologists are prone to do the Freudian formula: *Wo es war soll Ich werden* (normally translated "Where id was, there must ego come to be"). The sense for Lacan is: "Where it (*Es*) [i.e., the Other of language] was, there I (*Ich*) [as desiring subject through which language speaks, distinct from "ego" as objectified, reflecting image] must come to be [aware of It (the Other) speaking in/as me.]" In the analytic situation, this comes to pass by the analyst taking the place of the Other and listening to the discourse of the patient, by attending to the patient's slips, dreams, parapraxes, etc. and echoing them back so that the patient, too, may hear what is being said in him/her. The process takes place in conjunction with the real, of course, and always with an imaginary correlate, i.e., some accompanying affect and the cluster of phantasms that crystallize around object *alpha*. You will ask, perhaps, how this affects the way the Lacanian listens to the analysand's discourse differently from the classical analyst. In the briefest terms, the difference lies, I think, in the fact that the Lacanian, in following the course of desire, attends to (and intervenes with regard to) the signifier in its relation to other signifiers rather than to the signified as such—much as Kundera showed us how to do in talking about the bowler hat.

A brief word about transference here might help clarify all this, though it is too big a problem to be dealt with adequately at the end of a long evening. Let it suffice to say here that Lacan conceives of transference as a relation between two human beings that includes the real component of both subjects, to be sure, but takes place in both an imaginary mode and a symbolic mode. In the imaginary mode, transference, I take it, is the dyadic relationship between the ego of the analysand and the ego of the analyst, often under the rubric of affect, which is

essentially a "repetition, a new edition of an old object relationship" (Greenson, p. 152).

In the symbolic mode, however, transference consists not in the imaginary relationship between ego and ego but in the relationship between the analysand as subject of speech-mediated desire and the analyst as holding the place of the Other, attending to the discourse of the Other as it comes to pass in the analysand and helping him/her to hear it too. In the analysand's eyes the analyst is the "subject supposed to know" the meaning of what is being said. Be that as it may, it is on this level that the effective work of the Lacanian analysis is to be done. The task of the analyst is to avoid being trapped in the imaginary transference where he is experienced as no more than "a new edition of an old object relationship," or the replacement of a failed one, or taken to be a bastion of ego strength that will serve as a model for the patient's own ego to identify with and imitate. The analyst's responsibility is to acknowledge the imaginary transference as inevitable and use it only in order to transcend it by engaging the relationship between them on the level of language as metonymy of desire.

3. There is a third problem, a theological one, and we can let it be posed by Tomas' son, Simon. Though Tomas had effectively abandoned him as a child and avoided him as an adult, Simon yearned for Tomas's recognition and settled for regularly writing him letters. On the day before their final trip together, Tomas finally tells Tereza about these letters. In the university Simon had dabbled in politics, but now Tomas tells us:

He believes in God and thinks that's the key. . . . If we believe in God, he claims, we can take any situation and, by means of our own behaviour, transform it into what he calls "the kingdom of God on earth." . . .

I used to think believers had a transcendental way of perceiving things that was closed to me. . . . But my son's experience proves that faith is actually quite a simple matter. He was down and out, the Catholics took him in, and before he knew it, he had faith. . . . Human decisions are terribly simple, [I guess]. (307-308)

Theologians may not find such "decisions" that simple, but let us suppose that through Simon's influence Tomas himself, having passed

through both an esthetic phase and an ethical phase, might be moved to consider a "leap of faith." What kind of faith could it be that would not be unfaithful to his experience as we have conceived it. Would you look for a model in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine? But based on the structure of the *Enneads*, this implies a return to the fullness of God after the manner of a Neo-Platonic one—hardly object *alpha*! Or would you look rather to the non-Western orientation of the later Thomas Merton? To put the same question differently: if you take psychoanalysis seriously, how do you account for the mystical experience of Francis, or Teresa, of John of the Cross? This is the kind of question that Lacan poses to himself; theologians who take him seriously might do well to pose them, too.

After their conversation about Simon, Tomas and Tereza headed off with two friends for a "night on the town"—a nearby town—where, after some wining and dancing they would overnight at the local hotel. Toward the end of the evening, Tomas and Tereza were dancing to the two-piece band that was playing hit songs from sixty years earlier, and Tereza said.

"Tomas, everything bad that's happened in your life is my fault. It's my fault you ended up here, as low as you could possibly go."

"Low? What are you talking about?"

"If we had stayed in Zurich, you'd still be a surgeon."

"And you'd be a photographer."

"That's a silly comparison to make," said Tereza. "Your work meant everything to you; I don't care what I do, I can do anything. I haven't lost a thing; you've lost everything." Haven't you noticed I've been happy here, Tereza?" Tomas said.

"Happy"? What does "happy" mean here? How "happy" was he really? Analysts usually are not very optimistic about "happiness" as the goal of psychoanalysis. Freud had a famous word to say about it at the end of *Studies in Hysteria*: To patients who complained that he did nothing to change the circumstances of their lives that caused their illness, Freud replied:

No doubt fate would find it easier than I to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against unhappiness.

Lacan is not any more sanguine than Freud in the matter. "Happy" for Tomas meant, I suspect, the tranquility that comes from recognizing that the lost object is really lost and that desire is inevitably unsatisfied. It's a kind of negotiable peace with human finitude, happiness scarred by castration.

On they danced to the strains of the piano and violin. Tereza leaned her head on Tomas's shoulder. Just as she had when they flew together in the airplane through the stormclouds. She was experiencing the same odd happiness and odd sadness as then. The sadness meant: we are at the last station. The happiness [for her] meant we are together. The sadness was form, the "happiness"—their negotiated peace—content. "Happiness"—bearing the scar of castration—filled the space of sadness. (313-314)

And so, the following morning they climbed once more into their pick-up truck and headed at last for home. 