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Literature and Learning How to Live: Milan Kundera's Theory of the Novel as a Quest for Maturity

JACQUES DERRIDA'S *SPECTRES DE MARX* opens with a curious exhortation: “*Je voudrais apprendre à vivre enfin*” (13). Derrida wonders what it would mean to know how to live, *finally*: at what point in life does one know how to live, and how much time is then left to live once one actually knows how to do so? What is even more intriguing than the indefinite adverbial is the phrase itself. “Apprendre à vivre” conflates the positions of the learner (learning how to live) and the teacher (teaching how to live), thus making the source of the desired knowledge unclear. On the one hand, because learning how to live strictly by oneself and only from one’s own life is impossible—one is irrevocably tied to others and the outside world—this knowledge must come from somewhere else. Derrida suggests that it comes either from death—one’s realization and acceptance of finitude—or from someone else. Teaching and learning how to live, he argues, are a matter of “hétérodidactique” (14), because they imply something external that instructs one in the art of living. On the other hand, one never learns how to live simply by adopting some external knowledge or by following someone’s advice. It is an individual type of knowledge acquired only by living. Learning how to live takes place neither solely in oneself and the immanence of one’s life, nor somewhere else and by implementing someone else’s wisdom. Learning how to live happens within one’s own life when, with some external assistance, one reflects on one’s life, thereby turning it into a practice in which self-fashioning and formation by external forces coincide.

The role of literature in the practice of teaching and learning how to live is not immediately apparent. Although literary fictions have frequently served as a privileged site of heterodidactics, equally often they have been a means of instruction incompatible with self-fashioning. For the politically committed literary critics of the past three decades, the issue of the role of literary fictions in teaching and

learning how to live has been in itself uninteresting. Its relevance was limited to showing that literary knowledge is always ideologically conditioned because it promotes specific sets of values. For the less politically determined scholars this issue has been unattractive as well, because it is simultaneously too elusive and too presumptuous: because one is always learning how to live but never knows definitively how to do so, one is never in a position of being able to teach it to someone else.

In recent years, however, many critics once again have begun to ask why literature matters and what kind of knowledge it imparts. Harold Bloom, for example, reminds us that “the deepest motive for reading has to be the quest for wisdom [on how to live]” because no knowledge is “so hard to acquire as the knowledge of how to live life well” (*Where Shall Wisdom Be Found* 101, 137). Even critics who do not share Bloom’s conservative stance on socially engaged approaches and his antipathy toward conceptions of reading that emphasize a clear social purpose have urged us to revisit the question of literary knowledge. Rita Felski, for instance, points out that this question is important because literary knowledge gives us neither something entirely new and unknown, nor a mere confirmation of our ideas and reiteration of what we already knew. Literary knowledge concerns what Felski calls “the becoming known” (25), a nascent form of knowledge that emerges as a result of the process of accentuating or renewing something we might have intuitively sensed and thought about for some time, but only in a semi-conscious and dispersed fashion. Literary fictions are not only vehicles of propositional knowledge and normative precepts, but, as Joshua Landy argues, also a formative medium that hones our thinking, reasoning, and judgment-formation (*How to Do Things with Fictions* 184). Instead of telling us what to do and which views to uphold, fictions stimulate and refine our cognitive, affective, and imaginative faculties, especially when it comes to complex and uncertain situations. As Bloom observes, when we encounter fictional characters, we “metamorphose into a provisional acceptance that sets aside moral judgment” (*Anatomy of Influence* 20–21). This opening is more than empathy or identification. It concerns an imaginative understanding of literary characters and the freedom of consciousness they display that serves as a seed of desire to achieve the same freedom of consciousness for ourselves. By prompting our mental faculties, literary fictions bolster our freedom and galvanize the process of our self-formation.

This emphasis on self-formation and fostering of faculties among contemporary scholars of very different persuasions does, however, undermine the argument that literary fictions advance moral improvement. Such a view has had a long tradition in literary studies. Mark William Roche, for example, claims that fictions, and novels above all, inspire moral improvement by conveying concrete rules of conduct that readers accept as part of their moral code because they recognize their relevance to higher truth claims (57). Others, such as Wayne Booth, stress the novel’s ability to nurture a reader’s “moral sensitivity” (287–88), which, Martha Nussbaum adds, is an extension of that reader’s personal experiences following characters’ interactions, with the result that readers are able to empathize with what otherwise would be inaccessible (46–47). In a similar fashion, Anthony Cunningham concludes that novels help us “diagnose” and “filter” our moral experiences by “heightening our attention to what should be morally salient” (84–85).

Yet, as Joshua Landy points out, most literary texts are too complex and many-sided to serve as vehicles for delivering value-beliefs. Their sophisticated formal devices (intricate hypotaxis, antithesis, authorial irony, shifting points of view, and so on) offer training in a “figurative state of mind” (*How to Do Things with Fictions* 64)—an abstract type of thinking that involves linking separate events and disparate pieces of information—not an invitation to detect moral models (such as identifying characters as good or evil) (“Formative Fictions” 184). Moreover, not everyone reads novels to become a better person. Arguably, many of us read them to learn how to live a better life. Novels are a vital companion in the process of learning how to live because they bring into our view—more intensely than any other arena of culture, as Frank Farrell notes (11, 24)—the ways in which the world is arranged, what it means to be a human being, and what principal patterns of interacting with others determine human life.

Milan Kundera’s “métaphysique romanesque,” as François Ricard has recently dubbed Kundera’s theory and practice of the novel (“Œuvre” 50), offers an important contribution to understanding the role of novels in the process of learning how to live. Kundera admits that novels must contain relevant insights into human life, but he insists that, as a genre, the novel cannot be limited to straightforward instruction. Novels must also activate a reader’s critical faculty regarding the insights they communicate. This makes the novel a catalyst in a process at the end of which the insights that individual readers attain vary from case to case and often include each reader’s self-knowledge and beliefs. The reason that Kundera’s argument has been largely overlooked is his old-fashioned discourse: he formulates the question of what the novel teaches us and what we can learn from it as a question involving one’s maturity and ability to overcome what he calls the “lyrical” attitude to life. This terminology, which is reminiscent of the Arnoldian understanding of literature as a place of mature wisdom, seems disconnected from contemporary criticism—apart, perhaps, from Bloom. However, a close look at Kundera’s texts reveals that his notions regarding maturity and the novel’s role in promoting it are not pedagogies involving a moral code or instructions in correct values.

In Kundera’s theory and practice of the novel, maturity often appears as an unspoken antithesis to immaturity, which in turn manifests itself via the proxy of a “lyrical age,” a period of inexperience and a perspective on life that is lacking in critical insight: “l’âge où l’individu, concentré presque exclusivement sur lui-même, est incapable de voir, de comprendre, de juger lucidement le monde autour de lui” (*Le Rideau* 106; “the age when the individual, focused almost exclusively on himself, is unable to see, to comprehend, to judge clearly the world around him,” *The Curtain* 88).¹ The lyrical age is the time when individuals exhaust themselves in endless self-contemplations because they are a mystery to themselves (Kundera, “Interview” 142), and the predicament of this period is encapsulated in the formula “life is elsewhere,” itself the title of a Kundera novel, *Život je jinde*, in which the protagonist, Jaromil, finds that the exuberance, fullness, and vitality of life is always missing. Moreover, in the lyrical age, disappointments are inevitable and

¹ Citations from Milan Kundera’s essays will be given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as follows: AR (*L’Art du roman*), AN (*The Art of the Novel*), TT (*Les Testaments trahis*), TB (*Testaments Betrayed*), RD (*Le Rideau*), CR (*The Curtain*), RC (*Une Rencontre*), EN (*Encounter*).

changes of strategies for seizing the missing fullness of life ineffectual. Thus, when Jaromil turns away from Modernist poetry to become a Revolutionary poet, he encounters the same emptiness and disillusionment. He remains locked within the same lyrical self-involvement—never finding what he is looking for, but continuing to be unwavering in his convictions and always sure of himself.

As *Život je jinde* shows, the lyrical age is more than a period in an individual's life. It is an attitude toward life that, irrespective of age, wishes to reclaim experience in its totality. Nor is this lyricism a consequence of modernity. For Kundera, lyricism is an integral part of the human condition, an outcome of basic processes that take place in the human psyche, irrespective of the historical era. Peter Steiner observes that in his novels Kundera usually links these processes to a character's longing for stability, predictability, and harmony (208). What is less apparent in these novels is the driving force behind these manifestations of the lyrical attitude to life. The source of lyricism—as well as its spectral presence and constant menace—is the fear of insecurity and the ensuing desire to be acknowledged and loved. Satirized most biting through the character of Madame Raphaël in *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*), a woman who strives throughout her life to belong to something larger—the church, the party, the political opposition, the pro-abortion movement and later the anti-abortion movement, a teaching profession that makes possible motherly bonding with her students—lyricism is the pathos of yearning for recognition and acceptance, both by others and oneself.

Although Kundera does not systematically analyze and separate the different mental operations that are utilized in the lyrical attitude to reality, there are essentially three types. The first is the imaginary judge for whom we often perform our actions in order to receive a positive evaluation. As Kundera confesses, even his celebrated political rebellion in communist Czechoslovakia was not immune to this form of playacting. Because he believed in the eventual overthrow of the regime, his rebellion was, at least in part, fueled by his moral satisfaction and performed, as he admits, for “I’invisible tribunal” (TT 258; “the invisible tribunal,” TB 221) that appreciated his actions. The second operation resembles the first, but the roles are reversed. One now becomes the judge of others. Kundera illustrates the pervasiveness of this “technique de la culpabilisation” (AR 137; “technique of culpabilization,” AN 110) with a story about a friend who, when imprisoned by the communist government on false charges, managed to resist the common practice of accepting the accusation and searching within for anything that might provide corroboration. But she then subjected her son to a similar trial, in which, after she had accused him of failing her, he accepted the verdict and identified his oversleeping as a proof that he lacked the self-discipline cherished by his mother (AR 135–37; AN 108–09). As in the first case, the goal here is to receive acknowledgment, acceptance, and respect. The third mental operation is reliance on symbolic thinking. Referring to a scene in Hermann Broch's *Die Schlafwandler* (*The Sleepwalkers*) in which Pasenow decides to marry Elisabeth before seeing her and in spite of being in love with someone else, Kundera argues that Pasenow is attracted not to Elisabeth, but to the *idea* of marrying her. By succumbing to the hidden “système de la *pensée symbolique*” (AR 83; “system of *symbolic thought*,” AN 62), Pasenow links marriage to the kindness and safety of a bourgeois

family life that is irresistible to him. For Kundera, this character exemplifies how little of what we think and do in real life is a result of our decisions, and how much of it is a product of fears, conventions, and received ideas.

Although the goal of these three mental operations is to offset the feeling of insecurity, they in fact deepen our insecurity by projecting it onto the outside world, thereby turning the latter into a source of permanent dangers. New events in life appear as threats to be pacified, rendered familiar, and made predictable, rather than new experiences to be welcomed. In his novels, Kundera adds three new facets to these operations: garrulousness, self-centeredness, and self-righteousness. Marie-Claude in *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) is loud because she feels secure only when she is at the center of attention, where she basks in her confident expression of uncompromising opinions. In *Žert* (*The Joke*) Pavel similarly craves attention and, like Jaromil in *Život je jinde*, is always certain of himself and his views despite changing them drastically over time. Although some other self-righteous characters in Kundera's novels lack the pomp of Marie-Claude and Pavel—for example, Růžena in *Valčík na rozloučenou* (*Farewell Waltz*)—all of them reveal that immaturity and insecurity go hand in hand. Kundera suggests that dependence on symbols and the gaze of the other (whether oneself, others, or imaginary tribunals) leads to a life in which one lives constantly outside and ahead of oneself in an incessant and always unsatisfactory search for a safer position. The paradox of this attitude is that it exacerbates what it sets out to cure.

Maturity, on the other hand, is for Kundera a state of lucidity and self-awareness in the perception of oneself and reality. For a renowned skeptic, Kundera is surprisingly optimistic when it comes to this notion. If immaturity is an attitude to life and the world that inhibits one's ability to live, maturity is an attitude that, conversely, increases one's capacity to live in direct proportion to the level of one's independence from self-delusion. Kundera's essays identify as the main catalyst of this independence the moment one overcomes concern for how one is perceived by others. When discussing Louis-Ferdinand Céline's denunciation as a Nazi collaborator, Kundera argues that Céline's relegation to insignificance liberated him from the "auto-satisfaction qui veut se faire voir" (RC 38; "preening satisfaction," EN 24) that befalls all victors and so made him aware of the vanity of a never-ending pursuit of success and acknowledgement. Citing two lines from Céline's novel *D'un château l'autre* (*From Castle to Castle*)—"Ce qui nuit dans l'agonie des hommes c'est le tralala" ("the trouble with men's death throes is all the fuss") and "L'homme est toujours quand même en scène" (RC 37; "somehow man is always on stage," EN 23)—Kundera argues that Céline's "unimportance" made it possible for him to live a life devoid of posturing and lyrical longing for acceptance. As a result, he was able to give a voice to "*l'expérience d'une vie à laquelle on a entièrement confisqué le tralala*" (RC 38; "the experience of a life utterly devoid of fuss," EN 24).

Clearly, a life devoid of fuss—a mature life—entails a degree of privacy and solitude. But this life is not a result of resentment and bitter withdrawal from the world. As some of Kundera's characters demonstrate—most vividly Ludvík in *Žert*, and to a lesser extent Mirek in *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* and Jakub in *Valčík na rozloučenou*—the problem with resentment is that it perpetuates that which is resented. Although Ludvík sees the ruse of lyricism, his preoccupation with cynically debunking it keeps lyricism a constant in all his actions. The resentment of

immaturity is itself immature.² Maturity does not involve withdrawal or stepping into some other world, whether in order to discredit this one or to find a refuge from it; searching for another world is in fact the archetype of lyricism. If maturity is a sidestepping (Ricard 198), one “sidesteps” not into some other world or alternate reality, but into the concreteness of *this* world by leaving behind self-involved judgments and systems of interpretation that dilute that concreteness.

Curiously, there are not many examples of the mature attitude to life in Kundera’s novels. In *Žert*, Lucie would be one candidate because of her total absence of yearning for recognition. Unlike Pavel, who is self-assured and grandiloquent, but also unlike Ludvík, who is bitter and often selfish, Lucie is quiet and, despite her traumatic past, sensitive, gentle, and open to others. But Lucie lacks the inquisitiveness central to maturity, as Kundera understands it, and, as a result, does not absorb experiences and incorporate them into the trajectory of her life. As Ludvík observes, Lucie is outside of history, at a “předjazykovém, . . . němém stadiu člověka, kdy nebylo slova, kdy lidé spolu rozmlouvali způsobem drobných gest: ukázali si prstem na strom, zasmáli se, dotkli se jeden druhého” (*Žert* 76; “prelinguistic, . . . mute stage of evolution when there were no words and people communicated by simple gestures, pointing at trees, laughing, touching one another,” *The Joke* 79). Thus, although Lucie has a great capacity for immediacy because she does not rely on symbolic thought, her inability to question, probe, and reflect precludes her transformation. Another candidate might be “the man in his forties” in *Život je jinde*. However, the problem with this character is that we know very little about him, and especially about his past. He is presented as a tolerant intellectual, hedonistic lover, and kind friend, but we do not know how he has become who he is because his development is not part of the narrative. The best instance of the positive value of maturity in Kundera’s novels involves Tomas and Tereza in *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), who, after they move to the countryside, no longer seek or need approval, acceptance, and recognition from others. Tomas finally overcomes his obsession with success and sexual conquests, and Tereza dispenses with her compulsion to project an image of herself to the outside world as a strong and confident person.

For Kundera, novels play a crucial role in the passage from immaturity to maturity because they foreground the problematic nature of the human compulsion to be acknowledged, to judge, and to hide in symbolic thought. The novel is an antidote to lyricism because it examines ideas, actions, and sentiments from multiple perspectives without precipitating judgment. Asserting a classical belief that “great literature calls for a broadly developed and mature personality,” Kundera views the novel as an instance of “modern classicism” (see Chvatik 28–31) that cultivates

² It should be pointed out that Kundera’s treatment of his own period of immaturity seems to be characterized by the same resentment he criticizes in Ludvík. Although writers’ disavowals of their first literary attempts are not uncommon, Kundera has been surprisingly tenacious in dismissing his early texts as unimportant juvenilia, a dismissal that some critics have argued is disingenuous. See, especially, Milan Jungmann: “Byl jedním z myšlenkově nejvýraznějších a nejpronikavějších tvůrců, bez jeho projevů se neobešel žádný významný sjezd či konference Svazu čs. spisovatelů, na jeho články se čekalo, neboť nesmírně ovlivňovaly mínění veřejnosti” (322; He was one of the most intellectually incisive and unique artists; no important conference and convention of the Czechoslovak writers’ union could take place without his speech, and his articles were anxiously awaited, as they had an immense effect on the public opinion; my translation). An abridged translation of this essay, which does not include the cited passage, can be found in Petro 119–24.

a critical, complex, and open attitude to life and the world ("Interview" 143). The novel is "méditation perpétuelle" (AR 171; "sustained meditation," AN 139) on life and the world that "teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question" ("Afterword" 237). It is a product of the "regard lucide et désabusé" (TT 187; "lucid, unillusioned eye," TB 158) that keeps "pleinement déployé l'éventail des sentiments et des réflexions" (RC 176; "fully deployed the whole range of feeling and thought," EN 152). According to Kundera, "réflexion romanesque" (RD 88; "novelistic thinking," CR 70) relativizes everything, including itself. The novel makes the characters that carry out the various threads of its thinking hesitate, contradict themselves, and repeatedly fail (cf. Pavel 136). Unlike Homer or Virgil, who described idealized characters that function as examples of virtues, novelistic characters do not enact principles with which they identify without reserve. They are many-sided and uncertain, and require of us neither admiration nor condemnation, but understanding.

But if one goal of the novel is to demonstrate that the truth is not obvious, that not everyone has the same views and values, and that no one is exactly what they think they are (AR 194; AN 159), novels must also "nous étonner" (AR 152; "astonish us," AN 123) with their "originalité, la nouveauté, le charme" (RC 192; "originality, the newness, the charm," EN 167). Novels must at once embrace complexity, specific concrete existential insights, and innovative aesthetic forms. What is more, since the singularity of each novel's contribution stands out only in the context of other novels, it is only against the background of the historical evolution of the novel as a genre that each novel can exist as a "*valeur* que l'on peut discerner" (TT 30; "*value* capable of being discerned," TB 17). For Kundera, the history of the novel is neither a sequence of books nor a succession of triumphs over earlier works, but a creative evolution of inventions and discoveries in which each new novel places itself purposely at the end of the long chain of existential findings and formal innovations undertaken in previous novels. Kundera even remarks that our perception of a specific work of art is so firmly rooted in this historical continuity that an anachronism, such as a perfect copy of a Beethoven sonata written today by someone unaware of its prior existence, would still be perceived as preposterous (RD 17; CR 5).

Kundera's novelistic theory thus oscillates between an emphasis on the unique insights that appear in any single work that strikes us as astonishing and the importance of a historical and comparative perspective as a precondition for creating and appreciating the unique insights in individual works. This oscillation, and the dual allegiance it entails, is not without its challenges. Indeed, Kundera's argument that a novel's singularity can only be understood within a comparative—and transnational—context implies, as Michelle Slater has pointed out (925), that we read at least some of these novels in translation, a fact that inevitably compromises the singularity of the original texts' artistic and existential contribution, because a translation can never render all the nuances of the original. Similarly, Kundera's insistence on familiarity with literary history as a precondition for comprehending the discoveries made by individual novels stipulates the same familiarity with literary histories of the foreign-language novels we read; otherwise, their discoveries might go unnoticed. Kundera, however, focuses on different challenges.

There are four potential objections to Kundera's arguments regarding the role of the novel in teaching and learning how to live. The first concerns Kundera's

defense of poetry. Although he routinely denounces poetic genres and the lyrical attitude to life they induce, Kundera occasionally speaks of poetry positively. For instance, when discussing Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz as masters of novelistic writing, Kundera describes them as “*poètes du roman*” (RD 66; “*poets of the novel*,” CR 51). However, this reference to novelistic poetry is not a defense of the lyrical stance that Kundera so vehemently criticizes elsewhere. The poetry of the novel is “*antilyrique, antiromantique, sceptique, critique*” (AR 172; “*antilyrical, antiromantic, skeptical, critical*,” AN 141). Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz are poets of the novel only in the sense that they pay attention to each word; otherwise, they remain “*imperméables à toute séduction lyrique; hostiles à la transformation du roman en confession personnelle; allergiques à toute ornementation de la prose*” (RD 66; “*impervious to seduction by the lyrical; hostile to the transformation of the novel into personal confession; allergic to the ornamentalization of prose*,” CR 51).³

The second potential objection to Kundera’s novelistic theory is the emphasis on the freshness of writers’ ideas and innovation in their expression. Referring to Nietzsche’s plea that genuine thinking must be rapid in order to preserve its originality (TT 177–84; TB 149–55), Kundera argues that novels must rely on speed and dispense with conventional transitions and unnecessary details (RD 20; CR 8). He marvels at the creativity of Rabelais, Cervantes, and Fielding, and opposes the unadulterated vivacity and spontaneity of their narration to the descriptive style of writers such as Balzac. Likening the latter to “*laborieuses araignées*” (TT 188; “*spiders hard at work*,” TB 159), Kundera claims that the meticulousness of Balzac’s style dilutes his novels with artificial fillers—minute descriptions of settings, laboriously fabricated plots, and painstaking character constructions (in other words, exactly what Balzac has been celebrated for)—that kill the spontaneity of his novelistic thinking. However, Kundera also celebrates formal refinement, unhurried composition, and precision in the arrangement of ideas. Staying away from fillers, conventions, and mechanical habits does not happen automatically. It is the outcome of a focused and systematic elimination of the superfluous. Deleting, Kundera notes, requires an even greater intellectual effort than writing (“*Conversations*” 4). At moments like these, Kundera seems to suggest that unrestrained spontaneity and swiftness of thought are manifestations of haste and lack of critical fortitude, and thus susceptible to the lyricism of a narcissistic obsession with one’s own ideas. However, it is not a contradiction to advocate both slow and patient work during composition and rapid pacing in the novel itself. Kundera’s own epigrammatic style of brisk sentences, short paragraphs, and compact chapters preserves the freshness of the original thought process. At the same time, the

³ These distinctions are, however, less clear than Kundera implies. The author of *Der Tod des Vergil* (*The Death of Virgil*)—Hermann Broch—cannot be easily arrayed with novelists adverse to personal confession, and the novel itself might even be classified as an example of what Ralph Freedman has called the lyrical novel, which favors the technique of portraying theme via images and symbolic figures over the narrative focus on story, plot, sequence, and characterization (4–7). Works by Gombrowicz, and to a lesser extent Kafka and Musil, are also not obvious examples of the kind of impersonality Kundera advocates. Although Kundera would probably argue that the genre of the novel is not hostile to confession and lyrical style as literary techniques, but only to lyrical self-confessions of the author, like the disavowal of immaturity discussed in note 2, the tenacity with which Kundera expels lyricism from his account of the novel makes lyricism a constant presence and permanent threat. Moreover, this threat is not simply abstract or theoretical; Kundera’s own statements on occasion get very close to lyrical formulations.

arrangement of these short segments around the repetition of motives and variation on themes creates a refined and complex form that has no need for conventional transitions and artificial fillers.

The third objection concerns Kundera's argument about the historical evolution of art forms. Although he for the most part underscores the importance of continuity, Kundera occasionally gives a positive account of abrupt gestures that leave the legacy of one's art behind. For instance, he argues that Xenakis's music turns away "de toute de la musique européenne, de *l'ensemble de son héritage*" (RC 97; "from all of European music, from *the whole of its legacy*," EN 79) and interprets this exit positively as a beauty washed clean of sentimentality and affectivity. Yet, as I note above, for Kundera originality and tradition are not two incompatible forces. Continuity is essential to originality because something new can occur only when one does not repeat what was done before. Kundera envisions an artist who, as David James puts it (139), is "traditionally new," advancing in the spirit of invention rather than by the letter. Turning away from the legacy of one's art is a way of extending this legacy in an anxiety-of-influence-like manner that facilitates singularity. For Kundera, art, and especially the novel, is an idiosyncratic anticultural force: as a perpetual irruption of cultural conventions, the novel creates a culture of questioning and invention perpetuated by acts of novelistic discovery.

The last potential objection to Kundera's novelistic theory relates to the idea that the novel has to deal with concrete reality. Kundera criticizes novels that turn existence into a myth by throwing "le voile des lieux communs" (TT 174; "a veil of commonplaces," TB 146) over the present moment. Against this transformation of reality into symbolic meanings, he posits novelists, such as James Joyce, who try to capture reality in "sa face quotidienne, concrète, momentanée, et qui se trouve à l'opposé du mythe" (TT 158; "its daily, concrete, momentary aspect, and the opposite of myth," TB 132). Yet, elsewhere Kundera argues that Joyce's technique destroys the present moment by freezing it. Joyce's focus on the smallest possible aspects of daily reality evades the veil of myth, but the result is a reality that is too close and too raw. What we see in Joyce, Kundera declares, are atoms, not the whole (AR 41; AN 25).

Kundera thus draws attention to the novelistic technique of revealing life's crucial moments. He extols novels that foreground moments of amazement, unexpected happiness, and quiet reconciliation. In many respects, this emphasis is not a departure from Joyce and the Joycean epiphany. For Kundera, too, these moments are sudden realizations, unexpected revelations that involve our life in its entirety. Rooted in mundane circumstances that stamp reality with the kind of singularity that makes it unforgettable, these moments are instances of what Kundera calls "la beauté d'une soudaine densité de la vie" (RD 33; "the beauty of a sudden density of life," CR 19). In literary texts, these moments likewise rise out of seemingly irrelevant details. For example, when in *War and Peace* Andrei Bolkonsky looks at the surroundings of the operation room after being wounded in the battle of Borodino and an image of his childhood suddenly springs to his mind, he is filled "d'un étrange sentiment de paix et de réconciliation, d'un sentiment de bonheur qui ne le quittera plus" (TT 253; "with the strange sense of peace and reconciliation, a sense of happiness, which will stay with him," TB 217). For Kundera, it is on occasions such as this that the novel captures both the present moment in its immediacy and concreteness, as well as life in its wholeness and depth.

We have come full circle. As mentioned at the end of the discussion of the first objection, Kundera seems aware of the potential objections to his novelistic theory, and for the most part manages to resolve them. In the process, he nonetheless sometimes balances precariously on the threshold of what he passionately rejects: lyricism. For example, in the account of a scene from *War and Peace* quoted above, Kundera's description of the extraordinary moments of amazement, quiet reconciliation, and beauty of life's density sounds lyrical, not because it is vague, but because it resembles poetic clichés. But in spite of this resemblance, the fact remains that these formulations do not describe a lyricism that excludes reflection and critical thought. They are, one might say, poetic but not lyrical.

As a form of anti-lyrical poetics, a literary vehicle for fresh ideas and their unique expression, and a cultural medium that brings to our attention life in its entirety and concreteness, the novel, as Kundera theorizes it, teaches us how to be mature. This maturity is not the Bildungsroman ideal of acculturation and coming to terms with reality. Neither is it a result of accumulating functional knowledge. Novels offer something more tentative and circumspect, a something Kundera calls wisdom. He argues, somewhat tautologically, that "la sagesse du roman" (AR 192; "the wisdom of the novel," AN 158) is that a world deprived of individuality and thinking is a world "sans aucune sagesse" (AR 69; "devoid of wisdom," AN 48). The novel is a genre of maturity because it defuses the lyricism of self-involved judgments by cultivating a mature attitude to oneself and the world that involves individual thinking and critical reflection.

As Kundera's emphasis on critical thinking suggests, his conception of maturity is also not as conservative as it might initially appear. Maturity is neither a stage in life nor a superior position defined by a given set of values. One never really becomes mature, if maturity means overcoming youthful confusions and finding one's place in the world. For Kundera, this belief is untenable because as we progress with our life, the nature of what we experience changes: "depuis chaque observatoire érigé sur la ligne tracée entre la naissance et la mort, le monde apparaît différent et les attitudes de celui qui s'y arrête se transforment" (RD 165; "from each observation post standing along the line that runs from birth to death the world looks different and the attitudes of the person looking out from it change as well," CR 141). Older people are not therefore automatically more mature than younger ones. They are in fact "des enfants innocents de leur vieillesse" (AR 162; "innocent children of their old age," AN 133) because they were never old before and hence do not know how to be old. This argument finds its most radical articulation in *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, in which the narrator ponders that since we live only once, we remain in the state of permanent inexperience and can never be sure whether we are making the right choices (*Nesnesitelná* 237; *Unbearable* 222).

Kundera's refinement of the traditional concepts of maturity and wisdom does not, however, imply that maturity is an empty word and a futile notion. If we are never fully experienced, we inevitably perceive events in our life as part of the continuum from birth to death. We often, even though not always and not all of us, learn from our previous experiences. Thus, while it is true that the human condition makes both the young and the old innocent children of their respective ages, it is also true that older people are more likely to be mature in Kundera's definition of the term: free from the dependence on the recognition by others.

According to Kundera, older people tend to strive less to please or seek recognition from others because they are closer to death, “et la mort n’a ni yeux ni oreilles, il n’a pas besoin de lui plaire” (AR 187; “and death has neither eyes nor ears; it has no need to be pleased,” AN 146).

Maturity is not the final attainment of proper values, such as responsibility, calm, family, work ethic, and a practical attitude to life. It is likewise not the moment when life becomes complete. Maturity has no model, teleology, and transcendental meanings. It is a practice of reflection and a process of questioning that affirm change and openness to change. From this perspective, the traditional concepts of maturity and immaturity are in principal both versions of self-involvement and self-assurance.

For Kundera, literary fictions, and particularly the genre of the novel, are inextricably bound with the practice of maturity because they stimulate critical thought. Novels are not a social artifact, a corpus of highbrow knowledge that, Pierre Bourdieu maintains, is a particular form of fetishism with no inherent value (221). Novels are neither action nor contemplation, but, to borrow Stathis Gourgouris’s oxymoron, “theoretical praxis” (11): a staging of thought that itself, and not just the poetic language that carries it, bears elements of literariness. As Joshua Landy has pointed out, literary texts are formative as well as informative: they engage us in “arguing with Socrates in Plato (rather than just accepting his often unsupported claims); wrestling with uncertainty in Kafka (rather than just leaving it where it is); coming to a point with Mallarmé where one can hold the semantic levels in one’s mind at once (rather than just being excited at how difficult that is); or extending metaphors with Mark (rather than just seeking a “meaning” for the often obscure pronouncements)” (“Conditional Goods” 52–53). Since what literary fictions offer is irreducible to the language of denotation, this type of text contests both the traditional notion of knowledge as a register of specific truths and the apodictic way of conveying them. Readers of fictions are not passive recipients of what the text says. As Kundera’s technique of interrupting the narrative flow of his novels with long discursive passages, philosophical mediations, and commentaries on action shows, fictions call on readers to be engaged with the text and its insights. When Kundera’s narrators comment on the action, or when they revisit previously narrated events and retell them from a different perspective, they activate readers because, as Eva Le Grand (126) and Hana Píchová (111–13) have argued, they invite readers to pause, reflect, return, and compare.

Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí is a good example of this technique. In the novel, this mature attitude to life is not available to Tomas and Tereza as an option they can simply choose. It is a product of these characters’ interaction, development, and change. Similarly, this attitude is not available to readers as a directly voiced narratorial statement, but emerges as a result of an engagement with the text. In spite of the dominance of explaining over narrating in this novel, the narrator does not encourage full reliance on what he says at each given moment. He often qualifies his observations by employing tentative expressions and conjectural phrases, questions his previous interpretations, and offers counter-arguments to what he claimed earlier. By doing so, the narrator, who has been criticized for his intrusiveness and for artificially interrupting narration in favor of discursive meditations (Jungmann 337; Doctorow 1), promotes rather than hinders a reader’s active involvement with

the text. In essence, he shifts the emphasis from the forward movement of the narrative to processing its elements. As a result, the novel encourages questioning and individual reflection. Moreover, each of these responses has a value in itself, because, even in cases when it does not lead to any tangible changes in a reader's life, it influences and shapes how that reader thinks and relates to the world. *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* is a mature novel both because it describes the passage of characters from immaturity to maturity and because of the way it does so: its narrative technique promotes the same movement in its readers (see Just).

Kundera's poetics—or rather, prosaics, to echo Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson's neologism (15–31)—posits the novel as a medium that augments our ability to think, question, and, as a result, change. The novel is not a didactic tool for dispensing absolute truths, correct values, and instructions on how to act. However, it is arguably also more than just a training ground for skills. The novel, as Kundera understands it, is not only a formative medium (Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions* 184) that sharpens our faculty of reasoning and hones our skill of judgment-formation. According to Kundera, the novel is a genre that involves a certain principle of being and conducting oneself in relation to oneself, others, and the world. It is an essentially ethopoetic genre, in the sense with which Michel Foucault endowed the term *ēthopoiēsis* in his late writings: the kind of cultural product or practice that induces change in one's mode of being and transformation in one's relation to oneself and the world (227).

The novel generates the ethopoetic effect of transforming one's mode of existence by making one's change the object of deliberate fashioning. It mobilizes reflection that is both focused and multilevel. At the simplest level, the act of reading virtually any type of fictional text stimulates reflection on what the texts says—authoritative generalizations, for instance, which we consider and either accept or reject. Consider, for example, the famous opening of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1). But by leaving considerable space for a reader's personal choices and individual thoughts, the novel, as Kundera understands it, also stimulates reflection by virtue of mechanisms whose effect on readers is far different from that involved in considering what the text manifests. For example, in Proust's *Un Amour de Swann*, as Hervé Picherit has demonstrated (641–43), the narrator offers several incompatible explanations of Swann's love for Odette. A reader will likely select one as the most appropriate, only to realize after reading further that this initial selection was not determined by the presumed view of the author, but by that reader's own beliefs, desires, fears, projections, or anxieties. Kundera accomplishes the same ends in *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* by means of the narrator's modalized or conjectural expressions, his tendency to present arguments and counter-arguments, and his shifts among different viewpoints and semiotic registers of interpretation. In both of these novels, the text encourages us to reflect not only on what is said at the surface level, but also on our own responses and interpretations.

The effect of these multilevel reflections likely extends well past the time of reading. However, reflection on what is stated in a novel, what ideas come to mind when we read it, and what choices we make with respect to its communicational features and measures is not a matter of performing actions for the benefit of oth-

ers. It is an issue of a much less demanding and altruistic activity on our part. The experiences and reflections that emerge during the reading process frequently spring into our mind later. We time and again find ourselves, often unexpectedly in the midst of daily comings and goings, thinking about what we have read and contemplated earlier. These retrospective moments are more than mementoes of what we have encountered in the text or how we responded to it. They nearly always make us realize something new about the text that has significant implications for our own lives. The novel is an ethopoetic genre because the extended self-observation that follows a life-long practice of reading and rereading novels significantly shapes how we think and relate to the world.

When Cornel West declares that for him Anton Chekhov offers “the wisest” picture of the human condition, a picture that in turn inspires “wise living,” he explains his esteem for Chekhov by noting the latter’s refusal to indulge in dogmas, philosophic theodicies, and political utopias (xv–xvi). Chekhov does not present doctrines to be received and truths to be adopted. His texts teach readers how to engage in the reflection that generates change in their relation with themselves and the world. Literary fictions, and especially complex ones, inspire readers to question different modes of existence, consider other ways of living, and modify their own lives as a result. To be sure, as Michael Weston argues, novels present incompatible modes of life, conflicting visions of the human good, and irreconcilable conceptions of what a good life would look like (131). But this does not mean, as Weston concludes, that the role of the novel is to reveal the relativity of any particular idea of the human good and the incommensurability of different ways of valuing life (xix).

For Kundera, maturity is a lucid pursuit of an always different, broader, and more satisfying existence. As a process and practice, maturity is inseparable from a quest for maturity. The genre of the novel is both a catalyst and a medium of this quest. The novel is not a one-way communication directed from writers to readers, but a complex conversation in which both readers and writers—for writers, too, need to read in order to avoid repeating what was said before—are shaped by works written by others. Writers do not write good novels because prior to the act of composing they established an authentic relation with themselves, as Sartre’s theory of the novel would have it. Their relation with themselves and the world is a result of their literary practice, not its cause.

In *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida wonders if we will ever know how to live (13). Like Kundera, he does not believe that one can possess such knowledge as a positive and conclusive type of expertise. Thus, when asked in an interview two months before his death, “où en êtes-vous aujourd’hui, quant à ce désir de ‘savoir vivre’?” (where are you today with your desire to “know how to live”), Derrida admitted that he was no closer to it and that he had never learned how to live because he remained “inéducatable quant à la sagesse du savoir-mourir” (uneducatable when it comes to the wisdom of knowing how to die) (“Je suis en guerre” 12). Learning how to live, he suggests, can start only once one accepts life with everything it encompasses, including death. Like Kundera, Derrida believes that reading and writing can be instrumental to this affirmation. Texts expose readers to new ideas and unfamiliar ways of addressing them, thereby stimulating individual thinking and facilitating a more inclusive relation to everything of which life consists.

The roots of these claims run very deep. The ideas that we need to learn how to live, that we must accept everything life brings (death included), that reading and writing are helpful, and that we require both external assistance and our own reflection in this process of learning can be found in Montaigne, and most, if not all, of Montaigne's ancient sources. What this long tradition suggests is that the formation of someone who is learning how to live with the help of texts is simultaneously heterodidactic and autodidactic: at the same time a shaping by external forces and self-fashioning. If, as with Derrida, this auto-heterodidactic formation does not always lead to an acceptance of mortality, it nevertheless entails an openness to otherness, reflection, and change that, in Kundera's view, is the first step in the mature practice of learning how to live.

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