Immortality Short Guide

Immortality by Milan Kundera

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Characters/Techniques

The novel Immortality is occupied with the fates of two sets of lovers: Agnes (the central character, as most surely evoking the sympathy of the author and therefore his reader), her well-meaning but inept husband Paul, her sister Laura, and Laura's lover Bernard. While Laura is demonstrative, erotic, at home in her own body, aggressive and destructive, Agnes is the opposite: highly sensitive, desirous of solitude, even a bit weary of the contests of love and life. As Laura's histrionics of despair threaten the rare peace to be found, Agnes is killed, quite without reason, in an auto mishap. This leaves Laura, who has already driven away Bernard, free to marry Paul and thus assert the immortality of her love. Such is the plot of Immortality.

Yet to describe the plot and its characters in this way is to miss the essence of the novel. Here, more even than previously, Kundera breaks through the conventions of the novel form, to fashion a text of unremitting complexity. With the dictum that "a novel shouldn't be like a bicycle race but a feast of many courses," Kundera eschews the traditional chain of cause and effect, character development, and plot, and substitutes for them a text constructed of a blend of literary modes, from history and philosophical essay to lexicon, character sketch and journal entry. Maria Banerjee has noted the similarity of the novel's construction to the organizing principle of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, and whether or not the particular comparison is apt, the turning toward a principle of form from outside the tradition of the novel is surely in order. Kundera has in his afterword to the novel described its architecture as comprised of seven parts, each written in a different narrative mode dependent on the attention to narrative causality and the level of digression contained there, and each highly distinct from the others in pacing — both in terms of style and the time period covered.

Of course, Kundera's liberties can be startling: He himself appears in the novel, simultaneously as the historical Milan Kundera and as a novelistic convention chatting with the wily and antic Professor Avenarius about how this novel ought to have been titled The Unbearable Lightness of Being. This odd Kundera figure can describe at one point how Agnes is a character borne of a gesture, and yet go on at a later point to converse with her husband Paul. Add to this the liberty of introducing in the sixth part a character— the painter nicknamed Rubens — who figures nowhere else, and we can see Kundera's conscious and intentional breakage of the rules of novel writing, and how the disconcerting quality of that breakage can lead to charges of excessive cleverness in the service of aesthetic or philosophical meditation.

And yet this charge essentially misses the point. Revealing here is Kundera's playful rendering of a particularly Romantic tale. The story of Goethe and Bettina Brentano von Arnim is interstitched with the more "novelistic" plot regarding Agnes and her family and friends. But despite the remarks of reviewers, it functions not as an intrusion, but an integral part of the flow of ideas. Unlike, for example, the subplot of Sabina and Franz in The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984), where at least Sabina forms a connection between Franz on the one hand and Tomas and Tereza on the other, there is no obvious connection between the "historical" events of Goethe's life and those of Agnes or Paul

or Laura. However, in the exploration of the notion of "immortality," we find revealed our own constructions of history, constructions that would box Goethe in his century, Agnes in hers, when in fact, some things — gestures, situations, desires — remain intact across time, "immortal." This is not merely that the story of Goethe functions as example or allegory, through which we can read the present. Rather, the neutralizing, and humorizing, of our quest for immortality reveals that even the great Goethe fell under its spell as much as we, and thus Goethe is repositioned out from the Pantheon and into the human flow.

Although it is surely strange to find Goethe and Hemingway chatting merrily in the afterlife, such is a necessary outcome when the strictures of a dignified, ponderous immortality have been lifted. Here, in Immortality, the noticing of gestures and events otherwise apparently insignificant — the fall of a pair of glasses, for example — becomes a moment for reflection, where continuities and interrelations stretch to the horizon. In an age when individualism threatens to obliterate individuality, such moments become the last refuge for the constitution of "character."

Social Concerns/Themes

In an afterword to the Czech version of Immortality (1992), Kundera disavows a specific stance as social commentator, noting that his works are less concerned with the culture of spectacle than with the understanding that each man carries within him the seed of selfregard through the gaze of others, a seed that is projected into larger, more social spaces. At the same time, it is difficult to read his explorations of the "terminal paradoxes" of our contemporary era without noting the pointed, indeed inescapable, cultural critique present there. In this novel, for the first time, is the milieu of socialist Czechoslovakia left behind, in favor of a setting that is both Kundera's adopted city and thoroughly "Western" as well.

The Paris his characters inhabit is present-day: awash in consumerism, technology, image manipulation. Indeed, Kundera notes, "for contemporary man reality is a continent visited less and less often and, besides, justifiably disliked." There are, according to his afterword, two basic themes in the novel: that of the relation between man and his reflection, and that of homo sentimentalis. The interrelated investigation of these themes addresses issues including the rise of sentimentality as a cultural and political force; the terrible intrusiveness of the image constructors (largely media) and the consequent invalidation of a notion of privacy; the elevation of one's desires into rights, especially the right to question and demand an answer; and the raising of individual rights, in an aggressive assertion of self, to the level of a metaphysical imperative.

To the dyad mentioned above I would add the theme of "immortality," both personal and social, as literally a "theme" upon which to pursue variations, a controlling notion, a substructure of ideas determining our actions and reactions. Kundera is here as elsewhere in his fiction consumed with the question of ideology, the notion of privileging an "idea" — be it socialism, kitsch, feminism, or, here, "imagology," the creation and maintenance of image — beyond all rationality or human sympathy. As with litost in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, or lehkost (lightness) in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, a single yet complex conception underlies all, as nesmrtelnost (immortality) is played with, examined, turned like a jewel in one's hand in order to examine its facets. Of course, with the persistent questioning and unraveling of dearly held illusions, it is no wonder that readers of Kundera can become lost in his intricate web of ironies, nor that they look in vain for a secure anchorage. But as Kundera questions many of the underlying assumptions of contemporary life, he continues to regard even his most fallible characters with amused affection (Bernard Bertrand, for example, may be a "complete ass," yet he is not entirely irredeemable) without allowing his readers the conventionally novelistic comfort of identification with the virtuous and nice.

Key Questions

Immortality continues, in heightened fashion, many of the philosophical questions posed in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, and may usefully be discussed in conjunction with that novel.

In addition, some of Kundera's signature tropes here — immortality, the culture of spectacle, sentimental man — may well be approached in general, as sweeping critiques of contemporary cultural manifestations as well as metaphors within this particular text.

1. To what extent is Kundera's voice still that of an "exile"? Despite his protestations to the contrary, is classifying him as a "dissident" writer a useful conceptual move?

2. Identify and discuss some recent instances of the 11th Commandment, as perceived in the popular media. To what extent is Kundera's analysis of the power of media probing reflective of current conditions, and to what extent is that analysis inadequate to explain the phenomenon?

3. Is "imagology" a useful concept?

Why does no analogous term exist in common language?

4. What is the ultimate effect of Kundera's shifting, sometimes fragmentary style? Does it augment or incapacitate his philosophical meditations?

5. Offer a definition of "immortality" as illustrated by the novel. How is it related to death, fame, eroticism, art, history, memory, the construction of self and of culture?

6. What precisely is the function of Professor Avenarius in this novel?

Does he function as characterological mediation between the conventional characters, such as Laura and Bernard, and the odd character named Kundera?

7. Why does Agnes die in the way that she does, and what is the significance of how her death is "caused"?

Literary Precedents

One can see the already acknowledged influence of Cervantes, Diderot, and Sterne (whose Tristram Shandy [1759-1767], surely anticipates some of the technical departures here.) The presence of Kafka, as literary innovator, and as comic genius (a reading of Kafka which may only now, with the opening of Prague, be possible) stands as well in the line of direct influence.

Most of all, Kundera's own The Unbearable Lightness of Being surely "precedes" Immortality in an important way, and perhaps should be read in conjunction with it, in that questions common to both texts will thereby stand in clearer relief.

Related Titles

In 1988 Grove Press published Kundera's The Art of the Novel, a translation of L'Art du roman, originally published in 1986 (and not to be confused with his 1960 study on Vancura of the same title). The volume collects seven pieces which comprise, according to Kundera, "a practitioner's confession" of the idea of the novel inherent in his own works.

Notable among these are "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes," important for a full understanding of Cervantes's influence on Kundera's theory of the novel; "Somewhere Behind," a brilliant and suggestive essay on Kafka; and "Sixty-three Words," a dictionary of important terms in his fictions and aesthetics of the novel. Taken together, these essays and their companions reveal The Art of the Novel to be one of the most perceptive, interesting and lively theoretical statements on the medium within memory.

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