HUMANITY’S “TRUE MORAL TEST”: SHAME, IDYLL, AND ANIMAL VULNERABILITY IN MILAN KUNDERA’S THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

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Irony and Vulnerability

"Man thinks, God laughs": so goes the proverb that Milan Kundera has so famously associated with the art of the novel (Art 158). According to Kundera, the novel captures an “echo” of God’s laughter at the thinking of mankind, a Western Man who thinks that the truth is obvious, the same for all, and that he is capable of knowing himself. When we laugh at the pretentions of characters or when we weep (or scoff) at their weaknesses, we are not necessarily rejecting their aspirations, but understanding these characters as weak in relation to them. And if we look at them with irony, it is because there is a gap between their practical identities—the way they hold themselves forth in being—and how they fulfill them.¹ Novels attach themselves to these ironies with humor, pathos, and sometimes indignation. Their characters begin a voyage out into the world, but discover a world uncannily beyond their intellectual grasp.

Quoted in passim throughout Kundera’s work, the recurring figure of Western tradition’s aspirations is Descartes’s declaration that man is “the master and proprietor of nature” (see, for example, Art 4). Descartes’s pronouncement demonstrates a pretention to self-knowledge (a spiritual definition of the “human”) and to mankind’s place high above the rest of nature. The Kunderian novel toys with such pretentions in ways made familiar by many critics. To the unknowable selves, the terminal paradoxes, and the criticism of totalitarian regimes (among a host of other approaches), this essay adds a new facet to the understanding of Kundera’s irony: the significance of the suffering of animals, both human and nonhuman, to human self-conception. By examining animality and suffering in Kundera’s best-known novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, this essay will describe how it challenges the borders
that Western humanity has erected between humans and their own animality, humans and animals, and generally between humans and the natural world. When the novel was published (1984 in French and English), the philosophical debate on animal welfare was just starting to take on its modern vigor. The ensuing upsurge in thinking about animals, in philosophy and animal studies, prepares a sophisticated background for a new analysis of the book.

That the theme of animal suffering probes deep into the heart of Western anthropogenesis can be sensed in the tone of declarations such as the following:

Mankind’s true moral test, its fundamental [radical] 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 the others stem from it. (289)

Such provocations do not seem like the final summary of a moral argument in favor of animal rights. Since the foundational writings of Peter Singer and Tom Regan, most philosophers and proponents of animal rights have worked hard to establish indisputable criteria, such as sentience or consciousness, which would provide clear answers to moral questions involving animals, often strongly condemning contemporary practices. In the quote above we get the strong condemnation, a biting denunciation, but we do not get the reasoned demonstration. This is because Kundera sees such demonstration as indeed wrapped up in the very spiritualist aspirations of the Western tradition.

Kundera’s provocation is entirely coherent with his loose definition of the novel as “an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become” (26):

I would even say it [the novel] is purposely a-philosophic, even anti-philosophic, that is to say fiercely independent of any system of preconceived ideas; it does not judge; it does not proclaim truths; it questions, it marvels, it plumbs; its form is highly diverse: metaphoric, ironic, hyperbolic, aphoristic, droll, provocative, fanciful; and mainly it never leaves the magic circle of its characters’ lives; those lives feed it and justify it. (Curtain 71)

The Kunderian novel doesn’t explain; it exposes a problem. The character is an “experimental ego” and the novel is motivated by an attempt to “grasp its existential code.” Reconsidering the quote about animals and man’s moral debacle we see that it is made by a narrator commenting on the thoughts of a character, Tereza, who has developed a unique relationship with animals, especially her dog Karenin (despite the name, Karenin is a female). We will therefore direct the analysis here toward the “magic circle” of Tereza’s life, toward the thoughts that her existence inspires in a narrator, the style (sometimes ferocious, sometimes pathos-filled) in which her life is conveyed, and toward the relationship between her and various other experimental egos.
Tereza reveals a sorrowful perception of the “deeply buried” objectification and suffering of animals, human and nonhuman, stressing a shared vulnerability in which most animal rights philosophers have no interest. Exceptionally, Cora Diamond has argued that the suffering of animals is more likely to affect human attitudes if we become intensely aware that our suffering (as humans) and their suffering (as animals) are in fact shared in a way that brings us closer to them. In an early essay critical of the Singer/Regan approach, she focuses on a poem by Walter de la Mare that describes a titmouse as a “tiny son of life” that will eventually flitter off “into Time’s enormous Nought” (“Eating” 101). She speculates that being conscious of a titmouse as something with a life, one that ends in death, may indeed make us regard the bird as having a special relationship to our self, to us as animals, with our own vulnerable lives. In this way we cross the line separating humans from animals. Diamond’s later work on J. M. Coetzee’s novels, and especially on the character Elizabeth Costello, emphasize Costello’s horror as she realizes that she herself is an animal, a “wounded and clothed animal” with a “bodily life” (“Difficulty” 47). As Diamond puts it, “the awareness we each have of being a living body ‘alive to the world,’ carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them” (74). To understand Tereza’s experimental code, Kundera supplies a list of key words that bring her close to the problems experienced by Elizabeth Costello: “body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise” (Art 29). Each of these words is relevant to describing Tereza’s acute awareness of having a finite bodily life and is explored in her relation to animals.

Emphasizing shared vulnerability comes as a shock to anthropocentrism. In the earlier article, Diamond had argued that animals are never “given for our thought independently of a mass of ways of thinking about and responding to them” (“Eating” 103). She points out as one of many examples that vegetarians should take into account the fact that we have defined ourselves as a species in great part over the dinner table: animals have, for ages, been things that human beings eat, whereas we would never consider a human in this way. Around the time Diamond was writing her first essays, John Berger was listing intellectual forces that have gone to defining the human/animal divide. The decisive economic marginalization came with the transformation of animals into raw materials in factory farms. He also describes cultural practices ranging from the crass anthropomorphism of animals in popular culture to pets, zoos, and scientific discourses. Behind such practices lies what Berger calls the “decisive theoretical break” of Descartes. On one side of the Cartesian dualism lies the construction of Man without a body, a trajectory in which he continually transcends “the mechanical within himself” (264). On the other side, the animal is pushed away and resembles humans only in what is not human in us. Giorgio Agamben pushes the time frame further back, showing how the traditions of metaphysics and ontology have always created a “caesura” between animals
and humans, and how that caesura has fed the “anthropological machine” that has driven Western societies (The Open). To identify with animal suffering means to break ranks with the very definition of the human.

This essay examines the gradual emergence of animals and human animality in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and its corrosive effect on human pretention. It begins with an analysis of the narrator’s caustic treatment of emotional inhibitors to compassion for animals. It then turns to Tereza, an “experimental ego” who offers a counterexample to Western anthropogenesis. It more briefly treats the effects of Tereza’s understanding of shame, vulnerability, and animal suffering on Tomas, her husband. Finally it describes the last section of the novel in which Tomas and Tereza enter an Edenic “idyll” in which animals, especially their dog Karenin, emerge to the center of the fictional world. For the moment, however, Karenin must wait patiently, as she does through most of the narrative, in some corner of a café or at the foot of Tomas and Tereza’s bed. Most of the novel is focused on the core division between man and animal.

**Anthropogenesis: Shame, Disgust, and Kitsch**

We will concentrate on two inhibiting emotions Martha Nussbaum has diagnosed whenever humans encounter animals and their own animal vulnerability: shame and disgust. Both of these negative emotions are related to the perception of human weakness. For Nussbaum, the visceral reactions we have to disgusting things helps us identify objects and states that have negative consequences for our flourishing or our projects. It helps us police the limits of our bodies by defining certain objects as reminiscent of physical decay. Bodily fluids, gross odors, rotting flesh, and other slimy substances keep us from touching animals, feces, snot, or semen because we do not want to be “reduced to the status of animals,” and this because to be so reduced is to be reminded of our death (203). Shame, though more self-oriented and complex, also targets objects that remind us of our vulnerability. Here Nussbaum recounts a developmental story. After the “self-sufficient” time in the womb, the human infant falls into a world in which it is utterly helpless. In providing life-sustaining help, the child’s caregiver momentarily restores a state of golden-age bliss, but cannot erase the child’s realization that security could disappear at any time. No longer whole, the child feels incomplete and vulnerable. Psychoanalysts point to a need for a “facilitating environment” and especially proper holding in order to overcome anxiety. In a phrase that rings true to Kundera’s prose style, Winnicott writes: “The infant who is being held...is not aware of being preserved from infinitely falling. A slight failure of holding, however, brings to the infant a sensation of infinite falling” (qtd. in Nussbaum 186). If, as Nussbaum puts it, “things go well,” then a child’s emotions will “evolve in relation to an environment that is relatively stable, which provides spaces for the development of wonder and joy, as well as stable
love and gratitude” (209). But the lack of “subtle interplay” can prevent children from overcoming the “primitive shame” of their helplessness. Compelled to hide their vulnerability, they may develop disproportionate disgust for their own body, and eventually become “normotic” (198).

Dysfunctional shame and disgust lurk behind a great deal of the human interactions in Kundera’s novel, perhaps most emblematically in the death of Stalin’s son, Jakoff. The narrator compares Jakoff to the son of god, since his father was one of the most important men of his time; but he also describes him as “hated by god” since Stalin seems to have despised him. Self-regard and self-hate mingle, leaving Jakoff with a paradoxical delusion of invulnerability and constant fear and an intense shame. In a German prisoner of war camp he quarrels with the English prisoners because he consistently leaves the latrines a mess. When the camp director refuses to settle the matter, he cannot stand the idea of returning to his barracks, and instead throws himself into the electric wires surrounding the camp. The narrator calls this the “sole metaphysical death” in a war filled with senseless killing because “Stalin’s son laid down his life for shit,” or rather he preferred to die than be associated with his vulnerable and disgusting body (244).

As Jakoff goes so goes most of Western humanity in a metaphysical analysis of fecal matter laid out by the narrator. He frames this analysis in theological terms touching upon Gnostic heresies, Messianism, and incarnation, themes central to Agamben’s analyses of the anthropological machine. He tells of how, when he was a boy, seeing Gustave Doré’s illustrations of God as “an old man with eyes, nose, and a long beard” shocked his preconceptions of God’s perfection: if God was a person with physical traits, then he would also have intestines, as would Jesus (245). But how can divine creation be shameful? Kundera’s narrator rattles off examples of the denial of God’s (and Man’s) shit throughout Western thought. Valentinus the Master of the Gnosis affirms, for example, that Jesus “ate, drank, but did not defecate” (246). Similar theological conundrums arise over sexual desire: for example, was Adam concupiscent in Eden or were his erections, as Johannes Scotus Eriigena claimed, freely commanded by will rather than the excitation of desire? Kundera’s scatological style in these passages is crude or comically modest in part to force the reader to confront objects of disgust, to try out an acknowledgement that is not without shame, but also accompanied by laughter.

Kundera’s narrator sees a line “separating those who doubt being as it is granted to man (no matter how or by whom) from those who accept it without reservation” (247). On one side, we can accept postlapsarian creation as inherently containing imperfections and suffering, a dose of the shameful. On the other side, the choice diagnosed here, we insist that creation is unequivocally good, an option the narrator calls “the categorical agreement with being” (248). For those who hold this belief, defecation and other signs of vulnerability become an insurmountable problem that can only
be denied. The refusal of the unacceptable in the name of this prelapsarian nostalgia goes by the name of kitsch, a notion Kundera has elsewhere called the key to the entire novel. Kitsch is a collective manifestation of Nussbaum’s “normotic” personality, projecting a god-like image of humankind, in which any expression of individual deviancy (homosexuality, absence of “maternal instinct,” irony, etc.) is a “spitting in the face” of humanity. Kitsch brooks no difference: “everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for [sic, “from”] life” (252). In a shocking but simple transition, Kundera moves from theological debates to the gulag: “we can regard the gulag as a septic tank used by totalitarian kitsch to dispose of its refuse” (252).

It is not surprising that animals have been the first victims of this denial, as we are reminded when the narrator recounts a news story that has struck Tereza’s imagination. Just after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the government launched campaigns to exterminate pigeons and feral dogs, beginning with propaganda associating the animals with filth and disease. Those who volunteered “harbored in themselves the vindictive desire to settle their accounts with life” (my translation in the original French edition, 420). In this way the authorities were able to identify personalities who could later be enlisted to repress humans. By emphasizing the disgusting in animals, the authorities were able to establish a zone of Agambian “bare life”—life of no value—into which, later, humans could be slotted and then discounted because of their natural commonalities with animals. We may recognize here a common tactic by which certain human groups, for example indigenous people, Jews, or political dissidents, are “contaminated” through association with disgusting animal traits (see Nussbaum 221-22). This is what the narrator of the novel seems to be getting at when he says that mankind’s failure toward the animals is at the root of all of its other moral failures.

**Tereza’s Shame**

Tereza provides a different model for the exploration of shame. Here Nussbaum’s developmental account helps us understand why the narrator would uncharacteristically delve into Tereza’s childhood. Tereza’s shame comes from her relationship with a mother whose youth and exceptional beauty have been stolen from her. Her mother was forced to marry “the most virile” of her many suitors only because this one refused to be careful when they made love. Tereza is therefore the “Fault” that nothing could redeem, and described in disgusting and chance terms: “the absurd encounter of the sperm of the manliest of men and the egg of the most beautiful of women” (44). The mother eventually leaves her husband for a small-time crook, taking Tereza to live in a mountain village, where, prematurely shriveled and ugly, she flaunts her naked body around the house, farting, discussing details of her sexual life openly, and flipping out her false teeth. Tereza’s stepfather barges in while she bathes and her mother mocks her modesty when she locks the door. Her mother
reads from Tereza’s diary between fits of laughter over the lunch table. Tereza’s acute shame leads to a desire to see a soul beyond her body, and she spends hours in front of a mirror hoping to perceive her disincarnate self. It is really the same problem as Jakoff’s; and yet the style has changed here, the scatology has become less humorous and provocative and more sympathetic to Tereza’s indelible trauma.

For the narrator, Tereza was born of the “stomach rumblings” of someone in love, “a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience” (40). But what distinguishes Tereza from other iterations of vulnerability is her creative response to it. She sees her meeting with Tomas as a fateful love that takes away the contingency of her existence and lifts her up to “the world of ‘the other side’” (49). Tomas satisfies a demand for holding present from her childhood. As a child she would fall asleep clenching one hand in another—“making believe she was holding the hand of the man whom she loved, the love of her life” (54). When she arrives on Tomas’s doorstep in Prague, feverish, he is able to calm her, but in the morning he cannot leave his bed because she has such a strong grasp on his hand. Tereza does not, however, redeem her shame through love. At times, Tomas helps her develop a playful relationship to another, with dialogue, compromise, and a modicum of trust, but his sexual conquests intensify her fear of being just another body. Vulnerability haunts her dreams. In one she sees herself naked with a number of other women around an empty swimming pool, forced to sing together and perform knee bends, with Tomas shooting them with a gun at every wrong move. For Tereza the dream signifies an “equal sign” drawn by Tomas between her and so many bodies. Other dreams are haunted by images of raging cats, her own execution, and eternal humiliation.

Rather than denying these dreams, Tereza brings them into the open, and gains from them a glimpse into the lives of vulnerable others. The narrator emphasizes the resemblances of those who have been reduced to bare life. The nudity of the women around the pool reminds her of “the obligatory uniformity of the concentration camp” (57, translation modified [88]). They remind her of a photograph that a Swiss editor has shown her of a nudist colony, in which she sees a sea of interchangeable, soulless flesh. She also sees analogies between the broadcast of writer Jan Prochazka’s private conversations over state radio and her mother reading her diary. Tereza concludes that what she shares with these people is creaturely weakness, and upon this shared vulnerability she builds a community. Thinking of Dubcek’s stuttering on the radio after the Russian takeover, she feels attracted to this weakness: “She realized that she belonged among the weak, in the camp of the weak, in the country of the weak, and that she had to be faithful to them precisely because they were weak and gasped for breath in the middle of sentences” (73). Kundera refers to this attraction for the weak as “vertigo.” Vertigo is much stronger than dizziness: “It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the
desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves” (60). Vertigo is the prerequisite for Kunderian compassion: “She felt attracted by this weakness as by vertigo. She felt attracted by it because she felt weak herself” (73). Compassion cannot be a distanced and superior understanding that someone is suffering, but a “suffering with” as fellow creatures, as subjects with bare life.

In her dreams, vertigo becomes the “solidarity of the soulless calling to her” (60). One scene gives a glimpse of Tereza extending her solidarity to an animal. The scene might go unnoticed (the animals are still waiting in the corner) except that it has major implications in Tomas’s actions and in the couple’s arrival in the countryside at the end of the book. One day, walking home with Karenin, she sees a crow, buried up to its neck being tortured by a couple of boys (the cruelty toward animals is learned at a young age). After chasing the boys away she brings the bird home and tries, with Tomas, to nurse it in their bathroom sink. Watching the bird she realizes that Tomas is the only person she has in the world, and that he could easily abandon her. She is like this bird, wounded and alone, and does not want to leave it. Shame brings her to identify with weak animals.

Tomas and Oedipus

For Tomas, acknowledging vulnerability comes against his inclinations and in a more theoretical way. He has embraced the lightness of existence, the possibility of defining himself against the sentimental ties represented by others. His freedom has led him not only to divorce his first wife, but to cut ties with his son and parents as well. He understands his libertinage as a cold analytic observation of the most inaccessible part of each woman, in order to “take possession of the world” (200), just as operating on bodies means “opening the surface of things and looking at what lies hidden inside” (196). But he is drawn toward Tereza in a different, heavier way. One day, weeks after a chance meeting in a mountain village café, she arrives on his doorstep ill and with no place to stay. He lets her stay the night, in violation of a policy meant to protect his freedom. But Tereza seems different from other women precisely because she is vulnerable. He does not want to “reveal anything in Tereza” for, he concludes, everything in her is already “exposed”: “she had come to him uncovered” (209). So Tomas somewhat meekly recasts the rhythm of his life to that of Tereza’s: they marry and adopt a dog, he leaves Prague for Zurich on her suggestion, and then follows her back to Prague.

If Tereza may be associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition, Tomas’s mind moves back to the Greeks, through a reinterpretation of the myth of Oedipus. Tereza’s helpless arrival on his doorstep suggests to him that the importance of this myth is not Oedipus’s murder of his father or incest with his mother, but that Oedipus was a foundling saved from death. Tereza indeed brings to mind a long list of foundlings—Moses saved by the Pharaoh’s daughter, Oedipus taken in by Polybus, Remus and Romulus, and others—whose stories
are all lessons of compassion. At the heart and origin of civilization, including his own life, there is very often the compassionate act of saving an abandoned child. To refuse to welcome the abandoned would be shameful in itself.

Thinking through the myth brings Tomas to conclude that compassion and shame are lacking in a normotic society like post-invasion Prague. Communist party leaders, assailed by criticism for the woes of the country, were claiming that they were fundamentally innocent because they simply did not know about assassinations and deportations, which they blamed on the Russians. Tomas is skeptical, but the argument strikes him as irrelevant. Wasn’t Oedipus also innocent in any modern, juridical sense? This did not stop him from recognizing his terrible acts, gouging out his own eyes, and leaving Thebes. Ignorance was no excuse. Bernard Williams has argued convincingly that Oedipus feels shame when his mind associates the fact that something truly terrible has happened with the dreadful realization of “just one thing, that he did it” (69). In Oedipus’s view, the authority of “what one has done” surpasses in power “what one has intentionally done” because Oedipus is aware of his shortcomings in relation to his view of his life: he puts out his eyes in acknowledgement of having fallen short of his practical identity. The idea of ushering people off to the totalitarian septic ditch (like refusing to gather up the basket from the river) does not inspire in the communists a sense of shame because compassion and weakness do not enter their view of themselves. As for Tereza, both now become an essential ethical measure for Tomas.

Tomas publishes his thoughts on Oedipus and the Party leaders in a letter to an opposition journal. But even before hitting print, the letter is heavily edited into an assertion that the communists should have their eyes gouged out. And once the communists reassert themselves, the letter becomes the source of a Kafkaesque web of manipulations that brings Tomas down from his position as a famous surgeon to a job as a lowly window washer, passing through police interviews, refused retractions, and two losses of employment. At the same time, his son and one of his son’s colleagues (one of the journalists responsible for modifying the letter) use the letter to leverage Tomas into signing a hopeless petition in favor of political prisoners. Tomas’s son, like the communists he opposes, misunderstands the myth of Oedipus as a call for reprisals. “I wasn’t out to punish anyone….Punishing people who don’t know what they’ve done is barbaric,” Tomas says to his son. Indeed the letter is so badly distorted by them that it has nothing to do with Tomas’s original intentions. Facing his son, who is coercing him to sign the petition just like the policeman was forcing him to sign a retraction, he exclaims: “What I wonder is what made me write the thing in the first place” (218).

Oddly enough, the rhetorical question produces its own response, one that connects Oedipus to the animals. Tomas blurs out without explanation: “It is much more important to dig a half-buried crow out of the ground than to send petitions to a president” (219-20). It is as though Tomas, in one instant
(a non-tragic Oedipus face to face with weakness), has the lesson of Tereza’s kindness to animals revealed to him. This revelation has two steps. The first is to center action on compassion for the vulnerable, even a crow. The second step is recognition that compassion has no room in this society or in its dominant political or moral systems. Tomas refuses to sign the petition, making no attempt whatsoever to explain himself. He does, however, feel a “black drunkenness”: “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). His is a paradoxical freedom that means relinquishing everything and, like Oedipus, leaving the city behind.

The Animal Idyll

After the reunion with Tomas’s son, Tomas and Tereza are ready to make a radical break with the social world, relocating to a small house in an agricultural village where they find work, Tomas driving a delivery truck and Tereza leading cows into the fields. This section is the pièce de résistance of the novel, and one of the most moving passages in Kundera’s work. By placing these characters in this bucolic space, Kundera renews ties with (and transforms) an older novelistic tradition of the pastoral. Indeed, as Tomas Pavel has argued, the pastoral has been the privileged setting of characters representing the ideal of the good, especially a moral norm, come together in opposition to a social world in which they have no place. It is, in the Hellenistic or the pastoral novel, the space where god-favored lovers and beautiful souls find an appropriate physical environment. Pavel assimilates Kundera much more with the picaresque tradition and its skepticism toward moral idealism, just as I have in my introduction, so that this pastoral setting may be seen as a minor mode within Kundera’s work. We will return to Kunderian skepticism in a moment, but first it is worth exploring how thoroughly this idyll breaks from the traditional relations between humankind and animality.

Everything in the village—its rhythms, its people’s actions, its spaces—is organized by the relation to animals. Most importantly, Karenin, finally, is allowed to emerge from the corner to the center of the narrative. She becomes the “keeper of the clock” who helps Tereza lead the herd out to the fields to graze twice a day. But though a harmonious coexistence between Tereza, Tomas, and Karenin could provide many narrative opportunities, Karenin’s move to the center of the narrative world is again marked by vulnerability. Since the beginning of the narrative, Karenin has been a sort of ultimate, nonhuman, foundling: one of the first acts of the couple had been to adopt this unwanted St. Bernard/German Shepherd puppy from one of Tomas’s colleagues, thus saving her from death. When she starts limping, and Tomas diagnoses a cancer, her death becomes their central occupation. There is an irony here that associates Karenin’s life and death with that of Tomas and Tereza, for Sabina, Tomas’s lover, had received a letter from Tomas’s son many pages earlier informing
her that they had died. And yet instead it is Karenin whom the reader finds flying off into time’s “Nought.” Her dying is recounted step by step, covering several days, with the pathos one expects of a human death, indeed with more solemnity than we have seen in the death of Jakoff or Sabina’s lover Franz.

Karenin’s death leads Tereza to rethink the human/animal relation. For Berger, animals are similar to humans in that they “are born, are sentient and are mortal” (259). But they are dissimilar as well, and he believes that one regrettable result of the disappearance of animals is that humans no longer feel their gaze upon us. This gaze, similar to our own, is at the same time a sign of a deep, abyssal distance. When looked at by another human, we can overcome this distance, at least theoretically, through language and sociability. Tereza continually interprets Karenin’s behavior as though she were reading a book. She shows signs of wanting to play and emits a weak “grunt” of pleasure. Though Tereza and Tomas refer to this in baldly anthropomorphic terms as “Karenin’s smile,” it is only a “smile” in the sense that she still takes pleasure in life and has a will to live. This low-level translatability does not erase an ethical distance. Since her adoption, Karenin has been entirely dependent on Tereza, and yet now Tereza can neither help Karenin nor explain her situation. When she feels Karenin’s gaze fall upon her just before death she interprets it as a reminder of her great power. She is overwhelmed by this gaze and its absolute confidence: “It was a look of awful, unbearable trust” (300).

This capacity to receive the gaze of an animal stands in vivid contrast to the modes of viewing and blindness in the society left behind. Both Tomas and Tereza had been called to observe and visually analyze other people, Tomas as a surgeon and a lover (recall his desire to break the “strongbox” of his women’s sexuality in order to “expose” and “conquer” [200] their uniqueness) and Tereza as a photographer. But each character recognizes that there had been something wrong with their manner of looking. For Tereza, the break comes with the photographs of nudists that she is shown in Swiss exile, and not because of prudery, as the editor who shows her the images thinks: she had photographed Tomas’s lover Sabina nude and even posed nude for Sabina herself. Instead it is the mechanical depiction of the vulnerable bodies that turns her away from these photographs. For Tomas, the scalpel of his pursuit of women gives way to his compassionate relation with Tereza. No longer directed by mastery, looking now happens with reciprocity and compassion. Her own willingness to submit to the camera for Sabina shows that she is willing to take the risk of baring vulnerability.

This vulnerable gaze helps Tereza deepen a perspective from which human pretentions to the moral good can be judged. For Tereza, Karenin’s trustful eyes recall those of the crow, which seemed to reproach Tereza for what her co-specifics had done. Tereza also feels the gaze of her heifers, one of which, named Marguerite, approaches to look her in the face. From there she also constructs other external gazes, some of which overturn the human/
animal hierarchy. She imagines the arrival of an extraterrestrial, whose god tells him that he in fact “will reign over the creatures of all the other stars,” and who roasts humans on a spit. She concludes that mankind should consider apologizing to the cows. She also imagines, ironically, a nonhuman zoologist who would observe interspecies relations and define mankind as a “parasite of the cow.” Kundera’s narrator broadens her critique to include the massive transformation of animals into raw material in the meat industry, pointing out that the fact that she cannot name all of her heifers is itself an indication of the massive size of the exploitation she works for, that the village itself had become a “factory,” and that “the world has declared Descartes correct” (289).

To get at this critique of humanity, readers will also have to question the shame that haunts attitudes toward vulnerability. For Berger, animals are both here in our world and on the other side of a horizon in a place we no longer try to access. But if we look they can also form a link, or an “intercession between man and his origins” (Berger 261). Thus we have Kundera’s narrator returning with Tereza to Genesis, the closest Western humans have to a universal account of the origin of the human trajectory. Tereza’s vision of Eden is the negative image of the denial of shit and sexuality that we found earlier throughout the Western tradition. For Tereza, as explained by the narrator, the only logical, and decidedly non-Cartesian, response the narrator can find is that defecation and voluptuousness were present in Eden, but that they were different, that man “did not look upon shit as something repellent” (247). Humans were shameless animals.

Tereza looks back at origins and adopts an awareness of embodiment that is no longer debilitated or rendered normotic by shame. After Karenin’s death, she is almost pleased to find a sign on the sheet she had wrapped her in—a wet spot of urine, a final adieu that echoed the first “hello” when the puppy Karenin urinated on her blouse. She also thinks of how little disgust she felt when Karenin was in heat and had to wear Tereza’s old underwear in order not to dirty the furniture. She wonders why she can feel “tenderness” toward Karenin’s bodily fluids but shame and disgust for her mother’s exhibitions: why would the animals “know nothing about the duality of body and soul and have no concept of disgust” (297)? She concludes that animals have never fallen and have never taken the wrong turn of having been “expelled from Paradise” (297).

When shame disappears from Tereza’s idyll, so does any desire to belong to the community of humankind. In one scene Karenin reacts with indifference when Tereza shows her a mirror; in another Tereza imagines Adam bent over a stream in Paradise, unable (and likely unwilling) to recognize the shimmering image as his face: her shame-driven quest for a soul in the mirrors of her youth is unheard of in Eden. The “nostalgia for Paradise” is, as the narrator calls it, “man’s longing not to be man” (296). The narrator compares her to Nietzsche embracing a coach horse after seeing it whipped by its driver, an
event normally pointed to as the beginning of Nietzsche’s mental illness, but here presented positively. Tereza and Nietzsche break the contract negotiated by the Cartesian “trajectory” (296), according to which mankind forever attempts to transcend its animal origins: “I see them [Tereza and Nietzsche] one next to the other: both stepping down from the road along which mankind, ‘the master and proprietor of nature,’ marches onward” (290). For the narrator, the most egregious consequence of eliminating animals from our purview is the disappearing idea that man could be something other than a project of transcending death: “And that is why it is so dangerous to turn an animal into a machina animata, a cow into an automaton for the production of milk. By so doing, man cuts the thread binding him to Paradise and has nothing left to hold or comfort him on his flight through the emptiness of time” (297).

Tereza views Adam in a kind of a precultural Eden where there is no concept of mankind, no progression of time into a trajectory. Shame appears at the Fall, when it strikes humans that they are vulnerable and naked. Given that this vision has echoes in the pastoral setting of the novel, here where the characters have elected to move after quitting their society, Tereza and Kundera might be accused of a certain Messianism. It would seem that they have renounced the struggles of history, the negation of the given, and come to a sort of beatitude. They have attained, with the animals, another version of Agamben’s “physiology of the blessed,” based not on the redemption of the body, but on a forgetfulness of shame (Agamben 17).

But the narrator re-anchors Tereza’s perspective in time. Though he says he “loves” her and Nietzsche, a break occurs as he hesitates to follow her into her Paradise: indeed he watches the two of them leave the road of humanity from afar. Thus his representation of her idyll is quite different from traditional pastoral. The village reminds Tereza of childhood stories, but it is obviously not a harmonious world where everyone attends Sunday Mass after dancing at the inn on Saturday. It is a place abandoned by the gods in a thoroughly modern world, though without its amenities: a place without a cinema or a restaurant, a place where the state has renounced authority only because it saw no reason to care. The description does not dwell on the beauty of the hills and fields where Tomas and Tereza take their walks. Even the moon resembles “a lamp someone had forgotten to turn off in the morning, a lamp that had burned all day in the room of the dead” (409). The peasants who live there are more than a little dismayed by Tereza’s emotion for Karenin.

The narrator also tempers Tereza’s view of embodiment with his diverse stylistic juxtapositions throughout the novel. In face of the denial of defecation and sexual desire, the narrator will insist upon them, often combining them, with a number of characters feeling a deep desire to defecate while they are having sex. The sarcasm and scatology, as when the narrator describes Tereza’s mother or recounts Franz’s death, force readers to confront the excrement and weaknesses of vulnerable bodies. Tereza’s indulgence for Karenin’s periods is
not held up as an example that all can follow. And at the end of the book there is neither forgetfulness nor redemption of mortality. Death of Karenin but also of Tomas and Tereza themselves, looms over the final pages. This is a negative image of paradise, or a paradise of the weak.

The Paradise of the Weak

A global view of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, integrating all facets of the novel—characters, narrator, style, and narrative—opens a wide and deep perspective on the problem of animality and animal suffering, on the “trap” that life has become. It also confirms Kundera’s status as a skeptical ironist with regards to human pretentions. The book reserves its most pointed sarcasm and contempt for figures of Western anthropogenesis, characters such as Jakoff and the communists, but also the more sympathetic idealist, Franz, who believes in the “march of history” (another Messianism in which humankind will be concluded in a fraternal harmony). It is true, however, that he reserves a tone of compassion, respect, and admiration for Tereza and Tomas. His narrator does not agree totally; even if he leans toward Tereza’s counter-Utopia of animality, he excises from it its Messianism, its conclusion of mankind, its notion of “truth,” and its shamelessness. How much is left? We can say that Tereza, and with her Tomas, has rejected the anthropological machine and risked embracing her vulnerable, creaturely existence. The risk is total, because it places her in the zone of “pure life” that cannot be redeemed into any vision of human perfection.

This anti-anthropocentrism recalls an article Kundera wrote about a triptych of portraits that Francis Bacon painted of Henrietta Moreas. By blurring Moreas’s face, Kundera suggests, Bacon wipes out the conventional human face and emphasizes the vulnerability of her body. Even the crucifix, painted by Bacon in the sixties, which Kundera presents as “the whole ethics, the whole religion, indeed the whole history of the West,” becomes for Bacon a mere “physiological scandal”: the body of God is nothing more than butcher’s meat (Encounter 13). But though our contingent existence is obvious, it is “an obviousness that is veiled by our membership in a collectivity that blinds us with its dramas, its excitements, its projects, its illusions, its struggles, its causes, its religions, its ideologies, its passions” (13). Bacon’s art (and Kundera’s novel) is disengaged from history and the idea of man in order to isolate and observe, at its most basic and unredeemed level, mortal life. Berger, who has also written about Bacon, echoes Kundera when he says that the artist portrays humans like animals on display for study: “his figures are alone, but they are utterly without privacy” (“Francis Bacon” 317).

Surprisingly, despite the absolute reduction of the human figure to its carnal and excremental body, Kundera finds a lesson of compassion in Bacon’s work. The portraits of Moreas remind him of a young woman who, one could easily argue, is one “source” for Tereza (especially for the scene of her one
infidelity to Tomas). She was “a very serious girl, very skilled at controlling her emotions, and was always so impeccably dressed that her outfit, like her behavior, allowed no hint of nakedness” (4). And yet, while telling Kundera about a police interrogation, she became so upset that, he writes, “her bowels were revolting and she had to continually run to the bathroom. Fear had laid her open. She was gaping wide before me like the split carcass of a heifer hanging from a meat hook” (4). Kundera’s strange inner reaction to the exposure of the girl’s vulnerability is a dark desire to rape her: “Possess her, in one swift second, with her shit and her ineffable soul.” But compassion, and the sense of his power, prevents him from doing so: he sees her eyes staring at him, much like Karenin stares at Tereza, and he sees his desire (as Tereza sees her privilege) as “absurd, stupid, scandalous, incomprehensible, and impossible to carry out” (5).

There is no reasoned justification offered for this proto-ethical morality, just as the novel can find no real justification for Tereza’s indulgence for suffering animals. It isn’t a matter of justifying. Instead, the novel, through its pathetic and indignant irony, is an obliteration of a certain portrait of mankind. It is a fallen idyll in which those who step out of the anthropogenic machine receive a hearing: “It is the territory where no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin, but where everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin” (Art 159). Karenin the dog as well. The Unbearable Lightness of Being opens a perspective in which human life is “reduced” to the meat that is absent in the Cartesian tradition. But in meat and feces it issues an unjustified moral appeal concerning both human and animal suffering, to readers who must acknowledge their own vulnerability in order to hear it.

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Notes

1 In a recent book on irony, Jonathan Lear underscores two problems raised by Kierkegaard that express what I am trying to address here. The first is summed up with this quote from Kierkegaard: “to become human does not come that easily” (3). As Lear points out, Kierkegaard draws a contrast between Socrates and “everyone else who is perfectly sure of being human and knowing what it means to be a human being” (6). The second is expressed in a series of structurally similar questions about practical identities found throughout Kierkegaard and Plato: “in all of Christendom is there a single Christian?” “Among all shepherds, is there a shepherd?” “Among all the wise, is there a wise person?” Such questions evoke for Lear the uncanny experience of realizing that “the demands of an ideal, value, or identity to which [the person] takes himself to be already committed dramatically transcend the received social understandings” (25). In Kundera’s proverb, God represents the supreme goodness to which mankind aspires; his laughter indicates our weakness, the weakness of our practical efforts to attain and even understand that goodness, a weakness that most of us, in our confidence, never admit.

2 The official English translation of this passage is tame in comparison with the French, which Kundera recognizes as his own work:
Le véritable test moral de l'humanité (le plus radical, qui se situe à un niveau si profond qu'il échappe à notre regard) ce sont ses relations avec ceux qui sont à sa merci: les animaux. Et c'est ici que s'est produite la faillite fondamentale de l'homme, si fondamentale que toutes les autres en découlent. (421)

Here the test is the most "radical" (a word I will retain instead of "fundamental") and it is so because its roots are so deeply hidden from our view. And humankind has suffered nothing, but has "failed" or become "bankrupt." Generally I will follow the English translation of the novel with small modifications as the French permits.

1. Causing great solitude. Costello, who has been invited to give an academic talk on a fictional campus, gives in to "raw nerves" and draws incoherent and offensive associations between the meat industry and the Nazi death camps (reminiscent of Tereza's provocations), alienating her from her audience and from her family. She compares herself to the chimpanzee in Kafka's "An address to an academy," who searches for the precise and measured discourse that will please the academic audience. But, even more so than Kafka's chimpanzee, she finds herself giving in to emotions and her "raw nerves" in a way that makes it impossible for her to communicate with the academics, but also with a Holocaust survivor, and even her son and daughter-in-law.

4. The narrator dwells on various details of the couple's love for Karenin at the end her life: Tereza lying down on the floor to be licked one last time; the violet-print on the sheet they spread on a bed and on which they have to lift this big dog; the careful search for a vein; and Tereza's way of holding Karenin's head. And if Tereza takes the lead here, Tomas is just as engaged in caring for the dog. Her death merits respect for her body and a proper burial. She even has one privilege over humans: she can legally be euthanized and can thus die a merciful death. Tomas takes responsibility for administering the shot so that it would come to Karenin from someone she loves.

5. The dispelling of borders between humans and animals opens enormous imaginative possibilities, both odd and beautiful, in how characters are represented. The proximity between humans and animals leads to the drawing of similarities between them: Tereza finds that the puerile gaiety of her heifers, many of which she has named, makes them resemble middle-aged women prancing around like teenage girls, and there are obvious similarities between the village mayor and his trained pig, Mephisto. Indeed Kundera's animal imagery would be worth analyzing in a systematic way throughout his work.

WORKS CITED