CHAPTER 3

Kundera’s Polyphonic Novels

The Joke

The Joke, Kundera’s first novel was completed in 1965 and published only later, in 1967, because of the State censors. In it “the spiritual and political history of post war Czechoslovakia” is “reflected in a complex and ironic tale of love and sexual intrigue” (Lodge, “Idea of the Author” 105). The book immediately became a best-seller and an iconic book of the Prague Spring of 1968, a short period in which it appeared that Czechoslovakia might gain real independence from Soviet Russia under Dubek’s liberal government. But this dream was shattered by the invasion of the Russian tanks. For the second time Kundera became an enemy. He was expelled from the party, his academic post taken away and his writings proscribed. In the meantime The Joke was translated into twenty languages and received general critical appreciation. The French translation appeared with a foreword by the French poet and writer Louis Aragon who hailed it as one of the greatest novels of the century.

The novel is a “resonant and complex” (Feintuch 22) one with multiplicity of viewpoints, and non-linear narration. Perry Meisel has therefore called it “a polyphonic tour de force” (Hunter 321).

The novel makes a “radical rearrangement of the spatio-temporal continuity of the narrative line – what the Russian formalists called the deformation of the fabula in the sjuzet” (Lodge, “Idea of the Author” 111). The fabula is the raw material or the story in the most objective and chronological form in which we can conceive it and the sjuzet is the aesthetic representation of that story with all the gaps, elisions, rearrangements, repetitions
and emphases which imparts the story its meaning.

The fabula of The Joke is as follows: Ludvik Jahn was the eldest son of a Moravian family with two boys. When Ludvik was thirteen, his father “a bricklayer was hauled off to a concentration camp by the Germans” who had occupied Czechoslovakia. By this time “his younger brother had died. After his father’s arrest the mother and son were left alone. They barely managed to make ends meet. School fees were high.” Ludvik’s father’s sister “who had married a rich local builder,” Koutecky, supported him alone and not mother because she “looked down her nose at Ludvik’s mother.” Madame Koutecky “took Ludvik to her house because Ludvik with his talents made her envious” and she “had only one somewhat backward daughter.” “Ludvik saw all this, gritting his teeth. He was ripe for rebellion. But his mother would beg him tearfully to be sensible” (136).

During this time Ludvik became friends with Jaroslav and they “were like twins and of same age.” Jaroslav’s father loved Ludvik, a voracious reader, more than him. They started playing jazz together and joined the cimbalom band for which Ludvik “bought a cheap clarinet at the open market” (136). When the “pompous and pretentious” Koutecky’s daughter was getting married, Ludvik was forced to play one of the five pairs of bridesmaids and groomsmen behind the bride and groom with “the eleven-year-old daughter of the local pharmacist as a partner.” And “Ludvik lost all sense of humor.” An embarrassed Ludvik when teased by the members of the cimbalom band “that evening” “... proclaimed that he hated the bourgeois. Then he cursed the marriage ceremony and said he spat on the Church and was going to leave it” (The Joke 137).

Ludvik “did what he had promised.” He “mortally offended the Kouteckys.” “He was only too happy to break all ties with them. He went to lectures the Communists
sponsored. He became a Communist. In 1947 Ludvik and Jaroslav finished school and enrolled at the university, “Ludvik in Prague” and Jaroslav “in Brno” (137).

Next year Ludvik came back home as an enthusiastic supporter of the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948. Because of Ludvik, Jaroslav “joined the party at the beginning of 1949. And the others from the ensemble soon followed” him (142). He became a “Pied Piper” (139) successfully drawing parallels with the collective life of Moravian culture with its folk arts which “capitalism had destroyed,” and Communism (141).

As a student at the Natural Sciences Division at university in Prague Ludvik “stood up for” a young lecturer, Kostka, whose Christian interpretation of Marxism had brought him under cloud of suspicion, “at a plenary meeting of the Party” (210). Ludvik himself though diagnosed with
“‘traces of individualism’ and ‘intellectual tendencies’” (46) was doing well at the university until he perpetrated a trivial but fatal joke. He was following (courting) though not very successfully, a beautiful fellow-student, Marketa who “was the type of woman who takes everything seriously” (31). One summer, frustrated by their separation, and irritated by Marketa’s naively enthusiastic letter and responding to the “‘healthy atmosphere’” is the camp referred to in it, Ludvik sent a postcard saying “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik” (34). The authorities who came to know about the letter viewed its nonconformism seriously.

Ludvik’s only hope was that the party chairman at Natural Sciences was, a fellow student, Zemanek, and that he knew Marketa and him “very well” (39). Besides, Ludvik thought that Zemanek would be sympathetic to him as “the only genuine Moravian in the Natural Sciences Division” with Zemanek’s love for Moravian folk songs (40). But it was the same
Zemanek who recommended “in the name of the Organisation” that Ludvik “be expelled from the Party” at the plenary meeting in the lecture hall of the Natural Sciences Division (46). Then “the discussion following” his “self-critical statement went against” him: “no one spoke on” his behalf, and finally everyone present (and there were about a hundred of them, including his “teachers and” his “closest friends, yes, every last one of them raised his hand to approve” Ludvik’s “expulsion not only from the Party but (and this he had not expected) from the university as well” (46 - 47). That same night Ludvik went back home to wait for his summoning up to conscription, and was a pathetic guest at the wedding of his school friend, Jaroslav who now became “a dyed-in-the wool Moravian patriot and a folklore expert” (47).

Jaroslav arranged all traditional folk customs and festivities for the wedding to satisfy “his ethnographic passions” like “regional dress, a cimbalom band, a ‘patriarch’ and his flowery speeches, the rite of carrying the bride over the threshold, songs, and any number of details to fill up the day” but “curious” for Ludvik he “gave the church a wide berth, even though a traditional wedding was unthinkable without a priest and God’s blessing” purging the ritual speeches of “patriarch” with all “biblical motifs” (47). A sorrowful Ludvik sensitized to the “chloroform seeping into the clear waters of these folk rituals” “refused” when asked by Jaroslav to play with his clarinet with the other players (47). “Six months” (211) after Ludvik’s expulsion, Kostka, partly because of the “voices raised against” him at the university realising them as an “appeal” of the voice of Christ and partly “alarmed” at his “attachment to a comfortable life whose calm security distanced” him “more and more from the turbulent fates of” his “fellow men” resigned (212). He then took up the job of a technical adviser on a state farm in Western Bohemia that separated him from his wife and “five-year-old” (212) “son” “in Prague” (245).
Ludvik got conscripted and was put “among the politically dangerous soldiers” in Ostrava (242). Zemanek married an enthusiastic young Communist with whom he sang Soviet songs, socialist–construction songs, and folk songs and who fell in love with him not “for love” but “out of party discipline” (17).

Ludvik languished in the military camp and after some time, when permitted outside on a pass met Lucie Sebetka an “utterly ordinary” girl, whose “ordinariness” touched and attracted him, in Ostrava. His courtship progressed mainly through letters, to which she responded by bringing flowers stolen (unknown to Ludvik) from a local cemetery when Ludvik rarely managed to have an opportunity for sex with her she adamantly refused his advances. Ludvik thought that Lucie was defending her virginity, but in fact she had been raped in the past and his aggressive advances revived the trauma. Ludvik rebuked her for her frigidity and shortly later, to his dismay, Lucie vanished from Ostrava. By this time Ludvik had spent one year in Ostrava. But for escaping without permission from camp, to seek Lucie in vain, he “was hauled before a court-martial and given ten months for desertion.” “After serving out the ten months,” he “went back to the black insignia in Ostrava for” his final “year of military service.” Then he “spent the next three years mining coal as a civilian” to avoid further stay with the battalion (117) and gradually forgot Lucie (17).

Lucie in fact was caught stealing flowers from the graveyard. But she ran away from Ostrava because a soldier “who was nasty and brutal, like all the others” wanted to rape her, ripping off her clothes (177). After living in the woods thus giving rise to the legend of a local fairy, she was discovered by the Chairman of the District National Committee and a policeman and brought to work under Kostka’s supervision in the farm. Responding to Kostka’s tender care and all his “talk of Jesus and God” Lucie fell in love with him and was
able to have happy sexual union. Then Kostka again came under ideological suspicion, feeling guilty of assuming himself as “a seducer in priest’s robe.” He left the farm of his “own accord” (238) and “became a construction worker” (239) (bricklayer). In the autumn of 1956 Kostka met Ludvik “for the first time in five years in the dining car of the Prague-Bratislava express” (247) just released from the mines and returning from Prague after seeking permission to continue his studies. Ludvik outraged by the story of Kostka’s persecution, secured him a job as a virologist in a hospital in Moravia with the help of a child-hood friend. Lucie got married, though not very happily and persuaded her husband to move “to the town where” Kostka “was living” (244).

Ludvik resumed his studies in the more liberal post-1956 condition “and found an excellent job as a scientist in a field he enjoyed” (158). Zemanek who did well at the university got the job of “a cushy lectureship in Marxism at the university” (20).

Now a radio journalist – Helena’s marriage with Zemanek by the mid-1960s had become shattered and “the only reason” they “didn’t get a divorce was “little Zdena,” their daughter (200). Zemanek who knew “how to handle all women” (15) was frequently unfaithful, and Helena in love with Jindra, “the poor boy” who was happy for every minute he could “spend with” her “and show off his nineteen-year-old virility” (19).

One day when Helena interviewed Ludvik in the course of her work he understood that she was the wife of his enemy, Zemanek and he conceived a plan to take revenge by seducing her. Helena, helpless, forlorn and sentimental was an easy prey. He arranged to meet her at Moravia, his hometown, where she was going to cover a folk ceremony called the Ride of the Kings. This annual ritual, whose meaning and origins were lost in antiquity involved a boy king veiled and disguised as a woman “forbidden to utter a word
throughout” attended “by his pages dressed as women” (262) all dressed in antique costume, processing through the streets on horseback begging alms. As part of reviving the tradition “in the last year of the Nazi occupation, the Ride of the Kings was staged in.” Jaroslav’s village was the venue and he, “fifteen at the time” was chosen the King in honour of his father, a village school master and a patriot (129). Since then he had always taken a keen interest in the Ride, finding in it a poetry increasingly lacking from his own life and this year his somewhat alienated fifteen year-old son, Vladimir had been chosen as King as a “reward” “for him for everything” he had “done for folk culture” (127). Vladimir “had all kinds of excuses” to skip it and Jaroslav after his “heart-to-heart talk” with him thought: “Maybe he understood” (127).

Ludvik arrived at Moravia, his hometown “from Prague” after “fifteen years” on a Friday (125) with “almost no friends or acquaintances left”(3) to prepare the scene of the seduction. Finding the hotel uncomfortable “to achieve a beautiful demolition” (7) he went out to seek alternatives. He came across Jaroslav “but avoided his eyes” (10); he met Kostka and ensured the use of his room the following afternoon when Kostka planned to visit his new “fiancée in another town fifteen miles away, a school teacher with a two-room flat of her own” (5). Ludvik when asked for a shave was taken to a barbershop where he was shaved by a woman selected by Kostka, whom he recognised as Lucie. He did not reveal his identity to her.

The next day Helena arrived, eager for love and attended by her young assistant and lover Jindra. Ludvik took her to Kostka’s flat and had sex with her in the most violent, degrading manner he could “And thus to steal the secret cipher! to steal the royal seal! To rob Pavel Zemanek’s secret chamber; to ransack it, make shambles of it!” (195). This treatment however, only raised the infatuated Helena to new peaks of orgasmic bliss and
“excitement” (196). When “this beautiful act of demolition was over at last,” (196) to
Ludvik’s “sheer horror” (200) she revealed that Zemanek and she were “actually strangers”
and not living together “for three years now” and not getting divorced only because of “little
Zdena” (200). This deprived Ludvik of any satisfaction at having cuckolded Zemanek.
Now Ludvik “saw her nudity in a new light; it was nudity denuded, denuded of the power to
excite that until now had eliminated all the faults of age in which the whole history and
present of Helena’s marriage seemed to be concentrated” (200). Ludvik, somehow, got rid
of her; waited for Kostka’s return and experienced further agony at learning the story of
Lucie.

The next morning, on Sunday, Ludvik overslept – “didn’t get up until nine” – and
missed his morning transport to Prague and so was forced to spend the day in the town
(249). This was the day of the Ride of the Kings which Helena, still on high romance, was
busy reporting. Meeting her husband by prior arrangement, and stung by the presence of a
pretty student girlfriend Miss Broz with Zemanek, Helena intimated that she was going to
leave him for Ludvik. Zemanek who was happy with the prospect of separating from
Helena congratulated Ludvik when he ran across him and was killing time by watching the
Ride of the Kings. Ludvik “stifled by humiliation and shame” “wanted nothing more than
to disappear” and to “wipe out the whole story, the stupid joke, wipe out Helena and
Zemanek, wipe out the day before yesterday, yesterday, and today, wipe it all out” (283).
He “went through a minor martyrdom” and got rid of Helena who “went pale” and “started
shaking” quickly leaving the place (284). Before leaving her he also informed her that he
“did not love her” and “wouldn’t be seeing her again” (284). Helena thoroughly shaken,
took an overdose of analgesics belonging to Jindra though with “no intention of poisoning”
herself (286) and despatched via Jindra a pathetic farewell letter to Ludvik. Ludvik who
received the letter rushed back to try and save her life only to find her, not in a coma, but suffering violent diarrhoea: the pills were laxatives kept in a bottle with “ALGENA printed on the label” (302). Ludvik got himself extricated from the place where Helena went raving – “you beast, beast, beast!” – and spat on his face while Jindra went attacking him (300). Ludvik had “still a few hours before the next bus was due to leave,” and loitered onto the bank of the river Morava, saw Jaroslav whom he avoided “two days ago” and persuaded by Jaroslav into taking part in a jam-session of the folk-music ensemble. Jaroslav himself was seeking solace after learning that the King of the Ride of the Kings was not his son, who hoodwinking him “went to the motor-cycle races in Brno” (306) and was substituted by a friend in his place. He felt like “A righteous pauper king without heirs. The last king” (308). While singing together as if in a trance “falling down into the depths of years, the depths of centuries, in the fathomless depths” in “sweet vertigo,” (316) Jaroslav went sinking with “a heart attack” (317). He was alive but Ludvik foresaw for him only a vegetable life, “a life under the aegis of death” (317).

The above summary gives an idea of the narrative content of The Joke. But it is very different from the way the novel is narrated and gives nothing about the structure of the novel.

The novel begins not with the childhood or with the youth of Ludvik, but with his arrival as a “thirty-seven” (278) year old man in his hometown “to achieve a beautiful demolition” (7). Besides we are only told that he needed “a pleasant atmosphere” the next day “afternoon” “not just for” himself “of course” (6-7) in the first chapter. Which person, man or a woman, imagined or real he is going to meet? There is no indication. The base-time of the narrative starts then and covers three days, Friday to Sunday in the mid 1960s leading to the Ride of the Kings, Helena’s suicide attempt and closing with Jaroslav’s heart
attack. Everything else – the entire biographies of the characters and their mutual relationships – unfold as retrospective narrative or analepsis as used by Gerard Genette. Besides both the three-day action in the Moravian town and all the analepses are not presented by a reliable, impersonal authorial narrator identifying and distinguishing between the characters, filling in the gaps in their knowledge and putting the reader in a privileged position of knowing more than any of them knew. But it is presented through the interwoven monologues of four of the important characters: Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav and Kostka. The monologues are distributed as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PART ONE</th>
<th>Ludvik</th>
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<tr>
<td>PART TWO</td>
<td>Helena</td>
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<td>PART THREE</td>
<td>Ludvik</td>
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<td>PART FOUR</td>
<td>Jaroslav</td>
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<td>PART FIVE</td>
<td>Ludvik</td>
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<td>PART SIX</td>
<td>Kostka</td>
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<td>PART SEVEN</td>
<td>Ludvik, Jaroslav, Helena</td>
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These monologues, says David Lodge, do not pretend to record thoughts and sensations as they occur like those of Stephen, Bloom and Molly in Joyce’s *Ulysses* but are rather what Dorrit calls “memory monologues” as those of the characters in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. They are in the past tense and are too well-formed in language to imitate the stream of consciousness in Joycean way. They are interior monologues, though they do have something of the quality of confession. The characters seem to be telling their stories, the story of the last few hours, and the story of their entire lives, to some absent
other, or to themselves, to their own consciousness, in an effort to understand, justify or judge their own actions (Lodge, “Idea of the Author” 114). The multiple-view point in which the novel is presented is itself a part of the polyphonic structure of the novel. Though these are monologues they are part of the whole dialogue between the characters among themselves through which the novel unfolds. As with all multiple-view point novels, from Samuel Richardson’s onwards the reader is provided different subjective versions of the same event, to ironic and instructive effect.

The aesthetic effect of multiple-view point narration is first felt in the way the names of the characters are presented. The full name of the hero Ludvik Jahn is presented fully only by Kostka in the sixth part of the novel. Till then the name Ludvik alone is there mostly in the novel and at other times he is addressed Private Jahn in the military service. Like this Pavel Zemanek, the name fully appears only when Ludvik narrates his act of revenging upon him in part 4 of the novel sounding as if he would like to revenge upon the complete man that he is: “To rob Pavel Zemanek’s secret chamber” – that is how he presents it (195). Similarly Lucie appears with full name “Lucie Sebetka” probably only twice in the novel; in Kostka’s informing Ludvik of the name of the barber in the first chapter of the novel. Till the full name Pavel Zemanek appears he was mere Pavel in Helena’s monologue and Zemanek in Ludvik’s monologues and in Kostka’s version of her story as the addressee of the letters found in the suitcase of the girl who gave rise to a fairy tale in the wild. This polyphonic way of presenting the names, teases and confuses, prompting the reader to turn back the novel and finally provides the effect of a recognition.

A close view of the fabula presented above by including quotations with parenthetical references will give an indication of how the storyline of the novel is scattered, as it were, in a haphazard way throughout the novel. As already stated the novel begins with Ludvik’s
coming back to his home town after fifteen years in an in medias res way. But from there, there is no linear progress and the narrative shifts back and forth in time, breaking all norms of continuity.

If gone back to the sentence constructed in the dissertation about the beginning of the novel it will become obvious. The novel begins not with the childhood or with the youth of Ludvik Jahn but with his arrival as a “thirty-seven” (278) year old man in his home town “to achieve a beautiful demolition” (7). The name “Ludvik Jahn” wholly appears only in page 207 of the novel of 317 pages. The only page in the novel that suggests the age of Ludvik is 278. And the “beautiful demolition” is all that the novel is about and the reader has to fully read the novel to know what it really is. The following sentence used on Kostka while presenting the fabula of the novel serves as another example: “He then took up the job of a technical adviser” on a state farm in Western Bohemia (214) that separated him from his wife, and five-year-old (212) “son” (213) “in Prague” (245).

It is worth considering the following extracts from part 6: “Kostka,” lying distant from each other in separate chapters out of which even the basic idea on the biography of Kostka can only be built.

“Of course my wife, with whom I had a five-year-old child, did everything in her power to make me defend myself and stand up for my position at the university. She was thinking of our son and of the future of my family” (212-13; pt.6, ch.4).

When I told the administration that I proposed to leave the university without applying for another scientific position, when indeed I requested to go among the ordinary people, preferably as technical adviser to a state farm, my Communist colleagues, friends and foes alike, interpreted this not in the light
of my own faith but in the light of theirs: as an unprecedented expression of self-criticism. They appreciated it and helped me to find a very good position on a state farm in western Bohemia, a position under a good director and in a beautiful part of the country. (214; pt.6, ch.5)

For I had a wife and child in Prague. I wasn’t much devoted to them, but I couldn’t part from them either. I was afraid of getting into a situation I couldn’t get out of. I was afraid of Lucie’s love and didn’t know what I should do with it. I was afraid of the complications it might bring me. (245; pt.6, ch.20)

The above passages suggest how Kundera uses the biography of his characters and how he tells a story. But the picture of the character will remain unfinalised. Kostka who always would “hear the voice of Christ’s appeal” (212) and who feels guilty of Lucie’s love for him as suggested in the third passage appeared in a totally different situation in the very first chapter of the novel as presented by Ludvik:

He was a strange character, at once scrupulously moral and oddly unsettled and unstable, whose wife, as far as I could tell, had divorced him years before for living anywhere and everywhere but with her and their son. I was little nervous: if he had remarried, it would complicate my request; I walked as fast as I could in the direction of the hospital. (5)

After meeting, to Ludvik’s question whether he was married he told him “that he was still on his own.” But Ludvik could add as follows just in a moment: “it turned out that Kostka had a fiancee in another town fifteen miles away, a school teacher with a two-room flat of her own” (5).
The above two passages also reveal the way multiple narration supplements and clarifies the story and theme of the novel. Ludvík’s reference in the above passage “as far as I could tell” is in the spirit of denying monologism.

Here follows the narration of the securing of a job for Kostka by Ludvík first through Ludvík’s opening monologue and then through Kostka’s perspective.

“But then I remembered a man here whom I’d helped to find a job and who would be only too glad, if I knew him at all, to repay one good turn with another” (4-5).

Later Kostka gives a detailed description of the same:

That time in fifty-six when we met on the train he was distressed by the life I was leading and immediately set to thinking of ways to find me work I would enjoy and derive satisfaction from. I was amazed by his speed and efficiency. He had a few words with a friend of his in his hometown. He hoped to find me a job teaching natural science at a local school. This was quite alarming. Antireligious propaganda was still going strong, and it was almost impossible to hire a Christian as a school teacher. That was the opinion of Ludvík’s friend, who did come up with another idea. That is how I came to obtain my position in the virological department of the local hospital, where for the last eight years I’ve been breeding viruses and bacteria in mice and rabbits. (244)

We confront characters addressing each other in the The Joke very often. This is one form of “double-directedness,” that is directing “toward another person’s speech” as Bakhtin says (Problems 153). The characters who do this type of interaction are mainly Jaroslav and Kostka. Jaroslav appears to be directly addressing the reluctant Vladmir, his son who is to be the king of the Ride of the Kings in chapter 3 part 4 of the novel: “If only
you’d try to understand, Vladimir. Your Papa is not just a crackpot folklore addict. Maybe he is an addict, but he goes deeper than that. He hears in folk art the sap that kept Czech culture from drying up” (128). Jaroslav while addressing Vladimir also has an “interior dialog” with himself (Problems 195). Thus we have the intertwining and combining of his dialog with his son’s. This is what Bakhtin calls the “loophole of the consciousness and of the word” (Problems 195). A loophole is the retention for oneself of the possibility to alter the final, ultimate sense of one’s word. “If the word leaves this loophole open, then that fact must inevitably be reflected in its structure. This possible other sense, i.e. the open loophole, accompanies the word like a shadow.” Thus it is not the “last word” but only “a next-to-last word” (Problems 195).

Here is Jaroslav’s inner dialogue on seeing Ludvik at the Ride of the Kings:

By the time I reached the green [village green], the Ride had started down the long main street. I wanted to drag myself after it, but then I saw Ludvik. He was standing by himself on the grassy edge of the road looking thoughtfully at the riders. Damn Ludvik! I wish he’d go to hell! Up to now, he’s been avoiding me, well; today I’m going to avoid him!

So there I sat, listening and watching. The Ride of the Kings gradually drifted away. It clung pitifully to the sides of the street, along which cars and motorcycles passed continually. A group of people were walking after it. A pathetically small group. From year to year fewer people came to the Ride. Though this year Ludvik is here what is he doing here? Damn you, Ludvik! It’s too late now. Too late for everything. You come like a bad omen. A dark omen. Seven crosses. Now of all times, when my Vladimir is king. (266)
Here Jaroslav addresses himself, Ludvik and some absent other.

Indeed one of the most poignant scenes in *The Joke* is Jaroslav’s turning violent in his encounter with his wife Vlasta after knowing that Vladimir and Vlasta “deceived” (306) him with Vladimir pretending to be the king of the Ride of the Kings’ while he went off to the motorcycle race “with Koutecky’s grandson on his motorcycle” (305).

Vlasta salted the noodles and said I made things difficult. I was living in another world. I was a dreamer. They didn’t want to take my ideals from me, but Vladimir was different. He had no use for my singing and whooping. He got no pleasure from it. He was bored by it. I’d just have to accept it. Vladimir was a modern person. He took after her father. Her father was always a great one for progress. He was the first farmer in the village to have a tractor before the war. Then he had everything taken from him. But from the time the fields went to the cooperative they’d never yielded half as much. (306)

Here Vlasta’s position justifying and representing her son’s is unequivocally authoritarian and monologic. She is “stupidly sure” (307) of her position as a “modern person” (306) from where she brooks no deviation. They had no use for singing and whooping – meaning folk arts and largely arts itself. She is cocksure about the “progress” that modern technology in the form of modern tractor will bring. She is also stupidly sure of her own interpretation of history that cooperative and collective farming is not good. She misleads her husband and is still not ready to tell him the truth. When specifically questioned by Jaroslav, whether Vladimir skipped the role of the king, before suggesting the answer she further defends her arbitrary position.
Jaroslav then asks the meaning of a “modern person” (306). Then,

She had her back to me, stirring the noodles, and said that even our home couldn’t be furnished in a modern way. What a fuss I’d made about that modern floor lamp! Even the modern chandelier I hadn’t liked. And yet anyone could see that the modern floor lamp was beautiful. Lamps like that were being bought everywhere these days. “Shut up,” I said. But there was no stopping her. She was all wound up. With her back to me. With her small, spiteful, bony back. This was what irritated me most of all. Her back. That back without eyes. That back so stupidly sure of itself. That back I couldn’t come to terms with. I wanted to make her shut up. Turn her around to face me. But I felt such distaste for her that I didn’t even want to touch her. I’ll make her turn around some other way. (306-07)

Vlasta here is resisting dialogue “as a mode of communication associated with reciprocal exchange and negotiation” (Pearce 121). Here dialogue ends giving way to aggression. “When the dialog is finished, all is finished” (Problems 213). These words of Bakhtin find substantiation here. Jaroslav begins a trail of destruction in the house beginning with the plates in the cabinet. From the shock Jaroslav never recovered. He “left the house” (308). He felt forlorn: “Where could I go? The streets belonged to the Ride of the Kings, home belonged to Vlasta, the taverns belonged to the drunks. Where do I belong? I am the old king, abandoned and banished. A righteous pauper king without heirs” (308). Shortly, within hours, he suffered the heart attack. In the passage we can also see Vlasta using the most commonplace justification for her mentality saying “. . . anyone could see that the modern floor lamp was beautiful. Lamps like that were being bought everywhere these days” (306). She thinks she can decide for “anyone.” She thinks what is
seen “everywhere” is appropriate. It is this kind of totalising and totalitarian discourse that the whole of The Joke and Kundera is against. It is exactly this kind of idea the whole of polyphony is anathema to.

As Bakhtin analysed Notes from the Underground by Dostoevsky The Joke is a confession; not of a single character, but of four characters of which a half is of Ludvik who begins and ends it. “The extreme and acute interior dialogization is the first thing that amazes” in the whole novel. It contains literally not a single monologically firm, undissociated word. From the very first sentence the characters’ speech begins to cringe and crack under the influence of the anticipated word of the other persons, with which they, from the very first step, enters into a most intense interior polemic (Problems 190). “So here I was, home again after all those years.” Thus begins the novel. The first sentence itself is an indication. The novelist seems to answer the question, “Where you were? After how long?” The sentence will probably loose its dialogic nature and aesthetics if it is rephrased as “I was back home after fifteen years.” The period of “fifteen years” mentioned is held back by the author for the next paragraph,

During those years, there was nothing to attract me to my home town; I told myself that I had grown indifferent to it, which seemed natural: I had been away for fifteen years, had almost no friends or acquaintances left here (and wished to avoid the ones I did have), my mother was buried among strangers in a grave I had never tended. But I had been deceiving myself: what I had called indifference was in fact rancour; the reasons for it had escaped me, because here as elsewhere I had both good and bad experiences, but the rancour was there, and it was this journey that made me conscious of it: the mission that had brought me here could easily have been accomplished in
Prague, after all, but I had suddenly begun to feel an irresistible attraction to the prospect of carrying it out here in my home town precisely because this was a mission so cynical and low as to mock any suspicion) that I was returning out of some maudlin attachment to things past. (3)

The above passage throughout has “internal polemic with the person” “hidden” in it as is characteristic of *The Joke* and other novels of Kundera. “But the other person’s word is invisibly present determining the style of the speech from within” (*Rabelais* 191). This became obvious in: “I had been deceiving myself: what I had called indifference was in fact rancour. . . .” The other person’s anticipated response as well as inner dialogue takes root in narration. The narrator corrects or clarifies his position subsequent to his initial utterances.

Time and again the narrative breaks into an open polemic addressing the absent other directly. Here are some instances:

“If only he would try to understand how interesting it all is” (130).

“As I’ve said before, Cenek was partial to . . .” (83-84).

“I called Ludvik my adversary. Have I the right to do so?” (207) says Kostka.

“Had Ludvik heard my soliloquy, he might have said that I was ungrateful” (244) says Kostka.

The single thing/incident upon which the entire novel hinges on is the letter that Ludvik wrote to Marketa: “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik” (34). This letter is partly a reply (or response) to a specific addressee, Marketa, who in her naively enthusiastic letter had
referred to the “healthy atmosphere” in the training camp. Bakhtin brackets letter as a “double-voiced word” of the third category he identified as the active type that is “for the reflected word of another person.” “Characteristic of the letter is” what he finds “the writer’s acute awareness of his interlocutor, the addressee to whom it is directed.” Further “The letter, like the speech in a dialog, is directed to a specific person, and it takes into account his possible reply.” But the addressee whom Bakhtin calls the “absentee interlocutor” (Problems 170), here Marketa, was “the type of woman who takes everything seriously” (31) and thought that Ludvik has “no” “right to remain in the party” (45). The word opium in the letter also invokes Marx in his famous statement on religion as opium.

But things did not stop there. Despite Marketa the letter found its way into the hands of the authorities. The absentee interlocutor became the wrong interlocutor or the letter reached the wrong addressee. There the private became public; there it lost all its dialogic nature and read in an authoritarian, univocal and monologic way. Kundera as Restuccia analysed is travestying the unsophisticated hermeneutical practices of authoritarian regimes (288). Devoid of any zones of cooperation with other types of words, the authoritarian word excludes dialogue. It unfortunately was a political reading too. Ludvik was mistaken for a Trotskyite. The result in Ludvik’s own words is: “I had been thrown off my life’s path” (52). “Yes. All the lines were cut” (53) “Broken off, my studies, my participation in the movement, my work, my friendships; broken off, love and the quest for love; in short, everything meaningful in the course of life, broken off. All I had left was time” (53).

In The Joke polyphony started to bloom in Kundera and it is not a completely polyphonic work. There is no dialogical relationship between all elements of its structure. Characters surely are simulations of living beings. It is neither multistyled nor has multiple themes. There is also the “despotism of the story” (The Curtain 11).
Life is Elsewhere

As with other genres poetry occupies an inferior position to novel in Bakhtin’s scheme of things. Poetry for him is monological. It has double or even multiple meaning only in a narrow sense. The interrelationship of meanings in a poetic symbol (a trope) is never of the dialogic sort. It is impossible under any conditions or at any time to imagine a trope being unfolded into the two exchanges of a dialogue, that is, two meanings parcelled out between two separate voices. “The polysemy of the poetic symbol presupposes the unity of a voice with which it is identical and it presupposes that such a voice is completely alone with its own discourse” (Dialogic Imagination 327-28). This point finds extreme favour with Kundera. For him “The lyrical poet does not have to prove anything. The only proof is the intensity of his own emotions” (Life is Elsewhere 212). If for Bakhtin poetry is complacent, conformist and therefore reactionary, for Kundera lyrical poetry is authoritarian and monstrous. He is a man who witnessed an epoch “ruled hand in hand by the hangman and the poet” from up close (Postscript to Life is Elsewhere 310). Kundera tells us that he had heard his “admired French poet Paul Eluard publicly and ceremoniously renounce (ing) his Prague friend,” the Czech surrealist Zavis Kalandra whom Stalinist justice was sending to the gallows (Postscript to Life is Elsewhere 310). Kundera in Life is Elsewhere extends upon and then illustrates Bakhtin’s theory of poetry with the story of the monster poet, Jaromil.

Life is Elsewhere, Kundera’s second novel, is the fictional biography of the lyrical poet. In Kundera’s own words it is a “critique of poetry” “and yet at the same time would itself be poetry (transmit poetic intensity and imagination)” (Postscript to Life is Elsewhere 311). To be specific it is as one critic stated “a sly and merciless lampoon of revolutionary romanticism” (Locher 324). The lyrical poet, Jaromil is a teenager encouraged by his
doting mother to become a poet and achieve fame. Not much of a complex story is there in *Life is Elsewhere* as in *The Joke*. Despite its innocent appearance, however, Francois Ricard finds it most “demanding” and presenting “a challenge to the mind and heart that is extremely difficult to take up” (58). The novel traces the life of Jaromil from conception to his death. “Jaromil and his mother are in full view, while we glimpse other figures only when they appear in the presence of these two protagonists” (269). Maman, the mother of the poet who is as much the focus in the novel as Jaromil, conceived the poet, of her lover, “a penniless young Engineer” (4) who later received a military mobilization order. He then “packed his suitcase and left for the frontier” (25). Maman – “the daughter of a rich merchant” – loved the poor Engineer as a revolt (4).

Jaromil is described as living in a world of mirrors, a world prepared by his maniacally possessive mother, who is his closest friend and greatest enemy. Jaromil is a failure with women (“the whole crux of his misery” (101) just as with many other things including his studies. “The word ‘girl’ was depressing, like the word ‘loneliness’ and the word ‘failure’” (101). His affairs with one or two girls became flops. With his loving classmate, “A kiss hung in the air. All he had to do was to lean closer. And yet he seemed to find the route to her lips long and difficult” (107). And “she agreed it was pity they hadn’t kissed each other” (108).

Maman arranged private tuition to help Jaromil to catch up in class and improve his art grades. Jaromil began with showing the sketches he had drawn. Artist the tutor was not impressed and he gave him an advice: “‘Remember, it’s not the artist’s job to copy anything, but to create a world of his own lines on paper’” (34). Jaromil who had so far not received a single word of praise from the artist brought to him his secret sketch book, containing his drawings of nude female bodies. The artist though flipped through the
sketchbook did not say anything. However the artist later informed Maman in their conversation that “what fascinated him about her son’s drawing was his peculiar, almost morbidly sensitive imagination” referring to his drawings of people with dog’s heads and latest one of headless nude women (38). Maman however saw this as her son’s turning into “such a pessimist as to deprive people of humanity” (38). Artist’s reply to this is,

Art doesn’t have its sources in reason . . . Don’t you think there is a kind of mysterious link between Jaromil’s vision and the War? The War, which shakes us and makes us tremble every hour of the day and night? Didn’t the War rob man of his face and his head? Aren’t we living in a world full of headless men longing for torsos of headless women? Isn’t a so-called realist view of the world the greatest illusion of all? I ask you – isn’t there more truth and reality in your son’s drawings? (38)

The artist once gave Jaromil a lecture on the currents of modern art and then lent him several books on the subject. He leafed through the artist’s book endlessly reciting the poems of Paul Eluard, letting him be carried away by the enchanted lines: “in the stillness of her body a tiny snowball the colour of an eye, or the far-away sea that washes your eyes, or sadness inscribed in eyes that I love” (55). Paul Eluard had become the poet of sorrowful eyes and calm body of his servant girl, Magda who lost her fiancé through the execution by Gestapo. With Life is Elsewhere the Kunderian polyphonic novel has begun to be made of “variously formed matters” the way “a book” is for Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari (Lucy 93). In other words, the novel also becomes heteroglossic, enriched with “inserted genres” (Dialogic Imagination 410-11).

One day Jaromil started writing poems. It happened like this: once the housemaid
Magda happened to be in the bathroom without covering the keyhole. He peeped inside and savoured the scene. And then he suddenly noticed that Magda was looking straight in the eye. Though he made sure he could not be seen by Magda from inside “Madga’s gaze threw him into such a state of bewilderment” (56). Even more than the lost opportunity his lack of courage began to torment him and “He was seized by violent distaste for himself.” “The only salvation was flight.” His first poetic expression was born out of this experience, as a means of escape: “I am submerged in water and the beating of my heart makes circles on the surface” (59).

*Alas my aquatic love,* said another line, and Jaromil knew that the aquatic love was Magda; but he also knew that nobody else could find her in that line, that she was lost, extinguished, buried in the verse; the poem he had written was independent and unintelligible as reality itself. Reality does not discuss, it simply *is.* The independence of the poem provided Jaromil with a marvellous world of concealment, the possibility of a second existence. (60)

He showed his poem to his mother who was all praise for it. “She read and she cried” (61). The narrator provides a polyphonic interpretation for her tears: “Four kinds of tears flowed from her eyes. First, she was struck by the similarity between Jaromil’s poems and the poems which the artist had lent her, and her eyes filled with tears of lament for her first love”; then she sensed a certain general sadness emanating from her son’s lines, and this reminded her of husband’s abandoning her “and she wept tears of insult and hurt”; but quickly, she felt tears of consolation, for her son was a source of balm for all wounds; and after reading the poems over several times they remained incomprehensible to her and she therefore had the impression that, she was the mother of a marvellously gifted child (61). Thus the mother and the son found consolation in one another, the two unsuccessful lovers.
Jaromil “had stopped sketching long ago” and Maman discouraged his visits to the artist (99).

Jaromil got excited when the “girl he met at dancing class” “put her head on Jaromil’s shoulder” (109). Jaromil tried to command his body to put an end to its “shameful display” (110). He feared that the girl might notice it and blushed with shame. “After long deliberation, he took a long wide ribbon out of Maman’s linen closet and before his next rendezvous made the proper arrangements under his trousers to make sure that the semaphore of his excitement would remain surely tied to his leg” (110). It is not that Jaromil was not interested in bodily beauty. Novelist marks a fine distinction: “He did not long to possess a girl’s body; he longed to posses the face of a girl who would yield her body to him as proof of her love” (111). He is like Tereza in Unbearable Lightness who “can’t reconcile herself to the idea that the human body pisses and farts” (45). The body was beyond the bounds of his experience and therefore it became the subject of countless poems. Through the “magic of poetry” which is the “magic of inexperience” he transmuted that organ of copulation and procreation into an airy conceit of fanciful dreams: “In one poem he wrote that the middle of a girl’s body contained a small ticking clock” (111). “In another line of verse he imagined that a girl’s genitals were the home of invisible beings” (111). Jaromil, for the author “was living in the land of tenderness, the land of artificial childhood” (sic) (112).

Later Jaromil met a girl cashier in a white coat in the store, to which his mother sent him. “He liked the girl enormously” who “resembles the maid Magda whose fiancée was shot by the Germans” (164). Jaromil could develop a relationship with the redhead, the cashier’s friend very quickly and simply. “She not only liberated him of his virginity, she made him feel like a man of great prowess and experience” (180).
The relationship between Jaromil and redhead steadily grew. Jaromil once joined a
debate of young Marxists. He argued that in art too progress was indisputably taking place.
He invoked Marx’s idea that until modern times mankind had been living in prehistory, and
that its real history began only with the proletarian revolution, which was a leap from the
realm of necessity into that of freedom. In the history of art, a comparable decisive turning-
point was the moment when Andre Breton and other surrealists discovered automatic
writing, revealing a hidden treasury of the human consciousness. At this point the dark-
haired man entered the debate. He praised Jaromil for defending the principle of progress.
But he stated his belief that modern art was decadent and that the epoch in art which best
corresponded to the proletarian revolution was socialist realism. For him “Not Andre
Breton, but Jiri Wolker the founder of Czech socialist poetry - must be our model!” (116).
“Jaromil, too, now made attempts at a sarcastic laugh and responded that socialist realism
was nothing new from an artistic viewpoint, but only a replica of the old bourgeois ‘kitsch’ ”
(116). Whatever his argument Jaromil however was determined to join them.

Jaromil started a love affair with the university student he met there whom her
friends jokingly called “stone maiden” (123). The girl called him an ephebus and told him
that he was beautiful, intelligent and full of fantasy. “He sensed that the word [Greek one to
booth] had something to do with youth; not with the kind of youth he knew from personal
experience – awkward and degrading – but strong and admirable” (118). He felt himself to
be reborn. “At last he found his real portrait, which he had so long been seeking in both of
his mirrors” (122). Jaromil who “believed that love meant everything” could not agree more
when she said “ ‘I believe that in matters of the heart there is no such thing as compromise.
Love means that you give each other everything’ ” (123). He was still happier when he
learned that he was to be the stone-maiden’s first lover. Jaromil racked his brain over the
upcoming event of sex with the girl. He knew only that such an act required preparation, skill, and knowledge. He knew that behind it leered the threatening grimace of pregnancy and that there were ways of preventing it. He was as ashamed to procure “a transparent little sock” to prevent pregnancy. As part of “preparation” and “initiation” he started practising masturbation (“The Poet Masturbates” is the name of part 3 of the novel) easing his “fundamental opposition toward it” (125). The radio had announced that a revolution had broken out. Jaromil grasped the situation, “for in recent days he had heard a lot of talk about it”: “the three non-Communist ministers had threatened Communist premier Gottwald with resignation” (126). While lying sick in bed he heard on the radio the Communist premier denouncing the traitors who had planned to cripple the Communist Party and to block the nation’s progress toward socialism. He exhorted the people to insist on the resignation of the ministers, while new revolutionary organs of power under the leadership of the Communist Party were being organised. To Jaromil’s uncle’s curse “‘Those whores! Those lousy whores! Pulling of a putsch like that!’”. “‘It’s not a putsch, it’s a revolution’, he said” (127). Jaromil added “And I always knew that the working class would sweep capitalist parasites like you into the dust bin of history!” (127). Now the narrator says

. . . let us examine it. He used words which appeared over and over in Communist newspapers and in speeches of Communist orators, but Jaromil had always disliked them just as he disliked all jargon. He considered himself first and foremost a poet, and even though he held revolutionary opinions he was determined never to give up his own words. And yet he had spoken of capitalist parasites and the dust bin of history. (128)

Regarding this the novelist further clarifies; “. . . Jaromil discarded his own speech and chose to act as a medium for someone else” (128). Later in the day: “‘Mother, today I
made a big decision’, he announced ‘I’m joining the Communist Party’” (129-30). In his next meeting with the stone maiden though “he had a package of the transparent little socks in his jacket” (131) he failed to make love to the girl because he was “ashamed” (133). He began writing a long narrative poem about a man who suddenly realized that he was old: “This love has no door leading out / this love is like a wall . . .” (137). He longed for a female body but he was afraid of it. Therefore in his erotic poems he fled from the concreteness of the body into a world of childish playfulness. “He deprived the body of reality, and imagined the female genital organ as a humming toy” (138). “He wrote poems about an artificial childlike love, about an unreal death, and about an unreal old age” (138).

Next time Jaromil and the stone maiden met at Jaromil’s house. He failed to make love: “under his uneasy scrutiny his body seemed to be seized with fear. If anything it was shrinking rather than growing” (140). “She said at last, ‘You don’t love me’” (140). Jaromil intended to convince her that his failure had nothing to do with love. But he changed his mind and used the unexpected opportunity of the girl’s words for hiding his shame. To her accusation that he loved somebody else he bowed his head and sadly shrugged his shoulders, as if admitting there was some truth in the allegation “In all mirrors, he now saw only the leering grimace of his immaturity and that was unbearable” (142). It was in this circumstance that he sent the famous “poet illumined by the halo of membership in European avant garde” his poems with a humble pleading letter (142).

On his surprise visit to the artist he happened to be involved in a discussion of art and politics. They were arguing the same questions that were being heatedly debated at that time by all artists. Modern Czech art had always proclaimed its allegiance to the Communist revolution; but when the revolution arrived, it declared itself to be totally committed to a program of readily intelligible, popular realism and modern art was rejected as a product of
bourgeois decadence. “‘That’s our dilemma’ said one of the guests. ‘Should we betray the art we grew up with, or the revolution we admire?’” (148).

For the artist the question is badly formulated:

“A revolution that wants to dig up dead academic art and that manufactures busts of statesman on an assembly line betrays not only modern art, but itself. Such a revolution has no desire to change the world. Quite the contrary: to preserve the most reactionary spirit of history – the spirit of bigotry, discipline, dogmatism, faith, and conventionality. There is no dilemma. As true revolutionaries we cannot agree with this betrayal of revolution.” (148)

Jaromil thirsting for rebellion along with the distaste for acting the role of teacher’s pet said:

“You love to cite Rimbaud’s motto: it’s necessary to be absolutely modern. I quite agree. But the absolutely modern is not something we have seen coming for fifty years, but something that shocks, and surprises us. Surrealism is in no way absolutely modern – it’s been around for a quarter of a century. No, the modern event is the revolution which is now going on. Your failure to understand it only proves how it really is.” (148)

Here Jaromil is led astray by the fictional truth of Rimbaud, which he takes as having a universal, all-time truth value. Others interrupted him:

“‘Modern art was a movement aimed against the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie world’” (148). For Jaromil, Modern art was really consistent in its opposition to the contemporary world; it would welcome its own destruction. Modern art must have anticipated that revolution would create its own culture. As regards the statement of the woman with the
alto that all modern literature is prohibited and that the cubist paintings in the National
Gallery carted off to the cellar, Jaromil stated that revolution was violence.

“‘Surrealism above all other movements realized that old clowns have to be brutally kicked
off the stage, but it didn’t have the sense to know that it had turned old and useless itself’” (149).
The woman then wondered whether the regime would approve of Jaromil’s own
poetry. Jaromil then thought of his last poem, about two old people and their last love that
would never be published in the prevailing epoch of joyful song and agitprop verse. Jaromil
later found out that stone maiden had fallen in love with a colleague of his.

Jaromil had written to the famous poet but there was no response. He longed to get
in touch once more with the famous poet. Not by means of an ordinary letter, but in some
outrageously poetic way. Every day he managed to cut off the receiver from a phone booth
until he managed to acquire twenty of them. He despatched it to the great poet. He later
saw the poet in a seminar. The letter that he wrote as follows would long ring in his head as
a document of weakness and dependence:

My dear master, we are now in the month of love; I am seventeen years old:
the age of hopes and illusions, as they say
. . . And if I send you some of these verses . . . it is because I love all poets,
all good Parnassians. Don’t sneer too much when you read these verses:
you’ll make me deliriously happy, dear Master, [sic] if you’ll be so kind and
have my poem published! I am unknown; what difference does that make?
Poets are brothers. These lines believe, love, hope. That’s all. Dear master,
reach down to me, lift me up; I am young; give me your hand . . . .(170)

The language of the letter is poetical and it reveals the blind faith felt by simple
believers towards high priests of their church which seized Jaromil.

Jaromil took redhead many times to his home. Maman though unhappy about Jaromil’s relationship with redhead covered up her feelings. Jaromil however became a domineering lover who brooks no deviation from his norms. He was an absolutist who “couldn’t bear any opposition” (255).

Once Jaromil raved up against redhead girl for having been late for fifteen minutes. Jaromil quizzed the girl for the reason for being late. She cooked up lies one after the other. First she said she had an appointment with her friend “terribly depressed” over her “breaking up with her fiancée” (252). Then unable to mollify Jaromil she said she in fact had been to her brother Jan who “had decided to leave the country, secretly” and “illegally” (254). The girl had actually been to her middle-aged lover. The narrator presents what passed Jaramil’s mind then:

What’s that? Her brother wants to betray our young republic? To betray the revolution? Her brother wants to become an emigrant? Doesn’t he realize what he’s doing? Doesn’t he realise that all emigrants automatically become employees of foreign espionage services trying to undermine our country.

(254)

Typically of polyphonic novel, Jaromil’s words are concealed in the narrator’s. To him “Love means all or nothing. Love is total or it doesn’t exist” (255) and he admonishes redhead who loves her brother,

“... I am here, and he’s on the other side. You have to take your stand on my side, and not in the middle. And if you’re with me, you have to want what I want, do what I do. The fate of the revolution and my fate are one and the
same. Anybody who is against the revolution is against me. And if my enemies are not your enemies then you are my enemy!” (255-56)

The ensuing dialogue between redhead girl and Jaromil further reveals Jaromil’s arrant absolutism.

“Yes, that’s right,” he laughed sarcastically. “As well as you know how! The trouble is that you don’t know how! You don’t know how to love at all!”

She said that was not true.

“Could you live without me?”

She swore that she couldn’t.

“Could you go on living if I died?”

No, no, no.

“Could you go on living if I left you?”

No, no, she shook her head. (256-57)

After a while the same matter is repeated in their conversation:

He stiffened. “You mean you can imagine a situation in which you could go on living without me?”

The girl didn’t seem to notice the hidden trap. “I’d be awfully sad.”

“But you would be able to go on living.”

“What else could I do if you left me? But I’d be terribly lonely” (258).
Jaromil was not satisfied. He realized that he had been a victim of a misunderstanding and
the redhead girl had not really pledged her death – that she would not perform an innocent
sati after his death. For him the girl’s answer that she couldn’t live without him was only “a
bit of conventional love-patter, a petty phrase, a metaphor.” “He knew only absolutes! All
or nothing, life and death!” (258). He still queried, insatiated.

Jaromil reports the matter of redhead’s brother leaving the country at the police
headquarter to his friend, the janitor’s son, the policeman. Police picked up redhead girl and
her brother. Janitor’s son then informed Jaromil

“‘You put us on the track of a very serious matter. We’ve got to get those bugs under a
magnifying glass’” (emphasis added). And now only Jaromil understood “that through his
decisive act he had entered the realm of tragedy” (264). The whole matter thus ends very
ironically.

Jaromil had risked the safety of his own beloved precisely because he loved
her more than other men love their women; precisely because he knew what
love and the bright new world of pure feeling were all about. Of course, it is
terrible to sacrifice a concrete living woman (redheaded, petite, talkative,
freckle faced) for the sake of the future world. Such a sacrifice, the only
genuine tragedy of our time, was worthy of a great poem! (265)

Then Jaromil started to write the greatest poem of his life out of this experience. “‘I
am writing the greatest poem of my life’, he said” (266).

The narrative then recalls an English romantic poet: “You must be mine to die upon
the rock if I want you, a sick and jealous Keats had written to his Fanny” (211) and this rang
through ages. “The redhead girl now belonged to him more than ever: her fate was his
creation. . . she was his victim, his creation; she was his, his, totally his own!” (266). The jealous poet, Jaromil was no longer jealous and slept the deep sleep of a real man that night.

Part 6 of the novel, “The Middle-aged Man” is metafictional. It is fashioned by the novelist “in about the same relationship to the rest of the story as does a small guest house to a country manor” (271). The section begins as follows: “The first part of our story embraced fifteen years of Jaromil’s life, whereas the fifth part, although equally long, covered barely one year. In this book time thus flows in a tempo opposite that of real life: the tempo slows down as the years go by” (269). The story here flouts the unity of time and openly declares its discarding the time-honoured convention of storytelling, celebrating its new way of conceptualising time.

Neither Jaromil nor his mother appears, nor are even their names mentioned in this part. The novelist quite metafictionally presents the role of the guest house “played by a gentleman’s flat” (272). The gentleman who was getting old, who hated uninvited visitors and therefore arranged set of signals with his friends and mistresses, had a visitor, a girl. She informed him that she had been let go after three years in prison. She confided in him, letting the reader make discoveries, as follows:

Of course she remembered: that was the afternoon when she had stayed with her middle-aged companion a bit longer than she had intended, and had been late for her date with the young man. The youth had been mortally insulted and she realized that only an excuse of equally mortal gravity could mollify him. She therefore had invented the story that she had spent the afternoon with a brother who was about to flee the country. (277)

The above passage is the only thing that implies that part 6 is on the redhead girl and
her middle-aged lover. The middle-aged man informed the girl now about the death of a poet “who just got sick and died” (279) and his mother’s moving away from the place. The middle-aged man appears as an antithesis of Jaromil. “This man was kind to her [redhead girl] and never demanded anything” (279). The redhead girl “was always safe with him; it was the kind of safety people feel when they are momentarily out of the reach of their own fate” (279).

This part of the novel is “another story” in a sense, but not “really” (286). This “interlude” “was only a pause in the story” “in the lives of the middle-aged man and the girl” (286). And for the narrator this section in the novel “was only a quite interlude in which an anonymous man unexpectedly lights a lamp of kindness” (286). And the narrator ends addressing the absent addressee: “Let us gaze at it for a few seconds more that quiet lamp, that kindly light, before it vanishes from our sight . . .” (286). Thus the part ends with an ellipsis, which is often used, in this text.

In the above quotations and metafictional statements the other person’s word though not reproduced influences and in one way or another determines the author’s word while itself remaining outside it as Bakhtin identified. The entire text is presented in the style of this kind of hidden polemic.

“Exactly when and where was the poet conceived?” (3). This is how the novel begins. This question appears, as it is from the addressee. On the question poet’s father and mother differ. For father “the poet had been conceived in the apartment of his friend, on a certain day that had been especially lucky” (3). Mother not only “refused to admit the possibility” for this, but also another or second alternative “that conception had taken on a park bench” (3). Maman in turn was “quite certain that the poet could have been conceived only on a
particular sunny summer morning behind a huge boulder picturesquely silhouetted against a green valley” of Prague (3). This shows the dialogic way in which people come to conclusions. Here conclusion is a dialogic reply to some one else’s opinion and it has no truth-value. The reason she rejected the two alternatives was because they were not of her liking – the first “was a typically untidy bachelor’s place” and “she was repelled by the disheveled bed and rumpled pajamas” and the second because park benches were for her “a common place for harlots and streetwalkers” (3). The kind of place she visualized that the conception had taken place is an ideal one for the romantic poet that Jarmoil is. The characters constantly hear each other, call out to one another and are mutually reflected in one another (Problems 62).

The narration then steadily progresses by taking into consideration or anticipating the response of the absent addressee. The narrator asks regarding Maman’s love for the engineer: “After all, had her great love for the poet’s father not been a romantic revolt against the prosaic orderliness of her parents?” (4). A little further on Maman is presented as “our young heroine” (6).

Regarding the engineer’s unwillingness to have the child born rather than aborted the narrator says, “We have already touched on this in the previous chapter: Maman so soon learned that the man who had been so avid for a love adventure was afraid of a life adventure, and had no wish to join her in a journey to the stars” (9).

A good example of how the narration progresses in a dialogic fashion is the following two passages on Jarmoil-Maman relationship.

It wasn’t true that she had betrayed the artist for her husband’s sake – it had been for Jaromil’s sake. She had wanted to safeguard a proper home for her
son! If her own nakedness made her anxious to this day, it was because Jaromil had marred her belly forever. She had even lost her husband’s love because of Jaromil, having stubbornly insisted on bringing him into the world. From the very first, he had taken from her all she had! (109)

After two chapters, in chapter 14 – part 3, the narrator presents Maman who is the mother of a grownup Jaromil, with whom she now has some distance mentally:

She tormented herself with memories. But at last, as she contemplated the past, she gained a glimpse of the paradise in which she had lived with the infant Jaromil, and she changed her mind. No, it was not true that Jaromil was taking everything away from her; on the contrary, he had given her more than anybody else.(112)

This novel is expressing “doubt, indignation, irony, mockery or ridicule” to the romantic attitude to life. This is what Bakhtin calls “the second manifestation of the third type of word” (Problems 160) or the “double-voiced word” (Problems 153) – parody. The second voice, “here the romantic voice which has made its home” in the narrator’s word “Collides in a hostile fashion with the original owner and forces him to serve purposes diametrically opposed to his own” (Problems 160). This novel is thus a parody of “not only an epoch of terror, but also an epoch of lyricism, ruled hand in hand by the hangman and the poet” (Life is Elsewhere 270).

“Life is elsewhere” is a famous sentence of Rimbaud.

Life is elsewhere, French students wrote on the wall of the Sorbonne. Yes, he knows that very well, that’s why he is leaving London for Ireland, where the people are rebelling. His name is Percy Shelley, he is twenty years old,
and he is carrying hundreds of leaflets and proclamations as passports which will ensure his entry into real life.

For real life is elsewhere. The students are pulling up cobblestones, overturning cars, making barricades; their entrance into the world is noisy and magnificent, illuminated by flames and glorified by explosions of tear gas grenades. Life was so much harder for Rimbaud, who dreamed about the barricades of the Paris commune but was unable to leave Charleville. But in 1968, thousands of Rimbauds have their own barricades, standing behind them they refuse to make any compromise with the temporary owners of the world. Liberation of man must be total or nothing. (Life is Elsewhere 175)

Jaromil with his concept of total revolution made the readhead girl’s life elsewhere. Her brother’s life is also made elsewhere, of which no one knows about later. Jaromil himself has his life elsewhere. That is why Kundera calls him not a “bad poet” but a “monster” one (Postscript to Life is Elsewhere 310). So it is not surprising that Jaromil brought doom to the girl he loved and her brother and still “hadn’t killed himself but had died a perfectly ordinary death.” Thus “Even his death turned its back on her” (279). What ultimately is forgotten is that “Life has to go on,” and that “life has its needs” (108).

Life is Elsewhere as all other novels of Kundera is against totalitarianism, but with a significant variation. Here “The wall behind which people were imprisoned was made of verse. There was dancing in front of it. No, not a dance macabre! A dance of innocence. Innocence with a bloody smile” (270). But it was not merely “a period of shabby lyricism” (270).

“The novelist, who wrote about this period with the blind eyes of a conformist,
produced mendacious, stillborn works” (270-71). The poet however just as blind often “left behind beautiful verse” but it was “a beautiful rainbow spanning prison walls” (271).

The totalitarianism of everyday life pervades Kundera’s work as well as Kafka’s (Restuccia 282). Thus “The novel is the one bright book of life” for which “why the novel matters” for D.H. Lawrence (Enright and Chickera 289).

It will be appropriate to end the analysis of this novel with a few words from Life is Elsewhere, which beautifully defamiliarizes absence of response, or monologue, which the narrator likens to a surrealist art. This sentence describes the “forsaken” (153) Jaromil whom the “stone maiden” (152) had left after his failure to make love, which she interpreted as absence of love:

A letter addressed to the girl (a tearful, imploring letter) floated into that tunnel and vanished without a trace. Jaromil thought of the telephone receiver hanging on the wall of his room. Alas, the surrealist art object took on a very real significance: a disconnected receiver, an unanswered letter, a conversation with nobody listening . . . (sic). (153)

The above passage is monologism or absence of dialogism, artistically presented.

In part 3 of the novel Immortality in the chapter “To be Absolutely Modern” while discussing Paul, Kundera says, “He merges in my mind with the figure of Jaromil from a novel that I finished exactly twenty years ago, . . .” (155). Kundera makes a recapitulation of Life is Elsewhere incorporating it into the present text as follows:

We are in Prague, the year is 1948, and eighteen-year-old Jaromil is madly in love with modern poetry, with Breton, Eluard, Dernos, Nazval, and following their example becomes a votary of Rimbaud’s dictum from A Season in Hell:
‘It is necessary to be absolutely modern.’ However, what turned out to be absolutely modern in Prague in 1948 was the socialist revolution, which promptly and brutally rejected the modern art Jaromil loved madly. And then my hero, along with some of his friends (just as madly in love with modern art) sarcastically renounced everything he loved (truly loved, with all his heart), because he did not wish to betray the great commandment ‘to be absolutely modern’. His renunciation was full of the range and passion of a virginal youth who longs to break into adulthood through some brutal act. Seeing his stubbornly renouncing everything dearest to him, everything he had lived for and would have loved to go on living for, seeing him renouncing Cubism and Surrealism, Picasso and Dali, Breton and Rimbaud, renouncing them in the name of Lenin and the Red Army (who at that moment formed the pinnacle of any imaginable modernity), his friends were dismayed; at first they felt amazement, then revulsion and finally something close to horror. The sight of his virginal youth ready to adapt to whatever proclaimed itself as modern, and to adapt not through cowardice (for the sake of personal gain or career), but courageously, as one painfully sacrificing what he loved, yes, this sight revealed a horror (a portent of the horror to come, the horror of persecution and imprisonment). It is possible that some of those watching him at the time thought to themselves: ‘Jaromil is the ally of his gravediggers.’

(Immortality 155-56)

The novelist here adds upon his earlier novel in a novel written twenty years later, simultaneously banking upon the earlier one to further his arguments in the later one. Kundera hands over a copy of Life is Elsewhere to Avenarius in Immortality and became
sad because the book was for his insomniac wife who needed to consume mountains of books in bed and Avenarius had never read the novel. Books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told (Eco 20).

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, published in 1978 was responded to by Czechoslovakian government by revoking the citizenship of Milan Kundera. The act was mainly symbolic and gratuitous for Kundera had left his homeland three years before and settled in France. The act was also a response to the subversive aspect of the polyphonic text that the The Book is.

The novel has seven separate stories which could be schematically presented as follows:

Part One : Lost Letters     Part Four : Lost Letters
Part Two : Mother            Part Five : Litost
Part Three : The Angels      Part Six : The Angels

Part Seven : The Border

Of the above, four stories share titles and only two of the above stories, part 4, “Lost Letters” and part 6, “The Angels” are a continuation of one another and concern the same character, Tamina. This work blurs the boundary between shortstory and novel and shares elements of many other genres like essay, autobiography and even literary criticism. The Book, however, cannot be treated as a collection of shortstories. “It is, by its very nature, not canonic” characteristic of a polyphonic novel, as Bakhtin says (Dialogic Imagination 39). “Is it a novel?” Kundera asks himself and tells us, “Yes to my mind” (The Art 83).
Because for him “The novel is a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters” (The Art 83). Kundera does not write seven novels and if he were to write like that he would have failed in encompassing the complexity of existence in modern world in a single book (The Art 72). The seven parts do not have clearcut boundaries separating one from another. They are linked to each other not through continuing narrative but through the omnipresence of the authorial voice who comments, digresses and interjects often in casual and non-fictional ways and through repetition with variation of certain themes and motifs. The essayistic, discontinuous and fantastic elements which commingle in The Book have emboldened many to even question the most dubious unity in the text. Charles Molesworth’s “one way to see the novel's unity is to see it thematically” and to define its themes as the limitations of certain sensibilities – the humourless, the kitschy.

Indicating the polyphonic structure of the novel the authorial voice tells us: “The entire book is a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual stretches of a journey leading toward a theme, a thought, a single situation, the sense of which fades into the distance” (The Book 165). Here Kundera appears to have adopted Bakhtinian term, “variation” into the larger context of novelistic narration. For Bakhtin the “variation” like stylization is a form of internally dialogized mutual illumination of language (Dialogic Imagination 362). The method of analysis inferring the fabula and comparing it with sjuzet which has been possible in the case of The Joke will not work here. There are too many discrete fabulas to cope with as stated by David Lodge but however they are narrated in a straightforward summary fashion. “The ‘deformation’ of the fabula in the sjuzet consists not so much in the manipulation of chronology and point of view as in the disruption of the temporal, spatial continuity of the narrative by the intrusions and digressions of the authorial narrator” (Lodge, “Idea of the Author” 116). The narrator
reveals himself clearly, though, in part 3 “The Angels,” as “Milan Kundera” and relates several apparently “true” stories about his own life. A journey through the individual parts, as the narrator terms it, will only reveal the multivoicedness of the text.

**Part One - Lost Letters**

This variation begins with an incident in Czech history in February 1948 coinciding with the birth of Communist Czechoslovakia. Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out of the balcony of a palace in Prague to address thousands of his fellow citizens packed into Old Town Square. Then the solicitous comrade Clementis took his hat off and set it on Gottwald’s head where he stood bareheaded in the cold with snow flurries. This photograph was highly publicized by Party propaganda section. Four years later Clementis was charged with treason and hanged and the propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history. He is forgotten.

Then comes the story of Mirek and his struggle against forgetting. In 1971 Mirek declared “that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”(3). This was an attempt to justify his keeping a careful diary, preserving all correspondence and taking notes at meetings, discussing current situation. This he told his sceptic friends was not against constitution. But Mirek soon realised his mistake. He accepts the dialogic position of his friends. “He had finally come around to the position of his more cautious friends.” It is true that the constitution guaranteed freedom of speech, but the law punished any act that could be construed as undermining the State. “Who could tell when the state would start screaming that this or that word was undermining it? He decided he’d better put the incriminating papers in a safe after all” ([The Book](#) 4). As Bakhtin observes this is an example of the speech of another (here Mirek) introduced into the author’s discourse in “concealed form” ([Dialogic Imagination](#) 303).
This shows Mirek accepting the dialogical position of his friends subsequently entering into dialog with himself and taking a new position vis-a-vis the world. For this, “first” “he wanted to settle the Zdena problem” (4). Twenty-five years back he had an affair with Zdena and had written so many letters to her. After many unsuccessful attempts he got through his telephone call to Zdena and arranged to meet her that afternoon. He set on his journey to meet Zdena driving his own car. On the way “he realized that a car had been tailing him all along” (6).

The narrative then digresses to the Czechoslovakian history. One bloody massacre leads to another – Bangladesh leads to Czechoslovakia which leads to the war in the Sinai desert and to the one in Cambodia - until ultimately everyone lets everything be forgotten.

“In 1939, German troops marched into Bohemia, and the Czech state ceased to exist. In 1945, Russian troops marched into Bohemia, and the country was once again declared an independent republic. The people showed great enthusiasm for Russia – which had driven the Germans from their country – and because they considered Czech Communist Party its faithful representative, they shifted their sympathies to it. And so it happened that in February 1948 the Communists took power not in bloodshed and in violence, but to the cheers of about half the population. And please note: the half that cheered was the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the better half.” (8)

Of course, the authorial narrator sounds an omniscient one, absolutely sure about himself contrary to the polyphonic conception. But he is the one who recognizes that “One of a novelist’s inalienable rights is to be able to rework his novel” (11) and not one who asks for the willing suspension of disbelief. The Communists also had a brand-new world in mind
whereas the others (opponents) had no great dream. The narrator’s interpretation of it is:

Now let me repeat: an Idyll for all. People have always aspired to an idyll, a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man or man against other men, where the world and all its people are moulded from a single stock and the fire lighting up the heavens is the fire burning in the hearts of men, where every man is a note in a magnificent Bach fugue and anyone who refuses his note is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless, easily caught and squashed between the fingers like an insect. (8)

The monological principle of “Utopian socialism with its faith in the omnipotence of convictions” identified by Bakhtin as inimical to polyphonic conception of life and art is under attack (Problems 66).

The narrator returns, after the polyphonic digression, to Mirek who is travelling, followed by another car. Mirek’s affair with Zdena lasted three years. “Soon he married a woman whose beauty gave his self-esteem a big boost.” Then she died and Mirek was left with a son in solitude. “He had also been highly successful in his research, and that shielded him. Since the state needed him, he could afford to make cutting political remarks before anyone else dared to.” But “when after the Russians came, he refused to disavow his opinions, they removed him from his job and surrounded him with undercover agents.” Thus this story also is only a polyphonic variation on the recurring event of expulsion in Kundera, especially from career as a part of political oppression. “He was in love with his fate and found pomp and beauty in the march to the ruin.” The narrator intervenes in the dialogic way: “Now don’t misunderstand me. I said he was in love with his fate, not with
himself. Those are two very different things. His life assumed a separate identity and started pursuing interests of its own, quite apart from Mirek’s. That is what I mean when I say his life became his fate” (10-11).

The above is an illustration of Bakhtin’s idea of existence as a dialogue. “Being” as Todorov says is for Bakhtin not just an event, but an event that is shared. Being is a simultaneity, it is always a co-being. In Mirek’s case we find a conflict between being and co-being, that is between Mirek’s “life assumed as a separate identity” as the narrator says and his fate which is the “co-being.” In short, Mirek bowed out to his fate.

The following passage regarding the Mirek-Zdena relationship is a typical example of double-accented, double-styled hybrid constructions in the novel:

Why was he so ashamed of her, anyway?

The most obvious explanations was that very early in the game Mirek had joined forces, with those who vowed to hunt down their own deed, while Zdena had always remained loyal to the garden where nightingales sing. More recently she had even joined the two per cent of the population who welcomed the Russian tanks.

True but I don’t find it convincing enough. If the only problem was that she had welcomed the Russian tanks, he would simply have given her a good public talking-to; he would not have denied ever having known her. No. Zdena had done him a far greater wrong: She was ugly.

But that couldn’t make any difference. He hadn’t slept with her for more than twenty years.
It made a big difference. Even so far away Zdena’s big nose cast a shadow over his life. (11)

After a few short paragraphs the narrative continues with Mirek’s reply to a common friend why he had an affair with Zdena at all, if he hated her so much:

Mirek’s explanation was that he’d been a twenty-year-old brat at the time, seven years younger than she. Besides, she was respected, admired, omnipotent! She knew practically everyone on the Central Committee! She helped him, pushed him, introduced him to influential people! (12)

Bakhtin calls the above a hybrid construction because it is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two languages, two semantic and axiological belief systems (Dialogic Imagination 304). In the above example it could be said that there enters a third semantic and axiological belief system – “omnipotent” the word would conduce to an authoritarian discourse, that is being suggested by Mirek. For novel is the place where diversity of social speech types and individual voices enter.

The narrator then intercepts, saying Mirek was not telling the truth. Zdena had no influential contact twenty-five years back. Instead “... he’d taken an ugly mistress because he didn’t dare to go after beautiful women. Zdena was as high as he rated himself then. A weak will and utter poverty – those were the secrets he had hoped to hide” (13). The originality of Mirek’s story lies in the fact that he who is struggling with all his might in order not be forgotten is at the same time hell-bent on making people forget his ex-mistress, whom he is ashamed of. The situation therefore is rather existential than political. Man has
always harboured the desire to rewrite history both his own and others’. The novelistic exploration of the theme of forgetting has no end and no conclusion (The Art 130).

Mirek met Zdena and asked for letters he had written to her. She replied “‘I’ll never give them to you. Never.’” Mirek “couldn’t stand the idea that a piece of his life had stayed behind in her hands” (18). The letter, Bakhtin says, like the speech in a dialog is addressed to a specific person. Now that Zdena is not in a relationship to Mirek as earlier he found irritable that those letters were with her. But more than that his fear was that those would reach the hands of a wrong interlocutor – the State. Mirek drove back. He airbrushed Zdena out of the picture in the same way Party propaganda section airbrushed Clementis from the balcony. When Mirek returned, a thorough search was going on in the house, in his son’s presence, by two men who came with search warrants. The list of the confiscated items included letters from Mirek’s friends, documents from the early days of the Russian occupation, analysis of the political situation, minutes of meeting, and a few books – the might be actually spoken and the already said against authoritarian discourse – and not any lethal weapon. After a year of investigatory custody Mirek was sentenced for six years and his son for two years.

Part Two: Mother

This part is about Karel, his wife, Marketa and “Mother” (sic) (not named). Marketa had daily run-ins with her mother-in-law who “was so hostile and ready to take offence” and so they moved “‘as far from Mother as possible.’” “Then one day her [Marketa’s] father-in-law died and mother was left all alone” (27). After some time they invited Mother to stay for a week with them. Eva, a friend arrives in the afternoon and Marketa picks her up at the station. The authorial narrator gives independence to Eva and presents her in her own words: she was a light-hearted man chaser. She did not chase men to marry them, though,
she chased them the way men chase women. Marketa has arranged to introduce Eva as her cousin to her mother-in-law to cover up her real three-way love-sex relationship with Karel and Marketa.

Mother, while talking to Marketa and Eva, got her childhood memories mixed up. “Memory” “was playing” “tricks” “on her” (33). Karel and Eva are together in the house with no others present near them. Eva discards her clothing one by one and dances, on Karel’s request to have a look at her, naked. Marketa and Eva are having a conversation while Karel receives a phone call.

“His voice was hesitant, his responses suspiciously laconic and suggestive. Marketa had the feeling he was choosing his words very carefully, trying to hide the real sense of what he was saying. She was certain he was making a date with another woman” (36). Marketa knew that the telephone call didn’t mean a thing in itself. The telephone call instead represented “an eloquent condensation of her whole life situation” (37). Fitting for a polyphonic novel the telephone call acts as a metaphor for what life is for Marketa. Lynne Pearce in the book Reading Dialogics “argue” for telephone as a “suggestive metaphor for coming to terms with the central tenets of dialogism.” For Pearce the telephone conversation exemplifies the Bakhtinian concept of dialogicality by being predicated on the active communication of two participants: the speaker and his or her addressee (1-2).

“Everything she did, she did for Karel she took care of his mother. She introduced him to her best friend, in fact, she gave her to him. For his very own, for his pleasure” (37). But the narrator asks: “And why did she do so much? Why did she try so hard? Why like Sisyphus did she roll her boulder up the hill? No matter what she did, Karel was spiritually elsewhere. He made dates with other women and constantly eluded her” (37).
Marketa and Karel quarrelled over the phone call. Both of them said they could not take it anymore. Though for Marketa “deep down she knew that this time she was in the wrong” (38). This is a self-deception on Marketa’s part. Marketa, Eva and Karel were involved in a “three-way love” (33) sex relationship and Karel did not get the thrill of philandering and when he now saw Marketa “in the arms of another woman, he felt like falling to his knees and begging her forgiveness” (40). Both Karel and Marketa felt the same; like Sisyphus, “Each was rolling a boulder up a hill. Both were tired” (41).

Mother recalled an incident of her school days. Right after the First World War in 1918, the year Czechoslovakia was founded “Mother had recited a poem at a special school assembly. It was to celebrate the end of the Austrian Empire. To celebrate their independence” (32). And suddenly she went blank, could not remember the last stanza. She was so ashamed that she ran and locked herself in the girls’ room and the Principal ran after her to comfort her. Karel contested mother’s version of the story saying “ ‘You graduated in the last year of the war’ ” (33) and

Karel had really set her thinking. He was absolutely right of course: She had graduated during the war. She had gotten mixed up. That story about reciting the poem and forgetting the last stanza had taken place at least five years earlier. The principal really had pounded on the door of the girls’ room where she’d locked herself to weep. But she couldn’t have been more than thirteen at the time, and it was nothing but a Christmas assembly. (42)

This is mother speaking through the author and is therefore a double-styled discourse. Though ashamed of her memory mother was not ready to make amends:

What should she tell Karel? Should she admit she’d mixed things up? As it
was, he thought of her as an old woman. Oh they were nice to her, all right, but Mother couldn’t help noticing they treated her like a child, with a kind of condescension she found distasteful. If she owned up and told Karel he’d been right and she’d confused a Christmas assembly with a political rally, they’d grow a few inches taller and she’d shrink even more. No, no, she wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. (42)

So she decided that she should tell them that she in fact had recited the poem after the war upon Principal’s invitation, though she was out of school then. Mother later tried to set the record straight telling them again about her recitation at the assembly, celebrating the end of World War I. “What Karel found interesting was not so much the story told by Mother as mother telling the story – Mother and her giant-pear world with a Russian tank perching on it like a lady bug” (44). It was the same Mother who had simply thought about pears when everybody else was talking about the advancing Russian tanks.

Karel persists upon the mother asking her to recite the patriotic poem whose last stanza she has forgotten.

Mother concentrated for a moment. Then utterly engrossed, she began reciting the poem she had recited at the school assembly when she was thirteen: not a patriotic poem at all, but some lines about a Christmas tree and star of Bethlehem. No one noticed the difference, not even Mother. All she could think of was whether she would remember the lines of the last stanza.

And she did. The star of Bethlehem burned bright and guided the Three kings all the way to the manger, [emphasis added]. She was excited by her success, and laughed and tossed her head proudly. (45)
Novelistic discourse here incorporates other genres into its own peculiar structure reformulating it (*Dialogic Imagination* 5).

Here Kundera is showing another kind of forgetting; geriatric forgetting – so to say – “Mother was getting on in years, and her memory wasn’t what it once was” (42). This senile forgetting for the Mother and Kundera’s father precedes death. Thus as for the nation, in the case of human beings forgetfulness precedes death. But mother’s forgetfulness is not so simple; it is complex and ambiguous. Did mother really forget or had she fashionably rebuilt her story to suit the occasion? Not even Mother can answer this correctly. This shows us how reality is later reconstructed by an intermingling of memory and forgetfulness. This is also an illustrious illustration of how existence is dialogic. Reality is contrary to Mother’s expression of it, still she is not ready to change it for fear that the others, here Karel, Marketa, and Eva, might “grow a few inches taller and she’d shrink even more” (42). Instead she herself wants to grow taller by her tall story. This is an in depth investigation made into human existence with a few words showing the intricacies involved in dialogue and existence. Mother, the central character in this part is unfinalized and indeterminate in nature – the hallmark of the hero of Dostoevskian polyphonic novel identified by Bakhtin. Mother sees a similarity between Eva and her own friend, Nora, a strikingly beautiful woman with the magnificent face of an empress. Karel once saw Nora at a spa – “tall, magnificent, naked woman” – with her back to the four-year-old that he was. Since then he had nurtured a love tinged with fear and envy for her. The narrator reminds us: “Let’s not forget that Mother’s sight was very bad. She mistook stones for a village, saw Nora in Eva” (46). This however has an influence upon Karel – “All Karel had to do was to squint a little and he would see huts instead of stones too.” Memory of Nora acted upon the sexual mood of Karel. He made love to Eva imagining her as Nora: “He had the feeling
that the leap he had taken was a leap across endless time

. . . . That movement, usually measuring six inches at most, was as long as three decades” (47). Sex here as elsewhere in Kundera becomes “a very revealing situation” (The Art 214).

He soon was caught up in his frenzy. In it from Nora he went over to Marketa and back and forth. He felt like “grandmaster,” Bobby Fischer who “just finished off two opponents on adjoining chessboards”: “I’m Bobby Fischer ! I’m Bobby Fischer !” (47). Chess enters the discourse of the novel here exhibiting its elasticity. “While Karel was shouting that he felt like Bobby Fischer (who at just about this time had won the world championship in Iceland) Eva and Marketa were lying on the couch in one another’s arms” (48). What Bakhtin calls “contemporaneity,” contemporary life becomes the content of the novel here (Dialogic Imagination 19).

Marketa saw off Eva. Karel was sure that “of the two or three thousand times he had made love” “only two or three were really essential and unforgettable.” He is also “well aware that yesterday’s session was one of the two or three really great ones . . .” (50-51). Karel saw off the Mother who politely declined to live with them saying she felt back at home.

Part Three - The Angels

“But even a literary language is anything but a closed dialect,” so says Bakhtin (Dialogic Imagination 294). Kundera illustrates this with regard to Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco. “The Angels” is also a parody of inhuman and arbitrary textual theories and specifically of Structuralism and thus belongs to the variety of Bakhtin’s hetero-directed double voiced word. Gabrielle and Michelle, two American girls who were the pets of their teacher, Madame Raphael were doing an analysis of Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco.
Gabrielle expressed her inability to understand so many people turning to rhinoceros. “Think of it as a symbol,” Michelle told her. “True” said Gabrielle. “Literature is a system of signs” (55). They later agreed that the symbol of the rhinoceros is meant to create a comic effect. The two girls laughed. There are two kinds of laughter. The laughter of the Devil and the laughter of Angels. “Whereas the Devil’s laughter pointed up the meaningless of things, the Angel’s shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well conceived, beautiful, good, and sensible everything on earth was” (62).

The two girls laughed emerging out of the stationery shops and theirs was the laughter of the Angel. They were the unquestioning blockheaded pets of Madame Raphael who “always kept their eyes on her and carefully wrote down her every word” (55). Madame Raphael on her part always longed to dance in a ring. The narrator further describes her:

All her life she had looked for a group of people she could hold hands with and dance with in a ring. First she looked for them in the Methodist Church (her father was a religious fanatic), then in the Communist Party, then among the Trotskyites, then in the anti-abortion movement (A child has a right to life!), then in the pro-abortion movement (A woman has a right to her body!); she looked for them among the Marxists, the psychoanalysts, and the structuralists; she looked for them in Lenin, Zen Buddhism, Mao Tse-tung, yogis, the nouveau roman, Brechtian theater, the theater of panic; and finally she hoped she could at least become one with her students, which meant she always forced them to think and say exactly what she thought and said, and together they formed a single body and a single soul, a single ring and a single dance. (63)
Kundera is not simply critiquing totalitarianism or nonrepresentational literature but any collective conviction that there is only one view that is true to the exclusion of all other possibilities (O’Brien 99). Madame Raphael is one of the most parodic characters in The Book. Kundera is parodying the educational system too which is one of the elementary institutions acting as thought police – disciplining students by straight-jacketing their thoughts. The girls trying to figure out what the play really means at last reaches a dramatic conclusion making two points (that a rhinoceros has a horn and that Ionesco’s play is meant to be funny) not only with words, but with their bodies as well. But the dramatic conclusion is inconclusive. The girls give their report wearing cardboard rhino horns, as awkward as if a man had stood up in front of the class and shown off his amputated arm as the author-figure says. Still the girls accept the laughter of their teacher as a sign of encouragement. Sarah, the mischievous class mate kicked the girls one after the other seeing “them making fools of themselves” (73). The girls understood the message, whereas the teacher who took it as a part of the planned presentation laughs all the more. Thus as John O’Brien says “A surrealist finale of semiotic confusion holds and concludes the study.” The kick which is the crux of the scene amplifies the irony to a tragic comedy on the failure of language (Hunter and White 344). The author in line with the one in “The Death of the Author” retains only his power to mix writings as he is wont to do; to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them (Lodge and Wood 167).

Parallel to this is the autobiographical narrative of circle dancing. Kundera “too once danced in a ring. He took fellow Communist students by hand, put arms around their shoulders, took two steps in place, one step forward, lifted first one leg and then the other and did it just about every month. The book with the name One Step Forward, Two Steps Back by Lenin first published in 1947 is parodied here. “Then one day” he “said
something” he “would better have left unsaid.” And he “was expelled from the Party and had to leave the circle” (65). At one of the anniversaries when he wandered into, he was forbidden entrance. It was June 1950; the day after Milada Horakova, a representative of the Socialist Party was hanged together with Zavis Kalandra, Czech surrealist and friend of Andre Breton and Paul Eluard. Andre Breton who did not believe that Kalandra had betrayed the people and its hopes called upon Eluard from Paris to protest the absurd accusation and save the life of their old Prague friend. But Eluard was too busy dancing in the gigantic ring encircling Paris, Moscow, Warsaw, Prague, Sofia, and Athens, encircling all the Socialist countries and all the Communist parties of the world, too busy reciting his beautiful poems about joy and brotherhood. It is ironic that Paul Eluard who in “his own words, singer of I’mour poesie, love poerty” (Immortality 209) and who sang “Love is at work it is tireless” (as qtd. in The Book 68) refused to stand up for his friend. This validates Ludivik’s experience in The Joke and his definition of man as a being capable of consigning his neighbour to death. This also validates Kundera’s permanent equation of lyricism with escapism and more seriously, with authoritarianism. Kundera says what he is referring to is the real incident of his “admired French poet Paul Eluard publicly and ceremoniously renouncing the Prague friend whom Stalinist justice was sending to the gallows” (Postscript to Life is Elsewhere 320).

Soon after the Russians occupied his country in 1968, like thousands of his countrymen Kundera lost the privilege of working. So for Kundera – “one of the newly accused (myself)” (68) – in order to eke out a living, some of his fine young friends offered to use their names as cover for him to write scripts, plays, articles, columns etc. He secretly wrote a horoscope column in the guise of a nuclear physicist for the magazine of his friend, R. . This was found out and this cost R. her job. The only thing left for him was to leave
his country. Kundera who had been attached to R. “in the most innocent, asexual way” now
“felt evident desire to make love to her or to be more exact, evident desire to rape her.”
“Perhaps that wild desire to rape R. was merely a desperate attempt to grab something
during the fall” (75-76).

As Nina Pelikan Straus says the reductive singleness of various discourses is the
object of parody here and it makes parallels between the politics of Communist self-
reference and the discourse of structuralist criticism. Besides, Kundera writes of angels of
orthodoxy who have tricked us all with their semantic hoax recognizing what Tzvetan
Todorov (who is similarly placed historically) identifies as a danger of over-theorization in
recent years in a discourse that no longer had anything but itself for its object. Kundera
insists that a real world beyond intertextual circle dancing exists and as in the enactment of
the Rhinoceros drama it can only be transcended by substituting for it an abstraction which
serves to deny that real world. Therefore, The Book is an attack on structuralist and
poststructuralist theories at one level and therefore a deconstruction of deconstruction at
another level. (Straus 70-71). The heterogeneity of this section lends way to an allegorical
reading of it by Laura L. Brennan and Mathew C. Brennan. They find Kundera using the
iconography of angels to bind two parallel plots and to symbolize his fall from the
Communist Party. Gabrielle corresponds to Gabriel, the divine messenger who announced
the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ; Michelle corresponds to Michael, leader of
the host of heaven, who according to Paradise Lost drove Adam and Eve from Paradise and
finally their teacher, Madame Raphael corresponds to Raphael, who in Paradise Lost taught
Adam. Besides, the cardboard horns of rhinoceros’ signify angels’ trumpet that convey
God’s message; the girls’ laughter signifies the angels’ trumpets. In the second plot we
identify Kundera with those fallen – Satan, Adam and Eve, and Sarah. Like Satan before his
Kundera once danced in a circle but later expelled and had to leave the circle. Kundera concludes “The Angles” by identifying with the girl excluded from the angelic circle of Madame Raphael – Sarah (Brennan 6).

Part Four: Lost Letters

Tamina the heroine of the novel makes a late appearance here. “Well, this time, just to make it clear my heroine belongs to me and me alone (and means more to me than anyone ever has), I am giving her a name no woman has ever had before: Tamina I picture her as tall and beautiful, thirty-three, and a native of Prague” says Kundera (79). As invention Tamina is shielded from doubting. Thus she can mean more, being a fiction as Anthony Winner observed (105-06). Not only the town the story takes place is kept anonymous but also the narrator makes it very clear in the beginning that it is anonymous. Tamina is a waitress in a small cafe with a miserable salary. Tamina and her husband left Czechoslovakia illegally while on a tour to the West via Austria with “only one large suitcase” and “had not dared to include the bulky package, containing their letters to each other and Tamina’s notebooks” (83).

Tamina had spent eleven years with her husband (now dead) in Bohemia during which she kept eleven notebooks at her husband’s behest. Shortly after her husband’s death Tamina bought a notebook and divided it into eleven parts. She had succeeded in reconstructing some half-forgotten situations but had no idea where to enter them. She had lost all sense of chronology. “That is why she so desperately wants that package of notebooks and letters back” (86). Here the struggle of Tamina to get back her lost letters as in the case of Mirek in part 1, and as visualized by him, is the struggle of memory against forgetting which becomes the struggle of man (women also) against power. Bibi, her friend who will go to Prague that summer is the only hope for Tamina to get back her valuables.
Another theme that acts as a counterpoint in this part is the act of writing itself. Bibi wants to write a book – “A novel. About how I view the world,” says she. The dialogue between Bibi and Banaka joined by Joujou, professor of philosophy ensues:

“Think of what goes into a novel, after all,” he said. “All those different characters. Do you really mean to say you know all there is to know about them? How they look, think, dress? What kinds of backgrounds they come from? Come on, admit it. You couldn’t care less about all that.”

“You’re right,” admitted Bibi. “I couldn’t care less.”

“You know,” he went on, “novels are the fruit of the human illusion that we can understand our fellow man. But what do we know about each other?”

“Nothing,” said Bibi

“True,” said Joujou

The professor of philosophy acquiesced with a nod of the head.

“The only thing we can do,” said Banaka, “is to give an account of our own selves. Anything else is an abuse of power. Anything else is a lie.” (89)

For Bakhtin the ability of the novel to criticize itself is a remarkable feature of this ever-developing genre (Dialogic Imagination 6). The novel here accomplishes this characterization. It is an illusion that we can understand human beings comprehensively. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and for all all of the human possibilities and needs, no form which he could exhaust himself to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero; no form that he could fill to the brim (Dialogic Imagination 37).
A naive Bibi unknown to the ways of the complex world of novel-writing gets enlightened:

“True, how true!” Bibi agreed enthusiastically. “I don’t want to write a novel. That wasn’t what I meant, what I want to do is exactly what you’ve been saying: write about myself, an account of my life. And I won’t hide the fact I live an absolutely ordinary everyday life and nothing special has happened to me.” (89-90)

Banaka further clarifies to her that “‘what goes on in,’ ‘on the inside, that’s worth writing about, that people will want to read about’” (90). Now it is the turn of the professor of philosophy.

“Ever since Joyce,” he said, “we have been aware of the fact that the greatest adventure in our lives is the absence of adventure. Odysseus fought at Troy, made his way home on a ship he himself piloted, had a mistress on every island – no, such is not the life we live. Homer’s *Odyssey* now takes place within man. Man has internalized it. The islands, the sea, the sirens seducing us, and Ithaca calling us home – they have all been reduced to voices within us.” (90)

The time of resistance, rebellion and death is over, and if we look for the insidious politics and culture, we find them well internalized in the behavior of individuals. Kundera’s novel ever since *The Joke* has approached experience taking into account this socio cultural shift (Pochoda ix – x).

Chapter 9 of this section is the novelist’s analysis of what he calls “graphomania” which for him is “not a desire to write letters, diaries, or family chronicles (to write for ourselves or one’s immediate family); it is a desire to write books (to have a public of
unknown readers)” (91-92). The reason that the authorial narrator finds for “why we write books is that our kids don’t give a damn” or that “we turn to an anonymous world because our wife stops up her ears when we talk to her” (91). In support of this he tells the story of a taxi driver who happened to swarm three days at sea after a ship-wreck and had lost the ability to sleep.

Graphomania or the obsession with writing books becomes almost a mass epidemic whenever a society develops the three basic conditions:

1. a high enough degree of general well-being to enable people to devote their energies to useless activities;

2. an advanced state of atomization and the resultant general feeling of the isolation of the individual;

3. a radical absence of significant social change in the internal development of the nation . . . (92)

The novelist finds France a typical example of the third condition where nothing really happens, and so the percentage of writers is twenty-one times higher than in Israel. The matter is a vicious circle. “If general isolation causes graphomania, mass graphomania itself reinforces and aggravates the feeling of general isolation.” The invention of printing originally promoted mutual understanding. In the era of graphomania the writing of books has the opposite effect: “everyone surrounds himself with his own writings as with a wall of mirrors cutting of all voices from without” (92). Here social changes resulting in isolation of the individual drives him/her to subjective romanticism which becomes a vicious circle. Consequently only one single language and a single authorial individuality expresses itself directly in that language whereby the stylistic nature of the novel slips hopelessly away
from the investigator (Dialogic Imagination 265). This is why Kundera defines it as “The mania not to create a form but to impose one’s self on others” (The Art 131). The devices of narrative reflexivity are one of the means by which Kundera lays seige to the graphomaniac’s self-absorbed, self-reflecting lyrical discourse.

Kundera here disagress with Roland Barthes’s statement Tout est ecriture, that there is an inherent aesthetic value in everything we write. He does not “believe in the principle” though he agrees that “writing is a form of therapy” enabling “to liberate something in oneself.” What he considers as literature is “writing which requires a certain aesthetic” (Elgrably 3). The Book here foregrounds the tension in and between the ideology of individualism and the form of the novel. Therefore Molesworth argues that this passage is a key one in reading this novel and in reading Kundera’s previous work as well (74).

The emigre status and the consequent isolation has sent Bibi into a state of graphomania. Besides, she also is fed up with her husband who is always thinking about his stupid vacation who when he gets back from his trips spends two whole days in bed without even changing out of his pajamas. Tamina asked her father to retrieve the lost letters and notebooks from the custody of her belligerant mother-in-law. Then Tamina was horrified at the idea that the fate of her package was in the hostile hands of her mother-in-law and father. The more she thought about it the more restless she was.

She realized that what gave her written memories value, meaning, was that they were meant for her alone. As soon as they lost that quality, the intimate chain binding her to them would be broken, and instead of reading them with her own eyes, she would be forced to read them from the point of view of an audience pursuing an impersonal document. Then the woman who wrote them
would lose her identity, and the striking similarity that would nonetheless remain between her and the author of the notes would be nothing but a parody, a mockery. No, she could never read her notes once they had been read by someone else. (100-01)

Language here refurbishes a past existence. Existence and dialogue are in extricably bound with each other.

When finally Tamina’s brother went and recovered the letters from her mother-in-law she asked her father to wrap up and seal them without reading a word. Tamina here is trying to recreate the memories of her fading past. Hers is a struggle against forgetting. Thus an important theme of the novel is examined polyphonically from her personal point of view. Tamina’s narrative is continued in chapter 4 of part 6.

Part Five: Litost

“Litost” begins with the chapter “Who is Kristyna?”. Thus “absolute epic distance” (Dialogic Imagination 17) is done away with and in the dialogical fashion the chapter is an answer to this question. Kristyna has a child and a butcher husband and has an affair with a local mechanic. She develops a relationship with her new friend, a student.

Next chapter has its title “What is Litost? (sic).” “Litost is a Czech word with no exact translation into any language. It designates a feeling as infinite as an open accordion, a feeling that is the synthesis of many others: grief, sympathy, remorse and an indefinable longing” (121). It is a state of torment caused by a sudden insight into one’s own miserable self. Litost then is illustrated with the life of the student with the girlfriend. Here story takes a back seat. Story in turn is used for the illustration of a word, which is an enquiry into human existence. Word becomes the hero of the novel as Bakhtin says.
Then comes the answer to the question “Who is Voltaire?”. He is a lecturer of the student at the university. The student planned to meet Kristyna the following evening. But his teacher nicknamed Voltaire, insisted that he go for the poets’ get-together the same day, same time. The student however managed to have a compromise between attending to Kristyna and the poet’s meet. He decided to have both of them. “. . . he left for the club calm and content at the thought of the coming evening’s exciting double program” (127). The student along with Voltaire entered the dining room of the writer’s club. Those attending are Goethe, Lermontov, Petrarch, Verlaine, Yesenin and Boccaccio. They all meet at the writer’s club. The epic past is “absolute past” for good reason. It is both monochronic and valorized. It lacks any relativity. It is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times and above all from the times in which the author and reader are located. The destruction of this impenetrable boundary is very crucial in the development of novel (Dialogic Imagination 15).

A scintillating conversation follows Petrarch’s narration of a story. Once a week he went to a girls’ school that has a poetry club. The girls were all secretly in love with him. One girl once intruded into his house out of infatuation and this created some confusion. In this conversion all kinds and degrees of otherness on the matter of poetry, love and women find its fullest and deepest expression in the novel. Baccaccio accuses Petrarch of being an “incorrigible idolizer.” He declares himself to be misogynist and states that “A woman poet is twice woman” and more than something he can bear (132).

On hearing Petrarch’s story Lermontov said he did not believe a word of what Petrarch said. Baccaccio then castigates idolizers or poets who have “‘never left their mothers’ shadows.’” “. . . Their mother’s skirts hung over them like firmament.” Hearing this Yesenin got angry and spat, which landed on Goethe’s collar. Yesenin, throughly drunk,
exhausted by the act of spitting collapsed into his chair. Goethe asked Lermontov why he
was so full of complexes. Voltaire, the biographer of Goethe then “began analyzing
individual metaphors, arguing wittily that Lermontov’s inferiority complex was the font of
his imagination and that it came from a childhood marked by poverty and the oppressive
influence of an authoritarian father.” Goethe summed up by saying that “the trouble with
Lermontov is he doesn’t get enough ass” (136).

Voltaire and others set on Lermontov for saying “I have my pride” and the student
then comes to his defence. He says, “A poet’s pride is very different from ordinary pride.
Only the poet himself can know the true worth of what he writes. Others don’t understand
it until much later, they may never understand. A poet has got to have his pride” (138).
Without it he would betray his life’s work. The student received autograph on a book of
Goethe which Kristyna had asked him to receive. Goethe filled up the title page of the book
with beautiful words that had never been addressed to any woman.

The waiter in the restaurant arrives and asked poets to leave, for it was closing time.
Goethe was too weak to leave. The other poets carried Goethe outside. Goethe then slid to
the ground and Petrarch and Boccaccio propped him up. Lermontov complained about this:

“They can’t even hold him up their arms are so weak. What do they know
about life? ‘The Poet Descending.’ A magnificent title, don’t you think?
I’ve been working on two books lately, two completely different books. One
is purely classical in form: rhymes, a clear-cut meter. The second is in free
verse. I’m going to call it Poetic Reports. The final poem will be ‘The Poet
Descending’ and a grim poem it will be. Grim, but honest. Honest.” (142)

The polysemy of the poetic symbol presupposes the unity of a voice with which it is
identical, and it presupposes that such a voice in completely alone with its own discourse (Dialogic Imagination 328). This point of view is here expressed by the poet himself. It is this monologism of poetry that Kundera and Bakhtin resist vehemently.

The student who arrived back to have a happy union with Kristyna failed in his attempt because Kristyna resisted it fervently. The next morning they parted. Kristyna “was happy to have at least one permanent thing to remember him by: Goethe’s book with that unbelievable dedication” (149). The boy “in despair” “wends his way from the station to his loveless wasteland, with litost, frustration, at his side” (149). The next chapter eponymously offers us “Further Notes for a Theory of Litost.” The author narrator tells us that he has “used two incidents from the life of the student to illustrate the two basic reactions we may have to our own litost.” He offers his thesis:

Should our counterpart prove weaker than ourselves, we merely insult them under false pretenses, just as the student insulted his girlfriend when she swam too fast.

Should our counterpart prove stronger, we are forced to close a circuitous route - the backhanded slap, murder by means of suicide. The little boy plays out of tune so long that the teacher can’t stand it anymore and throws him out the window. And as the boy falls, during his flight, he rejoices in the thought that the mean old teacher will be accused of murder.

These are the two classic reactions, and if the former occurs most commonly among couples, married or unmarried, the latter is a main ingredient of what we call the history of mankind. (149-50)

The narrator then interprets the history of his nation on the basis of litost.
It occurs to me in this connection that it is no accident the concept of *litost* first saw the light of day in Bohemia. The history of the Czechs – a history of never-ending revolts against stronger enemies, a history of glorious defeats setting the course of world history in motion but causing the downfall of its own people – is the history of *litost*. When in August of the year 1968 thousands of Russian tanks occupied this small, wonderful country, I saw the following example of graffiti on the walls of one of its towns: *We Do Not Want Compromise, We Want Victory*. You must understand that by this time the only choice was among several varieties of defeat, but the town in question rejected compromise and would settle for nothing but victory. That was not reason talking, that was the voice of *litost*! Rejecting compromise means *ipso facto* choosing the worst of defeats, but that is exactly what *litost* is after. A man obsessed with *litost* revenges himself by destroying himself. The little boy was smashed to smithereens on the sidewalk, but his immortal soul will eternally rejoice in the fact that the teacher hanged himself from the hasp of the open window. (150)

But we are told that the student could not do anything because Kristyna is safely on the train before he could do anything. Dialogically the narrator intervenes from some other person’s point of view: “Theoreticians are acquainted with this phenomenon and call it ‘impacted litost’” (150). The student forlorn left the message “I’m waiting. I love you. Kristyna. Midnight” in the restaurant where poets met (151). Petrarch saw the lovenote and immediately let Lermontov read the text of the message. He read it several times through and with a lilting, sonorous voice, as if it were a line of poetry. He asks the student “confess. You write poetry! You’re a poet!” (153). Now this is what the narrator has to say
about the entire thing:

It occurs to me that in situations where we can’t give a good slap to a girl who swims too fast or let ourselves be massacred by the Persians, when there is no way out of our heart-rending litost, then poetry comes to our aid.

What remains of this complete and utter fiasco? Only the poetry. The words Goethe inscribed in the book that Kristyna took home with her and the words on the lined sheet of paper that have earned the student unexpected glory. (153)

But the student who had actually come to see Lermontov lost him and he was lost to Lermontov. “Lermontov hates happy lovers. He frowned and started in disdainfully about the poetry of sacharine feelings and big words” (153). The unique position that Lermontov enjoys determines his responses. “Goethe knew it too. Not enough ass. The terrible litost that comes from not getting enough ass” (154). This repetition, now through narrator’s voice, shows that nothing is taboo for the novelistic discourse which still is in the process of development. In this part, the speech of the characters acts as one of those compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia enters the novel.

Kundera bear witness to all these things. “I watch from afar from my high-rise in France.” Lermontov is all by himself again. The part ends with the narrator addressing: “Dear Lermontov, the genius of that special torment which in my sad country bears a name evoking the plaint of an abandoned dog, the name of litost” (154).

Part six: The Angels

Tamina the heroine makes a second appearance. This part begins with the same incident as that of part 1 – the solicitous Clementis taking off his fur cap and setting it on
Gottwald’s head. Prague in the novels of Kafka “is a city without memory.” It has even forgotten its name. Nobody there remembers anything, nobody recalls anything. If Kafka was the poet of a world without memory, Gustav Husak, the seventh president of Czehoslovakia created it. He “is known as the president of forgetting” (157-58).

Husak was brought to power by the Russians in 1969. Since 1621 the history of the Czech people never experienced such a massacre of culture and thought. It was commonly agreed that Husak simply tracked down his political opponents. The struggle with the political opposition was merely an excuse, something much more substantial was at stake.

Significantly Husak dismissed some hundred and forty-five Czech historians from universities and research institutes. One of them was a friend of the author an “all but blind” (159) Milan Hubl, whose opinion is reported:

“The first step in liquidating a people,” said Hubl, “is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.” (159)

As regards language: “‘Why would anyone bother to take it from us? It will soon be a matter of folklore and die a natural death’ ” (159).

The narrative here assumes the nature of an autobiographical report and historical discourse and shares concerns that Kundera expresses in his nonfiction writing. Despite his averments however it seems ironical that the writer has turned his back on his country and culture and settled for good in France.
Six months later Hubl, the historian was arrested and sentenced to many years’ imprisonment. Kundera’s father was dying at the time. He presents the condition of the father thus:

During the last ten years of life my father gradually lost the power of speech. At first he simply had trouble calling up certain words or would say similar words instead and then immediately laugh at himself. In the end he had only a handful of words left, and all his attempts at saying anything substantial resulted in one of the last sentences he could articulate: ‘That’s strange’. (160)

The forced forgetfulness and silence in the country is parallely presented with the senile forgetfulness and silence of father. The myriad-voiced silence resounding from all over his country “forms the background of the picture against which” the narrator paints “Tamina” (161). Tamina went on serving coffee at the cafe and one morning she did not show up for work. The owner’s wife, with the help of the police, broke open her apartment to find everything carefully maintained nothing missing and nothing suspicious. The police “filed Tamina away with the Permanently Missing” (sic) (162).

Tamina leaves with a young man, Raphael in a sports car to a place where things weigh nothing at all as in a fairytale; as in a dream. The countryside gives way to wilderness and Tamina with Raphael reached an eerie place. She reached a shore and took a boat, with a twelve year old boy as oarsman, to an unknown destination. On the other shore were ten or so children playing ball. She was housed in a large room full of beds. Tamina later realized that she was in an island with only children.

Chapter 13 begins with the question “Why is Tamina on a children’s island? Why is that where I imagine her?””. Immediately follows: “I don’t know.” And Kundera adds “May
be it’s because on the day my father died the air was full of joyful songs sung by children’s voices” (173).

“In the world of things without weight” (174) Tamina lost the inhibitions of culture. Now she started using the bathroom with the children looking on. “She felt no shame” (175).

Chapters 17 and 18 are on the history of music. “The history of music came to an end” says the narrator. His line of argument is like this: “People fascinated by the ideas of progress never suspect that every step forward is also a step on the way to the end and that behind all the joyous ‘onward and upward’ slogans lurks the lascivious voice of death urging us to make haste” (179). Then as an aside the narrator asks if the obsession with the word onward has become universal now-a-days is not it because death now speaks to us at such close range.

Then he tries to answer the question: “If it is true that the history of music has come to an end what is left of music? Silence?” (179). “Not in the least. There is more and more of it, many times more than in its glorious days. It pours out of outdoor speakers, out of miserable sound systems in apartments and restaurants, out of the transistor radios people carry around the streets” (179-80). The narrator here sees a link between the cacophonic music shorn of its meaning and the state power that enforces a forced forgetfulness.

One day a year before his father’s death Kundera and he were taking a walk around the block and music followed them everywhere. “The sadder people are, the louder the speakers blare. They are trying to make an occupied country forget the bitterness of history and devote all its energy to the joys of everyday life.” Father commented on this as “The idiocy of music” (180).
The narrator then offers his view on father’s observation. Father must never have meant to insult “the love of his life.”

No, what I think he wanted to tell me was that there is a certain *primordial state of music*, a state prior to its history, the state before the issue was ever raised, the state before the play of motif and theme was ever conceived or even contemplated. This elementary state of music (music minus thought) reflects the inherent idiocy of human life. It took a monumental effort of heart and mind for music to rise up over this inherent idiocy, and it was this glorious vault arching over centuries of European history that died out at the peak of its flight like a rocket in a fireworks display. (180)

Music in our times says the narrator has returned to its primordial state, the state after the last issue has been raised and the last theme contemplated - a state that follows history. The collaboration of pop music and the “president of forgetting (sic)” (Husak) is presented by the author by presenting an apparently historical incident.

When Karel Gott, the Czech pop singer, went abroad in 1972, Husak got scared. He sat right down and wrote him a personal letter (it was August 1972 and Gott was in Frankfurt). The following is a verbatim quote from it. I have invented nothing.

*Dear Karel,*

_We are not angry with you. Please come back. We will do everything you ask. We will help you if you help us._

Think it over. Without batting an eyelid Husak let doctors, scholars,
astronomers, athletes, directors, cameramen, workers, engineers, architects, historians, journalists, writers, and painters go into emigration, but he could not stand the thought of Karel Gott leaving the country. Because Karel Gott represents music minus memory, the music in which the bones of Beethoven and Ellington, the dust of Palestrina and Schonberg, lie buried. (181)

Postmodern music or popmusic here collaborates with totalitarianism by its complacent and complicit forgetfulness. Kundera here is attacking the apolitical stand of popmusic. But it is not mere political quiteism but complicity when the narrative illustrates how “The president of forgetting and the idiot of music deserve one another.” “They are working for the same cause” (181). Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, and the speech of characters are those compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia enters the novel. This combining of languages and styles into a higher unity Bakhtin says, was unknown to traditional stylistics (Murray 1: 75).

Until now Tamina’s sexuality had been occupied by love and therefore had a “responsible, serious component to it, something Tamina watched over with anguish.” “Here” – the narrator is not defining the location – “with the children in the realm of the insignificant” it achieved its original sense of a toy for the production of sensual pleasure. The narrator puts it in another way “sexuality freed from its diabolical ties with love had become a joy of angelic simplicity” (182).

But in this “realm of the insignificant” or meaninglessness, life became oppressive for Tamina with imprisonment and torture. “Why are the children so bad?” “The reason for her misfortune is not that the children are bad, but that she does not belong to their world. No one makes a fuss about calves slaughtered in slaughter houses. Calves stand
outside human law in the same way Tamina stands outside the children’s law” (185).

The “president of forgetting,” Husak once addressed children saying “children, you are the future.” The narrator now realized Husak did not mean it the way he sounded. It is not that they will one day be grownups. “No, the reason is that mankind is moving more and more in the direction of infancy and childhood is the image of the future” (186).

“‘Children, never look back,’ he cried, and what he meant was that we must never allow the future to collapse under the burden of memory. Children, afterall, have no past whatsoever.” Apparently Karel Gott, the pop singer, came out on to the podium and sang immediately after Husak’s speech. Husak was moved to tears. The idiot of music finished his song and the president of forgetting spread his arms and cried “‘Children, life is happiness’” (187).

Tamina jumped into water and started swimming in the sea. “She wanted to get them away from the island and save them. Her body and her desire for life” (190). She drowns. “Keeping exclusive company with” anything is dangerous because “all privileged positions are dangerous” (181).

Part Seven - Border

This part has the story of forty-five year old emigre Jan, living in a town in the west of Europe, and Edwige. The narrator here is telling the “story” that took “place on the reverse side of Jan’s life” (206). The narrator further says “I have put it together from bits and pieces of events that Jan probably never paid particular attention to, because the obverse side of his life was taken up with all kinds of other cares and worries: the offer of a job in America, pressing professional commitments, preparations for departure” (206). It is not the serious side of the life that the novelist is interested in. Serious in no longer the serious
but the reverse is. Novelist fully explores the “openendedness” of his art (Dialogic Imagination 38).

What Jan finds most interesting with a woman during coupling was her face, but Edwige’s face was a “blank screen” and this filled him with many questions. “All he knew was that their silent copulations were inevitable, as inevitable as a man standing at attention when he hears his national anthem neither he nor his country derives any benefit from it” (196).

Now the narrator tells a story to show that “we are all prisoners of a rigid conception of what is important and what is not” (197). Over the last two centuries blackbird has abandoned the woods for the city. He tells the details of European cities in which this has happened. “Globally, the blackbird’s invasion of the human world is beyond doubt more important than the Spaniard’s invasion of South America or the resettlement of Palestine by the Jews” (197). The following of man by blackbird to his artificial, antinatural world shows that something has changed in the planetary order of things. “And yet nobody dares to interpret the last two centuries as the history of the blackbird’s invasion of the city of man” (197). This invasion “represents the reverse side of European history” (206). This matter is there left off by the narrator.

Jeanne the actress had just been through a nervous breakdown because her son who lived with her former husband in another town had run away. She told Jan her friend of meeting Passer an old friend of him. Passer who had cancer made a deep impression on her: “‘What a wonderful man! Younger than any of us. I just adore him!’” she went mushrooming with him in the woods around Clevises’ country place (199).

Next chapter digresses to a discussion on a cultural topic: “During the period when
all this took place, the beaches of Western Europe were crowded every summer with women who wore no tops and the population was divided between partisans of bared breasts and their adversaries” (200). We are then told of Clevis family – mother, father and fourteen year old daughter – viewing a discussion on television on women with no tops. Representatives of various intellectual groups participated in it.

The psychoanalyst gave a fiery defense of the naked breast, invoking the liberalisation of social mores and its roles in delivering the individual from the power of erotic illusions. The Marxist never quite took a stand on the topless issue (the membership of the Communist Party included both puritans and libertines and it was not politically expedient to set one side against the other), instead, he skillfully twisted the debate around to the more basic problem of the two-faced moral standards of bourgeois society, which was on its way to destruction. The representative of the Christian viewpoint felt duty-bound to defend the top, but did so only halfheartedly, even he could not escape the spirit of the time. The only argument he could cite in its favour was the innocence of the children, which everyone was obliged to protect. He was immediately attacked by an energetic woman who declared that childhood was the perfect time to overcome the hypocritical taboo against nudity, and recommended that all parents walk around naked at home. (200)

The fourteen-year-old girl takes a very different opinion from those expressed above. She says that women wear no tops not to give a thrill to men and adds “Now we do it for ourselves, because we like it, because it feels better, because it brings our bodies closer to the sun! You are incapable of seeing us as anything but sex objects.” This is a firm feminist stand and also a reply to her father who maintains “As long as the breasts are good-looking,
the reform is a winner . . .” (201).

The novel here becomes a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized, as theorised by Bakhtin. The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, languages of generations and age group, tendentious languages, languages of authorities, of various circles and passing fashions, languages that serve the specific socio-political purposes of the day, this internal stratification as Bakhtin calls it here becomes an indispensable ingredient of the novel (Dialogic Imagination 262-63).

This part has an incident which can be understood as an illustration of the dialogic nature of human existence. Jeanne, the actress whose son is missing meets the cancer patient, Passer. Jeanne had good words over Passer who she saw remaining enthusiastic. “ ‘Passer was terrific !  I just adore him’ ” says she (199). Jeanne whose “son ran away from home” and “had a regular nervous breakdown” as “soon as she set eyes on Passer” “forgot all about herself” (203-04). Passer also “spoke with glowing eyes about their jaunt through the woods” (215).

Passer died and he was being burried. Those included among the mourners were Jan, Jeanne the actress, the Clevises, Barbara and Passer’s wife, son and daughter. Papa Clevis had pulled his hat down firmly over his temples but the wind lifted it off his head and set it down half way between the open grave and the Passer family. The author-narrator describes the further movements of the hat in the wind and Papa Clevis’s movement before it for retrieval. “At that moment the entire assembly of mourners was racked by a silent wave of laughter” (221). This is an example of laughter being produced on crossing the border. Besides, “It takes so little, so infinitely little, for a person to cross the border beyond which
everything loses meaning: love, convictions, faith, [and] history” (206). Not long ago Jan ran across Barbara on the street. “She asked him reproachfully why he never accepted invitations to her house. Barbara’s house had a reputation for group sex parties – Jan was afraid of scandal and had refused her invitation for years” (206). This time he accepted the invitation because “he would be crossing the border” for America (206). Edwige and Jan “went naked down the steps to the beach, where other naked people were sitting in groups, taking walks, and swimming – naked mothers and naked children, naked grandmothers and naked grandchildren, the naked young and the naked elderly” (226). Jan and Edwige all excited agreed that they are “On the other side of the inhuman world our civilization imprisons us in!” (228).

In The Book Kundera maintains the polyphonic presentation. It discards what Bakhtin calls the first type of word, that is, the direct, linear, object oriented word. It is the double-voiced word that Kundera relies on. Here as in the earlier novels narration is oriented to another person’s speech. The absent interlocutor is always there from the first page to the last as evident in the following sentences extracted from the text:

“And please note: the half that cheered was the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the betterhalf” (8).

“Yes say what you will–the Communists were more intelligent” (8).

“Please don’t misunderstand R. was no cry baby” (71).

“She knew the country inside out, and I can tell you – everything she said was true” (95).

The heroine of the novel is introduced and presented in a dialogic fashion. In the dialogical scheme of things Tamina occupies a unique position. Everybody likes her. “She
is a good listener.” But whether she really listens or not the narrator “can’t quite tell.” The narrator is not an absolutist. He says, “You know what it’s like when two people start a conversation. First one of them does all the talking, the other breaks in with ‘That’s just like me, I . . .’ and goes on talking about himself until his partner finds a chance to say, That’s just like me, I . . .” And for Kundera “All man’s life among men is nothing more than a battle for the ears of others” (79-80).

Rhetorical questions are an important feature of an address to someone. All rhetorical forms though monological in their compositional structure, are oriented toward the listener and his answer (Dialogic Imagination 280). Rhetorical questions occupy significant role in the narration of The Book. It is used as an important technique for introducing new things. In part 1 on the relationship between Mirek and Zdena, Kundera asks “Why was he so ashamed of her, anyway?” and he is only trying to give us the “most obvious explanation” (11).

Many of the chapters begin with questions. Some of them are:

“Then why did she wait so long to ask her mother-in-law to send the package?” (86; pt.4, ch.1).

“If Tamina’s memories mean so much to her, why doesn’t she just go back to Czechoslovakia?” (95; pt.4, ch.12).

“Why do I picture her with a golden ring in her mouth?” (103; pt.4, ch.17).

“Why didn’t Tamina ask where she was going?” (168; pt.6, ch.10).

“Why is Tamina on a children’s island? Why is that where I imagine her?” (173; pt.6, ch.13).
“But what could she do now that she was there among the children?” (174; pt.6, ch.14).

Part 5 – “Litost” – is the only part which has chapter titles but with no numbers for chapters and even some of these titles are in the form of questions. Chapter 1 is “Who is Kristyna?” and the next two are “What is Litost? (sic)” and “Who is Voltaire?” respectively.

Then why had he introduced Marketa to Eva in the first place? Why had he made love to them? Anyone else would have made Marketa into a light-hearted, sensual, happy woman long since. Anyone but Karel. He felt like Sisyphus (40; pt.2, ch.8).

Sisyphus? But hadn’t Marketa just compared herself to Sisyphus? (40; pt.2, ch.8)

Questions and still more questions. The very structure of The Book is of a question, an interrogation as Kundera would put it. It is this compulsion in writing fiction to ask questions that prevailed upon his favourite translator Peter Kussi to define his novels as “dialogues with fiction.” As he observes these questions are part of a dialogue between narrator and the reader or perhaps between the narrator and the author (206-07).

In Dostoeveskian polyphonic novel Bakhtin identified the hero as one whose voice is constructed in the same way that the voice of the author is constructed. The hero’s word about himself and about the world is as much valid as the authorial word. In The Book not only the hero, but no character acts as the mouthpiece of the author. Instead, the author himself appears as “Milan Kundera” and relates many of the apparently true incidents in his life. Regarding Tamina’s nostalgic remorse on her dead husband the author says, “I understand the remorse Tamina felt. When my father died, I had a bad case of it too” (164). Narrator later adds: “that the variation form became the passion of mature Beethoven, who
(like Tamina and like me) knew all too well” the pain of bereavement (165). The author sees himself as one with the other characters. The author then acts frequently as a critic of the characters’ action and thoughts as in the following statements: “But I feel Jan is wrong in thinking that the border is a line dissecting man’s life at a given point . . .” (217). “If Jan defines the border for himself as the line of the greatest admissible repetition, I must correct him” (218). The author grants the characters independence, freedom and indeterminacy which itself constitutes a humanist action. For all these reasons “Kundera’s novel is polyphonic and dialogic” (Straus 72).

For Kundera the nineteenth-century novel developed a new method of breaking out of the linear mode of narration in novel which “for want of a better term” he calls “polyphonic.” For example if one analyses The Possessed by Dostoevsky from the purely technical viewpoint one can see three lines evolving simultaneously which if necessary can be considered as independent novels: the ironic novel, the love between Madame Stavrogin and Stepan Verkhovensky; the romantic novel about Nikolai Stavrogin and her amourous relationships; and the political novel about a revolutionary group. He then compares Dostoyevskian polyphony with that of the Austrian novelist Hermann Broch’s. There Broch’s “goes much further.” The “three lines” in The Possessed, though different in character are of the same genre; novelistic. Whereas in Broch the five lines differ radically in genre: novel, short story, reportage, poem, essay. “The integration of non-novelistic genre with the polyphony of the novel was Broch’s revolutionary innovations” (The Art 74-75).

The development of the polyphonic novel charted out by Kundera can be seen in his own writings beginning with The Joke through to The Book. The Joke is polyphonic in the sense that three lines that Kundera read in The Possessed and a few more can be seen in it. The novel is thoroughly ironic. It is the ironies running through the life of Ludvik that even
validates the name of the novel *The Joke*, the joke that life is for Ludvik. It is also a romantic novel in the sense that it deals with the amorous relationships of Ludvik, for the reason why Kundera himself calls it a love story. Though Kundera has denied and objected to it, it is as many other novels of Kundera a political novel too, dealing with the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia and its fallout, while in *The Book* Kundera’s writing reaches an acme of polyphonic excellence. Not only does it contain various themes – or “lines” as Kundera calls it – as mentioned earlier but also integrates various non-novelistic genres as Broch did earlier. Norman Podhoretz remarks that Kundera makes familiar seen unfamiliar and then familiarize it anew by creating an unfamiliar form in which a number of apparently unrelated stories written in different literary genres ranging from conventionally realistic to the surrealistic are strung together by an intrusive author (36).

The structure of *The Book* is looser than that of his earlier works. The chapters are bound together by musical principles of polyphony and variation. Thus different aspects of the same facts are being highlighted, one at a time. Several story lines, whose characters never meet, are presented in the novel. The narratives are related to one another only by being variation of the same set of concepts. One theme of the work is a struggle against forgetting. This theme is present in all chapters of the novel and is examined from many personal as well as social angles. Mirek who is struggling with all his might to make sure that he is not forgotten is at the same time doing his utmost to make people forget his exmistress, who he is ashamed of. Before its becomes a political issue, the will to forget is an anthropological one: man has always harboured the desire to rewrite his own biography, to change the past, to wipe out tracks, both his own and others’. Forgetting is ambivalent – good and bad at the same time. In Kundera’s own words, “Forgetting: absolute injustice and absolute solace at the same time. The novelistic exploration of the theme of forgetting has
no end and no conclusion” (The Art 130). The novel desists from imposing any particular truth on the reader; it only examines things and asks questions. The novel thus becomes a postmodern one too. David Lodge has therefore called it “a masterpiece of postmodernist fiction.” It is fragmentary, disjunctive, confused and confusing and has an improvised air. The closest equivalent to the text that David Lodge suggests is Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse 5, another postmodernist masterpiece. But even that heterogeneous text with its mixture of historical, fictional and metafictional discourse has a single main character (Billy Pilgrim), and a single main storyline (“Idea of the Author” 113).

The Unbearable Lightness of Being

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a touching and sad novel, at once a compelling love story, philosophical text, and dialogue with Frederick Nietzsche and a manifesto of nihilism, apart from all these, and more, as Bob Corbett says. The dialogue the text preoccupies with is not merely Nietzsche, but also the Greek philosopher Parmenides, the German composer Beethoven, the Bible and others in its discussion of weight/lightness binaries.

Bakhtin and his circle are generally credited with bringing to the fore the dialogic nature of language. A speech act, according to these theoreticians, is never an isolated event but a link in a communicative chain: a response to what was said before and, at the same time, a prefigurement of a future replica (Steiner 659). Unbearable Lightness unequivocally identifies itself as a dialogic text. As Cattrysse says the story is narrated by a heterodiegetic voice which presents itself explicitly as the narrator. It refers to itself as “the author” and uses the first person singular (I/me). Sometimes it addresses the reader directly in the second person singular, and at other times, it involves the reader in its thoughts with the pronoun “we.” For Cattrysse the filmic adaptation of the novel fails to capture the
polyphonic narrative technique.

The doctrine of eternal recurrence is the most controversial of all the things Nietzsche wrote. It is one of the four really big themes of his later work. It is also the hardest not just for people to understand but even for them to take seriously. “He appears to be saying that the whole of history moves in cycles, vast cycles, so that everything, comes round again and again and again literally for ever” so that everyone will have lived their lives innumerable times already and will do innumerable times again, says Magee (246-47). But Sterne, the Nietzsche expert remarks that the statement is only a “huge metaphor” and nothing to be taken literally (Magee 248).

The possible meaning of “eternal recurrence” has never been agreed upon. If it is the return of the same, a unique and unrepeatable life is precisely equal to a life infinitely repeated: every act is irrevocable, nonmodifiable for eternity as Calvino says (Hunter and White 315). The fact that Kundera himself is playing off the non-uniformity of opinion on the idea and that the narrator’s is only one reading of it is sure in his ironic reproduction of it through “Tomas’s version of eternal return” (224).

Somewhere out in space there was a planet where all people would be born again. They would be fully aware of the life they had spent on earth and of all experience they had amassed here.

And perhaps there was still another planet, where we would all be born a third time with the experience of our first two lives.

And yet perhaps there were yet more and more planets, where mankind would be born one degree (one life) more mature. (224)
The novel opens with a dialogue with Nietzsche examining the significance of the myth of eternal return – the “mad myth” as Kundera calls it (3). Dialogic inter-orientation as Bakhtin names it here becomes an event of discourse itself, animating from within and dramatizing novelistic discourse in all its aspects (Dialogic Imagination 284).

The position of Nietzsche which is debated in the novel is best expounded in the book, The Gay Science, section 341 “The Greatest Burden”:

What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: ‘This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live again and again, times without number; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and all the unspeakably small and great in your life must return to you, and everything in the same series and sequence – and in the same way this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and in the same way this moment and I myself. The eternal hour-glass of existence will be turned again and again – and you with it, you dust of dust!’ – would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment in which you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never did I hear anything more divine!’ If this thought gained power over you it would, as you are now, transform and perhaps crush you; the question in all and everything: ‘do you want this again and again, times without number?’ would lie as the heaviest burden upon all your actions, or how well disposed towards yourself and towards life would you have to become to have no greater desire than for this ultimate eternal sanction and seal? (qtd. in
Nietzsche 20-21).

Kundera makes an inversion of it. “Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity and beauty mean nothing” (3). In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. Nietzsche therefore called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens. Immediately the narrator becomes doubtful as to whether lightness or heaviness is important: “But is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid?” “The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man’s body” (5). The heaviest of the burdens is therefore also an image of life’s most intense fulfilment. The heavier the burden, the more earthly our lives are, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely the absence of weight causes man to be lighter than air. He will take leave of earth and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant.

“What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?” (5). Parmenides posed the very same question in 6 BC. For him the world was divided into pairs of opposites: light/darkness, fineness/coarseness, warmth/cold, being/non-being. The first half he called “positive” and the other “negative.” And for the novelist “this division into positive and negative poles” is “childishly simple except for one difficulty: which one is positive, weight or lightness?” For Parmenides “lightness is positive, weight negative” (5). “Was he correct or not? That is the question. The only certainty is: the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all”(6).
The novel at one level is an enquiry into the antithesis between lightness of being, the non-fictional state in which all is forgiven because all is without meaning, and the weighted determined condition of life, story, or destiny which cannot be avoided or denied. Sex belongs to the first and love to the second (Bayley 86). But as we proceed with the novel we realise that the lightness/weight opposition is the most ambiguous and the most mysterious one. Weight is unbearable and so too is lightness. The “unbearable lightness” in the title is an oxymoron which indicates the paradox of a lightness, too heavy to be borne. But the unbearable weight and lightness are the ones that Kundera’s characters are forced to bear or that the life forces us to bear. This is what existence is. This realization is in conformity with the dialogic tradition too. That is why John Bayley called it “fictive lightness and fictive weight.”

Tomas the protagonist whom the novelist has been thinking about for many years emerges in the light of the reflection on lightness/weight. Kundera says, “I saw him standing at the window of his flat and looking across the courtyard at the opposite walls not knowing what to do” (6). Unlike those of the distanced genre the individual hero here has no distanced image. He is not a complete and finished being. He does not coincide with himself and is in an existential predicament. Novelist suggests that the hero is the product of his own imagination. Storywise the novel is on two couples; Tomas and Tereza and Sabina and Franz. Tomas and Tereza, the hero and the heroine embody the mysterious antithesis that Kundera sets up. Sabina and Franz as well are likewise. For E.L. Doctorow all the four main characters to one extent or another enact the paradox of choices that are not choices, of courses of action that are indistinguishable in consequence from their opposite (Hunter and White 309). As Vicky Adams says the novel’s character quartet represent weightness or lightness or as structures or variations on a theme (Hunter and White 351-52).
Tomas a “modern-day Don Juan” (107) as Ivan Sanders calls him, practicing a philosophy of lightness “managed to rid himself of wife, son, mother [and] father” (Unbearable Lightness 12).

As John O’Brien comments though The Book and Unbearable Lightness consider the impact of opposition-based thinking they clearly differ at least in one respect. What for the primary female protagonist in The Book, Tamina is for Tomas primarily a question of perception. Tomas’s perception of women, and broadly life, lies so strictly within the framework of either/or oppositional extremes so that “Tereza and Sabina represented the two poles of his life, separate and irreconcilable, yet equally appealing” (Unbearable Lightness 28, O’Brien 109). He devised a sort of “‘erotic friendship’” (12) with women which is to free himself from any commitment and responsibility. After his initial meeting Tomas feared that if he invited Tereza to Prague she would offer him her life. Yet, instead of sending her back after sharing bed the second time, he collected her suitcase from the station and took her home. He himself was surprised. “He had acted against his principles” (10). Tomas for whom married life was weight, however in order to “assuage Tereza’s sufferings” “married her” (23). This choosing of weight, taking responsibility for another’s life was after fluctuating between lightness, negating individual and social responsibility and weightness accepting Tereza’s ponderous love as Adams observes (Hunter and White 352).

Tereza’s mother always reminded her that being a mother meant sacrificing everything. “If a mother was Sacrifice [sic] personified, then a daughter was Guilt [sic], with no possibility of redress” (44). And in her own mother’s words “‘Tereza can’t reconcile herself to the idea that the human body pisses and farts.’” “Her guilty conscience was as vague as original sin” (44). Tereza’s mother “insisted her daughter remain with her
in the world of immodesty... where the world is nothing but a vast concentration camp of bodies, one like the next, with souls invisible” (47). Mother forbade Tereza to lock the bathroom door with the stand that her body is like all other bodies. In dialogical relationship with her mother’s position since childhood Tereza had seen nudity as a sign of “concentration camp uniformity” (57). As Kafka, Kundera demonstrates that in the family relationship between the child and the deified power of the parents the “technique of culpabilization” works as much as in the social sphere. In other words, family’s private totalitarianism works parallel with political totalitarianism (The Art 109-10). That is why Kundera says his novels expose “anthropological scandals” – “what man is capable of” (Bradbury 217).

Kundera’s titles for part 2 and part 4 (“Soul and Body”) follow the lightness/weight opposition in tandem with the body/soul opposition. Tereza struggles with the Cartesian dualism of body and soul, feeling very much dominated by her body (O’Brien 118). Tereza is “born of a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience” (40). Sabina lives her life as an extreme example of lightness, finding satisfaction in the act of betrayal. She declares war or kitsch. “The woman who understood him [Tomas] best was Sabina.” “ ‘The reason I like you’, she would say to him, ‘is you’re the complete opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch you would be a monster’ ” (12). “Was it better to be with Tereza or to remain alone?” (8). Tomas has no certainty. “There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes, without warning . . .” (8). “Einmal ist keinmal, says Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all”(8). So it is not possible to test whether Tomas must live with Tereza or not.
For Tomas, Tereza was like a child whom he had taken from a bulrush basket that had been daubed with pitch and sent to the river bank of his bed. But “If the Pharaoh’s daughter hadn’t snatched the basket carrying little Moses from the waves, there would have been no Old Testament, no civilization as we now know it” (11). Besides, many ancient myths begin with the rescue of an abandoned child. Therefore, civilization itself is based on weight and not lightness. Then the author-figure makes a comment like an aside: “Tomas did not realize at the time that metaphors are dangerous. Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love” (11). The Biblical metaphor, therefore, it can be assumed, has played some part in misleading Tomas.

Part 1 chapter 3 is a polyphonically varied discussion on the etymology of the word “compassion.” Etymologically viewed, the word has a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other’s misfortune but also to feel with him or her any emotions – joy, anxiety, happiness, pain.

Though Tereza intruded the privacy of Sabina’s letters Tomas did not throw her out: “Compassion was Tomas’s fate (or curse)” (21). When Tereza sneaked back to Prague from Zurich in Switzerland, Tomas soared. “He had entered Parmenides’ magic field: he was enjoying the sweet lightness of being” (30). But two days after “. . . he was hit by a weight the likes of which he had never known. The tons of steel of the Russian tanks were nothing compared with it. For there is nothing heavier than compassion” (31). On the fifth day after Tereza’s departure Tomas leaves his job in Zurich for Prague. “Yes, it was unbearable for him to stay in Zurich imagining Tereza living on her own in Prague” (33). He leaves saying “Es muss sein” “it must be” (32). It was an allusion to the last movement of Beethoven’s last quartet introduced by him with a phrase “Der schwer gefasste Entschluss,” meaning “the difficult or weighty resolution” (195). “Unlike Parmenides, Beethoven apparently viewed
weight as something positive” (33).

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 and this conviction which we all more or less share is born of Beethoven’s music. “...we believe that the greatness of man stems from the fact that he bears his fate as Atlas bore the heavens on his shoulders. Beethoven’s hero is a lifter of metaphysical weights” (32). But the metaphysical truth that Beethoven’s music is supposed to deliver is based on a funny story: one Dembscher owed Beethoven fifty florins and when the composer who was hard up for money reminded him of the matter, Dembscher responded “Muss es sein?”. Beethoven replied with a laugh “Es muss sein!”. This incident resulted in Beethoven’s composing of a canon for four voices, three voices sing “Es muss sein, es muss sein, ja, ja, ja, ja!” (It must be, It must be, yes, yes, yes, yes!) and the fourth voice chimes in with “Heraus mit dem, Beutel!” (out with the purse!). After one year the same motif became the basis for the fourth movement of the last quartet, Opus 135. Beethoven then had forgotten the incident. The word “Es muss sein!” had acquired a much more solemn ring. They seemed to issue directly from the lips of fate (Unbearable Lightness 195). Thus Beethoven turned a frivolous inspiration into a serious quartet, a joke into a metaphysical truth. This is an interesting tale of light going heavy, or in Parmenides’ words positive going into negative. The truth and value which we cherish are therefore fabricated and Tomas is misled by such truth.

Italo Calvino averred that Tomas returned to Prague “dispite an awareness that he is entrapping himself.” “Because despite his professing the ideal of the lightness of living, and despite the practical example of his relationship with his friend, the painter Sabina, he has always suspected that truth lies in the opposing idea, in weight, in necessity” (Hunter and
White 315). It however seems that even such a stalwart as Calvino counts upon the very values that Kundera and his novel critiques: was Tomas aware of the consequences? Or could he make a decision based on his awareness? Is there anything like truth? Does he ever give into suspect that truth lies in weight? Calvino constructs Tomas in the Descartian way; he thinks therefore he is. On Tomas’ decision however the text goes like this: “Any schoolboy can do experiments in the physics laboratory to test various hypotheses. But a man because he has only one life to live, cannot conduct experiments to test whether to follow his passion (compassion) or not” (34). Tomas “came to love Beethoven through Tereza” and more ironically Tomas took “the difficult resolution” (195) of returning to Prague, to be with Tereza on the basis of the funny incident turning into a metaphysical truth, just by chance. We meet Tomas himself pondering over the “catastrophic mistake” of returning to Prague from Zurich while driving with Tereza and “furious with her” (226) in part 5.

Oedipus, the play by Sophocles serves as an important intertext appearing in many key scenes as a catalyst of the action that unfolds. The arrival of Tereza brought with her the analogy of a child who had been put in a bulrush basket and sent downstream, to Tomas’s mind. The image of the “abandoned child” became “dear to him” (175). Oedipus unknowingly killed his own father and married his own mother. When Oedipus realised that he himself was the cause of the suffering of his countrymen, he put out his own eyes and wandered blind away from Thebes. Tomas made an analogy between the Communists who had fallen into the hands of the Russians, and Oedipus. For Tomas the Communists should have put out their eyes and wandered away from Thebes! “. . . Metaphors are dangerous” (11) and Tomas’ article is inspired by his linking Tereza to a child who had been put in a bulrush basket. Besides if he had not taken in Tereza, he would not have written the article.
The weekly newspaper published by the union of Czech writers “... shortened his text by so much that it was reduced to its basic thesis (making it too schematic and aggressive). He didn’t like it anymore” (178). Within the world of this novel, Oedipus and what one might call “Oedipus-texts” operate as puzzling sings. Characters very often fail to “read” its dialogical significance and relevance as a sign. Tomas reads Oedipus in a way that seems to leave no question of Oedipus’ guilt (Pichova and Rhine 73). Tomas was unwilling to retract and this cost him his job, that of “the best surgeon in the hospital” (180). “... he was forced to leave the hospital” (184). Tomas was forced to take up the inferior position at a clinic where “... he could no longer practice surgery and became a general practitioner” (184-85). Tomas kept on falling and became “a window washer for nearly two years “(201) and later a driver in a collective farm.

Though Tomas wrote the Oedipal article he does not adopt a dogmatic stand on it. What transpired between Tomas and the man from the Interior Ministry and between Tomas and his son on the matter will bear witness to the fact. Man from the Interior commands: “... Then tell me, Doctor (sic), do you really think that Communists should put out their eyes? You who have given so many people the gift of health?” “‘But that’s preposterous!’ Tomas cried in self-defence. ‘Why don’t you read what I wrote?’” (186). Tomas’s son also makes a monological reading of his Oedipal article: “‘Your refusal to compromise. Your clear-cut sense of what’s good and what’s evil, something we’re beginning to lose’” (218). Simon’s reading of the article acknowledges no room for ambiguity or instability of signification, which polyphonic novel is based on. But this interpretation only made Tomas enraged: “‘But it’s all a misunderstanding! The border between good and evil is terribly fuzzy. I wasn’t out to punish anyone, either. Punishing people who don’t know what they’ve done is barbaric. The myth of Oedipus is a beautiful
one, but treating it like this . . .’ ” (218). Tomas refused to sign the letter to the President, called “Two Thousand Words,” the first glorious manifesto of the 1968 Prague Spring calling for the democratisation of the Communist regime. “Duty” the word his son used to make him sign, sounded the worst word any one could have used on him and this made Tomas’s decision easier. “He was not at all sure he was doing the right thing, but he was sure he was doing what he wanted to do” (220). The polyphonic hero’s word about himself and about his world is not an objectified image but an autonomous pure voice. Besides, Tomas found it an “excellent joke!” that the original Russian slogan “Citizen, have you joined the Red Army?” having been replaced by “Citizen have you signed the Two Thousand Words” (211). Kitsch turning after kitsch!

In the village where Tomas was employed as a driver at a collective farm, once on their occasional drive to the nearest town their pick up crashed and hurtled down a steep incline. “Their bodies had been crushed to a pulp” (122). Thus Tereza and Tomas “died under the sign of weight” (273). The aesthetic fundamentalist that Sabina is, the dead Tomas appears to her as: “Don Juan in the foreground, a specious stage set by a naive painter, and through a crack in the set – Tristan. He died as Tristan, not as Don Juan” (124). One of the beautiful instances in Kundera where painting comes to the aid of literary depiction – one literary medium talking in terms of another. Sabina however composed a will requesting that her deadbody be cremated and ashes thrown to the winds. “She wanted to die under the sign of lightness” (273).

In his essay “On Kundera,” Italo Calvino identifies the nucleus of the book residing in a truth as simple as it is ineludible: “It is impossible to act according to experience because every situation we face is unique and presents itself to us for the first time” (Hunter and White 315). But after a thorough reading one could only say that it is only one of the
nuclei of the text or it is just the nucleus of the story while the text is a multi-nucleus one, or in other words polyphonic – multi-accented and having multiple contents.

For Ivan Sanders, Sabina can “endure the agonizing lightness of being” unlike Tomas (107). This is misleading because as the narrator clearly states “Her [Sabina’s] drama was a drama not of heaviness but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being” (122). For long Sabina’s betrayals had filled her with excitement and joy, because they opened up new paths to new adventures of betrayal. “But what if paths come to an end? One could betray one’s parents, husband, country, love, but when parents, husband, country and love were gone – what was left to betray.” “Sabina felt emptiness all around her” (122). “She could not get over the news” of the death of Tomas and Tereza because the last link to her past had been broken (123). Sabina emerges at the end as typifying mysteriously inscrutable human nature. Franz “had never known quite what Sabina thought.” “Could she be mocking him? Did she consider the cult he made of her silly?” (273). Sabina’s bowler hat is an ambivalent motif contributing to the deconstruction of the weight/lightness opposition. “The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina’s life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning” (88). “First it was a vague reminder of a forgotten grandfather.” “Second it was a memento of her father.” It was the icon of her revolt against the brother who appropriated all their parents’ property. “Third it was a prop for her love games with Tomas.” “Fourth it was a sign of her originality, which she consciously cultivated.” “Fifth now that she was abroad, the hat was a sentimental object” (87). Symbols as is believed are not inviolable and they of course are dialogical and polyphonic. Franz who is prone to pursuing totalising interpretations “felt uncomfortable” with this “very lack of meaning” (88).

Anti-kitsch
At another level this novel is a polyphonic variation on kitsch. It is a treatise and illustration of the idea. Kitsch is an anathema to polyphonic mode of artistic thinking. Kundera identifies it as one of the “pillar words of the novel” (The Art 135). The text is “a kitsch destroyer” (Bedient 95). As Perry Meisel points out the rejection of kitsch is one of the “three working principles” (Hunter and White 321) outlined by Kundera in The Art. Not simply bad or laughable art, kitsch is, in Mr. Kundera’s definition from “Sixty-three Words” (his dictionary of the terms and categories that organize his imagination) “the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection” (The Art 135). Kundera tells us that “kitsch” is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all western languages. Through repeated use it lost its original meaning. Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence. For Kundera behind all European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good. Kundera calls “this basic faith a categorical agreement with being” (248).

The word “shit” appearing in print until recently as “s - - -” (248) for Kundera is not because of moral consideration. The objection to shit is a metaphysical one. As a child the narrator questioned the “basic thesis of Christian anthropology, namely, that man was created in God’s image” (245). “Either/or: either man was created in God’s image – and God has intestines! – or God lacks intestines and man is not like Him” (245). The great Gnostic master Valentinus solved the problem maintaining that Jesus “ate and drank, but did not defecate” (246).

Kundera sees shit as an onerous theological problem than evil. Since God gave man
freedom the argument that he is not responsible for man’s crimes can be accepted, if need be. “The responsibility for shit, however rests entirely with Him, the Creator of man” (246). “The daily defecation session is daily proof of the unacceptability of creation. Either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don’t look yourself in the bathroom!) or we are created in an unacceptable manner” (248). What follows is that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and for Kundera “This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch” (248). Kundera here is undermining the whole edifice of Christian values as Nietzsche did with his “experimental thought” with his first impulse to break up whatever is rigid (Testaments Betrayed 174). Theological truth forgetting the ambivalence of the ancient scatological images is devoid of dialogism. It eschews excrement conceived as something “intermediate between earth and body,” as a generating force linked to fertility as evinced in Rabelaisian images (Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World 175).

“Sabina’s initial inner revolt against Communism was aesthetic rather than ethical in character” (248). She was repelled by the mask of beauty it tried to wear, in other words, Communist kitsch. The model of Communist kitsch is the ceremony called May Day, women all wearing red, white and blue blouses, public looking on from balconies and windows, small brass bands accompanied the individual groups, keeping everyone in step, etc. etc. “The May Day ceremony drew its inspiration from the deep well of the categorical agreement with being” (249).

The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind, the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories.
Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says:

How nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. (251)

For Kundera the brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. “Kitsch is the aesthetic idea of the politicians and all political parties and movements” (251).

Totalitarian kitsch occurs whenever a single political movement corners power. It stands for banishing everything that infringes on kitsch; “every display of individualism,” “every doubt,” and “all irony” because in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken quite seriously “and the mother who abandons her family or the man who prefers men to women” because they all call into question the holy decree “Be fruitful and multiply” (252). This is a manifesto of Kundera’s writing on the whole, speaking against all kinds of absolutism.

Sabina always rebelled against the socialist interpretation of art. It is her antagonism against kitsch that provoked her when she was presented as a saint or martyr, suffering, struggling against injustice still struggling, by the political organization which organised an exhibit on her. “Her paintings are a struggle for happiness.” “‘My enemy is kitsch, not Communism!’ she replied, infuriated” (254). To avoid people making her life a kitsch in America she even hid the fact that she was a Czech.

In the realm of totalitarian kitsch all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. It follows then, that the true opponent of totalitarian
kitsch is the person who asks questions. A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it. In fact, that was exactly how Sabina had explained the meaning of her paintings to Tereza: on the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth showing through (emphasis added). (254)

O’Brien finds Sabina’s painting as a clear alternative to oppositional thinking and as a paradigm for understanding Kundera’s work in general. Instead of reproducing surfaces that insist on a totalizing “intelligible lie” Kundera’s novels draw our attention to deeper paradoxes (116). “For none among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely. No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition”. “Kitsch has its source in the categorical agreement with being”. Then asks Kundera: “But what is the basis of being? God? Mankind? Struggle? Love? Man? Woman?” (256).

Italo Calvino has a terminological objection to Kundera’s use of the term kitsch because for him Kundera takes into consideration only one among the many meanings of the term. But the kitsch that claims to represent the most audacious and “cursed” broadmindedness with facile and banal effects is also part of the bad tastes of mass culture. Though less dangerous, it cannot be taken as an antidote. For example, the image of Sabina, naked, wearing a man’s bowler hat presented as an absolute contrast with kitsch in part 3 seemed totally unconvincing to Calvino (Hunter and White 317).

“But since opinions vary there are various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national and international” (257). The Grand March that Franz undertook is the splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness, and Kundera considers this as a political kitsch. It
was in the wake of American bombardment, a civil war and the final occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam that the idea for a group of important Western intellectuals to march to Cambodian border and by means of this great spectacle before the eyes of the world to force occupied country to allow doctors in. Franz joined the march not because he was a devotee of kitsch but that he wanted to impress upon Sabina. Franz joined the kitsch of march, mistaking it as real, sidestepping his real life which he thought as false.

The Grand March at last turned out to be a “publicity stunt” with participants vying with each other for media attention. It was also stillborn – Grand March failed in its mission – was not allowed in Cambodia. Hence life as well as history lacks “Es Muss sein!”. Only when he reached Thailand for the march that the venture struck him as “meaningless, [and] laughable” (274).

Franz’s Grand March to Cambodia in search of a better future ended up being killed enroute in Thailand – “a heavy blow on his head” and “he lost consciousness” (275) in a mugging. Franz, the university professor who has an “extraordinarily gifted” “scholarly career” (99) “felt his book life to be unreal” (100). “He saw the marching, shouting crowd as the image of Europe and its history” (99). The dreamer that he is, it never occurred to him that what he considered unreal (the work he did in the solitude of the office and library) was in fact his real life, whereas the parades he imagined to be reality were nothing but theatre, dance, carnival – in other words, a dream (100). Part 6, chapter 29 is a brief summing up on how a person is turned kitsch after his death:

What remains of the dying population of Cambodia?

One large photograph of an American actress holding an Asian child in her arms.
What remains of Tomas?

An inscription reading HE WANTED THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH (sic).

What remains of Beethoven?

A frown, an improbable mane, and a somber voice intoning “Es muss sein!”

What remains of Franz?

An inscription reading A RETURN AFTER LONG WANDERINGS (sic).

And so on and so forth. Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion. (277-78)

The above descriptions are a parody of completely externalised view of man as fully finished and completed being. Such a view is hopelessly readymade and absolutely erroneous. Kundera is in accord with Bakhtin’s view that neither world view nor language can function as factors for limiting and determining human images or their individualisation (Dialogic Imagination 35). This is, as Adams remarks, also an illustration of “the fabrication of what is called truth, or shows history as an interpretation” (Hunter and White 351). John Bayley in his “Kundera and Kitsch” criticizes Kundera for his use of the term kitsch by oversimplifying the whole question of the mechanism by which we accept life and open our arms to its basic situations. Measuring by Kundera’s scale “all art would be as full of kitsch.” For Bayley what matters, as Kundera himself recognises, is the purpose behind kitsch today, the ways in which commercial and political interests have taken over and control a basic human need (Hunter and White 314).
What Kundera dramatizes as circle dancing in *The Book* he analyses as kitsch in *Unbearable Lightness* and in several occasional essays. While he points out that the term has its origin in Munich art circles in the nineteenth century, for Kundera kitsch refers not simply to a species of bad art but to the deliberate sentimentalisation of reality. In *Unbearable Lightness* he remarks that kitsch has its source in the categorical agreement with being, meaning that kitsch involves what he would call an angelic blindness to everything problematic and unaccommodating about experience as Roger Kimball says. But Kundera by expanding the meaning of kitsch empties it of its critical content. Kimball has no doubt that totalitarianism can make effective use of kitsch but to speak of totalitarian kitsch is to trivialize totalitarianism by assimilating it to a category that has its home in aesthetics; it is in effect to poeticize totalitarianism(11). But Irwin Howe sees a difference in perspective between Europeans and Americans with regard to kitsch. The Europeans, legitimately, see the problem of kitsch in terms of its threat to the life of politics and society while the latter see the problem largely as a threat to the life of culture (Boyers and Boyers 211).

Calvin Bedient charges Kundera with creating the hazard of reverse kitsch. As an example he points out the analysis of coarsely equating “my childhood” and the deaths of relatives, “my family” (4), childhood and Hitler in part 1, chapter 1 saying “. . .what were their deaths compared with the memories of a lost period in my life a period that would never return?”(4). Bedient finds it “dishonest,” an “exaggeration” and “a reification: a once-and-for all status conferred on a passing emotion” (97). Anyway for Kundera Kitsch, is the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into language of beauty and feelings for which one antidote is to write novels according to what he refers to frequently in *The Art* as novelistic *counterpoint* or *polyphony*.
The plot of the social-psychological, family and biographical novels bind hero to hero not as person to person but as father to son, husband to wife, lover to loved one, etc. and thus as Bakhtin says “chance is excluded here” (Problems 85). But Kunderian novel is the one that revels in chances. Chance stalks everywhere. In part 1 of the novel Tomas recalls the conversation he and Tereza had about his friend Z. wherein she announced, “If I hadn’t met you I’d certainly have fallen in love with him” (34). Then Tomas melancholically realized that it was only a matter of chance that Tereza loved him and not the friend Z. The narrator then addresses the reader saying “we all reject out of hand the idea that the love of our life may be something light or weightless . . .” (35) and we feel that Beethoven himself is playing the “Es muss sein!” to our own great love.

But Tomas at least is not like the model reader Kundera is addressing. He often thought of Tereza’s remark about his friend Z. and came to the conclusion that the love story of his life exemplified not “Es muss sein!” (It must be so), but rather “Es könnte auch anders sein” (It could just as well be otherwise) (35). Because this is how the story occurs:

Seven years earlier, a complex neurological case happened [sic] to have been discovered at the hospital in Tereza’s town. They called in the chief surgeon of Tomas’s hospital in Prague for consultation, but the chief surgeon of Tomas’s hospital happened to be suffering from sciatica, and because he could not move he sent Tomas to the provincial hospital in his place. The town had several hotels, but Tomas happened to be given a room in the one where Tereza was employed. He happened to have had enough free time before his train left to stop at the hotel restaurant. Tereza happened to be on duty, and happened to be serving Tomas’s table. It had taken six chance happenings to push Tomas towards Tereza, as if he had little inclination to go to her on his
“Beyond Causality”– bringing to light the causeless, incalculable, even mysterious aspect of human action (The Art 57) in the novel does not stop there. Tomas went back to Prague because of Tereza. That is, he made “so fateful a decision” based on “so fortuitous a love” (35). Tomas’s difficult resolution was made through Beethoven, to whom Tereza introduced him to. The Oedipal article that he wrote was based on an analogy sprung up in connection with Tereza. Besides, the fact that the article that wrecked Tomas’s life is a letter to the editor shows how insignificant a cause is large enough for his tragedy. Thus chance and coincidence play an important role in this novel much more than any other of his novels. “. . . Tereza the woman born of six laughable fortuities” (239) determined Tomas’s life. Even Tereza’s birth was by chance; her mother, “failing to find a doctor willing to perform an abortion” (42). The protagonist’s life turns on coincidences and Adams sees the very beauty of life in these coincidences (Hunter and White 354). But for the novelist this is true for the novel and for human life as well. That is why the novelist says “chance and chance alone has a message for us.” Only “chance can speak to us” (48). “Necessity knows no magic formulae – they are left to chance” (49).

Early in the novel, in part 2, the novelist theorises coincidences and the role that it plays in human life as well as in fiction. “ ‘Coincidence’ means that two events unexpectedly happen at the same time, they meet: Tomas appears in the hotel at the same time the radio is playing Beethoven” (51). “Our day-to-day life is bombarded with fortuities . . .” (51). The novel then makes a self-conscious commentary:

Early in the novel that Tereza clutched under her arm when she went to visit Tomas, Anna meets Vronsky in curious circumstances: they are at the railway
station when someone is run over by a train. At the end of the novel, Anna throws herself under a train. This symmetrical composition – the same motif appears at the beginning and at the end – may seem quite “novelistic” to you, and I am willing to agree, but only on condition that you refrain from reading such notions as “fictive,” “fabricated,” and “untrue to life” into the word “novelistic.” Because human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion.

(52)

The “famous myth from Plato’s Symposium” (238) appears in the novel in the end of part 5 as a recollection of Tomas. People were hermaphrodites until God split them into two, and now all the halves wander the world over seeking one another. Love is the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost. This means somewhere in the world each one of us has a partner who once formed part of our body. Tomas tried to picture himself living in an ideal world with the young woman from the dream. Tomas sees Tereza walking past the open windows of their ideal house. Then “Again, he feels her pain in his own heart. Again, he falls prey to compassion and sinks deep into her soul” (239). “And he knows that time and again he will abandon the house of his happiness, time and again abandon his paradise and the woman from his dream and betray the “Es muss sein!” of his love to go off with Tereza, the woman born of six laughable fortuities” (239). So Plato’s myth which is a version of Biblical myth that marriages are made in heaven remains very specious as far as Tomas’s life is concerned.

Human life is composed like music. Guided by his sense of beauty an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence – Beethoven’s music in Tomas’s case – into a motif which then assumes an important role in his life. Unwittingly individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty. Therefore readers are told that it is “wrong” “to chide the
novel for being fascinated by mysterious coincidences” but “right to chide man for being blind to such coincidences in his daily life. For he thereby deprives his life of a dimension of beauty” (52).

It is the role of chance in this text that prompts E.L. Doctorow to say that the first thing to note about Kundera’s character’s fate is that it is a gloss on Orwell. To destroy Tomas, Kundera is saying, the powerfully inertial police apparatus does not have to expend their energy required to torture him (Hunter and White 309).

The idea of life composed as beauty again owes to Nietzsche whose one among the four themes was that life is to be understood aesthetically. That is, there is nothing outside the world – no God and no transcendent realm of any kind – then life cannot have any purpose outside or beyond itself. Whatever meaning or justification it has, must come from within itself: it must exist purely for its own sake, and have import on its own terms alone (Magee 249).

**Animals’ Smile**

E.M. Forster called the second aspect of the novel as people “since the actors in a story are usually human” (142). Here the actors are not necessarily human. In the process of becoming a polyphonic novel *Unbearable Lightness* also becomes a book on animals. It examines man in relation to animals. Part 7 is eponymously kept apart for “Karenin’s Smile” (the only part title with a name). Tomas and Tereza tend Karenin, their dog, who has cancer. The novel also has Mefisto, a pig whom the collective farm chairman raised as a dog, who quickly made friends with Karenin. Kundera here deconstructs Bible which formed the bedrock of the theory upon which man consecrated his dominion over all other creatures of the world. Genesis in its beginning tells us that “God created man in order to
give him dominion over fish and fowl and all creatures” (236). Genesis was written by a
man and not by a horse. The novelist doubts the fact that God actually did grant man
dominion over other creatures. It is more likely that man invented God to sanctify the
dominion that he had usurped for himself over the cow and horse. The right to kill a deer or
cow is the only thing that mankind can agree upon. Even though the Genesis gave man
dominion over all animals it could be construed that man was given only the responsibility
for administration. Descartes took another decisive step: “Man is master and proprietor, says
Descartes, whereas the beast is merely an automation, an animated machine, *a machina
animata*.” Descartes was also the one who point-blank denied animals a soul. “When an
animal laments, it is not a lament; it is merely the rasp of a poorly functioning mechanism”
(288).

Tereza and Tomas who “each alone” in their sadness remaining with Karenin, until
his last hour, pass the test of “true human goodness” because:

> True human goodness, in all its purity and freedom, can come to the fore only
when its recipient has no power. Mankind’s true moral test, its fundamental
test (which lies deeply buried from view), consists of its attitude towards those
who are at its mercy: animals. And in this respect mankind has suffered a
fundamental debacle, a debacle so fundamental that all others stem from it.

(289)

The text also has two chapters in part 4 (chapter 20 and 21) on a crow which Tereza
saved from two boys who were about to finish it off. She took it home and tended it. But
despite her tender care the crow died.

The novel also narrates Tereza recalling an incident with Karenin’s head resting in
her lap: she had read in newspapers a two-line filler, ten or so years ago about how all the
dogs in a certain Russian city had been summarily shot. For the author this is an example of
how substitution works in the act of expressing revenge. This is history unrecorded by
historiography, which for Kundera is important in his exploration of existence. Polyphony
made the structure of novel more complicated and multifarious in form (Zhogwen 781).

One of the heifers Tereza used to graze made friends with her. She, named Marketa,
would stop and stare at her with her big brown eyes. Before the villages were turned into a
collective factory the cows in the villages had names.

The image of Tereza petting Karenin’s head and ruminating on mankind’s debacles is
changed now in the narrator’s vision as in a film to an image of Nietzsche. While leaving a
hotel Nietzsche sees a coachman beating the horse with a whip. Nietzsche immediately
went up to the horse before the coachman’s very eyes, put his arms around the horse’s neck
and burst into tears. The incident took place in 1889 when Nietzsche had his mental illness
begun. For the author-figure, “Nietzsche was trying to apologize to the horse for Descartes.”
“His lunacy” which is “his final break with mankind” began at that very moment. That is
the Nietzsche the novelist loves, just as he loves the Tereza with the mortally ill dog resting
his head in her lap, “both stepping down from the road along which mankind, “‘the master
and proprietor of nature’ marches onward” (290).

Karenin, though named as male, “was after all a female, had his periods too.” For the
menstruating Karenin, Tereza would put absorbant cotton between his legs and pull an old
pair of panties tying the whole thing with a long ribbon to his body. This was to prevent
him from soiling the flat. Tereza then would laugh for two weeks thinking about the outfit.
Why does Tereza feel light hearted and gay about “a dog’s menstruation” while squeamish
about hers? “The answer seems simple . . . dogs were never expelled from Paradise. Karenin knew nothing about the duality of body and soul and had no concept of disgust” (297).

Thus this part is a story of modern man losing his Paradise. How the so-called civilization has deprived us of a Paradise. That is why the author says, “The longing for Paradise is man’s longing not to be man” (296). And for the author so long as people lived in the country, in nature, surrounded by animals, in the bosom of regularly recurring seasons man retains at least a glimmer of that Paradisiac idyll. No one can give anyone else the gift of the idyll; only an animal can do so, because only animals were not expelled from Paradise. “The love between dog and man is idyllic. It knows no conflicts, no hair-raising scenes, it knows no development” (298).

We are also reminded to how much degree we are parasitic on animals, we have sucked the udder of cows like leeches; “ ‘Man the cow parasite’ is probably how non-man defines man in his zoology books” (287). And perhaps a man hitched to the cart of a Martian or roasted on the spit by inhabitants of the Milky Way will recall the veal cutlet he used to slice on his dinner plate and apologize (belatedly!) to the cow.

Kundera makes a revaluation of the novel form here. The novel ends with the slow death of Karenin, the dog, through euthanasia – “the right to merciful death” – “not forbidden by law” for animals (299). Tomas himself granted Karenin the privilege forbidden to humans. This as Guy Scarpetta sees is an indication of the overt desire to destroy classical notion of novelistic development progressing through exposition, peripeteia, reboundings and denouement (107). The author compares and contrasts a number of overlapping themes including those mentioned above in this novel. There is no
homogenous, centred plot, but instead a calculated tangle of semi-independent story-lines. This instigates one to describe the structural devices of the book in terms of variation, interval, counterpoint and restatement (Scarpetta 109). History, politics, ideas and dicta are spun out from the physical needs of Tomas and Tereza much as in Kundera’s account, Beethoven’s great composition of necessity takes its theme from a naked fact of debt (Winner 109).

Kundera is an expert at variation, the events affecting characters seem to depend on abstract, secret, haunting themes. At the core of the novel is the emblem of “Es muss sein!” – “it must be” or “overriding necessity” (193) or “weighty duty” (196) a “motif” that is adopted from Beethoven’s “fourth movement of the last quartet, Opus 135” (195). The novel contains seven major divisions or variations. These “variations” are not based on changes in register or changes in points of view but on focal differences. Each part is centred on one or two characters caught from within and commented on from without. Parts 1 and 5 focus on Tomas, parts 2, 4 and 7 on Tereza, parts 3 and 6 on Sabina and Franz.

The “architectonic formula” thus Guy Scarpetta arrives at is: A-B-C-B-A-C-B (113). What Scarpetta fails to mention is the focus of part 7 on Karenin, the dog. The process of multiple focuses allows at one and the same time for two or three effects. First this achieves the displacement of discourse time with respect to narrative time. The deaths of Tomas and Tereza are reported in page 122 of the 314 pages novel in part 3 and then almost towards the end of part 6 from the point of view of the novel’s other lovers, Franz and Sabina and the conclusion (part 7) goes back in time to tell the story of Tomas and Tereza spending their night in a hotel on one of their occasional visits (maybe the last one) to the next town. Thus for Perry Meisel in his essay “ Beautifying Lies and Polyphonic Wisdom” the last two sections of the novel are probably the most remarkable illustration of polyphony in his work
Second, it achieves the exposition of several perceptions of the same event and finally the authorization of a set of thematic variations and counterpoints. As usual in Kundera some events are narrated more than once, according to different points of view. For example, the matter of Tereza’s promotion from darkroom technician to staff photographer is told twice. Once it is told from the point of view of Tomas (17); another time it is told from the perspective of Tereza (56).

The narrator of the novel continually interrupts the narrative. But the narrator’s voice here and in other novels “must be regarded as one of many voices in the polyphony of views, competing for the reader’s attention. The events of the novel often transcend the narrow interpretations offered by the narrator” (Čulik). A significant example is that as for the narrator Tomas’s only “Es muss sein!” – the “internal” one – was medicine. It was not an “external ‘Es muss sein!’ reserved for him by social convention” (196). The narrator therefore wonders how he casts off “so fast,” “so forcefully,” and “so lightly” the “Es muss sein!” rooted deep inside him. “. . . the way he rushed into his decision seems rather odd to me. Could it perhaps conceal something else, something that escaped his reasoning?” he says (194). Narrator assumes no omniscience here.

Tomas achieves a better realisation and says, “Missions are stupid, Tereza – I have no mission. No one has. And it’s a terrific relief to realize you’re free of all missions” (313). The so-called real “Es muss sein!” of Tomas that is medicine, too is therefore weighty. Life has no “Es muss sein!” “. . . a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return . . . mean nothing” (3) as stated in the third sentence of the novel. Kundera thus joins issue in the philosophical dialogue on the idea of eternal return which often perplexed philosophers, and produces a very polyphonic novel. Kundera studiously avoids overtly privileging lightness over weight or weight over lightness in the novel and unsettles the notion that
lightness and weight are separate and irreconcilable as Tomas believes (O’Brien 110).

Part 3 of the novel is “Words Misunderstood.” As regards this Kundera remarks in The Art: “I realised that the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words,” “words misunderstood” (29). “Each of these words has a different meaning in the other person’s existential code” (29-30). If the narrator were to make a record of all Sabina and Franz’s conversation he could make a long lexicon of their misunderstanding. But the narrator takes the reader, the absent other who is always there, into confidence and says “Let us be content, instead, with a short dictionary” (89). Chapter 3 of the part is titled “A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words” and discusses the words “Woman,” “Fidelity and Betrayal,” “Music,” and “Light and Darkness.” The list continues in chapter 5 with the title “A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words (continued)” with words “Parades,” “The Beauty of New York,” “Sabina’s Country,” and “Cemetery.” Then chapter 7 is a continuation of the matter with the words “The Old Church in Amsterdam,” “Strength,” and “Living in Truth” and has the chapter title “A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words (concluded).” The above three chapters are the only titled chapters in the whole of the novel. This is a technique that is used to break the conventional unity of the text and make it polyphonic, by the short-cut method of bringing heteroglossia into the text.

Having said all this on how the novel accomplishes as a polyphony both in content and style narrator can also appear as forcing himself upon his characters and readers. All the characters embody a particular position with regard to weight/lightness and therefore there is a pattern in the subservience of his characters to Kundera’s will. They all exemplify the central act of his imagination, which is to conceive a paradox and express it elegantly. The paradox he is most fond of is the essential identity of opposites, and he plays with it over and over again with minor characters as well as major ones and with little essays and
one-line observations. Kundera shows us a dissident Czech émigré in Paris in the act of reproaching his fellow émigrés for their lack of anti-Communist fervor and he finds in him the same bullying quality of mind as in the former head of State, Antonin Novotny, who ruled Czechoslovakia for fourteen years. Kundera presents this through a marvellous image. In fact this type of people have index fingers longer than their middle fingers. E.L. Doctorow, therefore, accuses Kundera in his “Four Characters under Two Tyrannies” of acting in an autocratic manner. He charges him of murder of three of his quartet in the operation of his own mind as it formulates and finds images for the disastrous history of his country in his lifetime. “Tomas and Sabina and Franz and Tereza were invented to live under two tyrannies, the tyranny of contemprrary Czechoslovakia and the tyranny of Mr. Kundera’s despair,” he says (Hunter and White 310).

**Immortality**

The contents page of *Immortality* looks as follows:

- **PART ONE**: The face
- **PART TWO**: Immortality
- **PART THREE**: Fighting

  The sisters / Dark glasses / The body / Addition and subtraction / Older woman, younger man / The Eleventh Commandment / Imagology / The brilliant ally of his own gravediggers / A Compleat Ass (sic) / The cat / The gesture of protest against a violation of human rights / To be a victim of one’s fame/Fighting / Professor Avenarius / The body / The gesture of longing for immortality / Ambiguity / The clairvoyant / Suicide / Dark glasses

- **PART FOUR**: *Homo sentimentalis*
“The division of the novel into parts, parts into chapters, chapters into paragraphs – the books’ articulation – I want to be utterly clear,” so informs Kundera in The Art (87). Part 5, chapter 9 of the novel has a discussion between “Milan Kundera,” the novelist present in the novel and his friend Professor Avenarius. To Avenarius’s question what he is writing about these days the answer from the author is “‘That’s impossible to recount’” (265). This novel is impossible to recount. It is so because it is written by a novelist who regrets “that almost all novels ever written are much too obedient to the rules of unity of action” (Immortality 266). The novel explains it:

“. . . What I mean to say is that at their core is one single chain of casually related acts and events. These novels are like a narrow street along which someone drives his characters with a whip. Dramatic tension is the real curse of the novel, because it transforms everything, even the most beautiful pages, even the most surprising scenes and observations merely into steps leading to the final resolution, in which the meaning of everything that preceded it is concentrated. The novel is consumed in the fire of its own tension like a bale of straw.” (266)

Therefore for Kundera “A novel shouldn’t be like a bicycle race but a feast of many courses” (266). This novel, therefore, is written like a feast of many courses. This is for Kundera another way of saying that it is polyphonic.

That the structure of the novel is polyphonic can be detected even from a cursory
glance of the contents page. It is another variant of an architecture based on number seven (The Art 86). Part 3 has chapters which are named while all other chapters of all other parts are only numbered. Part 4, *Homo sentimentalis* is italicised and therefore it stands out as a part, as if the whole novel is about it. No doubt, it is one of the important themes of the novel. The layout of the contents page assumes extreme importance to the polyphonic structure of the novel in the light of the fact that Kundera is an author who insists that his publishers make the numbers prominent and set the chapters off sharply from one another (The Art 87). He once even left a publisher for the sole reason that the publisher tried to change his semicolons to periods (Author’s Note to *The Joke* x).

The thread of the theme of immortality passes through the novel. But very often the thread lies dormant and the reader loses this thread. Several other themes like a commentary on modern life, a study of self, fiction writing, sentimentalism and antiromanticism runs through the work. “Dark glasses” are an important motif in the novel. Another major motif of *Immortality* is the way artists and their works are changed by the passage of time. None of these elements exists without other; they illuminate and explain one another as they explore the theme of immortality (The Art 76).

Two parallel stories, one of Agnes and the other of Goethe and Bettina (historical characters) are used for the discussion of the themes. The seven parts which act as compartments of the text are not water-tight. “Unilinear composition” which Kundera considers antithetical to “polyphony in the novel” (The Art 74) is forsaken as in other novels. Kundera deliberately produces a complicated structure, a mosaic of events where themes and motives from various parts of the novel are interrelated in an extricate, precarious balance. As in his previous novels, narratives and characters are developed in order to analyse certain selected themes from many different angles (Čulík). As Lodge says
of Fineganswake, Immortality as other novels of Kundera resists reading and interpretation by its difficulty of narrative method (Nicol 256).

As in the The Book and Unbearable Lightness the author intervenes. The intervention here is frequent and sometimes blatant identifying himself as “Milan Kundera,” the author. Baranczak accuses the “brilliant narrator” of having infected with the disease which he calls “Usurpation of Authority (sic)” manifesting an attitude toward both the world represented and the reader making oneself a constant centre of attraction (38). Here the intrusive author is not only named “Milan Kundera” but discusses some of his books including, Immortality with Professor Avenarius and others. The author tells stories and injects bon mots of his own, which supply variations on such themes as immortality and the impoverishment of contemporary culture (Sanders 10).

Among the polyphony of voices that enter the novel is that of various radio programmes that the author listens too. It is from the radio the narrator hears that since the war two million people have been killed on the roads of Europe; in France alone, highway accidents have caused on an average ten thousand deaths and three hundred thousand injuries per year making a whole army of the legless, handless, earless, and eyeless people. Immortality published in 1991 is the first of Kundera’s novels to be set in France. The book presents a love triangle among its principal characters – Agnes, her husband, Paul and her sister, Laura who craves for immortality. The novel begins as the narrator says with his “Waiting at the swimming pool for Professor Avenarius and seeing an unknown woman wave to the life guard” (100). In the second chapter Kundera introduces Agnes as, “Agnes, the heroine of my novel” (7). Then the narrator who identified himself as Milan Kundera continues:
Who is Agnes?

Just as Eve came from Adam’s rib, just as Venus was born out of the waves, Agnes sprang from the gesture of that sixty-year-old woman at the pool who waved at the lifeguard and whose features are already fading from my memory. At the time, that gesture aroused in me immense, inexplicable nostalgia and this nostalgia gave birth to the woman I call Agnes. (7)

As is true with contemporary novels Kundera is calling into question one of the formal elements of narrative, character. The novelist debunks any real-life origin for Tomas, the hero of *Unbearable Lightness*. He is born in the light of the “reflections” on lightness/weight (6). As regards Tamina, the heroine of *The Book*, he makes it clear – “my heroine belongs to me and me alone” – and for the purpose he baptises her with an unheard of name – Tamina (79). Kundera wonders: “But isn’t a person, and to an even greater extent, a character in a novel, by definition a unique, inimitable being?” (7). Then how could the gesture that was performed by one person that characterizes her and was part of her individual charm could at the same time be the essence of another person and the author’s dreams of her. “That’s worth some thought:” (7) and the novel in the beginning probes the matter. It is impossible that every individual in the world has his or her own repertory of gestures. Arithmetically, it is simply impossible. The novelist concludes: “We could put it in the form of an aphorism: many people, few gestures” (8). This is one way of the disintegration in a novel, of the epic wholeness of an individual (*Dialogic Imagination* 37).

In the dialogic tradition the novelist makes a retraction: “I said at the beginning, when I talked about the woman at the pool, that the essence of her charm, independent of
time, revealed itself for a second in the gesture and dazzled me?” (8). What he perceived at
the time “was wrong” (8). He adds: “The gesture revealed nothing of that woman’s essence,
one could rather say that the woman revealed to me the charm of a gesture. A gesture
cannot be regarded as the expression of an individual . . .” (8). The novel is partly an
enquiry into the relation between the self and the gesture. The chapter “Addition and
Subtraction” in part 3 is an extension on the thesis of self. For Kundera there are two
methods for cultivating the uniqueness of the self: the method of addition and the method
of subtraction. Agnes, the heroine of the novel subtracts from her self everything that is
exterior and borrowed, in order to come closer to her sheer essence. This is even at the risk
that zero is left behind at the bottom after subtraction.

Laura acts in the opposite way. In order to make her self even more visible,
perceivable, sizeable, seizeable, she keeps adding to it more and more attributes. Laura’s
Siamese cat is an example of this and in the cat, Laura “saw her paradigm” and “she saw
herself” in it (111). The method of adding is charming if it involves such things as a cat, a
dog, roast pork, love of the sea or of cold showers. But the matter becomes less idyllic, for
Kundera, if a person decides to add love for Communism, for the homeland, for Mussolini,
for Roman Catholicism or atheism, for fascism or antifascism. Some of these are, and others
would easily become what Bakhtin identified as the centripetal forces in socio-linguistic and
ideological life which serve one and the same project of centralizing and unifying the
European languages (Dialogic Imagination 271). The narrator then identifies the paradox
involved in the cultivation of the self by way of the addition method: people use addition in
order to create a unique, inimitable self, yet because they automatically become
propagandists for the added attributes, they are actually doing everything in their power to
make as many others as possible similar to themselves; as a result, their uniqueness (so
painfully gained) quickly begins to disappear (122).

Dark glasses, an important motif in the story, are an example of an addition in cultivating the uniqueness of self, which both sisters – Agnes and Laura used. Agnes grew fond of dark glasses while she was still at the lycee. She used them not because they protected her eyes against the sun, but because wearing them made her feel pretty and mysterious. “Dark glasses became her hobby . . . Agnes had a collection of dark glasses” (103). In Laura’s life, dark glasses came to play an important role after her miscarriage. “From that time on dark glasses became her badge of sorrow. She put them on not to hide her weeping but to let people know that she wept. The glasses became a substitute for tears” (103).

Laura’s fondness for dark glasses was once again, as so many times before, inspired by her sister. But the story of the glasses also shows that the relationship of the sisters cannot be reduced to the mere statement that the younger imitated the elder. Yes, she imitated, but at the same time she corrected: she gave dark glasses a deeper significance, a more weighty significance, so that the dark glasses of Agnes had to blush before those of Laura for their frivolity. Every time Laura appeared with them on, it meant that she was suffering, and Agnes had the feeling that out of tact and modesty she ought to take her own glasses off. (103)

Dark glasses (Laura’s dark glasses) became implicated in “the senseless hatred that had broken out between the two women” (204) of which the finale is the dropping of it to the floor by Agnes for it to break. Dark glasses thus as Sabina’s hat in *Unbearable Lightness* contribute to the deconstructionist combination of opposing connotations.
Therefore Dark glasses are a polyphonic motif.

**A Parody of “to be Absolutely Modern”**

Rimbaud was the poet “who had commanded everyone to be absolutely modern” (245). His book *A Season in Hell* has the dictum: “‘It is necessary to be absolutely modern’” (155). Paul here is misled by the dictum as others. Paul merges in Kundera’s mind with Jaromil of *Life is Elsewhere*. Jaromil who is madly in love with modern poetry becomes a votary of the dictum. But the absolutely modern in Prague, 1948 immediately turns out to be the Socialist revolution. Jaromil, with some of his friends, then sarcastically renounces everything he loved with all his heart to become a votary of Socialist revolution. “It is possible that some of those watching him at the time thought to themselves: ‘Jaromil is the ally of his gravediggers’” (156). The text here is inclusive of other possible points of view exhibiting its polyphonic nature. Paul and Jaromil are not alike and the only link between them is their passionate conviction that it is necessary to be absolutely modern. The text now illustrates how this conviction that remains is a false conviction. How it makes people an ally of their own gravediggers. “The lyrical poet does not have to prove anything” (*Life is Elsewhere* 212). Art here goes astray and misleads. Simultaneously questioning the lyrical truth, thus *Immortality* “question(s) the content of modernity” “without hesitation” (156). It presents a world that is

[... gradually losing its transparency, darkens, becomes more and more incomprehensible, rushes into the unknown, while man, betrayed by the world, escapes into his self, into his nostalgia, his dreams, his revolt and lets himself be deafened by the voices inside him so that he no longer hears the voices outside. (85)
Visual media especially TV is synonymous with postmodern era. As the novelist regrets the present era grabs everything that is written in order to transform it into films, TV programmes or cartoons. “What is essential in a novel is precisely what can only be expressed in a novel, and so every adaptation contains nothing but the non-essential” (266). Immortality, “impossible to recount” (265) resists this trend of postmodern era through its form itself. Professor Avenarius defines this postmodern world of motor cars, motor cycles, imagologists and noise as “Diabolum.” He tells Kundera: “Surely it must be clear to you that everything I do is a struggle against Diabolum” (255). For him “ ‘There is no effective or sensible way to fight Diabolum. Marx tried, all the revolutionaries tried, and in the end Diabolum always managed to appropriate every organisation whose original goal was to destroy him’ ” (255). Avenarius’s whole revolutionary past ended in disappointment and now only one single question occupies him. It is what a man can do when he realizes that no organized, effective and sensible fight against Diabolum is possible. Avenarius “ . . . has only two choices: to resign and cease to be himself, or to keep on cultivating an inner need for revolt and from time to time give it expression” (255). He chooses the second and goes on slashing tyres with a knife in his war against motor cars. His complaint against motor cars is:

“The cars that fill the streets have narrowed the pavements, which are crowded with pedestrians. If they want to look at each other, they see cars in the background, it they want to look at the building across the street they see cars in the foreground; there isn’t a single angle of view from which cars will not be visible, from the back, in front, on both sides. Their omnipresent noise corrodes every moment of contemplation like an acid. Cars have made the former beauty of cities invisible
... But I protest that cars have led to the eclipse of cathedrals.” (271)

The eerie Avenarius, “dogmatic” (291) in his theories, was arrested when he slashed two tyres on a car in an empty street. Interestingly a man (whom we later recognize as Paul) appeared out of blue introducing himself as a lawyer offering Avenarius legal help. As regards his profession he considered himself not as a lawyer but as a poet of the defence who deliberately took the sides of people finding themselves outside the law and he considered himself a traitor, a fifth columnist, a humanist guerrilla fighter in a world of inhuman laws. Ironically, Paul was heading towards the car to take it and reach the fatally wounded and dying Agnes. His car had slashed tyres and “Because of the slashed tyres he had already lost at least half an hour” (297). Paul then reached the hospital only to hear from the woman in a white coat that “‘She [Agnes] died fifteen minutes ago’” (300). The theme of accidental, unintentional outcomes of events, a favourite of Kundera, recurs here.

The text is also a commentary on the postmodern life in which reality is eclipsed by hyperreality. Avenarius, who understands this position and who hates “symbol jugglers,” (256) repeats his offer of a proposal to public: who would like to sleep secretly with Rita Hayworth or Greta Garbo and who would rather show himself with her in public. The results, for him, are quite clear in advance: everyone, including the worst no hopers, would maintain that they would rather sleep with her. But for him no matter what they say, if they had a real choice to make, all of them, he repeats, all of them would prefer to stroll with her down the avenue. “Because all of them are eager for admiration and not for pleasure. For appearance and not for reality. Reality no longer means anything to anyone. To anyone” (385). The novel here also shows the crucial tension developing between the external and the internal man resulting in the disintegration of the epic wholeness of an individual that Bakhtin visualized.
Apart from Avenarius’s observation the text largely deals with the situation of imagology gaining importance over reality. Part 3 has a chapter on “Imagology.” The preceding chapter is “The Eleventh Commandment.” “Tell the truth!” is the “Eleventh Commandment” (122). Significantly Moses did not include among God’s Ten Commandments “Thou shalt not lie!” (122). Because the one who says, Don’t lie! has first to say, Answer! and God did not give anyone the right to demand an answer from others.

In our century the authority of the Eleventh Commandment is in full force. After all, people do need some commandment to rule over them in our century, when God’s Ten have been virtually forgotten! The whole moral structure of our time rests on the Eleventh Commandment and the journalist came to realise that thanks to a mysterious provision of history he is to become its administrator, gaining a power undreamed of by a Hemingway or an Orwell. The media have substituted themselves for the older world as Marshall McLuhan states (Appignanesi et al. 150).

This phenomenon became unmistakably clear when the American Journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward uncovered the sordid dealings of President Nixon during his election campaign, forcing the planet’s most powerful man to lie in public, then to admit that he had lied, and finally leave the White House with bowed head. (Immortality 123)

Watergate Scandal had exposed the most powerful man. He lied in public and admitted that he had lied showing the disintegration of the integrity of the individuals. All applauded because justice had been done and Paul applauded all the more because for him this was a sign of great historic transition, a milestone, an unforgettable moment, a changing of the guard and appearance of a new power. The journalist will decide which of the fifty
thousand sentences uttered by the politician will be released to newspapers or quoted on the radio or TV. It was in such a situation that the son of the politician Deputy Bertrand Bertrand, Bernard Bertrand chose the career of a journalist and not the politician.

Therefore “The politician is dependent on the journalist” (126). “But on whom are the journalists dependent?” (126). The chapter, “Imagology” attempts a reading. Kundera describes clearly how ideology is turned into imagology in the postmodern world:

You understand nothing. Some one hundred years ago in Russia persecuted Marxists began to gather secretly in small circles in order to study Marx’s manifesto; they simplified the contents of this simple ideology in order to disseminate it to other circles, whose members, simplifying further and further this simplification of the simple, kept passing it on and on, so that when Marxism became known and powerful on the whole planet all that was left of it was a collection of six or seven slogans, so poorly linked that it can hardly be called an ideology. And precisely because the remnants of Marx no longer form any logical system of ideas, but only a series of suggestive images and slogans (a smiling worker with a hammer, black, white and yellow men fraternally holding hands, the dove of peace rising to the sky, and so on and so on), we can rightfully talk of a gradual, general, planetary transformation of ideology into imagology. (127)

“Imagology! Who first thought up this remarkable neologism Paul or I? It doesn’t matter” (127). Here character assumes as much importance as the author and his discourse is never entirely subsumed and remains free and open (Dialogic Imagination 349).

What matters for the author is that something that goes by so many names:
advertising agencies, political campaign managers; designers who devise the shape of
everything from cars to gym equipment; fashion stylists; barbers; show-business stars
dictating the norms of physical beauty are all branches of imagology. Of course
imagologues existed earlier, but they gained importance only in the last few decades and
now imagology has gained a historic victory over ideology. “All ideologies have been
defeated: in the end their dogmas were unmasked as illusions and people stop taking them
seriously” (127). The example the author provides for this is that Communists used to
believe that in the course of capitalist development the proletariat would gradually grow
poorer and poorer, but when it finally became clear that all over Europe workers were
driving to work in their own cars, they felt like shouting that reality was deceiving them.

Reality was stronger than ideology. And it is in this sense that imagology
surpassed it: imagology is stronger than reality, which has anyway long
ceased to be what it was for my grandmother, who lived in a Moravian village
and still knew everything through her own experience: how bread is baked,
how a house is built, how a pig is slaughtered and the meat smoked, what
quilts are made of, what the priest and the school teacher think about the
world; she met the whole village every day and knew how many murders were
committed in the country over the last ten years: she had, so to speak,
personal control over reality, and nobody could fool her by maintaining that
Moravian agriculture was thriving when people at home had nothing to eat.
My Paris neighbour spends his time in an office, where he sits for eight hours
facing an office colleague, then he sits in the car and drives home, turns on the
TV and when the announcer informs him that in the latest public opinion poll
the majority of French men voted their country the safest in Europe (I recently
read such a report), he is overjoyed and opens a bottle of champagne without ever learning that three thefts and two murders were committed on his street that very day. (Immortality 128)

The novel like a lot of postmodenist writing implies that experience is “just carpet” and whatever patterns we discern in it are wholly illusory, comforting fictions (Nicol 256). Public opinion polls are the critical instrument of imagology’s power because they enable imagology to live in absolute harmony with the people. The contemporary man for whom reality is a continent visited less and less, the findings of polls have become a kind of higher reality, or have become truth itself. Public opinion polls are a parliament in permanent session, whose function it is to create truth, the most democratic truth that has ever existed. The suggestion is that the traditional richness and subtlety of nature, art and religion have faded away and we are left with a zapped-out zero-consciousness (Apignanesi et al. 150).

“In Paul’s words: ideology belonged to history, while the reign of imagology begins where history ends” (Immortality 129). For Bakhtin each character’s speech possessing its own belief system is one form of incorporating heteroglossia in the novel (Dialogic Imagination 315). Paul’s speech incorporates a commentary on the postmodern cultural condition echoing Francis Fukhoyama’s end of history. Paul adds to the “other-languagedness” of the novel (Dialogic Imagination 294).

“The word change, so dear to our Europe, has been given a new meaning: it no longer means a new stage of coherent development (as it was understood by Vico, Hegel or Marx), but a shift from one side to another, from front to back, from the back to the left, from the left to the front” as understood by designers dreaming up the fashion for the next season (129). If imagologist does something it is not because the thing is needed but
because on the roulette wheel of imagology it had landed on a lucky number. If, for example, everyone decided that Martin Heidegger was to be considered a bungler and a bastard, it was not because his thought had been surpassed by other philosophers but because on the roulette wheel of imagology this time he had landed on an unlucky number, an anti-ideal. After having said so much the narrator concludes: “After these remarks I can return to the beginning of the discussion. The politician is dependent on the journalist. On whom are the journalists dependent? On imagologues” (130). The imagologist demands of the journalist that his newspaper, or TV channel or radio station reflect the imagological system of a given moment. They promised to obtain many advertising contracts for the station and effected many changes in the radio station where Bernard worked as a commentator. The programme director “known as the Bear, was forced to submit” (130). He also promised to cancel the brief feature “Rights and the Law” by his friend, Paul and became ashamed of it.

Part 3, “Fighting,” has a chapter named “To be Absolutely Modern” wherein Kundera defines to be “absolutely modern” as “never to question the content of modernity and to serve it as one serves the absolute, that is without hesitation” (156). When young, Rimbaud was a “beloved poet” (157) of Paul and to his surprise he recently found out that Brigitte had never read a single poem by Rimbaud. Rimbaud however was not his “aesthetic love” and he never read all of his poems and was fond only of those his friends talked about and “he enrolled with Rimbaud, the way a person enrols under a flag, with a political party, or with a football team” (158). Paul is reminded of the fact pointed out by Bear: “he had allowed himself to be carried out by paradox” (159). The discussion Paul had with Bear, narrated in the chapter “The Brilliant Ally of His Own Gravediggers” four chapters before in page 137 is here suggested. There Bear accuses him of being like young men who
supported Nazis because of an excess of intelligence. “For nothing requires a greater effort of thought than arguments to justify the rule of non-thought” For Bear, Paul is doing the same. Therefore Bear charges: “You are doing the same. You are the brilliant ally of your own gravediggers” (137). Kundera here is punching hole in what is usually called as the great collective wisdom, which during every age rules the roost and to which people subscribe to, with what he calls “non-thought” (137).

What the soulless mechanized world has in store for modern man in distress is made clear in Paul’s experience while telephoning for a taxi when his wife is on the dying bed. As soon as he picked the receiver Paul heard an unusually sweet voice saying: “‘Paris Taxi. Please be patient, someone will be with you shortly . . .’ (sic) . . .” (295). Then he heard music, a chorus of female voices and heavy drumming. The same sweet voice interrupts the music after a long interval and asks him to stay on the line. He, so eager to see his dying wife felt like shouting. The same monotonous recorded response was repeated and he could not get through. Kundera shows that human values can shrivel in a democracy, too. They can be trivialized by a different kind of crassness and coarseness, like the popular media. His emancipated, urbane characters can experience the same sense of abandonment, the same angst, as can be harried subjects of political dictatorships (Sanders 107).

The text for Čulík is a criticism of our civilization towards the end of the twentieth century, based on concrete experience of life in France. The text establishes that the desire to be modern is an archetype, an irrational imperative, anchored deeply within us, a persistent form whose content is changeable and indeterminate: what is modern is what declares itself modern and is accepted as such. It is appropriate to end this section with a typical double-accounted, double-styled hybrid construction as identified by Bakhtin entering the heteroglossia of Immortality through the speech of Agnes introduced into
She parked, got out of the car and set out towards the avenue. She was tired and hungry and because it’s dreary to eat alone in a restaurant, she decided to have a snack in the first bistro she saw. There was a time when this neighbourhood had many pleasant Breton restaurants where it was possible to eat inexpensively and pleasantly on crêpes or galettes washed down with apple cider. One day, however, all these places disappeared and were replaced by modern establishments selling what is sadly known as fast food [sic]. She overcame her distaste and headed for one of them. (21)

**Immortality**

The novel is first and foremost a discussion on human being’s craving for immortality. Part 2 of the novel is titled “Immortality.” The immortality that Kundera is talking about has nothing to do with religious faith in an immortal soul. “What is involved is the different, quite earthly immortality of those who after their death remain in the memory of posterity”(54). When it comes to immortality people are not equal. Kundera distinguishes between what is called “minor immortality,” (54) the memory of a person in the minds of those who knew him and “great immortality”(54-55) which means the memory of a person in the minds of people who never knew him personally. There are certain paths in life which from the very beginning place a person face to face with such great immortality and these are the paths of artists and statesman.

The narrator then takes a look at fragments of contemporary history from the vantage point of immortality. To the narrator of all the European statesmen of our time the one who was most occupied with the thought of immortality has probably been Francois Mitterrand.
The basis for this is the unforgettable ceremony which followed his election as President in 1981 which the narrator recalls. The square in front of the Pantheon was filled with an enthusiastic crowd. The President withdrew from it, disappeared from the people’s sight and remained alone among the tombs of sixty-four illustrious corpses. There he followed his thoughtful solitude accompanied only by the eyes of the camera and several million Frenchmen, watching this on television screens. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who was the President before him invited a sanitation worker to breakfast in the Elysee Palace. Mitterrand was not so naive as him; he wanted to resemble the dead, which was much wiser, for “death and immortality are an indissoluble pair of lovers, and the person whose face merges in our mind with the faces of the dead is already immortal while still alive” (55).

The narrator also speaks of man’s longing for immortality by some quirk of chance turning upside down and people entering “a kind of immorality which we may call ridiculous” (56). This happened in the case of American President Jimmy Carter who while jogging, which was shown on television, had a minor heart attack and had to be supported. Tycho Brahe, a great astronomer, is remembered today for the incident in the course of a festive dinner at the emperor’s court where he was ashamed to go to the lavatory, so his bladder burst and he departed among the ridiculous immortals as a martyr to shame and urine. He departed among them just like Christiane Goethe, turned forever into a crazy sausage that bites. Robert Musil, the novelist dearest to Kundera died one morning while lifting weights, achieving ridiculous immortality.

Laura has too “high a conception of life.” “Either life gives me everything, or I’ll quit,” says she (179). In their chat Laura told Agnes, against the background of Bernard’s growing indifference to her, that she had “an urge to do something” (180). Agnes did not understand what Laura meant by “something.” “And then she [Laura] tilted her head
slightly, covered her face with a vague, rather melancholy smile, placed her finger-tips between her breasts and, pronouncing the word ‘something’ once again, she threw her hands forward” (180). Agnes, who had suspected suicide is now reassured that something aimed to soar to beautiful heights. Laura, few days later, visited the France-Africa society whose chairman was Bernard’s father and volunteered to collect street-corner contributions for lepers.

The narrator then comes forward with an addendum to this in the next chapter, “The Gesture of Longing for Immortality.” Regarding Bernard when Agnes said nobody was worth suffering over, Laura answered, “But I have an urge to do something. I must do something” (183). When she said that, she had a vague idea of going to bed with another man. She had often thought of this already and it did not contradict her longing for suicide. Her vague dreaming was rudely interrupted by Agnes’s attempt to have a more concrete answer. Laura now realised that it would have been ridiculous to admit a longing for infidelity right after having talked of suicide. And because Agnes’s gaze demanded a concrete answer, she tried to give that vague word, “something,” some meaning if only by a gesture: she put her hands to her breast and threw them forward. “Even though the gesture did not express anything concrete, nevertheless it suggested that doing ‘something’ meant to sacrifice oneself, to give oneself to the world, to send one’s soul soaring towards the blue horizon like a white dove” (183). The idea of standing in the Metro with a collection-box would have been foreign to her just a moment ago. “It was as if that gesture had its own will: it led her and she merely followed”(183). Laura was not one of the kind-hearted ladies. She was not in the habit of giving money to beggars. Laura’s was only “the gesture of longing for immortality” (sic) (185).

Kundera explores the theme of immortality further in the story of the great German
classical poet Goethe and his lover Bettina nee Brentano. Bettina was the daughter of Maximiliana La Roche, a woman with whom Goethe was in love (of a non-physical kind) when he was twenty-three. Bettina was attracted to Goethe from her earliest youth because in the eyes of all Germany Goethe “was sliding towards the Temple of Fame” (sic) (64) and for another because she learned of the love he had once borne for her mother.

Their first meeting was in the spring of 1807, when Bettina was only twenty-two years old. Goethe saw her as a “charming child” (65) and was moved by the child. She reminded him of his own youth, and he gave Bettina a beautiful ring as a present. Bettina met Goethe once more in 1807 and then only after three years she met him. “And a year later [in 1811] came that fateful two-week Weimer visit at the end of which Christiane knocked off her [Bettina’s] glasses” (67). Bettina contradicts Goethe’s opinions echoed by his wife Christiane on the paintings in the art exhibition and also that “. . . this young patrician, inspite of being married and pregnant, dares to flirt with her husband . . .” (51).

The novelist however does not make a chronological presentation of the above things. Chronology is forsaken for the sake of random narration. Similar to Kundera’s other novels this novel is also characterised by the defeat of linear expectations or what one might call realisation (Kiebuzinska 56). The part “Immortality” chapter 1 which begins the parallel story of Bettina and Goethe opens like: “The thirteenth of September 1811. It is the third week the young newly-wed, Bettina nee Brentano, has been staying with her husband the poet Achim Von Arnim at Goethe’s in Weimer” (51). Then as flashback comes the details on how Bettina and Goethe got introduced to each other and on the first meeting of Bettina and Goethe, etc., later in chapter 5. Chapter 6 continues with the second visit in the autumn of 1807 through to the 1811 visit at the end of which Christiane knocked off her glasses. Goethe and Bettina were alone together only “Three, four times, hardly more” (67).
The less they saw each other the more they wrote “or” as the narrator says correcting himself, “more precisely: the more she wrote to him” (67). Bettina had already made friends with Goethe’s old mother, for using it as an indirect way of access to Goethe. He however had “sniffed danger in the alliance of an extravagant girl and a naive mother” (68). Narrator says: “I imagine he [Goethe] must have experienced mixed feelings when Bettina repeated to him the stories she had heard from the old lady” (68). At first he was flattered by the interest shown by a young lady towards him. But coming from Bettina’s lips his childhood and youth took on a new colouration. “Goethe thus found himself threatened: the girl, who associated with young intellectuals of the Romantic Movement (for whom Goethe had not the least sympathy), seemed dangerously ambitious” (68) and took it for granted complacently and arrogantly that she would be a writer. One day she outrightly declared that she wanted to write a book on Goethe based on his mother’s recollections. He recognized at once that behind the expressions of love lurked the menacing aggressiveness of the pen, and that put him on his guard. Once she wrote to him not to destroy and not to show her letters to anyone and Goethe had no doubt that his letters would eventually have other readers as well and he knew that he was in the position of an accused being warned by the court.

Then the authorial narrator asks the absent other:

What, then, was at stake between them?

In 1809, Bettina wrote to him: “I have a strong will to love you for eternity.” Read carefully this apparently banal sentence. More important than the word “love” are the words ‘eternity’ and “will.”

I won’t keep you in suspense any longer. What was at stake between them was not love. It was immortality. (69)
The altered role of the interpreter is apparent from the above passage “The Text” (sic) as Barthes says in his “From Work to Text” is here asking of the reader a practical collaboration (Lucy 291).

In 1810 when Bettina and Goethe accidentally found themselves together in Teplitz she admitted to him that she would marry poet Achim Von Armin. Goethe then undressed her and touched her breast, so far untouched by anybody else. This was the only sexual encounter between them. Then came the meeting in September 1811, with which the part 2 “Immortality” of the novel begins, when Bettina arrived in Weimer with her young husband. Bettina however was not disarmed and had no intention to give up her battle. Then the narrator clarifies, “Understand me well: Not a battle for love; a battle for immortality” (72).

Further more, Bettina belonged to the generation of the romantics who were dazzled by death from the moment they first saw the light of the day. Novalis did not live to see thirty and yet inspite of his youth nothing inspired him as much as death, death the sorceress, death transmuted into the alcohol of poetry. Romantics addressed death as familiarly as Bettina addressed Goethe.

In 1810 Bettina went to Vienna and visited Beethoven. “She suddenly became acquainted with the two most influential Germans, the handsome poet as well as the ugly composer, she flirted with both. That double immortality intoxicated her” (73).

Bettina experienced the day of the broken glasses, the thirteenth of September, as a great defeat. At first she reacted very belligerently, announcing all over Weimer that she had been “bitten by a crazy sausage” but soon she realised that that will make her lose the “immortal” (75) Goethe. She made Arnim write a letter to Goethe apologising for Bettina. But the letter remained unanswered. In 1816, shortly after the death of Christiane, Bettina
herself wrote a long letter of apology to Goethe. There was no response from Goethe. Some other advances too remained unresponded. But when in 1923 when the town council of Frankfurt decided to put up a monument to Goethe, and commissioned a sculptor, Rauch to execute the work, Bettina chipped in. Though she had no drawing skill she produced a sketch for the sculpture: Goethe was seated in the position of a classical hero; he held a lyre in his hand, a girl representing psyche stood between his knees; his hair resembled flames. “She sent the drawing to Goethe and something quite surprising happened: a tear appeared in Goethe’s eye!” (76). Thus in July 1824 after thirteen years, Goethe now seventy-five received Bettina, thirty-nine at his house.

The novelist intervenes to say, “It seems to me that in this phase of the study the two protagonists arrived at a coolly clear-headed understanding of the situation: both knew what the other was about, and each knew that the other knew it” (76). The game has all been about immortality. Goethe therefore decided to “neutralize her; pacify her; [and] keep her under surveillance” (77). Kundera constantly interrupts himself in order to give the slip to the totalitarian drive to literary fiction (Eagleton 26).

Two years later when Goethe was seventy-seven, Bettina returned to Weimer and saw Goethe almost every day and towards the end of the visit she committed an effrontery. She tried to gain an entrée to the court of Karl August. Unexpectedly, Goethe exploded and sought the permission of Archduke to forbid the “annoying gad-fly” who “has been extremely troublesome for years” (79) to cause any further annoyance. “The comparison to an annoying gad-fly remained his last word on the whole story” (79). Goethe exploded with his pent-up feelings all on a sudden. As an explanation the novelist offers an illustration of the “dial of life” (79).
At first death seems too distant and therefore unseen and invisible. That is the first and happy period of life. Then comes the second period of life when we see death ahead of us. “And because immortality sticks to death as tightly as Laurel to Hardy, we can say that our immortality is with us too” (80). Then comes the third stage when “Immortality no longer interests the weary old man at all” (80).

Not everyone reaches this further limit, but whoever does reach it knows that there, and only there, can true freedom be found (81). After Goethe’s death on March 22, 1832 Bettina took the letters she wrote to Goethe from Goethe’s executor and rewrote those letters radically. She then published them in 1835 under the title Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde, Goethe’s correspondence with a child. Bettina’s book like Scheherazade’s narrative of The Thousand and One Nights is an effort, renewed each night, to keep death outside the circle of life, that is “intended to perpetuate the immortality” of her (Lodge and Wood 193). Nobody questioned the authenticity of the correspondence until 1920, when the original letters were discovered and published. She did not burn the letters. Because it would be like admitting to herself that she will die soon. “Man reckons with immortality, and forgets to reckon with death” (83).

In chapter 12 the narrator then makes a final assessment of Goethe: “Goethe is a figure placed precisely in the centre of European history. Goethe: the great centre” (84). Goethe was the greatest German of all, he was a cosmopolitan and yet throughout his life he hardly ever stirred out of his little Weimer. And then the novelist makes a contrast of Goethe’s life with that of Agnes. Agnes though a cybernetics expert lived in a world were every object she daily used was “strange and impenetrable to her” (84). “In contrast, Goethe lived during that brief span of history when the level of technology already gave life a certain measure of comfort but when an educated person could still understand all the
devices he used.” “The world of technical objects was completely open and intelligible to him” (85). This was the great moment of the European history in which Goethe was the centre. The novelist here is attempting a cultural analysis of modern times.

Beethoven’s work begins where Goethe’s centre ends. It is located in the moment when the world starts gradually losing its transparency, darkens, and becomes more and more incomprehensible, rushes into the unknown, while man, betrayed by the world, escapes into his self, into his nostalgia, his dreams, his revolt, and lets himself, be deafened by the voices inside him so that he no longer hears the voices outside. (85)

To the polyphony of voices in the text is added a letter Bettina wrote to her friend which she said was Beethoven’s version of a story involving him and Goethe: once when Beethoven and Goethe were walking they saw the Empress with her family and entourage. As soon as Goethe saw them, he stopped listening to what Beethoven was saying, stepped to the side of the road and took off his hat. Beethoven, on the other hand, pulled his hat even further over his forehead. The narrator then asks: “Did this scene actually take place? Did Beethoven make it up? From beginning to end? Or did he only add some colour? Or did Bettina add some colour? Or did she make it up from beginning to end? Nobody will ever know” (87). Factually speaking also this might not have taken place. Because as the novel itself acknowledges that Goethe died in 1832 (82) and Beethoven who was born in 1827 (89) was only five years at the time of death of Goethe. This shows the way how discourses are formed and Kundera clearly portrays history as a narrated story. In 1839 Bettina published in the journal *Athenäum* a letter in which the same story is told by Beethoven himself. The original of this letter has never been found. But whether the letter is a forgery, or a semi-forgery, this anecdote became famous and by this “She [Bettina] prepared
for Goethe what was given to Tycho Brahe and what will be given to Jimmy Carter: ridiculous immortality” (90). But ridiculous immortality is a danger everyone faces. So even if it is possible to design, manipulate and orchestrate one’s immortality in advance it never come to pass the way it is intended. Real life, for Kundera as well as for other postmodern theorists like Lyotard is in myth, or in narration, or in interpretation (Hunter and White 353).

The rest of the section “Immortality,” that is chapters 15, and 16 are a discussion between Goethe and Hemingway on the eternal trial that writers face. By bringing Goethe and Hemingway together, novel breaks the ancient hierarchization of temporalities that permeated old and almost ossified genres and present even in many novels (Dialogic Imagination 38). As regards the bringing together of Goethe and Hemingway the author says “. . . you may ask what was the point of bringing the two together” (95). Towards the end of Goethe’s life he had around him a “band of pale-faced Romantics” like Herder, Schiller, et al. who dominated Germany at the time and for whom he felt a pang of anxiety (95). So out of his most sincere love for Goethe he dreamed of Beethoven, someone who interested him very much. Hemingway complains: “‘they keep bringing up accusations against me too. Instead of reading my books they’re writing books about me. They say that I didn’t love my wives. That I didn’t pay enough attention to my son. That I punched a critic on the nose. That I lied . . . I was conceited. That I was macho . . .’” (91). “‘That’s immorality’, said Goethe. ‘Immortality means eternal trial’” (91). The conversation continues:

Goethe : “‘You did everything you could to become immortal.’”

Hemingway : “‘Nonsense. I wrote books. That’s all’” (91).
Hemingway says he has no objection to his books being immortal but as a human being he
does not give a damn about immortality. Goethe understands his position very well but he
says. “‘But you should have been more careful while you were still alive. Now it’s too
late’” (91).

What follows is a moving description of the plight of dead Hemingway by himself.
He admits that he loved to show off in front of people. But he was not a monster as to do it
on account of his immortality. When he realized one day that immortality was all it was
about, he panicked. From that time on he must have told people a thousand times to leave
his life alone. But the more he pleaded the worse it got. He continues,

‘. . . A man can take his own life. But he cannot take his own immortality . . .
I was lying dead on the deck and I saw my four wives squatting around me,
writing down everything they knew, and standing behind them was my son
and he was scribbling too, and that old dame Gertrude Stein was there writing
away and all my friends were there babbling out all the indiscretions and
slanders they had ever heard about me, and behind them a hundred journalists
with microphones jostled each other and an army of university professors all
over America were busy classifying, analysing, and shovelling everything into
articles and books.’ (92)

The novelist as Flaubert says disappears behind his work. Lending himself the role
of a public figure the novelist endangers his work, Kundera reminds us in his Jerusalem
Adress entitled “The Novel and Europe” (The Art 157). Kundera has always averred that
private and public lives are two essentially different worlds and that respect for that
difference is the indispensable condition, the sine qua non, for a man to live free. He
believes that the curtain separating these two worlds are not to be tampered with and that
curtain-rippers are criminals (Testaments Betrayed 261).

Goethe narrates a terrific dream he had. It was the performance of Faust, as a puppet
play. No actors were present and Goethe alone recited the lines. And then suddenly Goethe
realized that no audience was there. Instead they were at the back of the stage gazing at him
with wide open, inquisitive eyes. He adds, “And I realized that my Faust didn’t interest
them at all . . . but me myself! Not Faust but Goethe!” (93). The pestering became so
uncomfortable that Goethe ran off into the bedroom for cover. The disappearance or death
of the author that criticism and philosophy took note of centuries back as Foucault mentions
in his “What is an Author?” (Lodge and Wood 193) is the point of view that Goethe and
Hemingway are upholding. But those who want to revive the dead author are mad after their
personal lives and they are being parodied here. While discussing directly the significance
of the author in interpretation the novel argues against the monological idea that
interpretation should be constrained by historical or biographical contexts as John O’Brien
says in “Milan Kundera: Meaning, Play and the Role of the Author” (Hunters and White
347).

The Dial

Part 6 of the novel, “The Dial” is another polyphonic variation in the novel. As
regards the part the novelist makes a metafictional comment to Professor Avenarius as
follows: “Part Six will be a novel within a novel, as well as the saddest erotic story I have
ever written. It will make you sad, too” (267). A completely new character –Rubens –
enters the novel here and at the end of the part he disappears without a trace. Agnes appears
in this part as lute-player, which is never directly specified but only implied letting the
reader to take pains to ensure that the lute-player is Agnes. Part 6 can be said to be an
episode in life both for Rubens and for the lute-player as well as an episode for the novel. Chapter 14 in part 6 is on the concept of “episode” and a critique of Aristotelian poetics. For Aristotle episode from the point of view of poetry is the worst possible type of event. “It is not an unavoidable consequence of preceding action, nor the cause of what is to follow; it is outside the causal chain of events which is the story” (338). It is therefore a sterile accident which can be left out without making the story lose its intelligible continuity and incapable of making a permanent mark upon the life of the characters. Kundera illustrates that Aristotle’s definition of the episode was incomplete, through the relation with Bettina in Goethe’s life. “Aristotelian poetics” which Bakhtin identified as one of the “centripetal forces” “that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world” (Dialogic Imagination 270-71) is questioned here for its comprehensiveness by Bakhtin’s follower, Kundera. From a quantitative viewpoint Bettina took up only a tiny interval of Goethe’s lifetime and Goethe assiduously kept her outside his biography. “But it is precisely here that we realize the relativity of the concept of the episode, a relativity Aristotle did not think through: for nobody can guarantee that some totally episodic event may not contain within itself a power that some day could unexpectedly turn into a cause of further events” (339). Some day can even be after death and this was precisely Bettina’s triumph, for she became part of Goethe’s life story when he was no longer alive. Kundera thus completes Aristotle’s definition of the episode: “...no episode is a priori condemned to remain an episode for ever, for every event, no matter how trivial, conceals within itself the possibility of sooner or later becoming the cause of other events and thus changing into a story or an adventure” (339). With so much of theoretical explanation Kundera interprets the story of Rubens and the lute-player. The dance with the lute-player “was for Rubens nothing but an episode, an arch episode, an
episode through and through” till the moment he accidentally met her, fifteen years later in the Roman park. Then episode turned into a story and even then the story remained episodic in relation to Ruben’s life. This is true with Agnes’s (lute-player) life also. For the narrator, “A novel shouldn’t be like a bicycle race but a feast of many courses” (266). Part 6 is an attempt to make Immortality so and that is why the narrator, says, in part 5, that he is “really looking forward to Part Six” (266). Thus the author tries to avoid “dramatic tension,” “the real curse of the novel” which transforms everything; even the most beautiful pages “merely into steps leading to the final resolution” (266). Kundera thus shows us how novel can be self-critical. Kundera reverses the proper, well-spoken, straight forward way of narration thereby making it a pure production, wonderfully developing the pleasure of the text.

The part is also a commentary on the changing nature of the world which gets reflected in arts and literature. In the course of his artistic career Rubens realized this. When he was a student, he imagined all the painters in the world moving along the same great road; it was the royal road leading from the Gothic painters to the great Italian masters of the Renaissance, and on to the Dutch painters and to Delacroix, from Delacroix to Manet, from Manet to Monet, from Bonnard to Matisse and from Cézanne to Picasso. This march however was not like that of a group of soldiers along this road. Instead each went his own way and yet what each of them discovered served as an inspiration to the other. All of them were aware of the fact that they were blazing a trail into the unknown and a common goal united them all. “And then suddenly the road disappeared” (320). There is no forward movement when there is no longer any road. The desire to go forward therefore became painter’s neurosis; each set out in a different direction and yet their tracks criss-crossed each other like a crowd milling around in the same city square. The painters wanted to
differentiate themselves one from the other while each of them kept discovering a different but already discovered discovery. Kundera here is detailing the crisis in representation due to the exhaustion of forms in the postmodern era – “midnight had struck on the dial of European art” (321). “Fortunately” the intervention of not artists but businessmen and entrepreneurs “imposed order on this disorder and determined which discovery was to be rediscovered in any particular year” (321). This is an instance of aesthetic production becoming integrated into commodity production that Fredric Jameson saw as a feature of postmodern condition (Nicol 23).

The novelist then asks a few questions and says, “Of course, there is no answer to these questions, neither for me, nor for you, nor for Rubens” (322). The author, the character and the reader become collaborators. The deliberations are as follows:

If an alchemist of genius were transplanted into the nineteenth century, what would his occupation be? What would become of Christopher Columbus today, when there are a thousand shipping companies? What would Shakespeare write when theatre did not exist, or had ceased to exist? (321)

But when he visited New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Rubens told himself that his renunciation of painting might have had a deeper significance than lack of talent or stubbornness; “midnight had struck on the dial of European art” (321). Kundera seems to suggest that time is the meaning of the being as Heidegger says (Concise Routledge Encyclopaedia 342). Rubens might be a painter born at a wrong time, an anachronism. This is a typical instance of Kundera’s novel as an ontological interrogation.

These are not rhetorical questions, when a person has talent for an activity which has passed its midnight (or has not yet reached its first hour), what
happens to his gift? Does it change? Adapt? Would Christopher Columbus become director of a shipping line? Would Shakespeare write scripts for Hollywood? Would Picasso produce cartoon shows? Or would all these great talents step aside, retreat, so to speak, to the cloister of history, full of cosmic disappointment that they had been born at the wrong time, outside their own era, outside the dial, the time they’d been created for? Would they abandon their untimely talents as Rimbaud abandoned poetry at the age of nineteen?

(321-22)

The novelist has still more doubts: “Did the Rubens of my novel have the unrealized potential of a great painter? Or did he lack talent altogether? Did he abandon painting from a lack of strength or, on the contrary, from the strength that saw clearly the vanity of painting?” (322). He expressed doubts earlier too, on the matter of Rubens’s failing to pass the School of Fine Arts examination: “Was he worse than others? Or did he have bad luck?” and replies to himself, “Oddly enough, I don’t know how to answer this simple question” (312).

Rubens later became a paintings dealer. He became ashamed of the total uselessness of his job. “Today’s world, just as it is, contains the sum of the utility of all people of all times. Which implies: the highest morality consists in being useless” (323).

The novel speaks of Europe’s dial on various aspects of culture. Rubens belonged to the last European generation that grew up knowing shame. Arthur Schnitzler’s novel Miss Elsa marks a significant moment on Europe’s dial on shame. The heroine is a pure young woman whose father is deep in debt and threatened by ruin. His creditor has promised to forgive the father’s debt on condition that daughter exhibit herself in birthday suit before
him. Elisa after a great inner struggle agrees but is so ashamed that she goes mad and dies. Once while at school Rubens had to face real collective anger for peeping from a hallway at female school friends stripped to the waist waiting for chest X rays. He was reprimanded in front of the class and called a voyeur, by the headmaster. By the time he was forty, women would leave their brassieres in the drawer and lounge on beaches showing their breasts to the entire world. He became nervous and tried to avoid the unexpected nakedness. “In the end, he more or less came to terms with bare breasts, but he could not escape the impression that something serious once again happened: on Europe’s dial, another hour had struck: shame had disappeared” (331-32). That its disappearance was easy and “overnight” and that it had only been an “invention” and an “illusion” (332). The Book already had a discussion between “partisans of bared breasts and their adversaries” because during the period when all that in part 7 of the novel took place “the beeches of Western Europe were crowded every summer with women who wore no tops” (200). This portraying of an event on the same time-and-value plane as oneself and one’s contemporaries is the undertaking of a radical revolution, for Bakhtin, a stepping out of the world of epic into the world of the novel (Dialogic Imagination 14).

**Homo sentimentalis**

Goethe faced countless judgements, accusations and testimonies after his death but “Not to bore the reader with many insignificant matters” (209). Kundera limits himself to three depositions – that of Raine Maria Rilke, the greatest German poet since Goethe in his most famous prose work published in 1910, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge; Romain Rolland the widely read novelist; and Paul Eluard the avant-garde poet, and singer of love poetry, in his own words. Here the author offers us the extracts from the books of
Rilke and Eluard and reports from the book of Romain Rolland for “our examination” (214) of the three depositions. Rilke’s book has its focus that Goethe was “unequal” to Bettina and that he failed to pass the test Bettina represented (270). For Romain Rolland in his book *Goethe and Beethoven* published in Paris in 1930 “strongest sympathies were with Bettina” and “he explained events in approximately the same terms as she” and Christiane was for him a “spiritual zero” (211). Romain Rolland’s testimony dealt with the relationship between Goethe, Beethoven and Bettina and he regretted that Goethe’s political and aesthetic cautiousness is so unbecoming of a genius. Though Rilke and Rolland took Bettina’s part, they spoke of Goethe with respect while Paul Eluard who already appeared in *The Book* as “refusing to stand up for” Zavis Kalandra, his friend and Czech surrealist when he was hanged (*The Book* 66) and the “true Saint Just [sic] of love-poetry chose much harsher words” (*Immortality* 212). For him Goethe “gave domestic peace precedence over deliriums of passion” and if he had done otherwise “his song might have descended to earth” and he “would not have chosen his role of courtesan” (212). Here he based himself on an “anecdote [that] enchanted everyone and became famous” (88) and called Goethe a courtesan without verifying its authenticity.

Europe has the reputation of a civilization based on reason. But one can say equally well that it is a civilization of sentiment; it created a human type whom Kundera calls “sentimental man: *homo sentimentalis*” (sic) (216) – “a man who has raised feelings to a category of love” (218). Kundera discovers the reason behind it. The Jewish religion imposes a law which wants to be accessible to reason on its believers. “Christianity turned this criterion inside out: love God, and do as you wish! said Saint Augustine” (216). For Luther also, love precedes everything, even sacrifice, and even prayer. From this Kundera deduces that love is the highest virtue and the originality of European law and its theory of
guilt lies in the conviction that love makes us innocent.

For him the transformation of feelings into a value had already occurred in Europe some time around the twelfth century: the troubadours who sang with such great passion to their beloved, the unattainable princess, seemed so admirable and beautiful to all who heard them that everyone wished to follow their example by falling prey to some wild upheaval of the heart (218).

“No one revealed *homo sentimentalis* as lucidly as Cervantes” (218). Bakhtin also applauds Cervantes for his *Don Quixote* which for him possesses “all the artistic possibility of heteroglot and internally dialogized novelistic discourse” (*Dialogic Imagination* 324).

Agnes wanted her father’s funeral ceremony to consist only of Adagio from Mahler’s Tenth Symphony. This music is very sad and Agnes heard the record thirteen times to empty it of its sad tear producing feeling. Feeling is born in us without our will, often against our will. As soon as we want to feel, feeling is no longer feeling but an imitation of feeling, show of feeling. This is commonly called hysteria. Therefore *homo sentimentalis* is in reality identical to *homo hystericus.* Christiane Vulpius who in 1806 became the wife of Goethe after years of cohabitation was evidently an excellent lover as we may judge from Goethe’s joking reference to her as my bed-treasure. Nevertheless in Goethean hagiography Christiane finds herself outside the bounds of love. The narrator says, “You may say that this is simply due to the fact that she was his wife and we have become accustomed to consider marriage automatically as something unpoetical.” He, however, “believe(s)” that “the actual reason goes deeper: the public refuses to see Christiane as one of Goethe’s lover simply because Goethe slept with her. For love-treasure and bed-treasure were mutually exclusive entities” (220). The reason for this according to the narrator is that “The concept of European love has as its roots in extra-coital soil” (222). This concept of love however
has undergone no alteration even in “The twentieth century, which boasts that it liberated morals and likes to laugh at romantic feelings . . .” (222).

Rilke admired Russia the way he admired Bettina. For Russia is the land of Christian sentimentality par excellence. It escaped both the rationalism of medieval scholastic philosophy and the Renaissance. The modern age, based on Cartesian critical thought, entered there after a lag of some one or two hundred years. “Homo sentimentalis, thus failed to find there a sufficient counterweight, and became his own hyperbole commonly known as the Slavic soul” (223). What happens here is the gaining of an upperhand by the centripetal forces over the centrifugal forces of stratification and the consequent absence of the uninterrupted process of decentralization and disunification alongside verbal ideological centralization and unification. Russia and France are two poles of Europe. France is “the land of form, just as Russia is the land of feeling!” (223-24).

Shortly after however Cartesian thought is seen as assuming centripetal status and criticized as if strictly following Bakhtin for whom “Cartesian poetics of neoclassicism” is centripetal (Dialogic Imagination 271).

*I think, therefore I am* is the statement of an intellectual who underrates toothaches. *I feel, therefore I am* is a truth much more universally valid, and it applies to everything that’s alive. My self does not differ substantially from yours in terms of its thought. Many people, few ideas: we all think more or less the same, and we exchange, borrow, steal thoughts from one another. However when someone steps on my foot, only I feel the pain. The basis of the self is not thought but suffering, which is the most fundamental of all feelings. While it suffers, not even a cat can doubt its unique and
interchangeable self. In intense suffering the world disappears and each of us is alone with his self. Suffering is the university of ego-centrism. (225)

The simultaneous negation and embracement of Cartesian thought can be seen as a contradiction. Kundera might argue that it is the metanarrative status of the Cartesian thought that he is criticising. However, experts characterise contemporary novel as having such kinds of contradiction – subverting dominant discourse, but is dependent upon the same discourse for its very physical existence (Nicol 308). Kundera undermines the totalitarian arrogance implicit in the claims of reason. “Europe reduced Europe to fifty works of genius which it never understood.” He is offended against this “outrageous inequality”: “millions of Europeans signifying nothing, against fifty names signifying everything” (Immortality 376).

Europe is “unsurpassed” as a civilization by its music. “Europe: great music and homo sentimentalis. Twins nurtured side by side in the same cradle” (229). “Music: a pump for inflating the soul. Hypertrophic souls turned into huge balloons rise to the ceiling of the concert hall and jostle each other in unbelievable congestion” (229). Mahler is the last great European composer who still appeals, naively, directly to homo sentimentalis. For Laura who loved music sincerely and deeply Mahler is the ultimate composer. When she hears rock music coming from Brigette’s room, her wounded love for European music, vanishing in the din of electric guitars, drives her to fury. “She gives Paul an ultimatum: either Mahler or rock, meaning either me or Brigitte”(230). Rock is too loud for Paul while Romantic music evokes in him feelings of anxiety. Laura and Brigitte forced Paul to choose: between two kinds of music, between two women. And he did not know what to do, because both women were equally dear to him.
Chapter 14 of “Homo sentimentalis” is a re-evaluation of Romain Rolland’s assessment of Goethe. Romain Rolland had two outstanding characteristics; an adorning approach to women (“‘she was a woman and that’s sufficient reason for loving her’ he wrote about Bettina)” (232) and an enthusiastic desire to ally himself with progress. The novelist finds it odd that this admirer of women at the same time praised Beethoven for his refusal to greet women. The narrator is trying to set the records straight:

For this was what the episode in the Teplitz Spa was all about, if we have understood it correctly: Beethoven, his hat pulled down over his forehead and his arms clasped behind his back, strode towards the Empress and her court, which was certainly made up of ladies as well as gentlemen. If he failed to greet them, he was an out and out boor! But this is hard to believe: Beethoven may have been a strange, morose character, but he was never boorish towards women! This whole story is obviously nonsense, and could have been accepted and retold only because people (including, shamefully, even a novelist!) have lost all sense of reality. (232)

But anticipating the objection from “you,” the reader, on the impropriety in probing the authenticity of an anecdote not intended as testimony but as allegory the narrator agrees, “Very well; let us then examine the allegory as allegory . . .” (232). The “generally accepted explanation” of the incident of Beethoven’s deeply pulled-down hat means that Beethoven rejected the power of the aristocracy as reactionary and unjust while Goethe celebrated it. But it is indefensible. Beethoven even dedicated his sonatas to one prince or another and did not even hesitate to compose a cantata in honour of the victors who gathered in Vienna after Napoleon’s defeat. He even went so far as to write a Polonaise for the Empress of Russia, as if symbolically laying poor Poland at the feet of its invader. Thus the incident
cannot mean that aristocrats were contemptible reactionaries while he was an admirable revolutionary, “. . . but that those who create (statues, poems, symphonies) deserve more respect than those who rule (over servants, officials or whole nations); that creativity means more than power, art more than politics; that works of art, not wars or aristocratic costume-balls, are immortal” (233).

Romain Rolland’s respect for women was rather odd because he was partisan towards Bettina and belittled Christiane linking her name with derogatory adjectives like “jealous,” “fat,” and “ruddy and corpulent.” Then the novelist probes into the remaining question “Why did he give preference to Bettina over Christiane?” and assures the reader that “The next chapter will answer it” (235). The novelist asks us to remember Bettina’s gesture.

Let us remember her gesture, which I called the gesture of longing for immortality: first she placed her fingertips to a spot between her breasts, as if she wanted to point to the very centre of what is known as the self. Then she flung her arms forward, as if she wanted to transport that self somewhere far away, to the horizon, to infinity. The gesture of longing for immortality knows only two points in space: the self here, the horizon far in the distance; only two concepts: the absolute that is the self, and the absolute that is the world. (236)

Hypertrophied soul begins with a festering, unsatisfied love for one’s self, a self one wants to mark with expressive features and then send by the gesture of longing for immortality onto the great stage of history under the gaze of thousands:

What makes people raise their fists in the air, puts rifle in their hands, drives them to join struggles for just and unjust causes, is not reason but a
hypertrophied soul. It is the fuel without which the motor of history would stop turning and Europe would lie down in the grass and placidly watch clouds sail across the sky. (237)

Christiane did not suffer from the hypertrophy of the soul and did not yearn to exhibit herself on the great stage of history. Romain Rolland, “friend of progress and tears,” thus preferred Bettina (237).

The three themes of immortality, study of self and *homo sentimentalis* thus criss-cross here. The study of the self, which his novel is, leads Kundera to the recognition that the craving for immortality (hypertrophied soul) is an important characteristic of a section of people of whom Laura and Bettina are representatives of. But this craving for immortality does not affect people like Agnes and Christiane. Ironically hypertrophied soul “is the fuel without which the motor of history” would stop working (237).

Novel for Bakhtin and Kundera is an enquiry into existence which is the realm of human possibilities, everything he/she is capable of (*The Art* 42). Professor Avenarius whose “behaviour seems illogical” even to Kundera (*Immortality* 372) makes sense only in the light of this. He is an eccentric who, betrayed by the world, escapes into his self, into his nostalgia, deafened by the voices inside him so that he no longer hears voices from outside. He is presented by Kundera in a dialogic fashion in the text:

> I know my friend well, I often amuse myself by imitating his way of talking and by adopting his thoughts and ideas; and yet there is something about him that always eludes me. I like the way he acts, it attracts me, but I cannot say that I fully understand him. Sometime ago I explained to him the essence of an individual can only be expressed by means of a metaphor. By the revealing
lighting of metaphor. But as long as I’ve known him, I have never been able to find a metaphor that would explain Avenarius and let me understand him.

(372-73)

The above observation is made in chapter 1 of part 7, “The Celebration.” But in chapter 5 of the same part the narrator arrives at a new realisation:

And at that moment I understood him at last: If we cannot accept the importance of the world, which considers itself important, if in the midst of that world our laughter finds no echo, we have but one choice: to take the world as a whole and make it the object of our game; to turn it into a toy. Avenarius is playing a game and for him the game is the only thing of importance in a world without importance. (386)

The text here illustrates what Bakhtin says; it is possible to have dialogical relationships to our own utterances (Problems 152-53).

Avenarius maintained his eccentricity in handing over the diploma – “Bernard Bertrand is hereby declared a Compleat Ass” (sic) (140) – to Bernard the radio journalist. As regards narration, it is only in part 5 page 256 that the reader can understand that it is Avenarius who has awarded the diploma. The real motive behind the awarding is anybody’s guess. “. . . if it hadn’t been for her [Laura]” “probably” he would never have carried it out, by his own admission (269). Earlier he himself admits that he mistook Bernard Bertrand for his father Bertrand Bertrand, the politician, the symbol juggler while awarding the diploma. He however justifies it: “There is nothing morbid about my mistake. On the contrary, it clearly resembles what you called poetic coincidence. Father and son have turned into a single ass with two heads” (256). Anyway the diploma completely “flustered” (141)
Bernard. Now Paul is declared a brilliant ally of his own gravediggers and Bernard a Compleat Ass and they converse each other on the topic. Paul said with sadness:

‘The Bear is wrong and the imagologues are right. A person is nothing but his image. Philosophers can tell us that it doesn’t matter what the world thinks of us, that nothing matters but what we really are. But philosophers don’t understand anything. As long as we live with other people, we are only what other people consider us to be. Thinking about how others see us and trying to make our image as attractive as possible is considered a kind of dissembling or cheating. But does there exist another kind of direct contact between my self and their selves except through the mediation of the eyes? Can we possibly imagine love, without anxiously following our image in the mind of the beloved? When we are no longer interested in how we are seen by the person we love, it means we no longer love.’

‘That’s true,’ Bernard said mournfully.

‘It’s naive to believe that our image is only an illusion that conceals our selves, as the one true essence independent of the eyes of the world. The imagologues have revealed with cynical radicalism that the reverse is true: our self is a mere illusion, ungraspable, indescribable, misty, while the only reality, all too easily graspable and describable, is our image in the eyes of others. And the worst thing about it is that you are not its master. First you try to paint it yourself, then you want at least to influence and control it, but in vain: a single malicious phrase is enough to change you for ever into a depressingly simple caricature.’ (143)
In part 5 of the novel Avenarius and the author meet in a restaurant and over food they discuss Laura and Agnes among other things. Avenarius then took a paper from the waiter and made the following drawing:

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(270; pt.5, ch.10)
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“Then he said: ‘That’s laura: full of dreams, her head looks up at heaven, and her body is drawn to earth: her behind and her breasts, also rather heavy, look downward’ ” (270).

Saying, that’s odd, Kundera makes his own drawing next to Avenarius’s:

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(270; pt.5, ch.10)
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He then describes the picture: “ ‘Her sister Agnes: her body rises like a flame. And her head is always slightly bowed: a sceptical head looking at the ground’ ” (270).

Here the storyteller is not the one who joins the ranks of the teachers and sages as Walter Benjamin sees him (Lodge and Wood 47). He is not even a storyteller and does not like to identify with one, but a scriptor born simultaneously with the text. Like Proust he is concerned with the task of inexorably blurring the relation between him and his characters as Barthes says (Lodge and Wood 166).

The above pictures are the only drawings that appear in all of the novels of Kundera. Though this is the only recourse to a drawing in the whole of the novels of Kundera the
author is exhibiting the openness of the genre – that is showing that it can be multiform in style. Besides, the absolute hegemony of language as well as the hegemony of language over the perception and conceptualisation of reality located in the prehistoric past of language consciousness as Bakhtin says (Dialogic Imagination 369) are foiled.

The orientation toward the reader and towards the conceptual horizon is maintained in this novel as well, as evident in the following phrases.

“Perhaps we become aware of our age only at exceptional moments and most of the time we are ageless” (4).

“Let us recall” (82 and 84).

“Let us return to Betina” (89).

“In case you have forgotten, let me remind you” (95).

“Let’s not lose sight of the scene as a whole’ (204) and

“Any how, let’s not exaggerate” (350).

These statements as usual in Kundera’s novels exemplifies in a striking but by no means unrepresentative way Bakhtin’s idea that “. . . linguistic utterances never occur in isolation, but are always part of a dialogue – even if this is an imaginary dialogue with a partner who is absent” (Schmitz 67).

In Immortality more than any of his works, Kundera the intellectual, the man of culture, often obscures the novelist. One need not be a devotee of old-fashioned realism to be bothered by the thinness of novelistic textures. When plot and character are pretexts, a means to an end, as in Immortality, reading become a pleasure (Sanders 108). The text is a
matchless existential encyclopaedia about its century enriching the form of novel and immensely broadening the realm of what only the novel can discover and say (The Curtain 72).

In The Book, Unbearable Lightness, and Immortality Kundera uses an astonishing spectrum of instruments at meaning, cutting rapidly from one story to another, interleaving different historical periods, he shifts from anecdote to parody, biography to autobiography, dramatization to historical narrative, ontological meditation to criticism – given voice by narrators who range from omniscient to personal, including an invented “I” whose name happens to be Milan Kundera. Kundera who began as a musician creates remarkable unity by sounding a theme, then circling and returning to it again and again with a great breadth of variations (Hunter and white 359). All these texts have multiple centres – all major characters and the author – and are in this specific sense polyphonic novels (Waugh 220). Polyphony weakened the sealed nature of the conventional story and made the structure of fiction more complicated and multifarious in form. Kundera exposes and exploits the multiple forms that have always occupied and extended the space of the novel. And as Igor Webb observes out of this simultaneous multiplicity or polyphony as Kundera likes no call it he fashions his multidimensional existential questions (364). The last three novels beginning with Slowness appears to depart gradually from the polyphonic excellence.