

Beethoven, Music, and Polychronic Narrative in Milan Kundera's

The Unbearable Lightness of Being

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That music plays a central role in Milan Kundera's work is not a new insight. Kundera has written several essays that deal with music and various composers, often in very technical ways, and many critics have observed the importance of musical themes in his novels, perhaps most notably in The Unbearable Lightness of Being (hereafter, ULB). Nonetheless, the complexity and significance of this feature has not been adequately assessed as it relates to his narrative theory and practice. Based on a re-examination of the function of the Beethoven quartet in ULB, incorporating both musicologists' interpretations of the quartet and Kundera's insights on musical and literary composition, I argue that Kundera employs music both thematically and structurally to foster a type of narrative, and consequently, a certain approach to reading, that resists any singular, univocal, synthesizing interpretation, even when the statements of an apparently authorial narrator at times seem to lead the reader in the direction of such an interpretation. Finally, I suggest some of the broader implications of Kundera's writing in connection with a concept recently proposed in narrative theory.

The importance of Beethoven in ULB and its connection to the central motif of the novel—lightness versus heaviness—has long been noted. We are first introduced to this theme early in the novel, (but, I should note, late in the 'story'), after Tereza has returned to Prague, and Tomas is still in Zurich. In characterizing what everyone sees as Tereza's "crazy" decision to return to Prague, Tomas simply replies, "*Es muss sein*"—"It must be" (32). Here, the authorial narrator indicates that this phrase, taken from the motif of the last movement of Beethoven's last quartet (opus 135 in F major), "was actually Tomas's first step back to Tereza," because she had made Tomas buy Beethoven's sonatas and quartets (32). We later learn its close connection with the course of their relationship. When Tereza first encountered Tomas in the hotel restaurant, Beethoven was playing on the radio, and he represents for her "the image of the world on the other side, the world she yearned for" (49). For a good portion of the novel, we are under the impression that, based on the interpretations of Tomas, Tereza, and the narrator, Beethoven, and the last quartet in particular, represents weight and necessity, which is reinforced by the title Beethoven gave to the quartet's finale: *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*, translated as the "difficult resolution":

Unlike Parmenides, Beethoven apparently viewed weight as something positive. Since the German word *schwer* means both 'difficult' and 'heavy,' Beethoven's 'difficult resolution' may also be construed as a 'heavy' or 'weighty resolution.' The weighty resolution is at one with the voice of Fate ('*Es muss sein!*'); necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value. (33)

This theme, then, is central to the lives of Tomas and Tereza as they wind through the novel and is also closely connected to the theme of Nietzsche's eternal return, which serves as the progenitor of the entire lightness/heaviness opposition: "In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens (*das schwerste Gewicht*). . . . Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air . . . and become only half real" (5). As Tomas, the narrator, and even the novel's title suggest, this world seems to be characterized by lightness, over and against Beethoven and Nietzsche. Unfortunately, this interpretation of Beethoven, and the last quartet, as aligned with heaviness, weight, and necessity is only part of the story, and even misleading. Later in the novel, we are forced to recognize a variation in the original theme when we find information concerning the origin of the "*Es muss sein*" motif of the quartet. We learn that the phrase actually refers to a private joke of Beethoven's, arising out of comical reply he made with reference to Ignaz Dembscher, who owed him money. The narrator interprets this as follows: "So Beethoven turned a frivolous inspiration into a serious quartet, a joke into a metaphysical truth. It is an interesting tale of light going to heavy, or, as Parmenides would have it, positive going to negative" (195). So there appears to be something ironic, paradoxical, and perhaps even parodic lying at the heart of this Beethoven quartet. But if two-thirds of the way through the novel, the reader has learned to be cautious about the narrator's pronouncements, then there may also be good reason to look beyond this revised reading of the quartet as a kind of "heavy" metaphysical inversion. In this context, a more in-depth look at the quartet itself and at the importance of music as a compositional strategy for Kundera can help to underscore its significance in ULB.

First, as most musicological studies of the last quartet indicate, and as Kundera is undoubtedly aware, the last quartet is not in fact a "heavy" quartet, but one that combines, intermixes, and even parodies elements that might be labeled "light" and "heavy" in musical terms. An overview of some of the comments on the quartets illustrates this. According to Kurt von Fischer, this piece can be seen as a "critical reflection on the idealistic-pathetic formal principle of the Classic sonata" (121). This is particularly evident in the finale:

After the detachment of the first movement and the extreme contrasts of both middle movements, one expects a synthesis or resolution of the contrast. And this is what the heading of the movement—*Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*—appears to promise. Yet the finale does not resolve the conflicts and problems. The *Es muss sein* remains a verbal, and perhaps even an ironic,

proclamation. Question and answer remain unreconciled. What pretends to be relaxed humor is a critical reflection on the decision that is required. . . . [O]ne encounters in the finale a nearly unmediated juxtaposition. (116-7)

Joseph Kerman, perhaps the greatest authority on the late quartets, also comments on this hybridity: "For all of its classic references, and for all of its perfection of shape and procedure, the piece is too unbuttoned and elusive and natural to count as a classic evocation like the first movement of the quartet. That quality has been modulated . . . into something more earthy and more ethereal, both qualities at the same time and both in the very highest degree" (366-7). And so, as Michael Steinberg concludes, ". . . Beethoven's string quartets end where humor and the deepest seriousness meet" (282).

What seems to me striking here is not that these characterizations fail to embrace any "heavy" interpretation, nor even that they all recognize the "serious" and "humorous" tendencies that play off against each other. What is most striking is their almost unanimous agreement that these opposing elements are never really resolved, are never synthesized in the quartet, but rather seem to stand in juxtaposition, or perhaps better said, in superimposition, one on top of the other, a kind of double exposure reminiscent of the way in which Sabina's painting is described, which, I think, not only characterizes the lightness-heaviness issue the novel, but also stands as a representation of the inscribed aesthetics of the novel as a whole (63). In his deconstruction of the lightness-heaviness theme, John O'Brien has made an analogous point: "Beethoven's *es muss sein* motif is presented to suggest two opposite but equally plausible (and 'equally appealing') interpretations, a kind of 'double exposure' of Beethoven that leaves any either/or choice impossible once both are presented" (112). O'Brien's analysis, however, does not extend beyond Beethoven's role as a recurring theme in the novel, and supplementing the thematic emphasis with a consideration of music as a compositional strategy in Kundera's work seems necessary to assess the full import of the Beethoven motif.

As noted earlier, Kundera has a thorough knowledge of musical history and composition, and this often serves as a central concern in his non-fictional writing. In several of the essays in Testaments Betrayed, Kundera explicitly connects the history of music to the history of the novel. Although he recognizes that their timelines differ, there are significant parallels in their stages of development: for example, what he refers to as the emphasis on "composition" in the novel in the nineteenth century and the emphasis on technical development during the Classical and Romantic periods of music. Not surprisingly, Beethoven is a key figure here. For Kundera, Beethoven represents someone who stood at the heart of a compositional dichotomy between the spontaneous and the worked over, a "dichotomy [that] must therefore have weighed especially heavily on him; to overcome it . . ., he devised various strategies" (153-4). To do this, Beethoven went beyond the "frivolous technical virtuosity" of the variation, but not by abandoning the essential mystery of the

theme, but by turning it inside out, examining the "melodic, rhythmic, harmonic possibilities hidden in a theme" (155). Kundera makes explicit the connection between Beethoven's technique and his own compositional strategy in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: "As I worked I thus came across another old strategy: *Beethoven's variation strategy*; this allowed me to stay in direct, uninterrupted contact with some existential questions that fascinate me and that this novel in variation form explores from multiple angles in sequence" (168). And, as he states in The Art of the Novel, musical methods are equally operative in ULB: "There, from the moment the writing began, I knew that the last part should be *pianissimo* and *adagio* . . . and that it would be preceded by one that was *fortissimo*, *prestissimo*" (89). In addition, as Guy Scarpetta notes, "Musical terms like variation, interval, counterpoint and restatement" can also be used to characterize the techniques the novel employs (109). Images, motifs, ideas, philosophies are offered, juxtaposed, revised, re-contextualized so as to demand several re-readings to trace and re-trace the thematic variations, to deconstruct and reconstruct the novelistic word (in the Bakhtinian sense) with increasing nuance and complexity. Moreover, Kundera emphasizes that this approach to the novelistic word, or idea, is really the *sine qua non* of the novel as a form of discourse. He refers to this as "irony," but as the following definition from Testaments Betrayed illustrates, one can easily substitute such terms as polyphony, contingency, lack of finality, and open-endedness: "Irony means: none of the assertions found in a novel can be taken by itself, each of them stands in a complex and contradictory juxtaposition with other assertions, other situations, other gestures, other ideas, other events. Only a slow reading, twice and many times over, can bring out all the *ironic connections* inside a novel, without which the novel remains uncomprehended" (193). This aptly summarizes Kundera's aesthetics of the novel and suggests the ways in which re-reading is inscribed within his work, most noticeably via the literary application of musical devices.

Furthermore, other aspects of the narrative are closely related to the musical aesthetic outlined above and can be used to propose some broader hypotheses regarding the import of Kundera's approach to narrative. For example, one of the main manifestations of this approach, which permeates virtually all of Kundera's work, is the non-linear organization of the novel's sections. In ULB, as readers gradually realize, not only do the chapters that deal with the same characters fail to follow a chronological sequence, but there is little attempt to coordinate temporally the relationship between the Sabina-Franz chapters and the chapters dealing with Tomas and Tereza. In addition, one of the main events of the novel, the death of Tomas and Tereza, is alluded to twice in the novel before the description of the life of Tomas and Tereza that most closely precedes their death (122; 273). This narrative representation of time is significant in several respects. As is the case with much of twentieth-century fiction, the disruption of spatio-temporal continuity forces the reader to attempt to reorder events, in other words, to "return" (again, cf. the theme of Eternal Return) to various points in the text in order to coordinate them in a way the narrative does not (Lodge 111-2). Moreover, the deemphasis on chronological or teleological ordering, most evident in the case of Tomas and Tereza's death, paradoxically underscores the ways in which linearity,

sequence, and the narrative ordering of material in general are used to produce meaning (Calinescu 153). Kundera is well aware that these are fundamental characteristics of the human condition (at least in European culture), that time and history, as we experience them, are unidirectional and that one of the ways in which man deals with this is "transform his life into myth" (Testaments 132-3). Herein lies the importance of the novel for Kundera, its "*ontological mission*": the novel offers a critical reflection on the myth-making process without coming to rest on any "mythic" version (i.e., falsification and, in some senses, denial) of individual human reality (133).

By way of conclusion, I would like to consider these issues in light of concept recently proposed in narrative theory. In an article published in the journal Narrative ("Limits of Order: Toward a Theory of Polychronic Narration"), David Herman examines the complex and problematic narrative situations posed by the Anna Seghers story entitled "The Excursion of the Dead Girls" ("*De Ausflug der toten Madchen*"), written in Mexico in 1942-43, while Seghers was in exile from Germany. According to Herman, in its mixture of personal and collective history, fantasy, dream, memory, and hallucination, this story encodes "temporal structures resistant to linearization . . . [and] invokes and subverts reading conventions associated with narrative as a discourse genre" (78). In order to characterize this narrative, he develops the notion of polychronic narration:

[Polychronic narration] is not a complete absence of sequence or the lack of definite sequence but instead a kind of narration that exploits indefiniteness to pluralize and delinearize itself, to multiply the ways in which the events being recounted can be chained together to produce 'the' narrative itself. (75)

[P]olychrony entails sequences of situations and events that unfold just *by* referring and cross-referring to other ways in which the same situations and events could be sequenced. The sequencing itself, by compelling reflection on what it means to build sequences, encodes 'the time-act of reading.' It is not that, with polychrony, sequence is detemporalized, spatialized; rather, sequence is anchored in time (and space) in a different, more multidimensional way than it is in nonpolychronic narratives. (90, note 6)

Moreover, Herman demonstrates how polychronic narrative, in the context of Seghers' s 1943 story, works to counter two important tendencies in the narratives of Nazi ideology: on the one hand, to search back for an eternal *volkisch*, and at the same time to reduce complex historical situations to single causes, a kind of dangerously simple hyperlinearity (76). Seghers' s narration, based as it is on "an awareness of the power of stories to mold cultures, histories, worlds," seems to suggest that "the criminals of history are not those who disturb predestined order of events, but those who seek to mask their own strategies for ordering as destiny itself" (88; 89). Polychronic narration in general, rather than trying to escape from time or history, simultaneously offers a critical reflection upon the temporal and sequential features of narrative, upon the fallacy of *post*

hoc, ergo propter hoc, while still recognizing that such elements are, of course, necessary to the functioning of narrative itself (81; see Barthes 94).

I find these same processes at work in Kundera's novels. Although ULB may not represent a classic example of polychrony as Herman defines it, the parallels between polychronic narration and Kundera's strategy are significant. Kundera seems intent on achieving precisely the effects that Herman ascribes to polychronic narration. As in Herman's example, ULB is set within an overtly political-historical context: most of the events of the novel revolve around the Prague Spring and its aftermath. However, Linda Hutcheon observes the paradoxical way in which such settings are often used in the postmodern novel, which "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining" and at the same time problematizes the notion of history and the knowledge it might provide (89). Most importantly for the present analysis, as in Seghers's story, Kundera employs narrative methods that force the reader to reflect upon both the "eternalizing" and the "linearizing" tendencies of narrative (personal, collective, or aesthetic). And as I hope I have demonstrated, these methods are intimately connected with musical devices, thematically inscribed in ULB through the motif of the Beethoven quartet.

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