The Unbearable Lightness of Being features a narrator whose presence in the text is no less important than that of any other character. The narrator creates his own self as he tells the story. He achieves this not only by narrating but also by adopting the function of a creator of characters and a director of the text. These functions give the narrator visibility within the story and grant him a potential omniscience through which he could control his fictional personae and their world completely. In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, however, the narrator intentionally limits his powers to avoid subjugating his characters to the same totalitarian rule they try to escape on the thematic level. Furthermore, the narrator’s choice of narratological strategies and organization reflects his desire to create a textual world that in no way resembles the oppressive world he describes thematically. In other words, the narrator does not put up barbed-wire fences to enclose his characters. He chooses an open-ended structure for his narrative. In this way, the characters’ desire for freedom on the thematic level is supported by the narrator, whose choice of narratological techniques enables him to free the characters on the structural level. An analysis of the narrator’s functions and organizational choices within the text will provide a closer view of the structural openness the narrator strives for, an openness that provides the characters with what could be called textual freedom.

A narrator’s directing function includes the use of what Genette terms the repeating prolepsis or advance notice, a narratological technique that fragments the narrative through temporal disorder (intermingling the present with the future). Advance notices “refer in advance to an event that will be told in full in its place” (73). Generally, the formula for advance notices is “we will see” or “one will see later.” As Genette points out, their function lies in creating an expectation in the reader. Furthermore, organizing the narrative by means of advance notices positions the narrator in the role of director of the text. The narrator takes charge of the internal organization of the text by manipulating time through the chronological displacement.
ment of events. He is able to direct events against the chronological order of the narrative (going forward in time) which shows that the story is continually present in his mind and that he has complete control over it. In other words, such a role enables the narrator to stress both his complete omniscience and his power over the organizational aspect of the text.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* advance notices appear rather infrequently and are not so explicit as to begin with the formulaic “we will see.” Here is a typical advance notice:

Je to možná těch několik náhod (mimochodem docela skromných, šedivých, však hodných tohoto bezvýznamného města), které uvedly do pohybu její lásku a staly se pramenem energie, kterou nevyčerpá do konce života. (51)

[It may well be those few fortuities (quite modest, by the way, even drab, just what one would expect from so lackluster a town) which set her love in motion and provided her with a source of energy she had not yet exhausted at the end of her days. (51)]

This sentence in the original stresses its temporal orientation into the future by using the future perfective form “nevýčerpá.” (A more literal English translation would use the future tense “will not exhaust.”) This advance notice is of course an allusion to Tereza’s constant love for Tomáš, which will recur from now on throughout the novel.

A more complex advance notice forewarns of Tomáš’ death: “Po hříchu nedlouho potom začala žárlit sama a její žárlivost nebyla pro Tomáše Nobelovou cenou, nýbrž břemenem, kterého se zbaví teprve krátký čas před smrtí” (55) [“Before long, unfortunately, she began to be jealous herself, and Tomas saw her jealousy not as a Nobel Prize, but as a burden, a burden he would be saddled with until not long before his death” (56)]. Again, the future perfective (here “zbaví”) occurs in the original (the English sequence of tenses requires the conditional). Thematically, the advance notice anticipates not only Tomáš’ future marital problems but also his death, thereby creating the expectation in the reader’s mind of a death scene. At the same time, it reveals the climax of the story and eliminates suspense. The reader no longer needs to question what will happen, only how and when. Impatient readers may have turned to the last pages of the novel, expecting the foretold death to appear there, but their expectations are not fulfilled: the death scene appears much earlier, in a letter to Sabina:

Žilí prý v posledních letech na vesnici, kde byl Tomáš zaměstnán jako šofér nákladního auta. Zvykli si jezdit spolu občas do sousedního města, kde vždycky přespali v laciném hotelu. Cesta tam vedla přes kopce, sepratinami, a nákladní auto se s nimi zřítilo s vysoké stráňě. (114)

[For the past few years they had been living in a village, where Tomas was employed as a driver at a collective farm. From time to time they would drive over to the next town and spend the night in a cheap hotel. The road there wound through some hills, and their pickup had crashed and hurtled down a steep incline. (122)]
The chronologically displaced death scene appears approximately in the middle of the novel, in Part III, which is devoted to Sabina and the misunderstandings she faces in emigration. Furthermore, the death scene is followed by four more parts (“Soul and Body,” “Lightness and Weight,” “The Grand March,” and “Karenin’s Smile”) dealing directly or indirectly with Tomáš’s life. In other words, the reader is told that Tomáš dies on a collective farm before he actually moves there from Prague. To place the death scene of the main protagonist so early in the text seems anticlimactic. Why does the narrator opt for this deliberate chronological displacement?

A close analysis of the last part of the novel, “Karenin’s Smile,” provides an answer. “Karenin’s Smile” creates the illusion of a happy ending because there is no death scene involving the main protagonists. The critic Susan Moore claims that while living in the country Tomáš and Tereza find fulfillment and peace of mind: “No one envies them; no one interferes with them—certainly not the Red Army or the police; and no one threatens their freedom of speech or movement.” Moreover, Tomáš’s last words to Tereza seem to support the idea that inner peace and freedom may be found there: “A je to ohromná úleva zjistit, že jsi volná, že nemáš poslání” (283) [“And it’s a terrific relief to realize you’re free, free of all missions” (313)]. Could it be that the two main protagonists, who are driven by their search for “freedom” from Prague to Geneva and then back to Prague again, actually find it on a collective farm? Such a neatly resolved ending would be typical of a Socialist Realist novel and, by leaving little to question, would give the novel a closed-ended structure. I will argue instead that “Karenin’s Smile” leaves much to question, is open-ended in its structure, does not conclude on a happy note, and in fact parodies the Socialist Realist novel.

The last part of the novel might not evoke sadness in the reader, for it does not contain the actual death of Tomáš and Tereza. A closer reading, however, proves that it is permeated with secondary deaths: the dog Karenin has cancer and must be put to sleep; Tereza dreams of Tomáš’s death by shooting (which results in his metamorphosis into a rabbit); the narrator recalls the extermination of pigeons in Prague and the campaigns against dogs which were meant to divert attention from the Soviet invasion. The word “smrt” [death] and its verbal or adjectival cognates appear twelve times in this relatively short chapter (thirty pages in the original). These seemingly unimportant deaths and the frequent repetition of the word “smrt” lend the ending a melancholic tone and evoke the death of Tomáš and Tereza. The novel therefore lacks the closed-ended structure provided by an unequivocally happy ending; it leaves much open to question. The narrator brings up but never answers issues such as: Does Tereza’s love finally conquer Tomáš completely? Does Tomáš become weak (metamorphosed into a rabbit) at the end? Does the totalitarian system succeed in eliminating freedom from the society in which they live?
The narrator’s thematic parody of the Socialist Realist novel comes to light not only because the main protagonists die in the Socialist “paradise” of the collective farm but also because their deaths reveal the true conditions of the place: “Policie dodatečně zjistila, že brzdy byly v katastrofálním stavu” (114) [“The police determined later that the brakes were in disastrous condition” (123)]. The collective farm does not symbolize a new and better life as in Socialist Realist novels; it symbolizes death and decay.

The narrator undercuts the achievements of Socialist reforms in the countryside by describing its dehumanization: 

Ale pak se z vesnic udělala velká továrna a krávy prožívaly celý svůj život na dvou čtverečních metrech v kravínu. Od té doby už nemají jména a jsou z nich “machinae animatae.” (263)

[But then the villages were turned into a large collective factory, and the cows began spending all their lives in the five square feet set aside for them in their cow sheds. From that time on, they have had no names and become mere machinae animatae. (290)]

People too have been stripped of their individuality: “Zemědělec, kterému už nepatří půda a je jen dělníkem pracujícím na poli . . .” (256) [“A farmer who no longer owns his own land and is merely a laborer tilling the soil . . .” (283)]. Such a “farmer” no longer has any reason to care for the land or the work he does. He becomes apathetic, encloses himself in the four walls of his dwelling (like the cow in its cow shed), and stares “at the refulgent television screen.” Although, people in the country have nothing to lose or fear and have therefore maintained a certain amount of autonomy (for example, they can choose their own collective farm chairman), they are far from free. Tomáš cannot practice medicine, nor can he or Tereza go anywhere else, because they have sold all their possessions to move there. The only reason the collective accepts them is that it suffers from a constant shortage of people and needs them. The countryside is their last exile, a trap from which there is no escape—except in death.9

On the structural level, the chronological displacement of the death scene also parodies the Socialist Realist novel. By revealing the conclusion of the novel much earlier than expected, the narrator eliminates suspense and “lays bare” his technique with all its complexities. When a text is dominated by a suspenseful plot, the reader can block out everything but the outcome of the novel. By eliminating suspense, the narrator points to himself and his technique and forces the reader to read beyond the plot. In contrast, the Socialist Realist novel frowns upon experimentation and stresses its formulaic plot with its ever present “message.” Furthermore, the Socialist Realist novel tends to be closed-ended in its structure; it concludes on a happy note and ties all its loose ends together by answering all questions that may remain at the end.

The directing function enables the narrator to create a textual world over which he has power and control. The narrator tears down the conventions
of the Socialist Realist novel, or more generally, any novel that is totalitarian in its presentation. Instead, he strives for a narrative that can free its fictional personae on the structural level.

Not surprisingly, then, Kundera’s narrator gains visibility within the text: “Vyprávěl jsem ve třetí části tohoto románu o polonahé Sabině, jak stojí s buřinkou na hlavě vedle olečeného Tomáše. Něco jsem tehdy zamlčel” (224) [“In Part Three of this novel I told the tale of Sabina standing half-naked with a bowler hat on her head and the fully dressed Tomas at her side. There is something I failed to mention at the time” (my emphasis, 247)]. The repetition of the pronoun “I” emphasizes the presence of the narrator. He is the one who selects when and how to reveal the plot, the one who lurks behind each page with a compositional strategy that calls attention to his controlling hand. As the critic D. A. Miller writes, it is the “faceless gaze [that] becomes an ideal of the power of regulation” (The Novel and the Police, 24). But Kundera’s narrator is obviously not interested in the power of regulation on the thematic level. He subverts his potential power by revealing himself to the reader. He leaves this power to the “faceless gaze” of the secret police which listens in on private conversations and follows its subjects without their knowledge;[12]

Žádný z nich tehdy netušil, že je v profesorově bytě tajné naslouchání zařízení a že jsou dávno sledováni na každém kroku! Procházka vždycky bavil své přátelé hyperbolami a nehoráznostmi. Teď se ty nehoráznosti ozývaly na pokračování z rozhlusu. Tajná policie, která redigovala pofad, pdtrhla pečlivě místa, kde se romanopisec posměvil svým přátelům, například Dubčekovi. Lidé, i když sami pomlouvají své přátelé při každé příležitosti, se pohoršovali nad milovaným Procházkou víc než nad nenáviděnou tajnou policí. (123)

[For a long time, neither of them had any idea that the professor’s flat was bugged and their every step dogged. Procházka loved to regale his friends with hyperbole and excess. Now his excesses had become a weekly radio series. The secret police, who produced and directed the show, took pains to emphasize the sequences in which Procházka made fun of his friends—Dubcek, for instance. People slander their friends at the drop of a hat, but they were more shocked by the much-loved Procházka than by the much-hated secret police. (133)]

The secret police have immense destructive powers precisely because they are “faceless,” because they do not operate in the open. Throughout the novel the secret police are referred to as “they.” They are feared because no one knows when and how they will strike. The narrator, through his frequent use of the pronoun “I” and indications of how he will proceed (or has proceeded) with his narration, disowns the power of “the faceless gaze,” of the secret police.13

One could argue that although the narrator diminishes his powers through his visibility and the open manipulation of structural aspects of the text, he nevertheless keeps immense power through the other role he assumes within the novel: that of creator of fictional personae. The narrator stresses that the characters “are not born of a mother’s womb” and that
they never actually lived. Instead, they are born of a situation, a thought, or a phrase set up by the narrator. Tomáš, for example, comes to being through the narrator’s thoughts: “Myslím na Tomáše už řadu let, ale tepře ve světle této úvahy jsem ho uviděl jasně” (11). [“I have been thinking about Tomas for many years. But only in the light of these reflections did I see him clearly” (6)]. Tereza’s character emerges from a situation: “Tereza se tedy zrodila ze situace, která brutálně odhaluje nesmířitelnou duality těla a duše, základní lidskou zkušenost” (41) [“Tereza was therefore born of a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience” (40)]. The narrator, therefore, assumes the creative act of an author. He no longer participates in the text merely as a director, he is a creator, an absolute authority,14 and as such enjoys the privilege of complete omniscience whether it relates to the outcome of the story or to the characters’ consciousness.

With such powers, the narrator may seem God-like; he has the means to manipulate his characters’ lives and minds in any way he chooses.15 The characters may seem to be mere puppets in his hands. The narrator could therefore be accused of creating a totalitarian world that is dominated both by “the faceless gaze” of the secret police as well as by the authorial narrator. The characters’ search for freedom in such a world would be a lost cause. Even if they chose to leave their Soviet ruled homeland, their freedom would be hindered by the narrator’s total control.

While the characters are trapped in a society without freedom on the thematic level, the narrator diminishes his own powers of omniscience to free his characters structurally. How the narrator undermines his powers of omniscience can be seen through an analysis of his discourse. I will now return to the creation of Tomáš to illustrate the subtle undercutting of his own knowledge in which the narrator engages: “Myslím na Tomáše už řadu let . . .” [“I have been thinking about Tomas for many years . . . ”]. It is important to note that the narrator uses the present tense verb “myslím” [I have been thinking], rather than the past tense “myslel.” If the narrator used the past tense, he would imply that Tomáš’ development was complete. The use of the present tense indicates that there is more character growth to come. In the very sentence in which he describes how he created a character, the narrator backs away and grants the character the power to create himself. Characters may have been given life by the narrator, but they develop on their own throughout The Unbearable Lightness of Being. In fact, the narrator rarely has access to their thoughts.

The narrator openly distances himself from psychological omniscience. He steps aside whenever his omniscience would venture too deeply into his characters’ internal world: “Myslím, že i Sabinu ovanulo zvláštní kouzlo situace, když před ní stála žena jejího milence, podivně odevzdaná a plachá” (my emphasis, 65) [“I think that Sabina, too, felt the strange en-
chantment of the situation: her lover’s wife standing oddly compliant and timorous before her” (my emphasis, 66)]. Here the narrator merely speculates on what Sabina might have thought of this strange exchange between her and Tereza. That Sabina’s own thoughts are never presented, suggests that she has been given the right to her own private thoughts. Furthermore, the reader is given the choice of whether to believe the narrator or not. The next example shows that the narrator only guesses about Franz’s love for Sabina: “Nemohu to pochopit jinak, než že láška pro něho nebyla prodloužením jeho veřejného života nýbrž jeho protipôlem” (my emphasis, 78) [“The only explanation I can suggest is that for Franz, love was not an extension of public life but its antithesis” (my emphasis, 83)]. At one point the narrator even admits to a total lack of understanding of one of his characters:

Redaktor Tereze řekl skoro omluvným hlasem: “To je pravý opak toho, co jste fotografovala vy.”

Tereza řekla: “Ale kdepak. To je totéž.”

Nikdo této větu nerozuměl a i mně délá jisté potíže vysvětlit, co vlastně chtěla Tereza říci, když přirovnala nudistickou pláž k ruské invazi. (my emphasis, 66)

[Almost apologetically the editor said to Tereza, “Of course they’re completely different from your pictures.”

“Not at all,” said Tereza. “They’re the same.”

Neither the editor nor the photographer understood her, and even I find it difficult to explain what she had in mind when she compared a nude beach to the Russian invasion. (my emphasis, 68)]

Instead of analyzing the differences between Sabina and Franz, which would require psychological probing, the narrator writes a dictionary of misunderstood words: “Kdybych sledoval všechny rozhovory mezi Sabinou a Franzem, mohl bych sestavit z jejich neporozumění veliký slovník. Spokojme se s malým slovníkem” (84) [“If I were to make a record of all of Sabina and Franz’ conversations, I could compile a long lexicon of their misunderstandings. Let us be content, instead, with a short dictionary” (95)]. A dictionary is an objective form that gives no reason or motivation for how or why words are used by certain individuals. It shows only generally accepted meanings. Thus, the narrator’s lexicon portrays the differences between Sabina’s and Franz’s personalities without the expected psychological analysis. But the narrator’s ideal of psychological non-omniscience is difficult to maintain. At times, the narrator displays total—one might also say Tolstoyan—insight into his characters’ minds. One such instance occurs in the dictionary’s “Light and Darkness” category:

Žit znamená pro Sabinu vidět. Vidění je vymezeno dvojí hraničí: silným světlem, které oslepuje, a totální tmou...

Slovo “světlo” nevyvolává ve Franzovi představu krajiny, na níž spočívá měkká zář dne, ale pramen světla sám o sobě; slunce, žárovka, reflektor... (88–9)
[Living for Sabina meant seeing. Seeing is limited by two borders: strong light, which blinds, and total darkness . . .

In Franz the word “light” did not evoke the picture of a landscape basking in the soft glow of day; it evoked the source of light itself: the sun, a light bulb, a spotlight . . . (94)]

But this is more the exception than the rule. Even when reporting his characters’ lovemaking, for example, the narrator uses physical rather than psychological detail to make his point: “To nebylo vzdychnání, úpění, to byl opravdu křík. Křičela tolik, že Tomáš oddaloval hlavu od její tváře. Zdálo se mu, že její hlas znějící těsně u jeho ucha mu roztrhne bubínek” (53). [“It was no sigh, no moan; it was a real scream. She screamed so hard that Tomas had to turn his head away from her face, afraid that her voice so close to his ear would rupture his eardrum” (54)]. The narrator renders the scene, so to say, audiologically rather than psychologically. He may know more about the characters’ lives than they themselves: “Tereza ovšem neznala pětiběh noci, kdy matka šeptala do ucha jejímu otcí, aby si dal pozor” (45) [“Of course, Tereza did not know the story of the night when her mother whispered ‘Be careful’ into the ear of her father” (44)]. Here the narrator functions merely as an eavesdropper. His knowledge is limited to that of an observer; he may be ever present, but he has limited access to the inner world of his characters.

Considering the narrator’s dislike of psychological probing, it comes as no surprise that interior monologue is completely absent from The Unbearable Lightness of Being. As the critic Edward Bloom has written, interior monologue is “the most exploratory of all fictional states of mind, it is also the most intimate” (157). Kundera explains why he shuns this narratological technique: “Thanks to the fantastic espionage of interior monologue, we have learned an enormous amount about what we are. But, myself, I cannot use that microphone” (Art of the Novel, 28). Kundera’s very choice of words shows that he links interior monologue to secret-police techniques. The narrator in The Unbearable Lightness of Being is obviously close to the author in this respect, for he never immerses himself in the interior world of his characters, a world that is sacred to all who have once been denied freedom. The narrator who shows the dangers of totalitarianism in the story of his characters avoids playing the totalitarian within his own created world and provides his characters with an inner world to which he has limited access.17 Franz, who never lived under oppression, can say that he would like to live “in a glass house” into which all can see and in which nothing remains secret,18 but the narrator, as well as his East European protagonists, have seen a world where privacy is no longer respected and where the regime tears down the walls of one’s house. In such a world the psychological realm is the only realm that cannot be controlled. It is for this reason that the narrator of The Unbearable Lightness of Being protects it with such ferocity.
NOTES

1 Genette in *Narrative Discourse* states that the narrator can also possess four extranarrative functions, which he distributes "in accordance with the several aspects of narrative (in the broad sense) to which they are connected" (255). These are the directing, communicative, ideological, and testimonial functions. Genette's categories are helpful in providing a more systematic and profound analysis of the narrator. But as Susan Lanser points out, Genette deals with the functions of the narrator only cursorily (*The Narrative Act*, 38). I would also add that Genette's functions of the narrator are not all-encompassing. Nowhere does he mention the narrator's orientation toward the characters and his relationship to them. The narrator may place himself in the position of their author or creator. Therefore, I have added to the possible list of functions the function of creator. I will limit my discussion here to the directing function and the function of creator; these two functions most clearly relate to the theme of freedom.

2 In Czechoslovakia Tomáš and Tereza try to escape the totalitarian regime that is slowly demoralizing the whole nation. The countryside is the last place not totally under such control, and Tomáš and Tereza search for freedom there. Sabina tries to escape the aesthetic totalitarianism that first appears in the form of Socialist Realist art but later follows her, in different forms, throughout the world.

3 Genette states that advance notices are incompatible with suspense and for this reason appear rather infrequently in the Western tradition. In addition, because it seems more natural for the narrator to allude to the future than for a character to do so, first-person narratives are more suited to the use of advance notices than other types (67). For a discussion and critique of Genette's entire theory of narrative see Rimmon.

4 See Genette, 73–4.

5 All subsequent page references to the novel in the Czech will be from Milan Kundera’s *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*. The English text, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, was translated by Michael Henry Heim.

6 See Moore, 63–66.

7 As Booth points out, unequivocally happy endings, traditional moral judgments, resounding, unambiguous triumphs, explicit political programs, and sharp delineations of characters have been deplored by modern critics. An open-ended story, on the other hand, gives the reader something to work with, something to think about. Total openness is not desirable either, for it leads to reader apathy (67).

8 In an afterword to *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*. Květoslav Chvatík points out that the novel ends with an atmosphere of "smutné štěstí" ["sad happiness"] and wonders whether it is just a coincidence that a collection of poetry by the Czech poet Fráňa Šrámek bears the same title. It would be interesting to study Šrámek’s influence on Kundera.

   The critic Maria Němcová Banerjee makes an excellent observation in her *Terminal Paradox* (the first book-length study of Milan Kundera in English) that the nocturnal butterfly that circles the hotel room at the end of the novel is the same butterfly that appeared in Tereza’s dream in the preceding part. "The circling butterfly, which was once a larva, traces the mystery of the final transformation into the transparent medium of absolute transience" (251).

9 It is interesting to compare the ending of the novel to the film based on it, which is chronologically linear. The film does not evoke criticism or parody of the collective farm life; it portrays life in the country as romantic and simple.

10 In Czech subject pronouns are frequently omitted, but the auxiliary verb "jsem" determines the presence of the first person.

11 D.A. Miller states that the convention of omniscient narration does not suggest the possession of absolute power, because although it knows all, it can hardly do all. Nevertheless, omniscient narration, controls the discursive framework (24–5).
12 George Orwell’s “faceless gaze” of Big Brother inevitably comes to mind.
13 The narrator is not manipulative with his readers either, because he openly points to his choices of structural techniques within the text. Thus, the reader feels part of the narrator’s world.
14 Susan Lanser distinguishes among three types of narrators: the public narrator, the private narrator, and the focalizer. Each represents levels possible within a narrative and each carries conventionally distinct modes of authority. The public narrator functions as creator and authority in the fictional world he/she defines for the reader. The private narrator is bound to the text and thus dependent upon the existence of that world for his/her authority to speak. The focalizer is the consciousness through which the textual events are perceived (139–42). The narrator of The Unbearable Lightness of Being is to be categorized as a public narrator for several reasons: the narrator often addresses the narratee (and because the narrator’s speech context is a public one, he has theoretically an author’s relation to the discourse act); the narrator is in charge of his own voice, because there is no other narrator to define him; most importantly, the narrator defines the world in which he functions both as creator and authority for the reader.
15 A narrator who is in charge of the entire fictional world (including his own voice) has the power to manipulate the reader as well. If the reader is presented with only one perspective, the narrator’s, it is difficult for the reader to question him. Kundera’s narrators never have such a presence within their texts. Events or ideas are presented from multiple viewpoints and the reader is always left to choose whose perspective to believe.
16 According to Bloom, interior monologue may also dominate the angle of vision from which we are made to see the story (157). But in The Unbearable Lightness of Being the narrator is magnanimous and wants his readers to have their own opinions as well.
17 This leaves the characters with a mystical aura, with their own secrets. Again, this goes against the Socialist Realist model of writing, in which the fictional personae are one-dimensional, transparent figures. The reader knows everything about the characters of the Socialist Realist novel.
18 Zamjatin, in his novel We, shows a world where houses are made out of glass and where even the psychological world is taken away. In such a society people turn into automata.

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