

**Milan Kundera**

***Identity***

David Hayes

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Department of French

University of Otago

New Zealand

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# Lecture 1

# 1 Short biography

## 1.1 Life

Here is a short summary of Milan Kundera's background, although it might be useful to keep in mind that the author himself, according to Jan Čulík,

guards the details of his personal life as a secret, which is, as he says "nobody's business". In doing this, he has been undoubtedly influenced by the teaching of Czech structuralism, which argues that literary texts should be perceived on their own merits, as self-contained structures of signs, without the interference of extra-literary reality. [Čulík]

Milan Kundera was born on the 1st of March, 1929 in Brno, in Moravia in what is now the Czech Republic (Kundera himself still prefers to call it Bohemia) ["Biography"]. His father Ludvík, was a musicologist and rector of Brno University.

## 1.2 Work

Milan studied musicology, film, literature and aesthetics at Charles University in Prague. As a consequence, Čulík tells us “musicological influences can be found throughout [his] work” [Čulík]. In 1952 he became lecturer of world literature at the Film Academy, meanwhile helping to edit the magazines “Literarni noviny” and “Listy”. He had joined the Communist Party in 1948, but had been expelled in 1950 for “individualistic tendencies” (officially, “anti-party activities”) along with another writer, Jan Trefulka [Čulík]. This episode provided the basis for his first novel, *The Joke*, as well as Trefulka’s novella *Happiness Rained on Them* (1962).

## 2 Kundera's works

### 2.1 Marxist works

Kundera's early plays, such as *The Owners of the Keys*, were orthodox Marxist works and considered important in the Czech literary scene at the time. However, they were progressive and contained the seeds of Kundera's later discontent with the conservative communist leadership. As Čulík says: "In [*The Owners of the Keys*] Kundera for the first time openly voiced his revulsion over 'the desire for order, which equals the desire for death'."

He subsequently wrote many articles defending the inter-war Czech avant-garde, considered decadent by the régime of the time, on strictly Marxist principles. He wrote an analysis of the writings of the Czech avant-garde novelist Vladislav Van\`v cura (*The Art of the Novel: Vladislav Van\`v cura's journey to the great epic*, 1960), in which he defends experimentation in narrative, again on Marxist principles.

It was during this analysis that Kundera developed the narrative principles that mark him out today:

Kundera realised the importance of an ever-present, subjective narrator, a philosopher, who evaluates and comments upon the

story as it develops. He rid himself of lyricism, descriptiveness and psychological analysis and became aware that good fiction must be based on dramatic conflict.[Čulík]

Although this is still a characteristic of the present work, Kundera has developed this approach to fit the psychological profile of France at the turn of the millenium.

## 2.2 Ominipresent Narrator

In *Identity*, as the title goes some way to suggest, this ever-present, subjective narrator, while still being present and critical to the narrative, is supplemented by the extremely well-developed, subjective analysis of the two protagonists. The exploration of the theme of identity is carried out in part by the use of protagonists who seem to be capable of effecting the same level of analysis as the narrator. They are therefore extremely articulate, intelligent, self-aware, and able to debate their own perceptions coherently with one another. The fact that they are nevertheless misled utterly by their circumstances and lose themselves in their own fictions can be ascribed to the problem of identity. To put it perhaps a little simplistically, their concept of self will never resemble another's concept of them, no matter how intimate the relationship. It is the fact of being a particular person and not another (and the fact of one's lover being a particular person and not another) which is the problem around which the novel turns.

## 2.3 Love and sex

In *Jacques and his Master* (a theatrical tribute to Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist*, 1796, and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) Kundera first tried out the idea of using a set of amorous intrigues to develop variations on a theme. "Kundera believes that looking at people through the prism of erotic relationships reveals much about human nature." [Čulík] Or, as Stanislaw Baranczak put it in his review of Kundera's novel *Immortality* in *The New Republic*:

Sex has always served him as a vehicle for more complex explorations or, better, as a particularly revealing model of the human self-contradiction that fascinates him most, which is our permanent suspension between the extremes of Appearance and Reality. For it is sex that provides access to the most undisputably genuine component of reality that our senses may experience, while at the same time it is nowhere but in sexual behaviour that authentic experience takes on as many illusory and artificial disguises. [Baranczak, 38]

In *Identity*, sex is used to explore the suspension of the couple between appearance and reality. As we shall see, the relationship of Chantal and Jean Marc, on both the intellectual and the physical level, is driven by appearances which take control of reality.

## 2.4 Humour

He also explored the role of humour in fiction, as Čulík states:

In the preface of the play [*Jacques and his master*], Kundera attacks the notion of "seriousness". In one of his typical, challenging, but apodictic [expressing the nature of necessary truth or absolute certainty—*Merriam-Webster*] sayings, which should not be accepted at face value, he states that "to take the world seriously means to believe what the world wants us to believe". [Čulík]

Kundera's mature work is littered with statements like the one quoted above. Such statements are paradoxes. They are both true and untrue at the same time. By making them, Kundera encourages the reader to think independently and make his own conclusions. [Čulík]

One of his novels, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, was made into a film by the American writer-director Philip Kaufmann (director & screenplay) in 1988, with Daniel Day Lewis and Juliette Binoche in major roles. The film received an Oscar nomination for best screenplay [*Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia* 1994]. The novel tells the story of an uncomfortable love triangle involving a surgeon (Tomas) who "collects" women (he is an "epic" womanizer), but who is only comfortable sleeping with his wife (Tereza), but is drawn back to his lover (Sabina).

## 2.5 List of works

### Poetry

- *Man: A Broad Garden*, 1953
- *The Last May*, 1955

- *Monologues*, 1957

## Plays

- *The Owners of the Keys*, 1962. (*Majitelé klíčů*)
- *Two Ears, Two Weddings*, 1968
- *The Blunder*, 1969.
- *Jacques and His Master*, 1981. (*Jakub a jeho pán*)

## Novels and volumes of short stories

- *The Joke*, 1965 (*Žert*)
- *Laughable Loves*, 1968 (*Směšné lásky*)
- *Life Is Elsewhere*, 1969
- *The Farewell Party* (later: *The Farewell Walz*), 1975 (French edition: *La Valse aux adieux*)
- *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1978 (*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*)
- *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1982
- *Immortality*, 1988
- *Slowness*, 1994 (*La Lenteur*)
- *Identity*, 1996 (*L'Identité*)
- *Ignorance*, 2000

## 3 The Author's approach to his work

### 3.1 The Novel

To reinforce Kundera's insistence on the predominance of the work over the image of the writer, he insists on suppressing earlier "immature" works which might reveal more of the undisguised personality of the author. Čulík suggests that this practise imitates the control of composers over their early works.

Kundera's work can be seen to have a certain self-referential quality. Čulík points out that this tendency dates from his very early work: "Kundera's afterword to the printed version of *Majitelé klíčů* [The Owners of the Keys] of 1964 shows that his . . . propensity to explain and interpret his own work to the reader dates back to this early stage of his literary career" [Čulík].

Kundera's work embodies a reverential attitude to the novel as a form. He sets it apart, since its inception, as a medium which, *par excellence*, is removed from human failings, which rises above the mob mentality. In examining Cervantes' great novel *Don Quixote*, Kundera generalizes:

Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before

he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire. . . . They require that someone be right. . .

This “either-or” encapsulates an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human, an inability to look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge. This inability makes the novel’s wisdom (the wisdom of uncertainty) hard to accept and understand.

[*Art of the Novel*, 7]

Kundera seems to accord to the novel powers of encapsulating the human experience which annihilate the prejudices of the group. This standpoint places great responsibility on the novelist, and Kundera’s own self-referential standpoint seems to reflect the consciousness of this responsibility. (It may also explain his determination to push the bounds of censorship and criticism.)

## 3.2 Architecture

The architecture of Kundera’s novels is a primary consideration for him. This attitude goes back to his musical training. In *The Art of the Novel*, he states categorically: “My novels are variants of an architecture based on the number seven” [*Art of the Novel*, 86]. He is specific: “The division of the novel into parts, parts into chapters, chapters into paragraphs—the book’s *articulation*—I want to be absolutely clear” [*Art of the Novel*, 87].

If we look at the chapter numbering in *Identity*, there are 51 chapters, with significant milestones in the plot at the beginning of Chapter 15 (the first letter to Chantal), 36 (evicting Jean-Marc), and 50 (waking up). If we treat the moment up till waking up as a whole, then we have seven sets of seven chapters (reflecting the identity of the title), with major divisions at after two,

three, and two sets of seven, plus an explanatory eighth section. We notice also that the final seventh of the possible “dream” sequence begins with the descent into the tunnel under the English Channel.

He summarizes, in the edited dialogue with Christian Salmon:

C.S.: So there are two archetype-forms in your novels: (1) polyphonic composition that brings heterogenous elements together within an architecture based on the number seven; (2) farcical, homogenous, theatrical composition that verges on the improbable.

M.K.: I dream constantly of some great unexpected fidelity. But so far I have not managed to break out of my bigamy with these two forms.

Polyphonic is an adjective which is often used in relation to Kundera’s fiction, not least by himself. It refers to the simultaneous combination of multiple melodies in music, and in Kundera’s fiction refers to the play of storylines which reflect each other and interweave throughout the work. In *Identity*, instead of the usual variety of storylines interweaving, we have only the two characters, their thoughts and actions being interpreted by themselves and reinterpreted by the other.

# Lecture 2

# 4 *Identity*

## 4.1 The Joke

The present work, like all of Kundera's novels, turns around a joke which goes wrong. We saw this already in our discussion of *The Stranger*, in relation to Kundera's first novel *The Joke*.

Once Kundera's characters start perpetrating a joke, they are invariably forced by circumstances to stick to it as though they had always meant it seriously. As Květoslav Chvatík has pointed out, this highlights the crisis of language. A linguistic message, a sign, emancipates itself from reality, imposes its meaning on it and violates it. People succumb to stereotyped conventions which negate reality. The same theme reappears in *The Joke* and all the other, mature novels by Milan Kundera. [Čulík]

In *Identity* even the joke is serious, since it has a serious motivation: Jean-Marc's real concern that Chantal thinks men don't notice her any more. He wishes to give her a secret admirer, to add something to her erotic life that he doesn't seem able to give her in person. So he writes her anonymous letters.

But it is nevertheless playful in spirit, and essentially it involves the creation of a sign which takes on a life of its own (remember the joke of the eponymous novel, written on a postcard, also represented a sign which endured longer than intended<sup>1</sup>).

Clive Sinclair has seen in *Identity* the spiritual soul-sister of the heroine of one of Kundera's early stories, "The Hitchhiking Game". "Like the anonymous hitchhiker, she too was discomforted by adolescence, a delicacy she also outgrew" [Sinclair]. In that story, the joke that goes wrong is the game in which the girl pretends to be a hitchhiker whom her lover picks up and makes love to. It goes wrong when she cannot bear the lack of intimacy which accompanies the act and which is part of the game—the pretence of not recognizing the other starts becoming real.

## 4.2 Themes

In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera defined what he understood by themes in this way:

A theme is an existential inquiry. And increasingly I realize that such an inquiry is, finally, the examination of certain words, theme-words. Which leads me to emphasize: A novel is based primarily on certain fundamental words. . . . Over the course of the novel, those five principal words are analyzed, studied, defined, redefined, and thus transformed into categories of existence. The novel is built on those few categories the way a house is built on its pillars. The pillars of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: weight, lightness, soul,

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<sup>1</sup>Remember the text of the postcard: "Optimism is the optimism of the people! The healthy atmosphere stinks! Long live Trotsky!" [*Joke*, 30]

body, the Grand March, shit, kitch, compassion, vertigo, strength, weakness. [*Art of the Novel*, 84–85]

We might propose a similar list of “pillars” for *Identity*: disappearance, misrecognition, friendship, indifference (boredom), nostalgia, novelty, age, youth, weakness, strength, dreaming, seeing, and of course the problem of identity running through the whole work.

George Steniner in his review of *Identity* focussed on the theme of seeing:

‘Seeing’ is what *Identity* is about. The entire oblique shadow-play dwells on diversities of vision. Almost every page tells of glances, of eyes focused or clouded, of notice or imperception. . .

### **4.3 Action of *Identity***

A couple are to meet at a hotel in Normandy, France. The woman, Chantal, arrives the night before her partner Jean-Marc. The opening is noticeable for its lack of introductory information on these two characters, or of the place where they meet. We have the impression we are reading a screenplay whose details have not yet been decided.

Chantal has difficulty getting served in the hotel restaurant because the two waitresses are discussing a television show about missing persons called *Lost to Sight*. Eating alone, she reflects on the difficulty of someone going missing in a world where constant surveillance is the norm, and wonders with “horror” what would happen if she lost Jean-Marc in that way.

Chantal dreams that night about people from her past: her mother, her former husband, and his new wife, who “kisses her hard on the mouth” (6). We are struck by the fact that she pictures this woman vividly although she

has never met her, and the extreme physical reaction she has to the dream (she rinses out her mouth after waking up from the dream). Chantal analyses the dream philosophically: its resurrection of the past has the “effect of nullifying the present” (6).

Chapters tend to alternate between the two protagonists from this point. Jean-Marc is visiting his old (former) friend F. in hospital in Brussels. F. describes his time in a coma during which he was aware of everything around him, as if in a vivid dream, even the doctors talking about his slim chances of survival. He thinks that after death you may still go on being aware forever. Jean-Marc is depressed but unmoved.

We learn that Jean-Marc split with his friend after he found that he had not defended him when his workmates criticised his work in his absence, leading to his losing his job. F. tells Jean-Marc of his memory of Jean-Marc talking to him about girls, and how watching a girl’s eye blink disgusted him. Jean-Marc cannot remember this, and he ponders that friendship is only there to reflect one’s memories back later in time.

The next day Chantal goes to the beach, and notices that it is mostly the men who are pushing prams and carrying babies, and playing with kites, and the women are walking alongside. She imagines trying to seduce one of these men, and getting no response. She thinks: “I live in a world where men will never turn to look at me again” (13). When she returns to the hotel, she finds that Jean-Marc has been looking for her on the beach.

Jean-Marc observes the people on the beach and thinks about his theory of different kinds of boredom: passive, active and rebellious. He recognizes Chantal from a distance (we are told clearly that he recognizes her, even though he only *thinks* he does). He imagines that she will be hit by one of the

sand-yachts on the beach. He waves and shouts at her, runs up to her, and realizes at the last moment that it is someone else—“the woman he thought was Chantal became old, ugly, pathetically other” (18).

Chantal goes to a café, where she is confronted by loud music, and a pair of men who intimidate her subtly as she tries to leave, barring her way until the last minute.

Jean-Marc returns to the hotel room and finds Chantal there. She looks older to him, and when he asks what is wrong she says, “Men don’t turn to look at me any more” (21). Questioned about this, she flushes. The flush is examined for its meaning, suspected to have to do with hidden desires. In this we see the continuation of Kundera’s preoccupation for the unconscious signals of the body, for the gesture which inescapable provides a link to a memory (cf. *Immortality*). We infer from Chantal’s thoughts that it is in fact a hot flush brought on by the onset of menopause “she will not, she cannot, speak of it” (23). It is ironic that Jean-Marc takes the flush as a sign of youthful desire “She flushes as he had not seen her flush in a long time” (21). She repeats her phrase, and he counters that he chases after her everywhere. She pushes him away when he tries to embrace her because she is ashamed of the dampness brought on by the hot flush.

Later at the restaurant they discuss Chantal’s latest ad campaign, which is for a funeral home. He quotes his boss “Thanks to advertising, everydayness has started singing” (25). Chantal says that she has two faces, a “scoffing face” for Jean-Marc and a “serious face” for the office. When hiring staff, half the time she hires people she respects, the other half people who will work well. Jean-Marc quotes Baudelaire on death. Chantal counters that life is now their religion, and mentions the name of the Hiroshima bomb, “Little

Boy”.

We find out that Chantal had had a child who had died at the age of five. She had decided to leave her then husband when he had said they should have another so she would forget. His sister had also encouraged her to have another child. She had refused to make love with her husband, changed jobs so that she would have more money, and years later, had met Jean-Marc and left her husband to move in with him (in her own apartment).

Jean-Marc dreams that he is running after Chantal, and when he catches her she is different, but he knows it's her. He wakes and finds her in the bathroom, kisses her. He picks her up from work, and they kiss awkwardly on both cheeks. He wonders if he would have loved her office face if he'd seen that one when they first met.

Jean-Marc contemplates Chantal's phrase about men not looking at her any more. He concludes that his love cannot cure her of her consciousness of her aging body, because “the gaze of love is the gaze that isolates” (36).

No, what she needs is not a loving gaze but a flood of alien, crude, lustful looks settling on her with no good will, no discrimination, no tenderness or politeness—settling on her fatefully, inescapably. Those are the looks that sustain her within human society. (36)

He remembers that she was always the weaker one in the relationship “because she was older” (37).

Chantal remembers that she used to want to be a rose fragrance that moved through men “to embrace the entire world” (37). She remembers dining by the sea with Jean-Marc and feeling “unbearable nostalgia” for him, even though he was there with her. At this point we have the first mixture of the two lovers' thoughts in one paragraph, with the parenthetical observa-

tion that Jean-Marc can explain this paradox (“if you glimpse a future where the beloved is no more” (38)). Kundera here sets up a virtual conversation, an intellectual theorising which, like the screenplay motif in the first chapter, puts the reader in the position of the narrative’s creator for a moment. This episode also provides us with another example of Kundera’s preoccupation with physical sensations affecting intellectual thoughts, or we might even say, the suggestion of the idea that our thoughts are generated almost entirely by physical processes.

This preoccupation is emphasized by Chantal’s subsequent recollection of the “wave of happiness” which “flooded over her” at the thought of her dead child (38).

This concentration of emotional analysis is deeply rooted in Kundera’s work, and the theme is sheeted home in this episode by the narrator’s comment: “But no one can do a thing about feelings, they exist and there’s no way to censor them” (38). This takes us back to the genesis of Kundera’s published work, to *The Joke*, and his preoccupation with censorship based on his own personal history and the history of his country.

Another theme is introduced in the explanation which Chantal makes to herself in order to explain this feeling: the theme of moral transgression:

The answer was clear: it meant that her presence at Jean-Marc’s side was absolute and that the reason it could be absolute was the absence of her son. She was happy that her son was dead. (39)

We see a reflection of Meursault in *The Stranger* when she experiences this feeling again, with the difference that she is aware of the way the world will see her:

She realized then that her love for Jean-Marc was a heresy, a transgression of the unwritten laws of the human community from which she was drawing apart; she realized she would have to keep secret the exorbitance of her love to avoid stirring up people's malevolent fury. (39)

Chantal receives a letter without a stamp from an anonymous man who says he has been following her and thinks she is beautiful. She reads it on the bus and imagines that everyone knows what she has read. A black man laughs at her when she stumbles on leaving the bus. Later she decides to get rid of it but only ends up flushing the envelope.

Jean-Marc informs her that his friend F. has died. He talks to her about his feeling of joy when he decided not to see him any more. Despite that we know Chantal is having the same sorts of feelings about her dead child, she tells him: "You frighten me. You really do frighten me" (42), as if she has no understanding about his feelings, and experiences them as a transgression. It is apparent that the power of society's labelling of transgression cannot even permit divulgences of understanding it between this intimate couple.

Jean-Marc philosophizes about the role of friendship as memory. He says he used to say he would choose friendship over truth, but now he would do the opposite. He talks about Dumas' three musketeers, Sancho Panza and Don Quixote, and claims that there are no friendships like that any more, because our enemies now are invisible. In the modern world, we don't ask our friends to defend us. Chantal says that nowadays real friends are the ones that do nothing when you're in trouble, instead of ganging up against you.

At Chantal's work they watch a new TV ad which mixes motherly affection

for a baby and sexual suggestion and passionate kissing. Chantal remembers her first kiss with Jean-Marc, which demonstrated “an urgency to let each other know that they were prepared to make love” (49). Chantal’s boss convinces the audience that “Only a very small minority really enjoys sex” (47) and that in the ad “the sensual imagination is titillated, but then it’s deflected into the maternal realm” (50). He even tells the audience about the filming of a foetus in the womb apparently fellating itself. Chantal thinks about the rose fragrance metaphor, and decides that the world is held together by the constant exchange of saliva.

# Lecture 3

Chantal has another hot flash as she arrives home. We have another occasion where Chantal's thoughts "leak out", as with the statement about men not looking at her any more. After thinking "The crematory fire is leaving me its visiting card" (52) in the hallway, she announces to Jean-Marc: "The crematory fire is the only way not to leave our bodies to their mercy" (52). Quickly she tells him about the foetus, and about how touched her work-mates were by the idea, but that she felt "revulsion" (53) for the fact that even in the mother's womb we have no privacy. She compares it to a peasant woman who was disinterred to disprove the lineage of a supposed nobleman, and Haydn's head, which was cut off to discover the location of his genius, and of Einstein's eyes, removed before his burial.

The next day she visits her son's grave. She talks to him, saying she accepts his death as a gift of freedom from having to care about the world.

She receives another anonymous letter. It describes following her down the street when she was with Jean-Marc, but omits to mention him. It's signed C.D.B. She ponders the meaning of the letter, and what it seems to say about her relationship with Jean-Marc. She puts it with the other one under her bras in a drawer. Just then Jean-Marc comes in:

He moves slowly towards her and looks at her as never before, his gaze unpleasantly focused, and when he is very close he takes her by the elbows, and holding her a step or so in front of him, he goes on looking at her. She is flustered by this, unable to say a thing. When her discomfiture becomes unbearable, he clasps her to him and says, laughing: 'I wanted to see your eyelid washing your cornea like a wiper washing a windscreen.' (58)

In this passage the dislocation between the couple seems to become acute.

The woman has been dealing with messages from an unknown person in private, and the man has been, as we find out in the following chapter, contemplating in private the last exchange with his dead friend (despite earlier disavowing the “mirror” he held up to him). The feelings brought up by these thoughts come into conflict unwittingly, and Jean-Marc’s odd, overintimate behaviour clashes with Chantal’s feelings of having her privacy invaded by the letters. There is a common theme in both, however: Jean-Marc contemplates the idea of the eye as the window to the soul, and Chantal has the impression that the author of the letters somehow knows more about her than she does. The irony is that Jean-Marc has created this impression in her (he is the author), but he is unaware of it when he confronts her. He is lost in his own world, as she is in hers.

He thinks about the mechanism of the eyelid, and wonders how we don’t register its constant movement. He claims we must agree to forget such mechanisms if we are to believe in a soul. He wants to reexperience now with Chantal this youthful moment before he forgot the mechanism. There is another irony in that he only knows about this “memory” through his friend F., he doesn’t actually recall it himself.

He thinks about his decision to go to medical school, and how this recollection might have stopped him. After three years of it, he remembers:

He walked down the broad outside staircase of the medical school for the last time, with the feeling that he was about to find himself alone on a platform all the trains had left. (63)

Chantal tries to work out who the author of the letter is. She asks about a man who is a regular at the local bistro, whose name (du Barreau) seems to fit the initials. She and Jean-Marc pass him in the street, and she flushes

“down to her breasts” [65] when she realizes she is wearing the red beads he complimented in his letter. Jean-Marc notices. This time she realized that her hot flashes have taught her to flush in embarrassment again like she did as an adolescent. We have the equivalence of these two life stages: middle-age and adolescence, brought about by the predominance of physiological phenomena.

She takes more and more notice of the letters. One speaks of swathing her in red, and she buys herself a red nightgown. When Jean-Marc comes home, he makes love to her “with a new, unexpected force” (67). She imagines du Barreau watching them, and it excites her. She whispers the words of the letter into his ear, and they make love again. The words echo the theme of moral transgression by implicating a religious image: the woman naked under her red crimson nightgown as the cardinal in a crowded church. The idea of the rose fragrance returns with the image of the crumpled nightgown as a rose.

The next day Chantal brings up the subject of a man Jean-Marc had dubbed Britannicus, an older English client who had courted her at the agency, who she discovered later was an “orgiast” [70]. She receives another letter, which she reads in a nearby park. It talks of life as a tree and nostalgia. She thinks about Britannicus and her youth, and on the way back home she passes du Barreau who is sitting with a glass of wine alone, and seems not to notice her as she passes right by him. She realizes he is not the author of the letters.

In a restaurant with Jean-Marc they see a couple not speaking near them, and Jean-Marc discusses his aunt who talks about every detail of her day, and the fact of time going by while she speaks. Then he talks about the memory of the sound his grandfather made when he was dying:

I would watch him, hypnotized, and I never forgot that, because, though I was only a child, something seemed to become clear to me: this is existence as such confronting time as such; and that confrontation, I understood, is named boredom. (74)

The “ahhhhh” sound was “the only weapon [his] grandfather has against time” (74–75). The element of the battle against time adds another strand to Kundera’s theme of memory in the novel.

Jean-Marc thinks that there is more boredom nowadays, because of the separation of passion from work. Here Kundera reinforces the idea of friendships which were once absolute and now are subject to compromise, with the idea of eternal compromise in one’s career.

‘... Each occupation had created its own mentality, its own way of being. A doctor would think differently from a peasant. ... Today we’re all alike, all of us bound together by our shared apathy towards our work. That very apathy has become a passion. The one great collective passion of our time.’ (75)

Jean-Marc claims that the only reason he is not bored now is that he turns everything that happens around him into “fodder” for his and Chantal’s conversations. He emphasizes: “No love can survive muteness” (76).

He talks about a beggar who stands near their apartment, whom he wants to communicate with, but he doesn’t know how to approach him. Chantal thinks that this beggar might be the author of the letters, because of the image of him standing under a tree. Jean-Marc compares himself to the beggar, claiming that giving up medical school and ambition meant he could have ended up in the beggar’s position. Chantal imagines with something like

glee that it was the beggar watching them with his hand out in their room as she made love to Jean-Marc, and that she gives him a coin afterwards.

Jean-Marc notices her smile and realizes that he is afraid of losing her, of discovering that she is not who he thought she was. He tells her about this, but is reassured by her touch, and tells her to “Forget that. I didn’t say a thing” (82). The glib expression is significant here; in a narrative where so much is unnoticed or forgotten, the exhortation to deliberately forget is laden with irony. At the same time we see the first glimpse that it is in fact he who is the author of the letters: “He saw a pile of brassieres. A sad little hill of brassieres” (82). This is the same way that Chantal has described her bras before. This is an odd parallel because it forces the reader to imagine a third person who can see the thoughts of both characters, where before we had the impression we were seeing each of their thoughts one after the other.

When Chantal next sees the beggar she goes to give him some change from her purse, but finds nothing suitable. She gives him a 200-franc note, which seems to scare him. Afterwards she realizes from his reaction that he couldn’t be the author of the letters. She is angry with herself. When she looks at the hiding-place she remembers that someone has disturbed a shawl there, and realizes that Jean-Paul has been “reading” her letters. She makes as if to destroy them all, then realizes the handwriting is familiar. Suddenly she realizes he has written them and starts to re-analyse the remarks in them together with things he has said. She concludes he is trying to trap her in order to get rid of her, because she is getting old, and he will abandon her like he did his friend F. She takes his comments about being a spy and being afraid she was someone else in this context.

Jean-Marc, on the other hand, remembers their first meeting, and how she

had flushed on seeing him the day after they met. The next time he saw her flush was on the beach when she complained about men not looking at her. His idea writing the first letter was to rid her of this sense, by saying he followed her like a spy, and she was beautiful. He imagined himself as Cyrano de Bergerac, hence the initials. He interprets her secrecy and keeping the letters as evidence that she hopes the correspondence will turn into an affair.

Chantal has doubts about whether it is really Jean-Marc who has written the letters. She compares the handwriting with some other letters of his, noticing the different slant and size. She goes to a graphologist to have it checked out. There are two men there, and one of them informs her that he does psychological profiles from handwriting, not detective work. At the mention of the police, Chantal flushes again, and more so at the word “informer” (91). But the younger man steps up and assures her that the handwriting is the same in both letters. She realized that it is the same young man from the café in Normandy, and she feels similarly claustrophobic as she leaves the office. She has the impression she is hallucinating, and that her body is growing older under his gaze.

Once again, the young man has changed position: he is at the door and opening it for her. She is six steps away, and that little distance seems infinite. She is red, she is burning, she is drenched in sweat. The man before her is arrogantly young, and arrogantly, he is staring at her poor body. Under the young man’s gaze she feels it ageing visibly, at a faster rate, and in plain daylight. (95)

A remarkable passage if we take it out of the context of the novel and recall the bare details of the key episode from Camus’ *The Stranger* when Meur-

sault returns to the beach. In that episode too the young Arab man appears arrogant and stares, the distance to the spring seems further than it is, the protagonist experiences great heat and his body feels inadequate to bear it. We seem to have an playful indirect reference to the work here, an alternative ending perhaps (how else do we explain Chantal's "sensation of having escaped some huge peril" (95).

Jean-Marc thinks about how that first unexplained flush of Chantal's led him to imagine the cardinal's crimson mantle in his letters (96). Looking at her brassières under which she hides the letters he is moved to sympathy and decides to write one last letter. He writes that he must go away, and thinks of London, realizing that it's because of their "Britannicus" that he thinks of it. He puts the letter into the box, and notices a woman with three children pushing his bell. She is Chantal's sister-in-law. In the apartment, she talks about Chantal's first husband (her brother), and how she called him "mousie". The children sneak off to the bedroom and start a ruckus. He allows them to take out on the room vicariously the feelings aroused by the idea of her ex-husband and Chantal's holding on to the letters. The woman implies Chantal's ex-husband was sexually inadequate, and tries to whisper some "intimate advice" in Jean-Marc's ear, but he can't hear it properly. He laughs anyway. This missed information is the present-moment equivalent of Jean-Marc's forgotten memory of the eyelid-washing. The episode illustrates perfectly Kundera's idea, expressed in *The Art of the Novel*, in which the unsatisfactory term "psychological novel" is reworked to describe a novel which is concerned with the problem of the present moment.

Joyce analyzes something still more ungraspable than Proust's

“lost time<sup>2</sup>”: the present moment. There would seem to be nothing more obvious, more tangible and palpable, than the present moment. And yet it eludes us completely. All the sadness of life lies in that fact. In the course of a single second, our senses of sight, of hearing, of smell, register (knowingly or not) a swarm of events, and a parade of sensations and ideas passes through our heads. Each instant represents a little universe, irrevocably forgotten in the next instant. [*Art of the Novel*, 25]

Kundera’s treatment of the character of Jean-Marc here illustrates a new stage of development of this phenomenon of the fleeting moment, a “decadent” stage, if you like. Jean-Marc wilfully fails to understand what the sister-in-law tells him in that moment, makes no attempt at grasping the present that he has missed by asking her to repeat herself, and feigns understanding to prevent a clarification of it. Kundera presents us with a class of people who have given up any attempt at grasping the moment, and in fact use their apathy to their advantage. Just as he is perpetuating this fraud, he wonders that the sister-in-law’s apparent chummy relationship with Chantal does not tally with Chantal’s declaration that she hated the family. The one-way communication which indicates Jean-Marc’s concealed contempt answers his question.

But he sees only her ability to “adapt to things she detests” (105), characterizing her as a “collaborator” in her advertising milieu, not the “potential terrorist” he once thought she was. This parallels the label of “informant” which we saw the graphologist use, and which caused her such embarrassment. This parallel is now part of a consistent strategy of the author to have

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<sup>2</sup>Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* translates as “searching for lost (wasted) time”, and not the original English title *Remembrance of Things Past*.

the reflections of the one protagonist judged and elaborated in counterpoint by the other. The reader is struck by the similarity of their thoughts, and the way the similarities arise in different contexts with the same imagery. These similarities demonstrate not only the necessary parallels in the lives of a couple living together for years, but the growing homogeneity of European culture. Surrounded by the pervasive media influences represented especially by the television show *Lost to Sight* which we hear about in the opening chapter, characters struggle to maintain a degree of individuality in the pressure to conform.

Chantal enters unnoticed while Jean-Marc is having these thoughts and her sister-in-law is talking. We therefore hear the final words of her speech again. When they embrace the image of kissing as grotesque is repeated. This is the real life mirror of the dream Chantal has in which she sees her ex-husband and his theoretical new wife, and her sister-in-law “his overbearing, energetic sister” (6) “At the crease of her lips Chantal felt the wetness of her sister-in-law’s mouth” (106). While one of the children goes to the toilet the sound makes her remember refusing to answer someone trying the toilet door when she was in it, and the way the country house she shared with her sister-in-law and her husband carried the sound of lovemaking, which sounded also like the wheezes of an older relative.

When the sister-in-law reproaches Chantal for forgetting about her former family, she thinks that she should not have gone along with them so easily at the time. She is judging the same aspect of her personality which Jean-Marc has just characterized as that of a “collaborator” (106), by thinking “she had lived too long with that family without displaying her otherness” (108). She identifies this “life in a collective” with the presence of her child, and

therefore his absence with her individuality. At almost precisely the moment she thinks this, her “otherness” is forced onto display, by the discovery of the sister-in-law’s children ransacking her secret letters. In ironic counterpoint to Jean-Marc’s labelling of her as a “collaborator”, the revelation of the letters now “symbolize Jean-Marc’s deceitfulness, his perfidy, his treason. She now equates him with the sister-in-law and her invading child army.

Jean-Marc acknowledges that he is a visitor in the apartment: “I’m at the margin of this world” (112). But instead of taking a conciliatory approach, as he had intended after the receipt of his “last” letter, he reacts to her provocation with a challenge based on his earlier characterization of her:

But you, you’ll never give up that citadel of conformism where you’ve established yourself with all your many faces. (112)

# Lecture 4

Chantal opens the new letter from Jean-Marc and reads it right in front of him (113). Although this act ruptures the secrecy surrounding the letters on both of their parts—Chantal is stating blatantly that she knows it was Jean-Marc who wrote the letters by reading this one in front of him—the letters still form a barrier between them. The joke has taken on a life of its own, and it has reached a stage where it cannot be undone, despite the realization by both the perpetrator and the victim that the joke has been uncovered. What is the mechanism that has made this fictional whimsy so resilient?

For one explanation, we can turn once again to the main theme of the novel: identity. The two have lived so long together, and investigated each other's thoughts so thoroughly, that they live with the idea that they know the other like they know themselves. They have confused the other with themselves, to the extent that they think of the other's thoughts as if they were their own. This hubris has made their assumptions so strong that they think they need not even express them.

The irony is that their assumptions about the other's thoughts are not so different, but the subtle ways in which they differ are crucial. For instance, in the present example, Chantal's reading of the letter tells Jean-Marc: I know you are trying to entrap me, but I don't care, I'm free to do what I like. What he hears, however, is: I know you are spying on me, how dare you, my private life is my own. He still imagines that she hasn't suspected that he wrote the letters, thinking that he knows her well enough to keep the secret from her.

They eat silently, and sleep in separate rooms. Their silence reflects the earlier expressed fear of Jean-Marc's, as he commented on the silent couple next to them in the restaurant. It was indeed Chantal who had said of lovers:

“They could be silent” and Jean-Marc who countered: “Oh, no, no love can survive muteness” (76).

That night Chantal is assailed by erotic dreams which she finds unpleasant. She gets up early and announces she is going to London. Her manner of announcing the place makes Jean-Marc realize she also knows he wrote the letters. He is therefore mystified at her interpretation of his motives, and finally realizes his ignorance:

Behind all these questions, there is one thing he’s sure of: he does not understand her. For that matter, she hasn’t understood anything either. Their ideas have gone in different directions, and it seems to him they will never converge again. (118)

In his distress he decides to leave the apartment, leaving behind his keys.

Chantal mechanically takes a bus which happens to go to the Gare du Nord. When she notices this, we read the phrase “conspiracy of coincidences” (120). These coincidences seem to dominate the end of the novel more and more until, when Jean-Marc turns up magically at the precise house where Chantal’s orgy is taking place, they are not even worth remarking on any more. Kundera manages to work these coincidences into the novel in a gradual way that takes us off our guard. Although the waking-from-dream ending provides a rationale for these, his use of them is playful and the uncertain point of the dream’s beginning further elucidates the novel’s main theme.

In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera talks about these coincidences with reference to the early European novel:

Ever since Flaubert, novelists have tried to do away with plot devices, with the result that the novel is often duller than the dullest

life. Yet the early novelists had no such qualms about the improbable. In the first book of *Don Quixote*, there is a tavern someplace in the middle of Spain where by pure happenstance everybody turns up: Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, their friends the barber and the priest, then Cardenio . . . [seven others] An accumulation of totally improbably coincidences and encounters. . . . At the time, novels and readers had not yet signed the verisimilitude pact. They were not looking to simulate reality; they were looking to amuse, amaze, astonish, enchant. They were *playful*, and therein lay their virtuosity. [*Art of the Novel*, 94]

To the extent that he can get away with it after the nineteenth-century signing of the “verisimilitude pact” between readers and novels, Kundera tries to make his novels playful, to “amuse, amaze, astonish, enchant”. He has used the last excuse (other than the drug-induced hallucinations of William Burroughs) allowed to him to make this possible in the fiction of our day: the dream.

The coincidences multiply, then, as Chantal meets a group of her workmates who are going to London on the train. She rebels against Jean-Marc in her thoughts and asks why should she not conform to the wishes of the group? “Isn’t conformism the great meeting place where everyone converges, where life is most ardent?” she thinks (123). Chantal is talking here about the innihilation of what we ordinarily think of as identity, the integration of individual identity into the collective, the reverse process of individuation (assimilation into the Borg). She lets herself “be carried along”.

Jean-Marc takes a taxi to the station. He buys a ticket to London, gets on the train, and then realizes the absurdity of his actions. But he can’t

get off now, the security gates are closed. Once more the image of entrapment resurges. He finds the car with Chantal in it, and realizes that she was telling the truth, she is going to London with her workmates. He doesn't recognize her gestures (126), however, and his fear returns which he expressed to Chantal earlier in the novel, the fear that she was not who he thought she was (82), which goes back to the initial episode on the beach.

Chantal is listening to her workmate Leroy spouting political philosophy. He is combining Marxism and religion. Chantal thinks of the phrase "promiscuity of ideas" (129) to describe the flow of Leroy's speech. She agrees with his conclusion, which echoes her thought, that God intends humans only to make love, and this sudden rejection of her former notions of fidelity fills her with "a bliss that spreads throughout her body" (130). The metaphor of the rose fragrance, as well as the happiness at her child's death, find their final meaning. At that moment, she catches a glimpse of Jean-Marc, and looks out the window at the approaching tunnel.

The seven chapters 43 to 49 represent a kind of purgatory before the waking from the dream in chapter 50 and the reestablishment of relations in 51. The going down into the tunnel is greeted by hints at hellish imagery and use of the vocabulary of devils and the underworld. The philosophical discussion becomes more involved until the reaction from one of the female workmates: "But that's desolation, desolation!" (133) underscores the theme of carnal existence devoid of spiritual hope. To As an image of this abandonment of hope, as well as Chantal's rejection of her personal morality, Chantal imagines the woman chained up at an orgy, a ritual sacrifice of her own former naivety.

Jean-Marc sees Chantal making a phone-call at the station, but loses her

when he is held up. Her workmates refuse to give him the name of their hotel. He wanders out and ends up sitting outside a house where a party is happening. Suddenly he remembers Britannicus. He rushes into the house, and is ejected by a bouncer.

Chantal is at an orgy. She is comparing the people to animals. In their conversations about orgies, Jean-Marc had told her that he imagined the participants turning into animals as they copulated with her, leaving them finally alone surrounded by farm animals. Her experience of the orgy is disgusting and banal—she imagines the place as “this boggy field, this field of worms and snakes” (142). A woman pursues her, she runs from her into a closet. When she comes out everyone is gone, except for a few men fully clothed, who soon disappear, and an old man in a bathrobe, who appears to be Britannicus. She doesn’t know how to get her clothes.

Sinclair links this point of the novel again with “The Hitchhiking Game”:

At the end of ‘The Hitchhiking Game’, when the girl’s body betrays its soul, forcing her to enjoy loveless sex, she is said to have crossed a boundary, to have entered the dictatorship of sensation. In *Identity* the border is literal: that between France and England. London (home of a priapic [Merriam-Webster: “relating to or preoccupied with virility”] fantasy-figure called Britannicus) is designated the omphalos [Merriam-Webster: “central point” (from “navel”)] of orgy. Why London, rather than Berlin? Perhaps because of the Channel Tunnel, so freighted with Plutonian [infernal] symbolism. In this nether world Chantal loses her clothes, her liberty, her self; while Jean-Marc is trapped without, a helpless bystander. [Sinclair]

At this point in the story all the novels major themes reach a climax, co-

incidence overrides the whole structure, and the story reaches a thematic impasse, where the only possible dénouement is annihilation of identity. The dream is the frame for this crisis which makes it palatable enough for our demand for plausibility, but does not release us from the dilemma (are we us when we dream, or do we become someone else?).

The old man calls Chantal by the name of Anne, and she can't remember her real name. She thinks of Jean-Marc, knowing he will call her by her name. She says that her child is dead, and the man ends up insisting to her "Life! Life, Anne, life!" (151) echoing her sister-in-law's speech to Jean-Marc: "I like life!" (105 and 106). At the same time, he is outside, calling her. She is wondering if this is death, and moans "ahhhh" just as her grandfather had done. The crux of the crisis of identity has been reached—are we alive, or are we dead? How do we know? If we are someone other than who we think we are, are we therefore dead?

She wakes up with Jean-Marc calling her name and holding her. The narrator intrudes, using for the first time the first person "I", asking what part of the story is not real. Chantal decides to keep watching Jean-Marc in case someone takes his place. The story ends with a kind of dominance of existential anxiety: with the characters' uncertainty about their identity, and the reader's uncertainty about the reliability of the characters' experience.

## 5 Portrait of Europe

This book offers a view of Western Europe which is coloured by the author's experience of growing up in Czechoslovakia and forced exile in France. In particular the experience of watching Russian tanks roll into his city, in August 1968, paradoxically colours his attitude to the West. According to Banerjee:

... After years of living in the West, Kundera would describe the experience as the violent death of the West, and of its culture based on the values of Renaissance individualism. ...

In the essay "A Kidnapped West; or, Culture Bows Out" (1984), Kundera asks himself why it is so easy for present-day Europe to dispense with its borderlands to the east, which have grown thinkers and artistic innovators of genius, men like Freud and Einstein, Kafka, Husserl, Bartók, and others, without whom it is impossible to conceive of twentieth-century culture. [Banerjee, 4]

In other words, from a Central European point of view, the hegemony of the old Soviet Union was a defeat for the heartland of European culture. The fact the Western Europe was able to carry on in ignorance of this heritage was a

sign of the disappearance of European culture. In Banerjee's interpretation of the essay:

Culture is bowing out and the mass media are muscling in to occupy a privileged position at the centre of modern life. These quantifiers of human experience serve as a permanently installed Chorus, endlessly purveying images and sounds that have neither depth nor true vitality.

In *Identity*, we continue to read what amounts to a spiritual portrait of Western Europe at the present time. We begin with the television program *Lost to Sight*, whose theme dominates the thoughts of the protagonists throughout the novel. The advertising agency manipulates imagery and thereby emotions cynically to sell banal products—characters connect to these shallow images, but not to one another. Only rare, tactile stimuli force the people in the book to regain their reality.

The other aspect of this European malaise as Kundera paints it in the novel is represented by the self-analysis the protagonists subject themselves and their lovers to. According to Banerjee, Kundera sees European scientific progress, represented by Galileo and Descartes, as leading to the present situation where:

By persisting in using his reason like a knife to cut open the fruit of the world, neither sensing the living ripeness nor understanding itself in the act of penetration, man has reduced himself and the world in which he lives to pure instrumentality. [Banerjee, 6]

This is the world in which the characters of *Identity* grope around for a signpost, a reliable indication of their belonging. With every belief and thought

analysed and every moral system smashed or discredited, every organ and tissue dissected live on video, they are reduced to staring unblinkingly into each others eyes, in the forlorn hope of perceiving there the soul of the other.

## 6 Other works

Interestingly for those of you who enjoyed the Camus section of this course, Kundera has written a short story which seems to me to be a direct commentary on *The Stranger*. “Edward and God” [*Loves*, 201–242] tells of a young man who is also confronted with the judgement of his innocuous actions, but in contrast to Meursault, quickly realises that the truth will not help him, and that he must feign both guilt and remorse to extricate himself from the situation. He becomes the opposite of Meursault’s hero, finding pleasure in the degree to which he can manipulate others, but remaining like Meursault, unmoved by their ostentatious feelings. The final line “Please, keep him in your memory with this smile” seems an echo of Camus’ “we must imagine Sisyphus happy” in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

# EURO202/302

## Kundera Writing Exercise

**Due Date: Thursday 22 May**

Read the following extract from the novel *Identity* by Milan Kundera and answer the questions which follow.

She took his hand: 'What's wrong with you? You're sad again. For the last couple of days I've noticed you're sad. What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing, nothing at all.'

'Sure there is. Tell me, what's making you sad just now?'

'I imagined you were someone else.'

'What?'

'That you're different from what I imagine you. That I'm wrong about your identity.'

'I don't understand.'

He saw a pile of brassieres. A sad little hill of brassieres. A silly hill. But right through that vision he immediately caught sight of

the real face of Chantal as she sat across from him. He felt the touch of her hand on his, and the sense of having a stranger, or a traitor, before him vanished rapidly. He smiled: 'Forget that. I didn't say a thing.' (82)

1. Discuss the relationship of the characters in the extract. (2 marks)
2. Place the passage in the context of the novel. (2 marks)
3. Explain Jean-Marc's assertion 'I imagined you were someone else' in the context of the novel. (3 marks)
4. Discuss the image of the pile of brassieres in the context of the novel. (3 marks)

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