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Memory Mixed with Desire:
A preliminary study of Philosophy and Literature
in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Milan Kundera

By

Robert Spinelli

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ABSTRACT

Memory Mixed with Desire: A preliminary study of Philosophy and Literature in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Milan Kundera

Robert Spinelli
Brock University, Department of Philosophy

This thesis studies intertextuality in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Milan Kundera through the primary themes of memory and forgetting. The thesis starts with two introductory chapters that delineate memory according to Nietzsche and Kundera respectively. From here, I move into a discussion of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* as an example of the type of forgetting that Nietzsche sees as a cure for the overabundance of memory that has led to Christian morality. Next, I explore the Kunderan concept of kitsch as the polar opposite of what Nietzsche has sought in his philosophy, finishing the chapter by tying the two thinkers together in a Kunderan critique of Nietzsche. The thesis ends with a chapter devoted to the Eternal Return beginning with an exegesis of Nietzsche's idea and ending with a similar exegesis of Kundera's treatment of this thought. What I suggest in this chapter is that the Eternal Return might itself be a form of kitsch even in its attempt to revalue existence.

List of Abbreviations

NIETZSCHE

AC	<i>The Antichrist</i>
BGE	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>
D	<i>Daybreak</i>
EH	<i>Ecce Homo</i>
GM	<i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i>
GS	<i>The Gay Science</i>
HAH	<i>Human, All Too Human</i>
TI	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i>
UH	'On The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,' in <i>Untimely Meditations</i>
Z	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>

KUNDERA

AON	<i>The Art of the Novel</i>
BLF	<i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i>
IMM	<i>Immortality</i>
TB	<i>Testaments Betrayed</i>
ULB	<i>The Unbearable Lightness of Being</i>

Introduction

It is 1971, and Mirek says that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.¹

Mirek, the primary character from the first section of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, offers the view that the relationship between memory and forgetting is one of power. This is not only a description of the tension existing in the binary pair of memory/forgetting but, for Mirek, it is a struggle that he is involved in on an existential level. When we meet him, Mirek is a ghost, his existence blotted out by the Communist regime upon their 1945 invasion of Czechoslovakia. As an intellectual, Mirek opposed the takeover of his nation and was, along with half a million others, systematically erased from the official memory of the country. The political realm of imposed forgetting stands in direct correlation to a personal vendetta of erasure that Mirek is in the process of undertaking in his personal life. Mirek is on a mission to reclaim love letters from a former lover of his in order to destroy them, thereby completing the airbrushing of his life that he began by breaking up with her twenty five years beforehand. Kundera, ever present in the voice of the narrator, directly informs the reader that Mirek is as much an author of his own history as the Communist Party is on a grander scale.² This willed act of creative forgetting serves as a

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Penguin Books, 1980.), p. 3.

² *Ibid*, p. 22.

proper announcement of the arrival of the second figure in this thesis: Friedrich Nietzsche.

I call Mirek's desire to revise his past love life an act of creative forgetting because it is an instance where he actively takes possession of his own will in order to reshape a part of his life of which he is ashamed. Mirek is said to have the same attitude toward his life that a sculptor has toward his sculpture. Up until the moment when the sculpture is finished the artist has full power to revise the work as desired; one who maintains the same attitude toward their life would see it as something never finished until death makes further revision impossible. As one of these people, Mirek feels that it is his right to make revisions where desirable. In ridding himself of all concrete memory of his shameful event, Mirek strives to create a space in which his happiness can thrive. A cynical interpretation of this act might state that, in forcing the destruction of memory, Mirek is behaving inauthentically toward his actual, lived past. Nietzsche offers us another image: one who is unable to forget would be forced to exist in a constant stream of becoming. With all possible footholds shifting nonstop, a person in this dilemma might lose sight of what it is to be oneself.³ Mirek's aesthetic approach to his existence is one of many examples of parallel and overlap between the ideas expressed in the corpuses of Milan Kundera and Friedrich Nietzsche.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: University Press, 1997.), p. 62.

Since the publication of Milan Kundera's 1984 novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which confronts Nietzsche's doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence of the same in its opening pages, much ink has been spilled in exploring the links explicitly stated therein. Previous examinations of these thematic concerns have focused on the existence of the Eternal Recurrence as a moral imperative with direct political repercussions in the novel, or have discussed Nietzsche only so far as to lend Kundera's thought a little more viability, without exploring the connections in depth.⁴ Still others draw out the nuances that can be discovered in a study of the Eternal Recurrence such as Kundera undertakes; however, the vast majority of literature done on the pairing of Nietzsche and Kundera reduces discussion of Nietzsche's influence to minor passages in works whose primary project is one of literary analysis and critique.⁵ I have always felt that, in downplaying the Nietzschean presence in these works, we are losing a particular quality of thought woven into Kundera's novels. This is not to denigrate the originality of the ideas to be discovered in Kundera's novels; rather, it is a way of fostering a greater appreciation for the genesis of these philosophical themes, which both pays tribute to, and, I will argue, offers an implicit critique of ideas whose consequences are not fully explored by Nietzsche.

This thesis will explore the philosophical issues raised by the themes of memory and forgetting in the works of two different figures writing almost a

⁴ Erik Parens, "Kundera, Nietzsche, and Politics: On The Questions of Eternal Return and Responsibility," *Philosophy Today* (1993): 285.

⁵ Two of these, by Maria Nemcova Banerjee and Eva Le Grand will be used later in the thesis.

century apart: one, a philosopher, the other, a novelist. For Friedrich Nietzsche, memory plays a negative role in the development of his philosophy: socially, an overabundance of memory gives rise to a false sense of responsibility through the creation of a bad conscience that instills a slave morality into human reality. Ontologically, the text of *Zarathustra* reveals the negative attitude taken toward our collective and individual pasts as revelatory of the spirit of revenge. Of course, for Nietzsche, both facets of this theme are interwoven in his philosophy and, therefore, provide an excellent doorway into the greater totality of his thought. Memory, forgetting, and their relationship to the larger themes of time and finitude will mark the path that I follow through several of Nietzsche's works over the course of this thesis. Similarly, these themes will be followed through several of Kundera's most important works of fiction. It will be shown that Kundera's thought acts as a counterpoint to Nietzsche's philosophy; at some points following alongside Nietzsche's thought and, at others, diverging sharply to different conclusions. This thesis will begin with an explicit treatment of the themes mentioned above, seeking to perform an exegesis of their appearance in the work of both thinkers to be discussed here. Once this has been accomplished, it is my wish to allow the specific problems of memory and forgetting to retreat somewhat into the distance in favor of addressing the more pressing issues that they raise for both Nietzsche and Kundera. As mentioned above, it is my feeling that these themes should be treated as doorways into larger arenas of thought and it is my intention to treat them as such in this thesis. Additionally, treating

these threads as shared themes seems an appropriate and preferable method of approaching two thinkers whose thought is anything but systematic: Nietzsche has always been notorious for refusing to blatantly organize his thought into anything resembling a finished system and Kundera, as a novelist, does not set forth his ideas systematically, but lets them appear through the characters he creates. It is with this thought in mind that I want to explain a bit further the validity of bringing these two thinkers together.

On Convergence

At first glance, to bring together a novelist and a philosopher in order to place them into contrapuntal dialogue together might seem sheer folly. Philosophers, especially one such as Nietzsche, deal with specifically intellectual topics while novels tell mere stories whose ability to reveal truths lies in dispute considering their very existence as works of fiction. As such, philosophy is given deferential treatment in that it is said to have the ability to proclaim truths while fiction remains, by definition, unable to do the same. It is this common way of thinking that Kundera's fiction actively seeks to undermine. Indeed, in his books of essays on the novel and in his own writing, Kundera espouses an entire philosophy of fiction that not only clarifies his own view of what the novel is and what it accomplishes, but reveals an entire history of novelistic exploration that runs parallel to the history of philosophy. Taking Heidegger's claim that

philosophy has forgotten being as his starting point, Kundera characterizes the exploration of this forgotten being as the novel's domain:

Indeed, all of the great existential themes Heidegger analyzes in *Being and Time*—considering them to have been neglected by all earlier European philosophy—had been unveiled, displayed, illuminated by four centuries of the novel (four centuries of European reincarnation of the novel). In its own way, through its own logic, the novel discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one: with Cervantes and his contemporaries, it inquires into the nature of adventure; with Richardson, it begins to examine “what happens inside,” to unmask the secret life of the feelings; with Balzac, it discovers man's rootedness in history; with Flaubert, it explores the *terra* previously *incognita* of the everyday; with Tolstoy, it focuses on the intrusion of the irrational in human behavior and decisions. It probes time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examines the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present actions.⁶

And from later in the same book:

The novel dealt with the unconscious before Freud, the class struggle before Marx, it practiced phenomenology (the investigation of the essence of human situations) before the phenomenologists. What superb “phenomenological descriptions” in Proust, who never even knew a phenomenologist!⁷

For Kundera, who considers the novel to exist as a counter exploration to that undertaken by philosophy, ‘the sole *raison d'être* of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover.’⁸ In his conception of the novel, Kundera accepts as a basic condition of existence what Nietzsche saw as the necessary starting point for any future philosophy—the death of God. As such, the world

⁶ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 5.

that the novel explores is a world of ambiguity where any absolute truth is splintered into man made perspectival truths. In Kundera's terms, the novel approaches these shifting perspectives with the 'wisdom of uncertainty,'⁹ choosing not to balk at the ambiguity it finds, but to examine it nonetheless; however, it is the approach that the Kunderan novel takes toward questions that are typically considered to be philosophical that differentiates it from philosophy proper. In various interviews Kundera has tried to avoid the characterization of his fiction as philosophical, insisting that 'philosophy develops its thought in an abstract realm, without characters, without situations.'¹⁰ It is through the usage of characters, or 'imaginary selves,' obscuring the author's explorations that the novel is able to enter into an open inquiry of existence that always remains within situation and does not impose false claims to objectivity or absolutes. Where the later Heidegger views poetry as an artistic exploration of human existence, Kundera affords the novel similar status. Heidegger's later works explore the ontological import of poetry, an idea that is argued against in many of Kundera's novels¹¹; however, Kundera believes that the novel allows for a full phenomenological examination of human reality:

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 29.

¹¹ On Heidegger: "If European philosophy could not think out man's life, think out his "concrete metaphysics," then it is the novel that is fated finally to take over this vacant terrain where nothing could ever replace it (existential philosophy has confirmed this by a negative proof; for the analysis of existence cannot become a system; existence cannot be systematized, and Heidegger, a poetry lover, was wrong to disregard the history of the novel, for it contains the greatest treasury of existential wisdom)." Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 165.

A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable of. Novelists draw up *the map of existence* by discovering this or that human possibility. But again, to exist means: "being-in-the-world." Thus *both* the character *and* his world must be understood as *possibilities*.¹²

Kundera's novels are written in order to prevent the Heideggerian forgetting of being from becoming manifest; however, this purpose is challenged in the postmodern age. The fourth chapter of this thesis will explore in more detail the forces that Kundera seeks to oppose and explore through his work. It is enough to say for now that these novels are written in an attempt to stem the tide of reduction that Kundera feels has come about and trapped human reality in a purely social existence, forgetting about the deeper ontological existence that has been lost in a world of signifiers without referents. For this reason, Kundera characterizes the spirit of the novel as something that must exist in contrast with the spirit of our time.¹³ Novelistic thinkers must always be untimely.

A Fugue for Spiders

It is plain to see that Kundera views his writing as continuing serious, philosophical inquiry in a world that largely abhors this very thinking. I have illustrated, in brief, his indebtedness as well as his opposition to Heidegger;¹⁴ however, I have not yet mentioned Kundera's connection to the figure to whom,

¹² *Ibid*, p. 42.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹⁴ A future study focusing on Heidegger's connection to Kundera may prove to be quite fruitful.

arguably, he pays the most homage throughout his work – Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's philosophy is not only the crux of Kundera's most famous novel, but he is the only philosopher to have an entire essay devoted to him in Kundera's two works of nonfiction. Let us turn to this essay, then, in order to gather a preliminary understanding of Kundera's reasons for so deeply incorporating Nietzsche's philosophy into his own work. The second of these two books, *Testaments Betrayed*, contains a thirty page essay called "Works and Spiders," which connects the role of Nietzsche's writing in the history of philosophy with the role of Thomas Mann and Robert Musil in the history of the novel. Kundera begins his essay with a quote from *The Gay Science*:

Elsewhere Nietzsche writes that the philosopher "must not, through some false arrangement of deduction and dialectic, falsify the things and the ideas he arrived at by another route...We should neither conceal nor corrupt the actual way our thoughts come to us. The most profound and inexhaustible books will surely always have something of the aphoristic, abrupt quality of Pascal's *Pensées*."¹⁵

What Kundera finds to be so admirable in the above quote is Nietzsche's dedication to preserving the purest form of the thought that has come. Taking its inspiration from an image used throughout Nietzsche's corpus, at the heart of Kundera's essay is a deep respect for Nietzsche's refusal to dispense with the purity of his thought in favor of systematizing his entire philosophy. Throughout Nietzsche's philosophy, the spider is used to represent thinkers known for their

¹⁵ Nietzsche, quoted in Kundera, *TB*, p. 150.

elaborate systems such as Spinoza (*TI* "Skirmishes" 23) and Kant (*A* 11), and is often used to describe Christianity and its God (e.g. *UH* 9, *GM* III, 9) as well. Of course, *Zarathustra* is ripe with references to spiders, especially the tarantula, and a spider is included in several descriptions of the Eternal Return, which is arguably the most important of Nietzsche's central notions and the theme that Kundera will treat most extensively in his own novels. Most relevant to this thesis, however, is a passage that Alan D. Schrift¹⁶ points to that warns against works of art, especially musical works, that are tied too closely to historical moments:

-But is it not evident that these spheres of ideas and feelings—here seemingly still repressed by Wagner himself and by his adherents—have long since regained the upper hand, and that this late musical protest against them sounds mostly into ears that prefer to hear other and antithetical tones? So that this wonderful and elevated art will one day quite suddenly become incomprehensible and covered in forgetfulness and cobwebs.¹⁷

A Kunderan reading of this passage would hone in on Nietzsche's use of musical terminology and the possibility of art being lost in a world dominated by the forgetting of being. Indeed, the musicality of Nietzsche's thought is one of the major themes of Kundera's essay. Having studied music intensively early in his life, Kundera conceives of his own novelistic writing in musicological terms and he devotes several pages of the essay to speculations on the form of the fugue

¹⁶ Alan D. Schrift, "Arachnophobe or Arachnophile? Nietzsche and His Spiders," in *A Nietzschean Bestiary: Becoming Animal Beyond Docile and Brutal*, eds. Christa Davis Acampora & Ralph R. Acampora (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 61-70.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: University Press, 1996.), Volume II, § 171.

wherein 'a single theme sets off a chain of melodies in counterpoint, a stream that over its long course keeps the same character, the same rhythmic pulse, a single entity.'¹⁸ In the novels of Mann and Musil, Kundera finds the entering of theme as an important literary methodology in which everything becomes opened for existential questioning. Mann takes the first step in this direction by using specific fields of knowledge (sociology, political science, etc.) to illuminate the important themes of the novel; however, for Kundera, Mann's use of specific intellectual data is too diverting from what is essential to the novel itself.¹⁹ It is only with Musil, who analyzes human situations directly, focusing on the foreground of human reality instead of spending much time on background information, that the novel truly becomes phenomenological. Kundera owes his own ability to write novels based around themes to these two literary figures; the musical strategies that Kundera employs allow him 'to stay in direct, uninterrupted contact with some existential questions that fascinate me and that this novel in variation form explores from multiple angles in sequence.'²⁰ It is a similar quality of thought that Kundera sees in Nietzsche's philosophy. Kundera sees in Nietzsche's works a thinker 'always pursuing, developing, elaborating, affirming, refining the same compositional archetype.'²¹ Nietzsche's books are

¹⁸ TB, p. 152.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 165.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 168. For more on Kundera's novels of variation, see the discussion on *The Book of Laughter & Forgetting* below as well as Eva Le Grand's book, which concentrates more closely on the composition of Kundera's works, or, more importantly, Kundera on Kundera in *The Art of the Novel*.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 169.

arranged musically around themes which are revealed in their titles; further themes are developed either through titles, such as in *Beyond Good & Evil* (henceforth *BGE*), *Twilight of the Idols* (henceforth *TI*), and *Genealogy of Morals* (henceforth *GM*) or else are numbered. In Kundera's own words, 'this makes for a composition that is at once maximally articulated (divided into many fairly autonomous units) and maximally unified (the same themes constantly recur).'²² As other Nietzsche scholars have suggested, Kundera intimates that, because of the style of Nietzsche's composition, it is impossible to separate Nietzsche's thought from its means of expression; however, he does not mean to suggest, with Derrida, that it is impossible to derive truth from Nietzsche's philosophy. Rather, Nietzsche's complex style helps to bring philosophy closer to the wisdom of the novel.

Kundera characterizes Nietzsche's thought as experimental, meaning that 'his first impulse is to break up whatever is rigid, to undermine commonly accepted systems, to open rifts for venturing into the unknown; the philosopher of the future will be an *experimenter*, Nietzsche said; free to go off in various directions that could, conceivably, come into conflict.'²³ Nietzsche's experimental thought broadens the themes that are open for philosophy to explore; instead of focusing on specific fields such as epistemology or aesthetics, Kundera sees the opening up of human existence to philosophical investigation in a way that only

²² *Ibid*, p. 170.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 174.

the novel had explored hitherto. In attempting to understand Nietzsche's thought, however, academics have done it a disservice in their attempts at reducing its themes into something systematic:

Is there still room in their systematized Nietzsche for his thoughts on women, on the Germans, on Europe, on Bizet, on Goethe, on Victor Hugo-style kitsch, on Aristophanes, on lightness of style, on boredom, on play, on translation, on the spirit of obedience, on possession of the other and on all the psychological forms of such possession, on the savants and their mental limitations, on the *Schauspieler*, actors on history's stage—is there still room for a thousand psychological observations that can be found nowhere else, except perhaps in a few rare novelists?²⁴

Kundera's novel and Nietzsche's philosophy both seek to keep questions in play, to inspire thought instead of embalming it in concrete form. It is this distinction that these two thinkers share; to what extent they are successful, and whether or not success at such a task is possible, will be explored in what follows.

Some Notes on What Has Past

Although there is a vast literature devoted to all aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy, the same cannot be said of Kundera and his relationship to philosophical thought. In conducting my research for this thesis I have come across several excellent books that cover various aspects of Kundera's literature: his musicological theory of writing, his status as an émigré and socio-political commentator, his relationship to Communism, as well as his thoughts on poetry

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 176.

and kitsch.²⁵ In addition to works of literary criticism there are numerous journal articles on Kundera, many of which discuss his works as postmodernist fiction, or at least novels that describe a postmodern world. There are collections of interviews and essays devoted to Kundera's writings; however, none of these take the time to examine the philosophical import of the novels. One text, written by Alan White, that mentions Kundera's name alongside Nietzsche's in an extended study wherein Kundera's implicit criticisms of Nietzsche's thinking are actually so much as mentioned. As discussed above, the only time that Nietzsche and Kundera really come into contact is during discussions of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. As such, it would be foolish for me to write this thesis without addressing some of White's research and differentiating my own views from his. White, in his *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth*, explores Kundera's views on kitsch and the image of the circle as it relates to Nietzsche in great detail. Despite the dearth of material, it is heartening to see some serious treatment of the interconnections between Nietzsche and Kundera. Perhaps most exciting for those interested in new work being done on the meeting of these two figures is a book being written by Jason Wirth called *Tamara on the Border: Milan Kundera and Philosophy*, which will be the first full length work devoted to Kundera as a philosophical thinker, and that will deal, at least in part, with the Nietzschean influence on his writing while developing considerations on the proximity between literature and

²⁵ I make reference to these books throughout the portions of this thesis devoted to Kundera and will not call each by name in the introduction for that reason.

philosophy.²⁶ Whatever help my own thesis might offer in examining this relationship, I am excited to have some part in what appears to be a growing area of interest.

I have broken down my thesis into five chapters: Chapter One will begin with an exegesis of the role of memory as it is portrayed through a few of Nietzsche's works. I will lay out this faculty as a pathological trait in Nietzsche's corpus that has its natural and cultural cure in the opposing faculty of forgetting. Chapter Two will then detour into memory as it appears in Kundera's writing. For Kundera, memory will prove to have quite a different air about it than in Nietzsche. Instead of being a descending trait, Kundera's memory acts as a cure for a world in which the forgetting of being is prolific to the point where any effective means of preservation may be impossible. Chapter Three returns us to the Nietzschean thread in my thesis as it begins to tackle one of Nietzsche's major themes, that of the *Übermensch*. In order to examine Nietzsche's critique of civilization more deeply, I will discuss Nietzsche's views on Darwin's evolutionary theory as a means of differentiating his desire to create new values through creative forgetting from Kundera's desire to preserve a vanishing world through artistic memory. This will open the way to a critique of Nietzsche's immanent idealism in a later chapter. Chapter Four will introduce us to Kundera's most important theme, the concept of kitsch. After examining two of

²⁶ Wirth's book is still forthcoming. All information revealed here has been gathered from private correspondences with the author.

his novels in order to flesh out this concept a bit, I will then attempt to bring Nietzsche and Kundera into contact for the first time in the paper by investigating kitsch's application to Nietzsche's philosophy as expressed in White's book. The implications that will come out will be explored further in the next chapter. Chapter Five will be devoted entirely to the main point of convergence that these two thinkers share: the Eternal Return. The first half of the chapter will focus on examining some of the secondary literature on Nietzsche in order to gain an understanding of exactly what return signifies and how it should be conceptualized. The remainder of the chapter will be devoted to Kundera's literary investigation of the idea and the conclusions that his novel reveals about Nietzsche's philosophizing.

Before I abandon this lengthy introduction in favor of beginning the main body of the thesis, a note on my treatment of Nietzsche's texts: throughout the thesis I will attempt to make reference only to Nietzsche's published works. For reasons covered extensively in Bernd Magnus' essay in the collection *Reading Nietzsche* I have sought to examine only those thoughts deemed important enough by Nietzsche for publication. While I realize that this choice might cut me off from fruitful material, particularly as relates to the Eternal Return, I feel that there is enough evidence in the published works to make the kind of arguments that I wish to offer. My secondary reasons for choosing such a path will be explored in the conclusion to this work.

I

The Tyranny of Memory

Many a man fails to become a thinker only because his memory is too good.²⁷

Introduction

Nietzsche's enigmatic quote directly places negative connotations on the overemphasized human ability to remember the past. For Nietzsche, the aspect of memory that disables a human's ability to become a thinker is its reliance upon tradition. We are raised within cultures, brought up by parents who have themselves been educated by their culture, and so on *ad infinitum*. Necessarily, we live and grow within longstanding systems of thought, soaking up the intellectual and empirical histories that we are taught. A thinker buried beneath the rubble of traditional methodologies and systems will never evolve a proper intellectual conscience, and ultimately will not be able to implement their will to power in the Nietzschean project of self-overcoming. Characterized as a burden to thinking, memory is not a property that is beneficial to possess *in extremis*. It is this idea of memory as a weight, as something not entirely conducive to life that will serve as an important property for both Nietzsche and Kundera. This chapter will seek to diagnose an overeducated memory as something that, while not conducive to life, is a necessary pathology to overcome on the way to achieving the Nietzschean ideal.

²⁷ Nietzsche, *HAH*, Volume II, § 122.

I will attempt to trace the evolution of the role that memory plays through the reading of three texts spanning the three distinctly different periods of Nietzsche's thought. In examining one of the *Untimely Meditations*, we will uncover the popular concepts of history that Nietzsche will attempt to cure.²⁸ From there, the discussion proceeds into a consideration of the role that a mimetic education plays in maintaining this historical conception, and will offer glimmers of a way out of this situation.²⁹ The will to remember will then be exposed in its most notorious manifestation with a consideration of memory and slave morality. Ultimately, we should be able to see how important the overcoming of memory is to Nietzsche's project of a revaluation of values. Having posed the problem, then, I will leave it to a later chapter to reveal the steps toward the cultivation of a cure.

The Chains of Remembrance

When Nietzsche wrote his 1873 essay, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," he was reacting to a concept of history that was not only temporal, but 'ontological-existential'³⁰, in nature. Notions of historicism then in vogue were centered on the idea that man was a historical composite of all of his

²⁸ Although the antidote to this illness, forgetting, will be mentioned in several places below, any further analysis of the idea will be put off for another chapter. The purpose of this chapter is merely to lay down the problem and to hint at what is to come. Therefore, what seems superficial now is only so because its time has not yet arrived.

²⁹ A discussion of the role of memory in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* will be left out of this chapter in favor of examining the treatment that this theme gets in Nietzsche's non-poetic works and will be returned to in a later chapter that focuses on self-overcoming.

³⁰ To borrow a Heideggerian term.

prior experience. By placing the human race and, by extension, the individual, into a linear, causal stream of time it becomes inevitable for mankind to feel a sense of connection, of heritage to the vast totality of what has come before;³¹ hence the idea of the life story, the importance of biography and the notion of a national identity. Knowledge of the past—both individual and collective—was regarded as being of utmost importance. Furthermore, the assumption went that the more one knows about one's past, the healthier that person's psychological state might be. The importance of the ability to think historically cannot be overstated. Nineteenth century intellectual history begins in the wake of the French Revolution. Contract theorists and philosophers like Hegel historicized both people and peoples in their anthropocentric attempts at determining a singular human nature. For the first time it became possible not only to think about the past, but to think historically with a clear view of the various contingencies that must exist for anything to occur at all. Michel Foucault tells us that it is exactly this characteristic of historical study that Nietzsche would later combat with his genealogical method:

The historian's history finds its support outside of time and claims to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity. This is only possible, however, because of its belief in eternal truth, the immortality of the soul, and the nature of consciousness as always identical to itself.³²

³¹ F.R. Ankersmit, "The Sublime Dissociation of the Past: Or How to Be(Come) What One Is No Longer" in *History and Theory* (2001): 297.

³² Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1994), p. 379.

Although history bears the capability of understanding the world as existing within the flow of history, as something ever becoming, Foucault insists that the stability inspired by the historical sense becomes falsified once historians become genealogists. Nietzsche's untimely essay does not yet assume this methodology; however, he still manages a stunning critique of the historians of his time.

Ankersmit stresses that the practical importance of having knowledge of the past resides in the notion of the past as the origin of all 'meaningful and responsible action.'³³ Nineteenth-century historicists, with their related interest in politics, hereby present a vision of memory as something to be prized in its ability to cohere groups simultaneously with its power to serve as a balm for the individual. This active cultural memory is a noble concept that allows a wellspring of optimistic progress to endure out of the mire of the past through the hope that a simple, conditioned act of continuous remembrance will lead to progressive action. Thus, the purpose of memory is twofold: it grants the individual the ability to lead a meaningful life³⁴ and it allows for the possible betterment of the future through education of our collective past.³⁵ However, this progress smells of something abstractly universal that cannot truly be entered into with a sense of abandon. It is the matter of willfully subsuming the importance of one's life to the vague emptiness of the future that is problematic

³³ Ankersmit, p. 297.

³⁴ Nietzsche sees this as well: 'The feeling antithetical to this, the contentment of the tree in its roots, the happiness of knowing that one is not wholly accidental and arbitrary but grown out of a past as its heir, flower and fruit, and that one's existence is thus excused and, indeed, justified – it is this which is today usually designated as the real sense of history.' *UH* § 3.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 297.

in a transcendental historical theory. History, while it fills us as a mould, remains an impersonal sculptor whose whims are ever-changing and whose project is never finished. Collective futurity bears the possibility of abstracting the individual into an amorphous mass of mnemonic dust. Nietzsche's critical eye will reveal this significant flaw in the historical tradition.

The attack on historicism that Nietzsche perpetrates is not embarked upon with the directive of complete annihilation of the existing idea. Rather, Nietzsche's critique is an early step on the path of his primary project of revaluation, which involves illuminating some of the most detrimental affects of the historical outlook while salvaging and reforming others.³⁶ As one of the themes that will prove to be so important in his later works, Nietzsche immediately characterizes the overabundance of historicity as a burden chaining the individual to a destiny of constant backward gazing. Although he does not use the exact terminology, what Nietzsche describes as one of the results of this burden is a sense of nostalgia for a time before history became such a weight: "This is why it affects him [the backward looking individual] like a vision of a lost paradise to see the herds grazing or, in closer proximity to him, a child which, having as yet nothing of the past to shake off, plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future."³⁷ The type of nostalgia shown here is one that can only be understood from the perspective of a mature adult: it is a

³⁶ This tendency of Nietzsche's to confront and assimilate ideas that he finds worthy of not passing by will exhibit itself once again when we consider his relationship to Darwin's dangerous thinking.

³⁷ *UH* § 1.

longing for the imagined state in which an animal³⁸ may exist, or, more specifically to Nietzsche's imagery, a yearning for the *tabula rasa* of childhood. The unburdened child mentioned in the quote above serves as Nietzsche's primary exemplar of the necessary ingredient that historicity lacks: forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is the key that can unlock the chains of memory and allow for a measure of freedom to be attained from the burdensome past. We will go more in depth into the beneficial role that forgetting plays in a later chapter of this thesis, but for now it should suffice merely to hint at its connection with the image of childhood, whose role will be discussed later in a consideration of the section "The Three Metamorphoses" in *Zarathustra*.

Nietzsche seeks to attain an understanding of the individual as more than a historical subject. The individual that Nietzsche describes is one of self-directed becoming and futurity. While it may have seemed to the historicists of the time a desirable thing to be immersed in a continuous historical stream that will persist even after we are gone, Nietzsche draws out the devaluing implications of such a view. A man who did not possess the power of forgetting would succumb to a Heraclitean world of constant becoming; instead of remaining firmly grounded upon a mnemonic foundation, the individual finds himself swept away from any

³⁸ The animal that Nietzsche speaks of here only implicitly is earlier described as living happily in the present, appearing at every instant wholly as what it is. Animals who can live unhistorically serve as constant reminders of man's condition as 'an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one.' *UH* § 1. That Nietzsche discusses the unhistorical animal in a positive light here offers a hint toward the type of animality that he would like to see cultivated in the future. We will return to this idea later.

sense of his own being.³⁹ Indeed, the immersion in this vortex of history would result in a completely passive state wherein the individual succumbs to the forces acting upon him. The unhistorical character of forgetting, conversely, actively comports one toward the future—not just a future inherited from the past, but a future in which one can creatively⁴⁰ serve as a figure with its own sense of agency. We are gifted with a new sense of progress, again not as something immutably inevitable, but as something that can be joined into, shaped and experienced as a participant instead of a passive object. This rebirth of history can be seen as a grand march whose participants “glance behind them only so that, from the process so far, they can learn to understand the present and to desire the future more vehemently...”⁴¹ Those who join this progression look backward only as preparation for a leap forward. Indeed, the grand march of history is affirmed even, perhaps most especially, during times of revolution where old political systems, old tyrannies are uprooted only to be replaced by new ones. Nietzsche’s liberation of the individual from his historical memory is dramatic, allowing for the individual to dwell in a new conception of culture as a living entity; however, it will be some time until Nietzsche draws out the broader implications of forgetting on a deeper ontological-existential level. All we have done thus far is perform a necessarily superficial exegesis of the ingredient that

³⁹ UH § 1.

⁴⁰ This is a key point that will come out more in the discussion of *Human, All Too Human* below. Nietzsche addresses the stifling results of historicism here: ‘For it knows only how to *preserve* life, not how to engender it; it always undervalues that which is becoming because it has no instinct for divining it—as monumental history, for example, has.’ UH § 3.

⁴¹ UH § 1.

Nietzsche feels has been left out of the methodologies of historians, that being the act of forgetting. It remains to be seen what measure of value Nietzsche will propose as a means of promoting future orientation instead of placing all importance in the past. In order to shift our focus now to the possible uses of history for life I want to draw upon one of Nietzsche's middle period works, *Human, All Too Human*.

Education & Repetition

In examining this later text we are presented with a slightly more mature Nietzsche expressing ideas that clearly stem from his early essays, while simultaneously evolving into a coherence with the themes of repetition, aestheticism of the self, and becoming that so characterize his more famous works. Much of the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* (henceforth HAH) is concerned with discussions of civilization and man's existence as a civilized being. It is important to mark the distinction that Nietzsche draws between civilization and culture. Civilization, with its focus on the capacity for memory that separates humans from forgetful animals is the cause of an error that places humans in a false order of rank as superior beings.⁴² As we shall see below, the most insidious way in which civilization has tamed the forgetful animal is through the inculcation of morality; however, for now we are to focus on the educational methods that have helped to make humans calculable. A positive

⁴² HAH, Volume I, § 519.

form of culture, conversely, will provide fruitful grounds for the cultivation of superior beings. The beneficial aspects of culture will be discussed in a later chapter. Nietzsche draws out a picture of memory as educator which further reveals its passive, reflective nature. We learn by rote and it is this habitual means of sublimation that engenders fear of the new, fear of those who may be willfully forgetful individuals on the cusp of newness.⁴³ It is this uncreative, stultifying act that allows others to exist as something comprehensible that we need not turn away from. This is the crucial point where it becomes obvious as to how the possession of a good memory can prevent someone from becoming a thinker. Here, also, is where Nietzsche's theme of aestheticism ties into the problem of memory.

Historical studies cultivate the ability for this painting...it is in this ability rapidly to reconstruct such systems of ideas and sensations on any given occasion...that the historical sense consists.⁴⁴

History has a plethora of uses, and Nietzsche is not blind to the value of memory in endowing the individual with the ability to regurgitate ideas on command. Repetition is the death of the soul: if our education is to result in the creation of masses aping the knowledge of what has come before, there is no chance of this historical training allowing room for future development.⁴⁵ Our thorough knowledge of history can only be useful insofar as it provokes the act

⁴³ See HAH, Volume I, § 228.

⁴⁴ HAH, Volume I, § 274.

⁴⁵ Fiona Hughes, "Forgetful All Too Forgetful: Nietzsche and the Question of Measure" in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*. October 1998: 255.

of moving beyond what we have been taught.⁴⁶ However, in order for any creation to take place it is necessary for the thinker to possess the aesthetic spirit that will thrust their ideas into the future. Nietzsche acknowledges that artists who exist merely as mimetic thinkers can and do exist, but under limitations; these people can only become great improvisers, never reaching the same status as one who fashions strictly original artistic ideas.⁴⁷ The emphasis placed on originality in any type of creation cannot be overlooked. Someone who merely repeats what they are taught does not possess the necessary instinct that will enable them to overcome the limitations of their education. Indeed, they are no more than second rate actors:

Great actors have the happy delusion that the historical personages they play really felt as they do when they play them – but they are strongly in error: their power of imitation and divination, which they would dearly love to pretend is a capacity for clairvoyance, penetrates only sufficiently far to understand gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions and the superficial in general; that is to say, they catch the shadow of the soul of a great hero, statesman, warrior, man of ambition, jealousy or despair, they press close to the soul but not into the spirit of their object.⁴⁸

For Nietzsche, to be a good thinker is akin to being properly artistic.⁴⁹ Those who do not possess this talent are doomed to the worship and imitation of shadows.

⁴⁶ HAH, Volume I, § 292.

⁴⁷ HAH, Volume I, § 155.

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997), § 324.

⁴⁹ I will elaborate on this theme in a more thorough discussion of the character of the future philosopher in Nietzsche's work; however, for now, my description must necessarily remain superficial. The central task that I am concerned with at this moment is to provide an overview of the role that memory plays in Nietzsche's works and tease with a view of how this idea ties into Nietzsche's more studied themes.

We are presented with the vision of an individual who can synthesize the characteristics of thinking and creating, one who has looked back, appropriated their past, and is ready to leap forward into futurity.⁵⁰ At last, we have a concrete example of the methodology that must be instated for life to turn knowledge on its head and seek new avenues in which to grow. Thus far, we have seen several of the negative characteristics that memory has been given in Nietzsche's work: memory affects man's historical knowledge of himself on an ontological-existential level as a being who finds himself mired as a completely passive agent in a world of becoming. This passivity is deepened by our historical education, which has as its basis the activity of repetition, resulting in the cultivation of weakened minds and a contented animality. These are only signposts leading to the most widespread, horrific abuses that Nietzsche charges memory with—a notorious role in the creation and cultivation of a slave morality.

Memory As Master

Before beginning my discussion of one of Nietzsche's later works it is my wish to address a few possible questions that may arise when taking note of the leap between *HAH* and *GM*. Although the works in between these two texts (*GS*, *Z*, and *BGE*) are replete with references to memory and forgetting they deal more explicitly with the positive properties of forgetting. Elements of *GS* pertaining

⁵⁰ It will be suggested later that this formulation can be said to describe the *Übermensch*, one who has confronted and affirmed the challenge of the Eternal Return.

solely to the function of memory will be discussed in Chapter Three; *Zarathustra* will also be dealt with in more detail in the same chapter. In order for that chapter to cohere better with the thesis as a whole, I am purposely departing from chronological order here in favor of focusing on one of Nietzsche's important themes.

In the second essay of *GM*, Nietzsche turns his analysis of history toward examining the interconnections within the concepts of guilt and conscience. It is here that Nietzsche instates his primary usage of the genealogical method to examine properly the history of the forces behind traditional history—in this case, morality. Central to Nietzsche's notion of the slave morality, guilt and bad conscience exist as binding forces constricting us to traditional systems of measuring value through the creation of resentment, or repression, and bad conscience. We have been tamed through the inculcation of a moral sickness that has been continually strengthened over the course of history. This civilized taming of the forgetful animal takes on several forms in the *Genealogy*; however, we will focus here on the capacity for promise making that memory allows. As with many of Nietzsche's most important ideas, though, promise making is a trait with twofold value: it bears negative connotations when considered in relation to the herd and positive connotations when considered in relation to the *Übermensch*. The ability to make promises is used here to illustrate one of the

final results of our training in moral concepts.⁵¹ Promises instill a creditor/debtor relationship wherein the promisee is obligated to fulfill the promise made by not forgetting the action they have agreed to perform. Remembering the task at hand ensures that there will be no betrayal of the creditor/debtor relationship, whether explicit or implicit. To the extent that making and keeping a promise is a rare example of memory being used as an active faculty, this may seem to be a positive trait to possess. As we have seen above, memory has usually been characterized as a wholly passive trait, whose existence as such is demeaning to the human spirit. The *Genealogy* offers a glimpse of the memory of the will; however, Nietzsche wants to direct our attention to the process that has led to this promise-making capacity. In examining the way in which memory has been formed, we will be afforded the ability to fully understand its life restricting tendency.

How can one create a memory for the human animal? How can one impress something upon this partly obtuse, partly flighty mind, attuned only to the passing moment, in such a way that it will stay there? One can well believe that the answers and methods for solving this primeval problem were not precisely gentle; perhaps indeed there was nothing more fearful and uncanny in the whole prehistory of man than his *mnemotechnics*.⁵²

What the ability to make promises is evidential of is termed by Nietzsche as a morality of mores, through which an understanding of himself as a causal, social being has caused the human to conceive of his existence as something calculable

⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage, 1989), II, § 1.

⁵² GM, II, § 3.

and predictable, something that can look forward and ordain a sense of necessity to a future event.⁵³ Nietzsche goes on to show how this sense of responsibility has become so deeply ingrained into our cultural and, therefore, our personal memory that it has taken on an instinctual character. So deep is this sense of responsibility and its attendant feelings of power over one's fate, reliability and honor for one's peers, that its instinctual character is inscribed with the mark of conscience.⁵⁴

Here we have the development of bad conscience, that brand of a tamed animality that turns itself inward to devour its own stomach with nauseated resentment. It is 'the result of a forcible sundering from his animal past, as it were a leap and plunge into new surroundings and conditions of existence.'⁵⁵ Since the slavish animal characterized by bad conscience is no longer able to embrace its own instinctual nature, it projects everything in itself that it has denied into metaphysical ideals, into God.⁵⁶ As an abstraction of the creditor/debtor relationship mentioned above, humanity's relation to God assumes the same dialectic and manifests itself in worship, awe, and piety. These attitudes and their attendant rituals exist as poisoned instances of the memory of the will. Bad conscience's sense of responsibility, then, is dependent upon the possession of a good memory. Here is where we find the ability to characterize

⁵³ Recall the role that memory plays in burdening one with knowledge of one's past; thereby effecting future action. In the case of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche concerns himself with a memory based morality that instills in the individual an artificial sense of good and evil.

⁵⁴ GM, II, § 3.

⁵⁵ GM, II, § 16.

⁵⁶ GM, II, § 22.

memory as a tyrannical force, one that has ingrained a moral sense through asceticism and punishment.⁵⁷ Testament to this is the banality that something has been painfully 'burned into' our memory when it has the character of unforgettability. Nietzsche describes several historical methods of torture that serve the purpose of forcibly creating memories; in this case, memories that will help to tame the individual to social mores. In order for one to have a fully developed memory it cannot be a wholly passive quality, but one that is actively rekindled throughout time. Despite the positive character that is usually attributed to active forces in Nietzsche's philosophy; active memory remains negative as it inspires the creation of resentment.⁵⁸

With the aid of such images and procedures one finally remembers five or six "I will not's," in regard to which one had given one's *promise* so as to participate in the advantages of society – and it was indeed with the aid of this kind of memory that one at last came "to reason!"⁵⁹

The individual suffering from resentment acts out of feelings of guilt or fear of punishment, which, in turn, become directed either externally, as reactive forces against the punishers inflicting the torment, or internally, against the self.⁶⁰ Once punishment is fully appropriated as resentment it gives way to the ascetic ideal that calls 'evil' all that makes positive creation possible. To put it another way,

⁵⁷ For an action to truly be deemed responsible or conscientious, it must be self directed, and not simply a byproduct of conditioned reactions.

⁵⁸ Richard S. Findler, "Memory and Forgetfulness in Aristotle's Ethics: A Nietzschean Reading" in *New Nietzsche Studies*. Summer 1998; 2(3-4): 27.

⁵⁹ *GM*, II, § 3.

⁶⁰ Findler, p. 29.

misdirected mnemonic techniques lead to manifestations of the will to nothingness, while the future directed techniques, which we have yet to see, allow for overcoming and creation. Civilized memory, with its ability to affect not only the punished, but those who witness, firsthand or otherwise, the punishment enacted, constricts through habit and custom, breeding an obedient society whose memory encourages 'a will henceforth to go to work more cautiously, mistrustfully, secretly, in the insight that one is definitely too weak for many things.'⁶¹ Thus, we are presented with a different consequence of an overabundance of historicity. Nietzsche's genealogy has shown how the constant remembrance of things past relegates the individual to a slavish existence wherein they are hounded by what has already occurred.

Here we have the final ingredient necessary to paint a picture of the sort of humanity that Nietzsche struggles to undermine throughout his work. Unfortunately, the picture we are granted is pathological; it is a portrait of a race whose animality has been tamed through an overabundance of civilized memory and has been left in the throes of bad conscience. Moreover, the taming of the forgetful animal has allowed for humans to enjoy a false feeling of superiority over those creatures that are beneath them. As insurance of the subjugation of animality, civilization has imposed harsh laws leading to the creation of a bad conscience and ascetic ideals. The sickness of civilization requires a creature with opposing values to liberate those who can be liberated from its shackles.

⁶¹ *GM*, II, § 15.

Humanity's alienation from its own natural character is complete in the creation of and relationship with the Christian God. Existence in such a world can only lead to nihilism. Although morality has resulted in decadence, Nietzsche sees it as a necessary step in the overcoming of the nihilism that will be its creation.

The over-animal – The beast in us wants to be lied to; morality is an official lie told so that it shall not tear us to pieces. Without the errors that repose in the assumptions of morality man would have remained animal. As it is, he has taken himself for something higher and imposed sterner laws upon himself. That is why he feels a hatred for the grades that have remained closer to animality: which is the explanation of the contempt formerly felt for the slave as a non-man, as a thing.⁶²

Despite the fact that man's imposition of superiority over animals is based on error, it can be construed as a positive development since once this error is exposed it can lead the way to a new, more naturalistic conception of what it is to be human. This will be a being who has overcome the false bifurcation made between human and animal, not in order to despair at the great leveling that occurs from that overcoming, but to surpass all prior notions of humanity. What exactly this is we leave to another chapter.

Conclusion

Nietzsche presents us with a bleak portrait of our human capacity for memory. Although memory has admittedly permitted an ontological sense of security through its preservation of a continuous historical identity, this security

⁶² HAH, Volume I, § 40.

is diseased and cannot provide for the creative spirit necessary for a redemptive future to come about. Beginning with his analysis of the nineteenth century's overwrought sense of historicism we have seen how memory has cultivated a sense of passivity and stasis through repetitive educational techniques. Even more insidious is the role that punishment has played in forming a memory based morality intended to instill in humanity a withered, artificial sense of responsibility that has only succeeded in alienating humanity from its essential animality. Contrary to the sickness that memory's tyrannical rule has instilled, Nietzsche desires a new ideal that will bring about a 'great health.'⁶³ This figure will be able to correct the errors of an age ruled by slave morality and offer himself as a new ideal. Before we can go any further, however, it is time to introduce the second of the thinkers to be treated in this work, and offer a contrary viewpoint to that of Nietzsche.

⁶³ *GM*, II, § 25.

II

Orpheus' Forget-Me-Not

The cars were honking their horns, and I heard the shouts of angry people. It was in such circumstances that Agnes longed to buy a forget-me-not, a single forget-me-not stem; she longed to hold it before her eyes as a last, scarcely visible trace of beauty.⁶⁴

Introduction

Agnes, the main protagonist in Milan Kundera's *Immortality*, is a character born from a feeling of nostalgia⁶⁵ that was itself sprung out of the witnessing of a gesture made by an old woman whose features are already fading from the memory of the narrator.⁶⁶ For Agnes, the forget-me-not serves as a means of preserving and conjuring up an image of a world of beauty that is constantly under assault from the visual and aural ugliness that pervades the contemporary world. The flower as mnemonic device exemplifies one role that memory plays in Kundera's work. As we have seen from our preliminary discussion of Nietzsche, an overabundance of memory can have stifling effects. Kundera's characters typically exist within a world suffering from the complete opposite of what Nietzsche concerns himself with; they are subject to an existence where forgetting is ever present as a threat, not only from the erosion over time of individual memory, but the willful erasure of cultural memory imposed from an

⁶⁴ Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi, (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 345

⁶⁵ From the Greek *nostos* – return home and *algia* – longing. A longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. (Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. XIII)

⁶⁶ Kundera frequently appears as a character in his own books. Although he doesn't name himself as the narrator in *Immortality* I will refer to the narrator as Kundera.

external source, courtesy of a political regime. This chapter will focus on Kundera's mnemonic-aesthetics, the ways in which memory relates to beauty and the existential dilemma that Kundera confronts the reader with through these relations, as well as the question of how to live an authentic mnemonic existence.

Firstly, I will undertake a study of Tamina, the central protagonist in Kundera's 1981 novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Through an examination of Tamina's story, we will begin to come to an understanding of how memory relates to beauty and what exactly is at stake in a forgetful world. I will also follow this line of thought through to the point wherein it becomes problematic, a point that pervades Kundera's corpus and will play an integral part in later chapters of this thesis. Unlike my treatment of Nietzsche, I will not split the discussion of memory and forgetting into two chapters with Kundera since the two concepts are so closely related in his fiction. This is not to say that the two are not related in Nietzsche; it is merely to suggest a different level of proximity as Kundera's characters necessarily live in an intertwined conceptual world, whereas Nietzsche poses the quality of forgetfulness as the solution to a problem. From here we can proceed to a discussion of the role that memory plays in the 1991 novel, *Immortality*. Here we will see a treatment of the theme in a manner vastly different from the goal that Tamina approaches by examining the character of Agnes, mentioned above, as well as the relationship that Kundera explicates between Goethe and Bettina Brentano. This will open up the

discussion to point toward the aesthetic notion central to many of Kundera's works—kitsch. One final note on my strategy for dealing with Kundera's novels: instead of explicating the ideas in his books through plot summary followed by investigation, I will endeavor to perform something that would be more accurately described as a character study, for Kundera's themes are always tied to specific characters whose existences are meant to be understood by the theme pertaining to them. This is not to say that Kundera's characters act as ciphers; rather, it is Kundera's way of exploring what he terms the character's 'existential code,' which is bound to key words and concepts that are then explored through the novel's action.⁶⁷ In this way, it is impossible to understand the full force of Kundera's ideas unless they are studied the way they are meant to be: through characters and situations.

Who is Tamina?

In our exegesis of memory á la Kundera the character of Tamina from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* will provide the most fruitful example of the initial role this quality plays in his work. In order to provide a clear trajectory for the chapter to follow, I will lay out a preliminary paraphrase of Tamina's story. First, a note on structure: Kundera orchestrates his novel as a seven part symphony consisting of variations on dualistic titular themes.⁶⁸ Appearing only in parts 4

⁶⁷ AON, p. 29.

⁶⁸ As the title states, the second of these themes is laughter. Although this aspect may also benefit from a Nietzschean reading, I will leave that work for later.

and 6, then, Tamina might seem like an odd choice of protagonist; however, she is the only character who does recur at all in the book. Indeed, Tamina's significance should not be underplayed, as Kundera points out himself:

It is a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina goes offstage, it is a novel for Tamina. She is its principal character and principal audience, and all the other stories are variations on her own story and come together with her life as in a mirror.⁶⁹

The Tamina of novelistic facticity is not given many of the detailed signifiers that we are used to in fiction: we are told that she is attractive, thirty three, and living in a provincial town far from Prague, where most of Kundera's fiction takes place.⁷⁰ Tamina lives a life of meditative silence, a life that began after the death of her husband some years before. After this event, coupled with a failed suicide attempt that proceeded from her émigré husband's death, Tamina decided to devote herself to a life of quiet, continuous remembrance.⁷¹ Tamina does not seek to hold her husband's memory up as a means of preserving beauty – it is a task undertaken to prolongate and realize life. For Tamina, all that has substance is past.⁷² Authentic existence for Tamina, then, is dependent on a concrete, continuous relationship with her memory of past events. Whether or not she is successful at her task will be explored below.

⁶⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Aaron Asher, (New York: Perennial Classics, 1999), p. 227.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 109.

⁷¹ It is important to note here that Tamina attempted suicide through drowning. In doing so, she was seeking a death that could be experienced in solitude, away from observing eyes in the company of silent fish. This will bear significance in her later demise in section 6.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 116.

As a mnemonic athlete, Tamina spends the majority of her silent existence listening to stories told by customers who come into the café. Whenever her ear is engaged by a male speaker, Tamina endeavors to maintain complete mnemonic faithfulness to her husband by practicing a form of spiritual exercise, consciously converting the speaker's features into those of her husband.⁷³ To forget their shared past would be tantamount to a destructive betrayal of fidelity: Tamina sees this process taking place in her forgetting of pet names that her husband gave to her as well as in the gaps in her memories of shared vacations.⁷⁴ In order to counteract this inexorable event, Tamina enlists the assistance of a café patron named Hugo to return to Prague and retrieve a series of notebooks chronicling these vacations in addition to a collection of old love letters. The first half of her story chronicles the events leading up to this journey and Hugo's failure to accomplish his task. Once his failure is complete, Tamina continues to sell coffee, but retreats into a total silence—one which does not listen. The importance of the different forms of silence depicted here will gain further clarity when we reach our discussion of *Immortality*; however, it should be noted that the former, receptive silence lives through the spiritual exercise that Tamina

⁷³ Tamina's repetitive practices here take on a dimension not hinted at by Nietzsche. I am thinking of a book called *The Way of a Pilgrim: And the Pilgrim Continues His Way*, which describes the results of living out an idea found in I Thessalonians. 5:17, a passage that talks about prayer without ceasing. Repetition of a simple prayer, when appropriated meditatively, allows one to connect with God and live a life of holiness. Spiritual exercises are meant to make prayer or meditation a natural extension of one's consciousness. In spiritual traditions, this is a transformative event that brings one in contact with a true reality, a fuller life. Hence, Tamina, through repetitively conjuring her husband's image, seeks to imbue her existence with a deeper resonance. Apparently, she is successful, as the mental metamorphosis that she constantly subjects others to becomes, over time, as natural as breathing.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

undertakes while listening to her customer's stories. Tamina allows her customers the benefit of existing in a silent space without herself engaging in the 'battle for the ears of others'⁷⁵ while enabling the continued existence of her husband's memory. Once the chance of retrieving concrete artifacts of her husband's existence becomes impossible, Tamina's retreat into silence loses its living character, stifled by the forgetting that she no longer attempts to battle.

Part 6 continues Tamina's story, albeit in a more fantastical manner. Kundera crosses from historically centered narrative storytelling to a tale of nearly mythical proportions. Contrasted with an account of his own experience of his father's death, Kundera places the conclusion of Tamina's story into dramatic counterpoint. Self-exiled to a new life of total silence, Tamina finds herself engaged in conversation with a young man who asks her questions: something that has not happened to her in all her time at the café. This character comes to Tamina with an offer to accompany him on a journey; the object—to forget her forgetting.⁷⁶ Since Tamina's project to preserve the memory of her husband as something endowed with life has been thwarted, the young man

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 110.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 224. Ankersmit offers a Kantian anecdote: "For many years Kant was dutifully served by the faithful Lampe. But one unfortunate day Lampe could not resist the temptation to steal something from his master's household. He was dismissed on the spot by his master, for whom property was sanctified by nothing less than the categorical imperative. Nevertheless, Kant was not at ease with his Roman *severitas* and he kept worrying about poor Lampe. In order to get rid of this most unwelcome manifestation of *Neigung* he pinned above his desk a little note with the stunning text "*Lampe vergessen*"—"forget Lampe."" (Ankersmit, 296) What we have here is an instance where one is required to remember in order to forget. For Kant, then, a complete forgetting of Lampe would be impossible unless he were to forget his attempt to abolish his memory. Tamina has just been offered a way to successfully resolve this paradox.

offers her the consolation of being rid of the forgetting she has fought against for so long. Tamina and the young man, whose name is now revealed to be Raphael,⁷⁷ enter into a red sports car⁷⁸ which begins their journey.

Raphael brings Tamina to the edge of a river where a young boy is waiting next to a boat. Tamina rows the boat across to an island populated entirely by children. The island is an alternative to the world of ponderous memory that we inhabit, a place where things weigh nothing at all.⁷⁹ Upon arriving on the island, Tamina's identity is stripped as she is forced into communal living with an entire community of children. After some initial resistance, Tamina begins to understand the significance of her journey to the island as a return to a past without any memory of her husband, resulting in the absence of any desire for his presence either physically or mentally.⁸⁰ Once she submits to the sexual whims of the children, who are fascinated with Tamina's mature body, Tamina becomes an object of idolization and is treated with awe. Tamina is not allowed too much time to revel in the children's polymorphous perversity⁸¹, however, as tension soon springs up between her and the children

⁷⁷ Kundera tells us that the naming of the young man is no coincidence. Indeed, Raphael is Hebraic for "God heals," and is the name of the healing archangel. It is no wonder that he is summoned here to provide an antidote for Tamina.

⁷⁸ This image is one that will recur in Kundera's 1999 novel, *Slowness*, where the speed of a red sports car is used to denote forgetfulness, as one who desires to forget will hasten the passage of time. The sports car is contrasted with travel by horse drawn cart, whose slow movement denotes patience and a desire to prolong the moment. Tamina is suspended somewhere between the two extremes, indicative of her somewhat coerced mindframe as she embarks upon her rowboat.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁸¹ According to Freud, a young child is, by nature, polymorphously perverse which is to say that, before education in the conventions of civilized society, a child will turn to various bodily parts

after a disagreement during one of their games. Their idolization turns to cruelty until Tamina resigns herself once again. Tamina's story ends with a final attempt to escape from a world without memory. Echoing her unsuccessful suicide attempt of before, Tamina tries to swim back across the river she had crossed to banish her forgetting. Kundera assures us that this escape is not simply another suicide attempt; rather, Tamina regains the desire for life that drove her earlier in the novel.⁸² As she swims, Tamina realizes that the shore of the island has never grown smaller—in effect, she has been expending her energy in order to remain still. Soon, she succumbs to exhaustion as her body becomes heavier and heavier, pulling her under the water for good.

Crossing the Banks of Lethe & the Disharmony of Nonbeing

In Kundera's twofold approach to the chronicling of Tamina's fictional existence, the first section presents the reader with an image of an intrepid warrior fighting to preserve a sacred memory in a world that can only encourage the exact opposite. The consequences of Tamina's failure condemn her to a life of silence in a dystopic world of battling voices and harsh noise. Throughout the first section of her story, Tamina is intimately joined with images of sound.

Kundera relates a story by Thomas Mann of which only a small event concerns him: "...in between the sounds made by his footsteps he heard another sound in

for sexual gratification and will not obey the rules that in adults determine perverse behavior. Education however quickly suppresses the polymorphous possibilities for sexual gratification in the child, eventually leading, through repression, to an amnesia about such primitive desires.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 260.

the rooms on either side — a soft, clear, metallic tone — but perhaps it was only an illusion. Like a golden ring falling into a silver basin, he thought..."⁸³ The interpretation that Kundera offers here is that of Mann using the image of the ring in order to create a silence in which beauty can be heard.

I think Thomas Mann sounded that "faint, clear, metallic tone" to create silence. He needed that silence to make beauty audible (because the death he was speaking of was *death-beauty*), and for beauty to be perceptible, it needs a minimal degree of silence (of which the precise measure is the sound made by a golden ring falling into a silver basin).⁸⁴

Tamina, already characterized by a memory enabling silence, is hereby pictured with a golden ring in her mouth that is said to symbolize the sort of silence that she had only encountered before during her failed suicide attempt. Tamina's silence, then, even in the first half of her story, preserves a beauty that masks death. According to Maria Nemcova Banerjee, the beauty that Tamina's silence offers stands in direct opposition to her desire for a living memory.⁸⁵ All that the silence that Mann's ring can create is a beauty that obscures the true nature of death. The lie of beauty-death is the exact antithesis of Tamina's goal to continuously reaffirm the substance of the past. Contrary to Gottwald, the Communist politician who airbrushed his comrade out of history in order to bring a smooth polish to a preferred history, Tamina's project was never one of poetry; rather 'she is not compelled by a desire for beauty, she is compelled by a

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Maria Nemcova Banerjee. *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), p. 149.

desire for life.⁸⁶ Banerjee also points out the acoustic beauty of Tamina's own name, with its three syllables that invite 'musical articulation.'⁸⁷ Musicality, then, is a thread woven into Tamina's story from the very beginning. Its importance, as well as its connection to the prevailing theme of memory, is fleshed out in the next narrative variation.

As mentioned above, part two of Tamina's story is accented by a contrapuntal narrative depicting the death of Kundera's father. In order to further illuminate Tamina's story I will examine this account. As with most of his work, Kundera places his characters into a firm historical setting. These settings are never incidental and serve to demonstrate the telescoping way in which the universal takes hold in the personal. Kundera opens this section with a discussion of the Communist president, Husak; the president of forgetting.⁸⁸ In the time period of the novel, Husak has just dismissed one hundred and forty-five historians from their positions in order to rid the nation of its collective past. This forced silence finds its counterpoint in the silence of Kundera's father, a musicologist whose loss of speech parallels his loss of memory. The loss of the ability to speak, a sickness characterized by forgetting imposed silence, echoes the sound of Tamina's death masking silence once the hope of retrieving her notebooks is lost. Tamina reenters the story onto a platform where her formerly

⁸⁶ BLF, p. 119.

⁸⁷ Nemcova, p. 149.

⁸⁸ BLF, p. 249.

receptive silence has been replaced with one that devours and suppresses what needs to be vocalized.

Kundera brings us once again to the bank of the river. Crossing the river will take Tamina on the final journey to her death; Kundera's father, too, is preparing for a journey into a coma, a rider on horseback.⁸⁹ This is the moment that the entire novel has been leading to: each part up to now has been a variation on a theme that Kundera is about to weave together. The structure described above has been purposively constructed, as we are given to understand through a mini-essay on Beethoven. Kundera writes of Beethoven's variations as a journey through an internal infinity to be found in all things. The journey into infinity allows the composer to descend into the deepest intrinsic quality of the theme being studied.⁹⁰ The theme, then, of Kundera's novel, whose subject and object are both Tamina, is the beautifying silence of forgetting as death's shroud.⁹¹ As the mind of Kundera's father dies, Tamina embarks on the waters of Lethe for her final descent into the underworld. Classically, the newly dead drank from the river before entering Hades: Tamina is entitled to retain her memory for a little longer still. It is for this reason that I liken Tamina to Orpheus, who was allowed to enter the underworld to reclaim his wife, Eurydice. His

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 239.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 226.

⁹¹ Or, from an interview with Kundera found in the afterword of *BLF*: This is the great private problem of man: death as the loss of the self. But what is this self? It is the sum of everything we remember. Thus, what terrifies us about death is not the loss of the future but the loss of the past. Forgetting is a form of death ever present within life.

condition, of course, was that he was forbidden to look back until they had once again reached the sunlight.

As mentioned above, the children who inhabit the island that Tamina is taken to thrive on a polymorphous sexuality. What I left out was that the island is also plagued with omnipresent, guitar laden music. Kundera treats the guitar earlier in the chapter as an instrument of abolition. Here we can catch the first glimpse of eternity according to Kundera:

Schonberg is dead, Ellington is dead, but the guitar is eternal. Stereotyped harmonies, hackneyed melodies, and a beat that gets stronger as it gets duller—that is what's left of music, the eternity of music...No work of Beethoven's has ever elicited greater collective passion than the constant repetitive throb of the guitar.⁹²

The idiocy of rock music lies in its return to primordality, to a time before theme and variation were considered sacrosanct, to a time of ahistorical oblivion. Guitar driven music, for Kundera, is mere noise full of sound and fury; however, this static does not signify nothingness. Rather, it signifies form without content, the abolition of both meditative and masking silence, and the reign of music without memory. The president of forgetting is coupled with the idiot of music at the moment when Kundera's father dies. Tamina waits until the children are distracted by their overbearing music before attempting to swim back across Lethe in a desperate attempt to reclaim the mnemonic existence she had fled. Several of the children, however, spot her and follow behind in a rowboat while

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 247.

Tamina expends her energy. Even in her attempt to recapture the meditative silence that had come into being during her first suicide attempt, Tamina is unable to free herself from the intrusive presence of the children. Inevitably, Tamina looks back toward the land only to drink from the waters of forgetfulness and disappear beneath their surface. In Tamina's drowning we see the terminal effects of forgetfulness, as well as the impossibility of a beauty-death in a world of white noise. Ultimately, Tamina cannot lead, despite her best efforts, an authentic mnemonic existence due to the proliferation of the forces of forgetting in the world around her. Let us turn now to a later work of Kundera's that further explores these possibilities and even seems to offer some sort of conclusion.

A Single Spot of Blue

Tamina's story shows us the uses of memory for life and the extent to which this use has become problematized in a world of forgetting. The main character of the novel *Immortality* is Agnes, the woman described above who wishes to preserve beauty in a world of ugliness. Contrary to Tamina's world, where becoming a mnemonic athlete can still lead to a preservation of life, the world that Agnes inhabits has already abolished this possibility with the rise of imagology and the preponderance of images. As with many of his terms, Kundera supplies the word 'imagology' with several distinctions. *Immortality* places ideology into confrontation with imagology, stating the claim that all

logical thought behind ideas becomes lost in the realm of the image. Imagology is the state where the appearance of a symbol wins out over the referent it is supposed to imply, as in Baudrillard's simulacrum.

Kundera describes the history of imagology in the lengthy quote that follows:

All ideologies have been defeated: in the end their dogmas were unmasked as illusions and people stopped taking them seriously. For example, 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 has 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 schoolteacher 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 neighbor spends his time in an office, where he sits for eight hours facing an office colleague, then he sits in his car and drives home, turns on the TV, and when the announcer informs him that in the latest public opinion poll the majority of Frenchmen 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.⁹³

Even beauty, that force which Tamina struggled against throughout her story, is quickly vanishing from view for Agnes. In examining *Immortality*, I wish to examine what Kundera tells us about the ways in which we attempt to ensure

⁹³ IMM, p. 114.

the prolongation of our memory after death while observing, with Agnes, the ways in which all attempts at preserving memory in life are destined for failure. It is my hope that this will show just how important the struggle between memory & forgetting is for Kundera while indicating the driving force behind the inability to lead an authentic mnemonic existence.

“Individualism? What does it have to do with individualism when a camera takes your picture in a moment of agony? On the contrary, it means that an individual no longer belongs to himself but becomes the property of others...The right of the camera was elevated above all other rights, and that changed everything, absolutely everything.”⁹⁴

Agnes' primary existential struggle is the struggle to maintain a sense of individual identity and being in the face of a culture of images that seeks to wrench individuals out of their solitude and into the public eye. The obliteration of the line between public and private turns the individual into something categorizable, something predictable and easily understood. Although the act of picture-taking is usually conceptualized as an aid for remembering, for Agnes it is a means of diminishing any sense of uniqueness that the photographed subject possesses. In that moment when the shutter clicks, the subject is condemned to existing only as an object for the gaze of others. Paul, Agnes' husband, describes this reality as a truth that has been revealed by the imagologues, those who forge 'systems of ideals and anti-ideals, systems of short duration that are quickly replaced by other systems...just as in the past we have been ruled by the systems

⁹⁴ *IMM*, p. 32.

of ideologues.⁹⁵ Moreover, the fact that our image remains forever out of our control allows for the reality to set in that 'a single malicious phrase is enough to change you forever into a depressingly simple caricature.'⁹⁶ Who are these imagologues? How have they managed to sublimate individuality into snapshots devoid of meaning unless they are interpreted by the gaze of the other? Kundera tells us that, in an age where all ideologies have devalued themselves, imagology is what remains as an organizing principle. Imagology is what takes over when ideology, with its historical struggles and wars, ends and is replaced by a principle which beautifies and makes illusion of all individuality. Kundera offers the following as a historical example of this process from content to empty form:

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.⁹⁷

In a world where imagology reigns, any substance behind the image, any actual content behind thought is lost and replaced only by empty gestures, symbols

⁹⁵ IMM, p. 116.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 127.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 114.

without referents. The cultural effort to preserve memory results, paradoxically, in a forgetting of being when it tries to isolate moments by wrenching them out of the flow of time. Unlike in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, however, there are a few characters that are cognizant of the effects of being torn out of time. The first of these is Agnes' father, who we meet early in the book cutting up pictures after the death of his wife. Upon discovering their father engaged in this act, Agnes' sister, Laura, yells at her father while Agnes understands that her father's act 'is a rejection of the "laughable illusion" which immortality represents, a rejection of the posthumous "future" filled with the clamour of memories and counterfeit photographs and biographies.'⁹⁸ For Agnes, there is nothing crueler than to turn a second into eternity, to tear 'someone out of the flow of time, stopping him in the midst of his natural motion.'⁹⁹ Agnes' desire to move away from mnemonic clatter and the distortion of the gaze is echoed in her father's wish to not be looked at while dying¹⁰⁰, and the calm that descends once he dies. In order to understand Agnes and her forget-me-not it is necessary to pause here and examine this silent calm. Just before dying, Agnes' father recites to her a poem by Goethe that he taught her when she was young. The poem speaks of silent death and this is when Agnes remembers her own desire for solitude and silence—a silence that can preserve beauty. The question I want to raise here is this: is not Agnes' desire for beauty an instance of Mann's beauty-death from *The*

⁹⁸ Eva Le Grand. *Kundera or the Memory of Desire*, trans. Lin Burman (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999), p. 32.

⁹⁹ *IMM*, p. 294.

¹⁰⁰ *IMM*, p. 249.

Book of Laughter and Forgetting? Kundera provides something of an answer in the following passage:

It is death sweetly bluish, like nonbeing. Because nonbeing is an infinite emptiness and empty space is blue and there is nothing more beautiful and more soothing than blue. Not at all by chance did Novalis, the poet of death, love blue and search for nothing else on his journeys. Death's sweetness is blue in color.¹⁰¹

Novalis, the poet of death, succeeds in beautifying nonbeing through coloring it blue; however, as we have learned from Tamina, all poetry is simply a forgetful means (by way of forgetting the truth of being) of obfuscating the living substance underneath.¹⁰² Kundera explicates this difference in his description of the two faces of death: one as poetic nonbeing; the other as the material experience of the corpse.¹⁰³ In the beginning of this chapter, I used a quote from the end of *Immortality* describing Agnes' longing to purchase a single forget-me-not stem to hold before her eyes in order to preserve the world's diminishing beauty. The first time that Kundera uses this image he specifically describes the forget-me-not as a 'slender stalk with miniature blue flowers.'¹⁰⁴ Agnes, therefore, desires to concentrate on a single blue point—a container for the poetic death of nonbeing. For Agnes, living in a world of imagological, dissonant forgetfulness,

¹⁰¹ BLF, p. 236.

¹⁰² This is where we can catch a glimpse of Kundera's disagreement with Heidegger's views on poetry. As phenomenologists go, we can see from the next sentence that Kundera's thinking seems to bear more similarity to Sartre.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 235.

¹⁰⁴ IMM, p. 21.

the only recourse to a silence in which memory, albeit the false memory of the poets, can live is the sweetness of death.

The portions of *Immortality* devoted to Agnes show only one aspect of Kundera's treatment of the methodologies for memory preservation in a world of forgetting. Agnes, as we have seen, is a character with no illusions about the state of the world she inhabits and, as a result, finds her solace in death's blueness. Her story, however, is told in counterpoint to another, more surrealistic account of memory and death which takes as its focus the motivations of writers. In order to provide the proper theoretical basis for this analysis, we need to return once more to *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

From Her to Eternity

In the first section of Tamina's story, Kundera takes a pause to expound upon the idea of graphomania. As he defines it, 'Graphomania is not a desire to write letters, diaries, or family chronicles (to write for oneself or one's immediate family); it is a desire to write books (to have a public of unknown readers.)'¹⁰⁵ Similar to the erosion of privacy that Agnes sees in the proliferation of cameras and images, Kundera's description of graphomania threatens the boundaries of the written word. This is why Tamina is so obsessed with the reacquisition of her diaries; she feels that the gaze of any reader will destroy what was intimate and

¹⁰⁵ BLF, p. 127.

concrete in her past writings.¹⁰⁶ The proliferation of graphomania that Kundera sees emerging with the rise of autobiography and the notion that every individual houses a potential writer results in the creation of a Shakespearean world of sound and fury where no one understands or hears each other because of their own narcissistic solipsism. What is the origin of this impulse to chronicle and display every facet of one's existence? Kundera has this to offer:

For everyone is pained by the thought of disappearing, unheard and unseen, into an indifferent universe, and because of that everyone wants, while there is still time, to turn himself into a universe of words.¹⁰⁷

Immortality takes the theoretical base of graphomania and uses it to flesh out the second form of memory treated in that novel – the kind of memory that instates the individual in the memory of those who they never knew, the memory of posterity or immortality. The two kinds of people who most often achieve this kind of memory are, according to Kundera, artists and statesmen.¹⁰⁸ As the key to understanding the memory of posterity, Kundera offers an account of the relationship between Goethe and Bettina Brentano.¹⁰⁹ Their relationship, which exists mostly through a letter writing correspondence, illustrates the

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 146.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁸ *IMM*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁹ In the same section, Kundera tells us of a meeting between two immortals – Goethe and Napoleon – that is used to illustrate the ways in which both of these figures, in their greatness, manipulate their actions for the observant eyes of writers and imaginary cameras. Although I won't examine the implications of this parallel, it is interesting to note that Kundera uses two figures that appear in Nietzsche's corpus as exemplars of the genius of culture. Like Nietzsche, Goethe is an important figure to Kundera, appearing in several of his books. It might be fruitful for a future study to concentrate on the importance of Goethe as it relates to both Kundera and Nietzsche.

extent to which both suffer from the desire to exist in the memory of posterity. Bettina's graphomaniac impulse is more blatantly evident as she confesses her desire to write a book about Goethe immediately upon beginning their correspondence.¹¹⁰ Once work on the book begins, however, Bettina realizes that the bulk of Goethe's letters to her do not paint her in as flattering a light as she would like and she commences to edit their past relationship for public eyes.¹¹¹ Simultaneously, then, Bettina exemplifies graphomania as well as the mnemonic impulse to constantly alter and beautify the past. Seeming at first to succeed in permanently changing the past with the publication of her book, the truth of Bettina's relationship with Goethe is revealed after her death. Once again, death makes it impossible for anyone to control their image for eternity.

Goethe's own graphomania is far more connected with the existential impulse to possess the world, in this case through writing. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* places Goethe's impulse to write in direct opposition to Tamina's: Tamina wants to write in order to give her own memories body and feels that the eyes of others will destroy the value of her past; Goethe, on the other hand, 'thinks that if a single individual *fails* to set eyes on his lines, that individual calls his—Goethe's—entire existence into question.'¹¹² Goethe's desire to have the eyes of many read his words masks his desire not to disappear into an indifferent universe, the desire for immortality. When we next see Goethe in *Immortality*,

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 60.

¹¹¹ Nietzsche would experience a similar situation, post-mental breakdown, with his sister's mistreatment of his writings.

¹¹² *BLF*, p. 146.

after the interlude with Bettina is finished, we find him in an otherworldly dialogue with Ernest Hemmingway. Hemmingway bemoans the treatment that his books and life have received after his death, with critics displaying more interest in the mundane activities of his biography than the words he put on paper. The obsession with knowing everything about the artist behind the work that continues long after their death is what Kundera calls the eternal trial. This problem is compounded later in the book when the two meet again. Again, although the following quote is quite lengthy, I feel it best to allow the characters to explain their own existential dilemmas:

'Goethe shrugged and said with some pride, "Perhaps our books are immortal, in a certain sense. Perhaps." He paused and then added softly, with great emphasis, "But we aren't."

"Quite the contrary," Hemmingway protested bitterly. "Our books will probably soon stop being read. All that will remain of your *Faust* will be that idiotic opera by Gounod. And maybe also that line about the eternal feminine pulling us somewhere or other..."

"*Das Ewigweibliche zieht uns hinan*," recited Goethe.

"Right. But people will never stop prying into your life, down to the smallest details."

"Haven't you realized yet, Ernest, that the figures they talk about have nothing to do with us?"

"Don't tell me, Johann, that you bear no relation to the Goethe about whom everybody writes and talks. I admit that the image that remained behind you is not entirely identical to you. I admit that it distorts you quite a bit. Still, you are present in it."

"No, I'm not," Goethe said very firmly. "And I'll tell you something else. I am not even present in my books. He who doesn't exist cannot be present."¹¹³

¹¹³ IMM, p. 214.

What Kundera shows here is the ultimate impossibility of preserving memory in light of the reality of death. The idea that art can be a means of salvation for those who desire to 'live on' after death is revealed to be yet one more way of ensuring the dissolution of the concrete individual behind the empty, imagological portrait that remains. Moreover, the efforts of those analysts and commentators to revivify the life of the artist or reveal the truth behind the existence of creators of works of art succeed only in shooting arrows into the dark, never being able to reach the object of their study. The effort to remember, it seems, is yet one more means of ensuring the domination of forgetting.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

Kundera's fiction does not offer the reader any easy answers, and this, according to him is exactly how it should be. 'The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything. The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything.'¹¹⁵ The wisdom of the novels *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *Immortality* lies in their continuous questioning of any definition of memory or forgetting that is conceived within their pages. While Kundera's own views are worked out through the course of his novels, they do not stem from a previously held system of beliefs. Rather, the philosophical

¹¹⁴ As Kundera himself says in one of his books of essays: When we study, discuss, analyze a reality, we analyze it as it appears in our mind, in our memory. We know reality only in the past tense. We do not know it as it is in the present, in the moment when it's happening, when it is. The present moment is unlike the memory of it. Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting. *Testaments Betrayed*, p. 128.

¹¹⁵ *BLF*, Afterword: A Talk with the Author.

explorations that emerge within the novel are expressions and developments of the characters contained therein. Especially as regards the discussion of graphomania, however, questions present themselves regarding Kundera's own motivations for engaging in the act of writing: does Kundera, like his fictional portrait of Goethe, write in order to gain artistic immortality or as an effort to shape his post-mortem image? Kundera's own need to justify his work will be taken up in a later chapter of this thesis. For now, though, I want to continue on to uncover the ways in which Nietzsche feels we can utilize the property of forgetting as a boon to life, standing in stark contrast to the inescapable snares to which Kundera's novelistic explorations confine us.

III

Nietzsche's New *Naturalphilosophie*: Darwin Overcome (?)

The forgetful – In outbursts of passion, and in the fantasizing of dreams and insanity, a man rediscovers his own and mankind's prehistory: *animality* with its savage grimaces; on these occasions his memory goes sufficiently far back, while his civilized condition evolves out of a forgetting of these primal experiences, that is to say out of a relaxation of his memory. He who, as a forgetter on a grand scale, is wholly unfamiliar with all this *does not understand man* – but it is to the general advantage that there should appear here and there such individuals as 'do not understand us' and who are as it were begotten by the seed of the gods and born of reason.¹¹⁶

Introduction

As we have seen in the first chapter of this thesis, Nietzsche has traced one of the key facets of civilization as the subsuming of our human animality beneath the chains of morality. Paradoxically, this forgetting of primal experience comes about through the enforcing of a human, all too human form of memory that tames humanity into a calculable maker of mundane promises. However, as we see from the quote above, this forgetting of animality can never be completed, as we are continually haunted by that which remains animal within us in the forms of dreams and the passions. What civilization has forced humanity to forget, its lost animality, must be encountered anew once again in the process of overcoming traditional thought toward the creation of an immanent, naturalistic

¹¹⁶ D § 312.

ideal rather than one that transcends the natural world of experience. One of the necessary steps in this project is the forgetting, or overcoming, of the prejudices and anthropomorphisms that remain ever present in everyday existence, especially as regards nature. Nietzsche speaks in *The Gay Science* of de-deifying nature so as to begin afresh with a new conception of the natural. De-deification will result in the abolition of prejudices that place humanity in a teleological position of superiority to other animals and result in the forging of a new, naturalistic ideal that does not beautify the world we exist in, but justifies its existence as is. By doing so, the old promise that civilization imposes, the one born of punishment and bad conscience, will be replaced by the new promise of the *Übermensch*. In order to facilitate a discussion of what this new promise will look like, however, I want to turn our attention toward another figure that had already begun the process of placing humanity amongst the animals once more — Charles Darwin. As early as *Daybreak*, Nietzsche saw the consequences of Darwin's theory of evolution and determined that it was necessary to use this as a naturalistic starting point in understanding humanity. Nietzsche's appropriation of Darwin, however, is problematic, as Nietzsche offers a critique of Darwinian thought that implies the necessity of overcoming teleological remnants in the theory of evolution. While this particular area of Nietzsche's thought might seem out of place here, I believe that it will prove to be a good approach to take toward the issue of a willed creation of values. Additionally, by placing Nietzsche in direct confrontation with a figure that he felt represented

the nineteenth-century thinking that he sought to overcome with his own thought, I aim to draw out some inherent dangers in Nietzsche's thinking that will be further explicated in a return to Kundera in the next chapter. Indeed, by emphasizing Nietzsche's disagreement with his perception that Darwin's evolutionary theory favors reactive preservationism over active creation, it is my aim to show just how different are the ways that Nietzsche and Kundera deal with the problem of memory and forgetting. Finally, the fact that Nietzsche cast his own project of revaluation in evolutionary terms that seek to shift the focus from natural selection to a willed selective principle should attest to the importance that this line of thought bears to his philosophy.

Although Nietzsche looked down upon those who would describe him as a Darwinist as 'scholarly oxen'¹¹⁷ one of the major facets of his philosophy can be seen as evolutionary in nature, albeit an evolution that realizes the shortcomings of natural selection and begins anew with the imposition of the will to power. I am talking here, of course, about the *Übermensch*¹¹⁸, the most famous of Nietzsche's creations. This model of Nietzschean perfection will be discussed in more detail below. Contrary to the position of the scholarly oxen derided in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche's philosophy has also been appropriately designated as perfectionistic in that one perfects oneself through constant becoming with the proper use of the will to power; however, in keeping with the Darwinian contrast

¹¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (United States: Vintage Books, 1989), "Books" § 1.

¹¹⁸ Normally translated as 'over-man,' the *Übermensch* is Nietzsche's own figure crafted as a new goal for humanity in a world where God is dead.

of this chapter, I will be describing some of Nietzsche's thought as evolutionary in the sense that simply denotes a process of change from one state to another. Change, in this sense, does not have to be solely biological and can apply to cultural evolution just as easily as to Darwinistic theory. This chapter will explore the critique that Nietzsche levels against Darwin and, more importantly, will trace the evolution of Nietzsche's own ideal that he offers as an antidote to the nihilism he sees resulting partly from a cultural embracing of Darwin's findings. Placed into the context of the forgetting that civilization has inured versus the active cultural forgetting that will overcome civilization's taming, this should illustrate the dual nature of this concept in Nietzsche's thought as well as its underestimated importance. Despite Nietzsche's assurances to the contrary, I will then attempt to point out the fundamental ways in which Nietzsche's project falls into some of the pitfalls he wishes and, ultimately, fails to avoid. This failure does not mean to imply that we should abandon Nietzsche's work; however, I will not attempt, as so many do, to construct any apologia for these flaws.

Before we can begin with the exploration of Nietzsche's confrontation with Darwin, I wish to examine in further detail the kind of forgetting that Nietzsche encourages and the difference in the promise of civilization and the promise of a culture that sees becoming where previously there was only calculable being.

Forgetting and the Great Promise

Arising as a counter-promise to the form of promising that would impose a character of being and calculability on humanity, the promise borne of the bad conscience, is the prophecy of Zarathustra that points to something yet to come. The prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is rife with descriptions of the *Übermensch* that tie him firmly to Nietzsche's search for a naturalistic, immanent ideal. Zarathustra describes man as a bridge and the kind of man he is looking for as one who 'justifies future and redeems past,' whose 'soul is overfull so that he forgets himself'.¹¹⁹ Humanity, as it exists under the throes of morality, can only be overcome by those who forget themselves and the taming they have undergone by civilization. Despite its best attempts, civilization has not managed to completely eradicate the traces of animality, as we have seen in *D* § 312. Those who recognize the inability to completely subsume our animality are said to not understand man; they are untimely and ahistorical; as such, they look to the future and not the past for the foundation of meaning and value. They are exemplars, who rarely coincide in proximity, but rather call 'to another across the desert intervals of time.'¹²⁰ The herd, those who still live within the confines of a rigid memory and confined animality, only rarely allow for an individual to break through in an attempt to overcome themselves. The repression enforced by

¹¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Penguin, 1966), Prologue 4.

¹²⁰ *UH* § 9.

civilization, which contains holes large enough to allow for the infiltration of animality through dreams and passionate events, can only serve to build pressure enough for the eruption of the beast into civilized consciousness. Indeed, humanity is said to be '*pregnant with a future...*as if with him something were announcing and preparing itself, as if man were not a goal but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise. —'¹²¹ What exactly the fruits of this promise looks like will be examined in more detail below. For now, though, we still need to draw out the beneficial qualities of living as a forgetful animal.

Now this animal which needs to be forgetful, in which forgetting represents a force, a form of *robust* health, has bred in itself an opposing faculty, a memory, with the aid of which forgetfulness is abrogated in certain cases — namely in those cases where promises are made.¹²²

Forgetting as a healthy faculty is embodied in that individual with the courage to forget themselves, to expend themselves as a gift to others, spoken of by Zarathustra.¹²³ The forgetful animal, then, can be seen as a parallel to the *Übermensch* and the genius of culture, both of whom we will examine in more detail below, the creation of which is characterized by Nietzsche as the ultimate project of culture. The task that Nietzsche sets out, then, is to embrace forgetting as a means to life. Once this ability is fostered it becomes possible for the

¹²¹ GM, II, § 16.

¹²² GM, II, § 1.

¹²³ Note the equating of self-expenditure and self-forgetting. As will be discussed below, the *Übermensch* whose cup is ready to overflow is characterized by a forgetting of self as part and parcel of Nietzsche's new ideal.

individual to create new values and affirm the meaning of the earth.¹²⁴ In the reincorporation of the forgetful animal that takes place once civilization, with its guilt and bad conscience, is overcome, it becomes possible not only to gaze backward at a reappropriated animal past, but to look forward at the possibility of the *Übermensch* as something new, something more than human.¹²⁵ It is important to note here that when Nietzsche speaks of re-translation into nature he is not advocating a descent into barbaric animality or the iteration of any system that would not correct the errors of previous thinkers that have maintained a false order of rank. Rather, Nietzsche wishes to use the forgetfulness of civilization as an impetus toward '*going-up*—up into a high, free, even frightful nature and naturalness.'¹²⁶ Let us turn now from the forgetful animal to a discussion of what it is that forgetting promises.

God is dead: What now?

Nietzsche's critique of Darwin was not centered on the biological aspects of the theory; contrarily, Nietzsche seems to accept evolution as a historical fact that needs to be properly treated by future philosophers. It is to our detriment that its full implications have not been considered.

¹²⁴ For more on the role of responsibility and freedom in the formation of Nietzsche's ideal figures see: Vanessa Lemm, "The Overhuman Animal" in *Acampora & Acampora*, p. 220-239.

¹²⁵ This forgetting of identity in order to make room for a new identity will be touched on again when we discuss the Eternal Return below. I will suggest that the meaning of the earth is recurrence, which can only be affirmed thoroughly by those of the *Übermensch* rank.

¹²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1968), "Expeditions" § 48.

Contemplation of history has never flown so far, not even in dreams; for now the history of mankind is only the continuation of the history of animals and plants; even in the profoundest depths of the sea the universal historian still finds traces of himself as living slime; gazing in amazement, as at a miracle, at the tremendous course mankind has already run, his gaze trembles at that even more astonishing miracle, modern man himself, who is capable of surveying this course.¹²⁷

Since the theory propounded by Darwin hammered one of the nails into the coffin of God by ridding humanity of its divine origin and model it is necessary, to Nietzsche, for new values to be erected in place of the old; however, the inability of Darwin's theory to do so makes it nihilistic. While it will be shown that Darwinism does allow for some form of value to be maintained in the absence of God, these values are only reactive and cannot properly overcome the void left in the wake of this great event. It can be argued that Nietzsche is improperly searching for an ethical purpose to Darwin's theory when it is not the aim of science to set forth ethical imperatives. This is not to say that Darwin was completely blind to the implications his theory had for the Christian faith he himself possessed. Robert Morrison, in his brief treatment of the Nietzsche/Darwin confrontation, quotes from one of Darwin's letters:

I am conscious that I am in an utterly hopeless muddle. I cannot think that the world, as we see it, is the result of chance; and yet I cannot look at each separate thing as the result of design.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ UH § 9.

¹²⁸ Charles Darwin Quoted in Robert Morrison, *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A study in nihilism and ironic affinities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 76.

Although Darwinism is said not to be the only positivistic theory to contribute to the death of God, it is the scientific theory most explicitly treated by Nietzsche. Another obstacle standing in the way of revaluation is the fact that the reality of the death of God is not yet something that is known, even to those who committed the crime. As one of these oblivious murderers, Darwin clings tenaciously to God's shadow with his apparent insistence on maintaining a teleological framework in his theorizing.¹²⁹ What makes this an illusory belief to maintain is the fact that, without an absolute principle (God) governing nature, there can be no grand scheme of value existing as an *a priori* measure. In fact, Nietzsche says, we must abandon this scheme altogether if we are to understand nature in any meaningful sense.

Proceeding along these axiological lines, we find the backbone of Nietzsche's disagreement with Darwin in *TI* "Expeditions" 14 with his assertion that natural selection ensures that 'Species do *not* grow more perfect: the weaker dominate the strong again and again—the reason being they are the great majority, and they are also *cleverer*.' As early as *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche has always placed emphasis on the cultivation of higher beings or geniuses of culture. These geniuses of culture are always those who open up new avenues of thought and who eventually make themselves superfluous,¹³⁰ similar to the type that Zarathustra wishes to see emerge that will have the potential to

¹²⁹ This charge will be examined in a bit more detail below; for now I want merely to suggest the notion to illustrate how Darwin's theory has contributed to the death of God without taking the next necessary step toward revaluation that Nietzsche will undertake.

¹³⁰ *HAH*, Volume II, § 407.

forget, or expend, themselves when they become overfull. Darwin's theory of natural selection, with its concentration on self preservation as the impetus behind existence, would necessarily counteract the sort of cultivation that Nietzsche desires so completely. In the aftermath of the death of God we are left with what Deleuze calls reactive man, a being existing alone, preferring an existence with 'no values at all than higher values' and who believes it better 'to have no will at all, better to have a nothingness of will than a will to nothingness.'¹³¹ The reactive man remains within God's shadow by positing new empty values in God's void. Deleuze mentions several values represented in Darwin's theory: 'adaptation, evolution, progress, happiness for all and the good of the community.'¹³² What makes these values remain negative is their status of reacting to a prior event, namely the death of God, instead of existing as fully future directed creations. The passivity of the reactive man's values needs to be overcome in Nietzsche's philosophy. The Nietzschean cultivation of genius is something that cannot be achieved through any solely natural process, as we can see from the quote above; rather, Nietzsche wishes to see higher types become something bred as a corrective for what natural selection cannot engender. The further evolution of the species can only come about through culture. Recast in cultural terms, then, Darwinian selection does not encourage the emergence of

¹³¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 150.

¹³² *Ibid*, p. 151.

higher beings or truly new values, but rather seeks to maintain herd stasis. Hence the characterization that Nietzsche has used to describe his higher types, the forgetful animals, confined to a world of natural selection, as 'lucky hits.'¹³³ Natural selection does not only place the favor on the side of the herd, but actively counteracts the possibility of an upsurge of higher types. Nietzschean lucky hits have only appeared in the past as isolated cases away from the societal status quo:

The human beings who are more similar, more ordinary, have had, and always have, an advantage; those more select, subtle, strange, and difficult to understand, easily remain alone, succumb to accidents, being isolated, and rarely propagate.¹³⁴

Here we have a continuation of the idea from *Daybreak* which stresses the untimely character of those who would be exceptional forgetful animals. The strength of Darwin's theory lies in its ability to sound out the hollow ideals of old; it cannot accommodate Nietzsche's desire to surpass the error laden humanity that has prescribed otherworldly metaphysical ideals in the first place. Since the news of the death of God, were it to reach the ears of the herd, would decimate the last vestiges of an exemplar of aspiration, Nietzsche takes it upon himself to offer a new type—one that is based on a re-translation back into nature and, therefore, one that can be found within the bounds of human empirical existence. We are presented then with a Nietzschean either/or: those who would remain on

¹³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (New York: Penguin, 1968), § 4.

¹³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), § 268.

the level of Darwinian self-preservation, the herd, and those who would journey over humanity toward Nietzsche's naturalistic ideal.

Every individual may be regarded as representing the ascending or descending line of life...If he represents the ascending line his value is in fact extraordinary — and for the sake of the life-collective, which with him takes a step *forward*, the care expended on his preservation, on the creation of optimum conditions for him, may even be extreme...If he represents the descending development, decay, chronic degeneration, sickening (--sickness is, broadly speaking, already a phenomenon consequent upon decay, *not* the cause of it), then he can be accorded little value, and elementary fairness demands that he *take away* as little as possible from the well-constituted.¹³⁵

It is not the purpose of this chapter to examine the ethical implications of imposing such an either/or; I merely want to emphasize the importance that Nietzsche places on his bifurcation between those who would affirm and those who would deny the character of the forgetful animal. Before we examine what Nietzsche's alternative looks like, I want to question Nietzsche's motives in assuming this task: is Nietzsche seeking a new justification of humanity because he, with Zarathustra, 'loves man,'¹³⁶ or is it because Nietzsche, seeing how his prophecy can only lead to nihilism, quakes at the implication and seeks to salvage something from the wreckage of God? One makes him into a moral idealist and the other into a divine nostalgic. Both are troubling possibilities that will be explored later.

¹³⁵ TI "Expeditions" § 33.

¹³⁶ Z: Prologue 2.

Pour, oh pour, the Will to Power

As noted above, Nietzsche sees the endpoint of natural selection as encouraging and prolonging the victory of the weak over the strong. Since natural selection has made the creation of higher types into the exception rather than the rule, Nietzsche wants to turn the tables once again so that these lucky hits can be willed into creation. What might such a lucky hit look like? Zarathustra describes the higher type through comparison with the metaphorical image of the child as 'The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred "Yes."¹³⁷ The higher type, a new cultural being who has willfully forgotten or overcome the nihilistic values of the past, stands as a vision of the future whose very existence is an embracing of becoming and affirmation. Immediately, we can see the contrast with Darwin's picture: the type that Nietzsche prescribes is self-propelled; it is not the preservation of the old, but a step into a new future, one that is over and above man. Moreover, the exemplar of creation is poetically referred to as a child whose innocence precludes knowledge of good and evil, and whose evolutionary status is at the bottom of any falsely ascribed order in humanity. The figure of the child, as the culmination of Nietzsche's formula for creation, embodies the forgetful animal spirit that is necessary for the creation of new values. Since Nietzsche sees here the futility of trying to promote any sort of actual progressive evolution through solely natural means, he instead turns his

¹³⁷ Z:I "On The Three Metamorphoses"

attention toward cultural cultivation, as Keith Ansell-Pearson has pointed out in his work on the Nietzsche/Darwin problem.¹³⁸ Rather than rehashing everything that Ansell-Pearson says in the chapter of his book devoted to Nietzsche's confrontation with Darwin, I will focus on a few salient points relevant to what has already been touched on here. Instead of the passive, reactive force of natural selection, Nietzsche proposes an 'unexhausted, procreative will'¹³⁹, the creative will to power. Ansell-Pearson sees one facet of Nietzsche's opposition to Darwin in the contrast between the will to power as an active notion of life that, unlike reactive natural selection, affirms life through expansion in the place of mere preservation as we can see from this selection from *The Gay Science*:

The wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of a condition of distress, of a limitation of the really fundamental instinct of life which aims at *the expansion of power* and, wishing for that, frequently risks and even sacrifices self-preservation.¹⁴⁰

If nature is actually characterized by will to power then, as Nietzsche argues, 'it is not conditions of distress that are *dominant* but overflow and squandering, even to the point of absurdity.'¹⁴¹ For any ideal that Nietzsche would erect to be properly immanent, then, it too would have to be possessed of the will to power in all of its naturalistic implications. Since Nietzsche's higher types have always been rare exceptions in the past, it is necessary for future cultures to create the

¹³⁸ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 102.

¹³⁹ Z:II "On Self-Overcoming"

¹⁴⁰ GS § 349.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

conditions necessary for the proliferation of *Übermenschen* and their like siblings. Ansell-Pearson acknowledges the importance of Nietzsche's contentions with natural selection as indicated by Nietzsche's insistence that culture's task should serve as 'a detour of nature to get to six or seven great men.'¹⁴² We should not assume from this quote, however, that Nietzsche wishes to posit these great men as endpoints; rather, the aphorism ends with the assertion that, once these apexes are reached they should be surpassed. The programme of cultivation that Nietzsche will embark on has proven to be quite controversial, but, I will attempt to show, marks a necessary progression from the idealistic poeticism of Zarathustra to the harder image that emerges when Nietzsche tries to paint a more realistic portrait of his higher type.

For any cure to Darwin's pathological preservation to be successful, it must be something that is attainable by human reality as it exists now. Daniel Conway,¹⁴³ in an article connecting the *Übermensch* with the ideals of higher humanity found in Nietzsche's later works, points out passages in *The Antichrist* that reframe the project that Nietzsche has set for himself in more specifically cultural terms. Conway makes the suggestion, with which I agree, that Nietzsche's clarifications of Zarathustra's teachings in the later works is indicative of his growing awareness that the *Übermensch* as presented by Zarathustra would be largely misunderstood. In order to make the idea more

¹⁴² BGE § 126.

¹⁴³ Daniel Conway, "The Genius As Squanderer: Some Remarks on the *Übermensch* and Higher Humanity" in *International Studies in Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (1998): 81-96.

palatable, Nietzsche will draw parallels between the *Übermensch* and several iconic geniuses of culture, most notably Goethe. More importantly, a discussion of several aspects of Conway's article will further reveal the immanent nature of Nietzsche's sought after ideal, while raising questions as to Conway's own resolution.

The problem I raise here is not what ought to succeed mankind in the sequence of species (—the human being is a *conclusion*—): but what type of human being one ought to *breed*, ought to *will*, as more valuable, more worthy of life, more certain of the future. This more valuable type has existed often enough already: but as a lucky accident, as an exception, never as *willed*.¹⁴⁴

By shifting the focus on the creation of higher types from the strictly individual evolution described by Zarathustra, Nietzsche expresses the desire for human reality to move forward as a whole. According to Conway, it is this passage that hints at the possibility that humans can perfect themselves, as is evidenced by the past occurrences of the higher type. Nietzsche elaborates in AC § 4 that it may be possible for whole peoples to serve as lucky strikes, as the Greeks did for Nietzsche in his earlier works. In the same passage, Nietzsche characterizes the higher types that have yet to be bred as 'a sort of superman' drawing a parallel between the political being of the later works and the Zarathustran *Übermensch*. Yet another place where we can see the continuity of these two figures is *Ecce Homo*, a book that, by Nietzsche's own admission, states nothing that had not been previously stated through Zarathustra. What *EH* does

¹⁴⁴ AC § 3.

is to put the message of Zarathustra into language that would be more easily digestible for a public not yet ready for Zarathustra's gift of the *Übermensch*.

It is here and nowhere else that one must make a start to comprehend what Zarathustra wants: this type of man that he conceives, conceives reality *as it is*, being strong enough to do so; this type is not estranged or removed from reality but is reality itself and exemplifies all that is terrible and questionable in it—*only in that way can man attain greatness*.¹⁴⁵

As we can see from this passage, Nietzsche wants to concretize the *Übermensch* in an effort to avoid seeming like a moral idealist. This attempt to bring Zarathustra's teaching down to earth as an immanent reality runs risks that I will address below; for now, however, I wish to draw out further parallels suggested by my reading of these later works as reflections of Zarathustra. If we return now to *TI*, we can see how the notions of genius that have evolved with Nietzsche from his early works have been focused through the lens of the will to power as related by Zarathustra to emerge in greater clarity with concrete exemplars who embody the will to power in an appropriately Nietzschean sense. One of these concrete examples portrays Nietzsche's late idea of the genius as 'explosive material in whom tremendous energy has been accumulated.'¹⁴⁶ Remember that Zarathustra himself was described as carrying fire, as a cup that wants to overflow.¹⁴⁷ Remember, too, that Nietzsche describes himself as

¹⁴⁵ *EH* "Destiny" § 5.

¹⁴⁶ *TI* "Expeditions" § 44.

¹⁴⁷ *Z*: Prologue.

'dynamite',¹⁴⁸ a force that destroys in order to create. What Nietzsche expects from his exemplars is such an overabundance of life (i.e. will to power) that they expend or forget themselves, thereby acting as more than human goals to which the rest should aspire. As indicated above, it is the new task of culture to form the conditions necessary for the higher types to emerge in greater number than past generations have allowed. So as not to lose sight of the fact that this new naturalism is being constructed as an alternative to a Darwinian naturalism, I quote:

The great human being is a terminus; the great epoch, the Renaissance for example, is a terminus...The instinct of self-preservation is as it were suspended; the overwhelming pressure of the energies which emanate from him forbids him any such care and prudence...He flows out, he overflows, he uses himself up, he does not spare himself – with inevitability, fatefully, involuntarily, as a river's bursting its banks is involuntary.¹⁴⁹

Nietzsche offers a concrete example of a past higher type several sections later in a discussion of Goethe. Although there are other exemplars discussed throughout the Nietzschean corpus, Goethe is the archetype that best fulfills the formula that Nietzsche comes to in the later works. For Nietzsche, Goethe aspired to '*totality*'; he strove against the separation of reason, sensuality, feeling, will (-preached in the most horrible scholasticism by Kant, the antipodes of Goethe); he disciplined himself to a whole, he *created* himself.¹⁵⁰ Goethe exemplifies the Nietzschean virtues of self-overcoming, life affirmation, gift

¹⁴⁸ EH "Destiny" § 1.

¹⁴⁹ TI "Expeditions" § 44.

¹⁵⁰ TI "Expeditions" § 49.

giving and 'joyful and trusting fatalism.'¹⁵¹ As Zarathustra's gift to humanity was his prophecy of the *Übermensch*, so Nietzsche's gift was Zarathustra, so one such as Goethe's gift would be his expended self as an example, a goal. We see here that the great promise of the forgetful animal presented in GM can find its fulfillment in places other than the prophecy of Zarathustra. Perhaps the most important of the Nietzschean virtues mentioned above is the final ingredient, reformulated in EH as *amor fati*: 'that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but *love* it.'¹⁵² Without possession of *amor fati*, it is impossible for any who would will their own evolution to successfully respond to the test of the eternal return. At first glance *amor fati* might seem to contradict the notion of the will to power as becoming; however, the desire that nothing be different embodies the attitude of the *Übermenschlich* type who can positively respond to the challenge of the eternal return. The eternal return, if we accept it as a moral/existential imperative, is the ultimate value judgment that determines whether or not someone is ascending or descending, whether they have capacity to continue their evolution or remain at the level of self preservation.¹⁵³ They who will be able to embrace recurrence will already understand the truth of becoming and will, therefore, overcome the spirit of revenge in justifying their

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² EH "Clever" § 10.

¹⁵³ The eternal return as value judgment will be further discussed in Chapter V of this thesis.

past and creating a willed future. I do not want to go into this further at this time since we will return to the topic later in the thesis. In place of natural selection, Nietzsche's unnatural selection – the eternal return – will be the new marker by which to decide who evolves and who remains static. We will examine the implications of Nietzsche's willed evolution below; however, before we do so I wish to draw out a further idea of what Nietzsche means when he says that he wants to re-translate man back into nature. An examination of this statement should provide grounds for the critique that will be mounted later.

Nietzsche and Teleology

To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been scrawled and painted over that eternal basic text of *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the *rest* of nature, with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all too long, "you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!"¹⁵⁴

We are now in a position to explore the teleological charge that Nietzsche holds against Darwin. Drawing attention to hierarchical language used by Darwin, Nietzsche accuses him of maintaining a false belief in humans as something higher than animals, as evidenced in *TI*, where Nietzsche argues against Darwin that 'species do *not* grow more perfect.'¹⁵⁵ Judging by the

¹⁵⁴ BGE § 230.

¹⁵⁵ *TI* "Expeditions" § 14.

implications of the theory of natural selection and the resulting contribution that theory has to the death of God, it is absurd to reference such a scale of value. What we must do in the face of this death is to no longer ignore the fact of becoming as the definition of life and instead 'naturalize humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature.'¹⁵⁶ As evidenced by the passage taken from *Beyond Good & Evil*, this is an important task even when Darwin is not specifically being mentioned. These anthropomorphisms would necessarily include any notion of hierarchy, design or purpose that is apparently still residual in Darwin.

The inhabitants of each successive period in the world's history have beaten their predecessors in the race for life, and are, in so far, higher in the scale of nature.¹⁵⁷

It would seem here that Darwin is writing blindly, without considering the implications of his research. So as to show that this is not a lone occasion of a possible misuse of language, Morrison quotes from the end of the book where Darwin again speaks in teleological language when he states that 'all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.'¹⁵⁸ Although Nietzsche does not reference these passages himself directly there is a telling sentence in *UH*, found directly below the quote already cited in this chapter, that addresses the results of not understanding the implications of one's research:

¹⁵⁶ GS § 109.

¹⁵⁷ Charles Darwin, quoted in Morrison, p. 76.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 74.

He stands high and proud upon the pyramid of the world process; as he lays the keystone of his knowledge at the top of it he seems to call out to nature all around him: 'We have reached the goal, we are the goal, we are nature perfected.' Overproud European of the nineteenth century, you are raving! Your knowledge does not perfect nature, it only destroys your own nature.¹⁵⁹

Despite the fact that Nietzsche does not name Darwin here specifically, in light of the passages from the *Origin of Species* that Morrison points to, it follows that Darwin himself can be seen as one of the metaphysical bird catchers that Nietzsche abhors in *BGE*.¹⁶⁰ It seems clear that Nietzsche has Darwin at least partially in mind whenever he talks about teleological assumptions regarding nature, and this is, in part, why Darwin's thinking must be overcome. Whether or not Nietzsche is completely fair to Darwin, or even wholly knowledgeable of the intricacies of his theories, is not up to this chapter to discover. What is important are the assumptions underlying Darwinian thinking that Nietzsche uncovers and argues against. Nietzsche himself is not advocating a mere return to a pre-cultural existence; rather, he seeks to reunite us with the instincts that have been forgotten through the natural cultivation of weaker types through Darwinian selection that have been assisted through the creation of civilized forms of weakness and depravity. In order to spurn humans onto the path of self overcoming it is necessary that 'man henceforth stands before man as even today,

¹⁵⁹ *UH* § 9.

¹⁶⁰ It is interesting to note here a further possible connection between *BGE* 230 and Darwin himself: as a naturalist, Darwin's theories were largely constructed through observation of finches on the Galapagos Islands. If Nietzsche was familiar with Darwin's research, he may have been aiming directly at Darwin with his description of 'metaphysical bird catchers.'

hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the *rest* of nature.¹⁶¹

Nietzsche's exemplars, then, while not seen as something superior to nature, can stand in an ordered rank against the rest of humanity. Indeed, the result of this re-translation would necessitate a new, humbler means of looking at life, one that understands man as an animal that is 'the sickliest, the one most dangerously strayed from its instincts',¹⁶² however, man is still worth investigating as an object since he remains the most interesting of animals. Ostensibly, then, it would seem as though Nietzsche is ready to move away from Darwin in terms of the artificial ranking of humans; however, it is yet to be seen exactly how successful he is in doing so.

As we have seen above, Nietzsche himself is quite willing to talk about the *Übermensch* as something over and above human reality. Peter S. Groff points out the problem in an article discussing the role of the ape in Nietzsche's writings.¹⁶³ Taking his aim at the famous passage in the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* wherein Zarathustra equates humans with apes and refers to the human as an embarrassment to the *Übermensch*¹⁶⁴, Groff notes a 'residual speciesism'¹⁶⁵ shining through in Nietzsche's anthropomorphic tones. The issue that arises here

¹⁶¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage, 1989), § 230.

¹⁶² AC § 14.

¹⁶³ Peter S. Groff, "Who Is Zarathustra's Ape?" in *Acampora & Acampora*, p. 17-31.

¹⁶⁴ 'What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too, man is more ape than any ape.' Z: Prologue.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 19.

hinges on a matter of interpretation: if Nietzsche is derisively speaking of the ape in a literal sense, then we are left with an unchallenged assumption on the part of Nietzsche himself; however, if Nietzsche can be shown to be speaking ironically, then we are presented with just another stylistic complexity. Although it is clear that Zarathustra is speaking analogically, more troubling are passages that Groff points to from *Human, All Too Human* that seem to belie teleological assumptions redolent in Nietzsche that bear similarities to the very charges Nietzsche brings against Darwin.

Circular orbit of humanity – Perhaps the whole of humanity is no more than a stage in the evolution of a certain species of animal of limited duration: so that man has emerged from the ape and will return to the ape, while there will be no one present to take any sort of interest in this strange comic conclusion. Just as, with the decline of Roman culture and its principal cause, the spread of Christianity, a general uglification of man prevailed within the Roman Empire, so an eventual decline of the general culture of the earth could also introduce a much greater uglification and in the end animalization of man to the point of apelikeness. – Precisely because we are able to visualize this prospect we are perhaps in a position to prevent it from occurring.¹⁶⁶

And from later in the same work:

If a god created the world then he created men as the *apes of god*, so as always to have on hand something to cheer him up in his all-too-protracted eternities. The music of the spheres encompassing the earth would then no doubt be the mocking laughter of all other creatures encompassing man.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ HAH, Volume I, § 247.

¹⁶⁷ HAH, Volume II, § 14.

What Groff takes issue with is the usage of obviously teleological language with explicit reference to man as something higher than the ape. Moreso, Groff contends, the first aphorism presents the ape in such an unattractive light that to return to it would be something best avoided. The second selection preserves the false order of rank as well, only this time with the addition of God. If we interpret this literally, we can see Nietzsche adhering to a linear progression from the ape as a lower animal to man an animal higher than the ape, yet still aping something else. The culmination of this mimetic chain, I will argue, is the figure of Zarathustra's ape, which appears after the death of God has been diagnosed. Although the subtraction of God from the equation in *Zarathustra* may seem to rescue Nietzsche from his own apparent anthropomorphisms and latent teleology, I will argue that Nietzsche's project still remains woefully unresolved. Groff argues differently, suggesting that we should take Nietzsche as always speaking rhetorically about the role of the ape, despite the presence of traditional teleological language in his writing; however, it seems to me rather disingenuous to pass over difficulties in Nietzsche's work when there seems little ground to do so. The question remains open: is Nietzsche disparaging the ape in *HAH* § 147 or is he simply being ironic? Given the above-described confrontation with Darwin it would seem as though Nietzsche is obviously writing with ironic flair; however, Nietzsche's own disgust with the modernity he criticizes might be taken to indicate a genuine abhorrence at the idea of returning to a form of life lower than the ape. Indeed, isn't this very abhorrence, this disgust at the state of

modernity the driving force behind Nietzsche's desire to redeem humanity from itself? What else are Nietzsche's ideal figures but various ways to prevent this return from occurring? It is not my intention to answer these questions now, but to leave them for a later chapter to pursue.

The character of Zarathustra's ape appears in the third part of the book as someone who has based his own life on the teachings that Zarathustra has been espousing throughout his journeys. Throughout conversation, it becomes apparent that this character, though fond of spreading Zarathustra's word, does so without fully understanding what he is saying. Nietzsche here is using the image of the ape to denote superficial mimicry, as he does in the latter of the earlier writings that Groff discusses. Mimicry is usually associated in Nietzsche's corpus with education¹⁶⁸ as a necessary, though pathological, stage on the way to creation. Indeed, the problem with mimesis as a way of living or a form of education is that it belies any attempt at surpassing mere imitation. Groff takes this interpretation of mimicry and applies it to the model given in the speech on the "Three Metamorphoses," equating the stage of mimesis with that of the camel that must first bear the burden of tradition before continuing along the path of creation. As Groff concludes, I think we can see here how Nietzsche uses the image of the ape, at least in Zarathustra, primarily as a metaphor. It is unclear whether we can absolve Nietzsche of the charge of residual teleology in places where he is speaking in unpoetically couched language. One nagging question

¹⁶⁸ *HAH*, Volume I, § 274.

remains: with the replacement of God with the *Übermensch* or the higher type as an exemplar to model ourselves on, are we not simply becoming apes of a supposedly more naturalistic ideal? One might suggest that, in light of Zarathustra's statement that, in reference to the path of the *Übermensch*, "'This is my way; where is yours?'" – thus I answered those who asked me "the way". For the way – that does not exist,¹⁶⁹ Nietzsche is not advocating the aping of one ideal by all. This apparent espousing of a pluralistic outlook finds its complete opposite in the either/or split that we find in *TI*, indicating a definitive rupture between ascending and descending types that does not leave much room for ambiguity. *TI* 33 boldly contrasts two distinct types; one that is spoken of in terms of value and the other spoken of in terms of disease and decay. Nietzsche is clearly advocating one type over another. It follows then, that in discussing the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche would more than likely urge one to follow Zarathustra in his attempts at overcoming humanity than to do otherwise. It seems to me that to stick too closely to the ideas of genius discussed above can only result in a) the positing of *Übermenschen* as ideals that exist as something more than human and are therefore unrealistic or b) the positing of merely exceptional humans as goals that are realistic to the point of being mundane, all too human. One direction leads us back to something that is more than natural, which would be devolution for Nietzsche, while the other confines us once again to simple anthropocentrism.

¹⁶⁹Z:III "On the Spirit of Gravity".

Paradoxically, it seems that Nietzsche's own attempt at de-deifying nature can only result in the re-deification of something else entirely.¹⁷⁰

In GS § 109, discussed above, Nietzsche cautions us also to avoid the proposition that states that nature follows laws or possesses drives, such as that of self-preservation. Nietzsche once again casts himself as someone who would redeem nature from our anthropomorphisms. Seen in this light, Ansell-Pearson suggests, is not the will to power, as the undercurrent of life itself, just another anthropomorphism?¹⁷¹ After all, if we are to accept the will to power as the fundamental instinct of life what is left to differentiate it from the anthropomorphic instinct for self-preservation that Nietzsche singles out in GS § 109. Indeed, to say that the will to power is a facet of natural existence does not seem altogether different from calling it a law of nature even though nature 'does not observe any laws.'¹⁷² Ansell-Pearson brings the problem home in the form of a strikingly direct question: 'If it is illegitimate to suggest that life and the universe manifest a desire or struggle for self-preservation, on what basis, and with what legitimacy, can Nietzsche claim that the fundamental essence of life is 'will-to-power'?'¹⁷³ Nietzsche's corpus is silent in responding to this objection and it is this silence that causes Ansell-Pearson to suggest that 'it is at the point at

¹⁷⁰ It has been brought to my attention that this analysis is somewhat akin to Heidegger's. While I do not agree with Heidegger that the *Übermensch* is substituted in the absence of God, I do think that Heidegger's criticism reveals flaws in Nietzsche's work. This will be addressed in a further chapter below.

¹⁷¹ Ansell-Pearson, p. 106.

¹⁷² GS § 109.

¹⁷³ Ansell-Pearson, p. 107.

which Nietzsche seeks to turn the experiment of return into a new 'contra' Darwinian model of selection, and to cultivate it with the selection of the strong and the weak 'once and for all' at a moment in history, that his thinking fails in his task.¹⁷⁴ This is a contention that I share and cannot presently find a convincing way to remedy; however, I am also not sure that a remedy is possible in this case.

On Redemption

We have seen glimpses of how Nietzsche casts himself in the same redemptive and messianic role that he claims to despise. This is echoed in the very way in which the *Übermensch* is characterized as one 'who will redeem us not only from the hitherto reigning ideal but also from that which was bound to grow out of it the great nausea, the will to nothingness, nihilism...this victor over God' and who '*must come one day*.'¹⁷⁵ This is almost a desperate call for an ideal that may be impossible to realize. By attempting to create an alternative means of evolution to that of Darwin, Nietzsche comes across as a moralist, or rather, an immoralist, who wishes to be seen as something other than what he is. As noted above, it is when Nietzsche tries to turn his more poetic philosophical creations into empirical models that they come dangerously close to the realm of the human, all too human. For me, Nietzsche is at his most effective when he is

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 108

¹⁷⁵ *GM*, II, § 24.

allowed to remain in the very realm of moral idealism that Conway attempts to dispel in the article discussed above. To sully his works through reconstructive apologia of this kind can only be destructive to the philosophy of someone so concerned with being understood. Conway does just this when he tries to reconcile Nietzsche's apparent moral idealism by regarding the *Übermensch* as nothing more than a 'propitious confluence of social, historical, and material conditions, such as those that presided over the birth of tragedy in ancient Greece or the Italian Renaissance.'¹⁷⁶ In suggesting that we view the *Übermensch* as a mere confluence of forces we are reduced to the mundane, all too human sort of ideal resembling the genius of culture that I discussed above. This is almost the same as returning to the concept of the lucky strike that Nietzsche sought to move away from with his very notion of willed evolution. The *Übermensch*, as presented by Zarathustra, is the more proper immanent ideal since it is something that must always be characterized by becoming. The great promise of the forgetful animal must remain a promise and not a realization for it to be meaningful, unless realization of the ideal is to take place on a solely individual level. If we are to view the genius of culture or the exemplars typified by Goethe as the aim of a willed evolution, then we are left with little more than mere human role models. Why, then, this drive to redeem what we cannot immediately embrace? Is it even necessary?

¹⁷⁶ Conway, p. 91.

What justifies man is his reality – it will justify him eternally. How much more valuable an actual man is compared with any sort of merely desired, dreamed of, odious lie of a man? With any sort of *ideal* man? ... And it is only the ideal man who offends the philosopher's taste.¹⁷⁷

Of course, Nietzsche himself would later attempt a revision of his own misunderstood ideal in *Ecce Homo* and even offers a glimpse of the kind of attitude necessary to avoid the will to redeem – *amor fati*. This attitude seems almost Spinozistic if we consider it in light of another passage from *TI*:

One is necessary, one is a piece of fate, one belongs to the whole, one *is* in the whole – there exists nothing which could judge, measure, compare, condemn the whole... *But nothing exists apart from the whole!*¹⁷⁸

To seek to redeem, compare, or measure the reality with which one is confronted is an affront against the very life one is meant to affirm. Nietzsche understood this, but could not overcome that part of himself that would become nauseated at man.¹⁷⁹ The question that I want to raise here, then, is this: does Nietzsche's own disgust at man cause him to erect an ideal whose purpose is to save us from ourselves or do the Nietzschean ideals of the *Übermensch* and the genius of culture lead to a different form of redemption, one that might affirm life? I will return to this question during the discussions of kitsch and the Eternal Return to come; however, for now I want to turn back to Kundera in order to lay further

¹⁷⁷ *TI*, "Expeditions" § 32.

¹⁷⁸ *TI* "Errors" § 8.

¹⁷⁹ *EH* "Destiny" § 6.

ground for the critique of Nietzsche implicit in Kundera's writing.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how Nietzsche utilizes the facet of forgetting as the starting point for the creation of his different forms of naturalistic ideals. This has been done by contrasting the kind of willed evolution that Nietzsche would like to see occur with Darwinian evolution, which Nietzsche interprets, perhaps inappropriately, as a social rather than a biological theory, as a pathological means of preserving the status quo instead of focusing on future becoming. Nietzsche's prescriptions however, are not borne out without their own problems, which will be returned to below. As such, the following chapter will seek to flesh out the force behind the forgetting of being to be found in Kundera's work and will begin to examine how this force lies at work in Nietzsche's own philosophy, despite his best attempts to eradicate its presence. Indeed, it will be suggested that the force that Kundera battles in his fiction may be immune to any overcoming that humanity can undertake.

IV The Beautiful Lie of Kitsch

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.¹⁸⁰

Introduction

As we have seen in the second chapter of this thesis, Kundera's thought as regards the themes of memory and forgetting is highly problematic. Both of these traits figure in with Kundera's aesthetics; however, more importantly, they reveal truths about his characters existential and metaphysical dilemmas. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *Immortality* were especially ripe novels to explore in relation to these themes as they revealed two facets of Kundera's philosophical concerns: the degradation and loss of self in a temporal sense through imagology, and the graphomaniac impulse that leads to a general inability to communicate or understand. With the impossibility of maintaining a mnemonic existence in the modern world, all are imbued with a desire for immortality, whether that immortality is the mere wish to live on in the memory of those the individual has known, or the more metaphysical urge to live on in the memory of future generations; however, these are only symptoms of a greater impulse that Kundera points to in yet another novel. Kitsch is the great

¹⁸⁰ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Perennial Classics, 1984), p. 248.

beautifier, the aesthetic ideal that banishes all manner of excrescence from the total world picture it attempts to create and affirm. It is a metaphysical category constituting a categorical agreement with being whose participants willingly deny the existence of shit.¹⁸¹

Eva Le Grand sees Kundera's novelistic explorations of the theme of kitsch as the most fundamental of his themes as it is 'a reductive representation of the world based on the denial of human time, so that even desire lives on as no more than a desire for eternity.'¹⁸² This neat summation is, in part, the description of kitsch that I want to take up in this chapter. First, I will discuss kitsch's theoretical aspect as presented in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and elaborated upon in *Immortality*. This exploration will allow me to expand upon the analysis of characters presented in the first Kunderan chapter of the thesis, as well as offer a thematic introduction to the characters of Sabina and Franz from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: Sabina's story is one of an individual engaged in a constant battle with kitsch through art. How she goes about accomplishing this task and the degree to which she is successful will serve as testament to the breadth of the problem of kitsch as presented by Kundera. Sabina will be contrasted to the character of Franz, a former lover of hers who finds himself enmeshed in two forms of kitsch: one that idealizes Sabina as an absent muse and the other that becomes obsessed with the notion of progress, what Kundera

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Le Grand, p. 3.

calls the grand march. Most importantly, it is my wish to put the two writers treated in this thesis into direct confrontation as we consider to what extent we can talk of a Nietzschean kitsch and begin drawing out some of the implications of this possibility.

On Vapid Smiles and False Emotion

Before we can begin our discussion of kitsch proper, it is necessary to understand the basic drive underlying the act of eradicating what is unacceptable to our image of what existence should look like. To facilitate this understanding, let us turn back to *Immortality* in order to see what Kundera has to offer:

Homo sentimental cannot be defined as a man with feelings (for we all have feelings), but as a man who has raised feelings to a category of value. As soon as feelings are seen as a value, everyone wants to feel; and because we all like to pride ourselves on our values, we have a tendency to show off our feelings.¹⁸³

The danger in raising feeling to a value resides in its tendency to attract all and sundry to participate in this new value. When everyone does not necessarily feel spontaneously, but actively desires to feel, Kundera says, feeling becomes an imitation, an act that we put on in order to show that we feel more than, or at least as much as, others.¹⁸⁴ Kundera is not stating here that actors lack the ability to feel; rather, he is stating that the feeling portrayed by *homo sentimental* lacks

¹⁸³ *IMM*, p. 194.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 195.

content as it vanishes once the performance is over and all watchful eyes are turned aside. This is the inherent danger of imagology, as discussed in the second chapter: when the Marxist imagologues simplified their theory to a system of images that can be deciphered by all eyes any meaningful referent became lost in a show of signs whose significance was no longer fully understood by a public fed on flashy metaphorical pictures. Elsewhere in *Immortality*, Kundera reconnects the idea of the empty image with the threat that Agnes voices with her thought that 'God's eye has been replaced by a camera.'¹⁸⁵ If the modern world is characterized by an overabundance of eyes, it is the imagologues who hold power with their ability to manipulate how they are seen. A character named Rubens, who only appears in one brief section toward the end of the book, realizes that the power of imagology is to be found in the smiles of politicians. Political kitsch, as Kundera calls this aspect of imagology, is exemplified in Kundera's description, through the eyes of Sabina, of the Communist May Day parade from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

As a group approached the reviewing stand, even the most blasé faces would beam with dazzling smiles, as if trying to prove they were properly joyful or, to be more precise, in proper *agreement*. Nor were they merely expressing political agreement with Communism; no theirs was an agreement with being as such... The unwritten, unsung motto of the parade was not "Long live Communism!" but "Long live life!" The power and cunning of Communist politics lay in the fact that it appropriated this slogan. For it was this idiotic tautology ("Long live life!") which attracted

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 31.

people indifferent to the theses of Communism to the Communist parade.¹⁸⁶

The smiles of agreement that Kundera describes here are empty because they bear no understanding of their meaning. Instead of the truth of Communist politics, the smiles of the many only refer back to an attractive, stupid tautology created by imagologues.

As Kundera says above, the raising of feeling to a value places all emphasis on the category itself and loses its hold on the actual reality ostensibly lurking behind the feeling. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bettina's relationship to Goethe. In an earlier chapter, I discussed how Bettina's graphomaniac impulse caused her to radically revise and beautify the letters between her and Goethe for the public eye. What I did not indicate was her latent motive for changing the substance of the past in favor of creating an image more conducive to her desire. Aside from the desire for immortality that resides in all graphomania, Bettina acts as a prime exemplar of *homo sentimental*. Kundera points to a textual oddity contained in their correspondence: in all of their letter writing, Bettina did not ask Goethe very many questions. The content of their letters is said to have been largely the expression of Bettina's opinions without the solicitation of any response from Goethe. Kundera diagnoses this self-absorption as a projection of Bettina's true interest in love as a value and not any

¹⁸⁶ ULB, p. 249.

intimate, particular love for Goethe as a person. Even more telling is Kundera's analysis of a line Bettina wrote in a letter:

"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." ...What was at stake between them was not love. It was immortality.¹⁸⁷

Bettina's idolatry of love as a categorical value leads her to write her emotion into history as a metaphysical absolute, a memory which we have already seen is based not on reality but the imagological love of *homo sentimental*. In making herself a universe of words, Bettina obscures the unacceptable aspects of her actual correspondence with Goethe—his admonishments, dismissals and laconic responses. In short, what Bettina and all other members of the *homo sentimental* persuasion are working towards in making their emotions a category in itself is the kitschification of their realities. Bettina's love for love itself becomes so devoid of any phenomenological referent that desire exists only as a desire for immortality, for eternal things. We are now in a position to get at this fundamental Kunderan critique.

As defined in the epigraph to this chapter, kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, a rejection of all that is unacceptable in human existence. Far from being simply a writer's provocative etymology, Kundera explicates his definition through mock theological discourse. Kundera begins with a discussion of the Gnostic writer Valentinus, who claimed that Jesus, as the embodiment of God on

¹⁸⁷ IMM, p. 61.

earth, did not defecate although he did eat and drink. Herein lies the dilemma: 'Either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don't lock yourself in the bathroom!) or we are created in an unacceptable manner.'¹⁸⁸ For Kundera, the existence of shit serves as base proof of the flawed nature of creation that undermines the perfection of the creation myth from Genesis; or, in more specifically Kunderan terms, shit undermines the categorical agreement with being that kitsch preserves. This ability on the part of shit to undermine kitsch can lead to catastrophic effects; however, these effects have metaphysical significance in that they imply the imperfection of creation. Kundera relates the story of Stalin's son, imprisoned in a war camp, who chose suicide over shaming himself by cleaning the camp latrine:

Stalin's son laid down his life for shit. But a death for shit is not a senseless death. The Germans who sacrificed their lives to expand their country's territory to the east, the Russians who died to extend their country's power to the west—yes, they died for something idiotic, and their deaths have no meaning or general validity. Amid the general idiocy of the war, the death of Stalin's son stands out as the sole metaphysical death.¹⁸⁹

Stalin's son, though not conscious of the implications of his action, dies a metaphysical death in that he would rather perish than face his own body's natural product. A death of this kind can only come about when the lie of kitsch is revealed.

¹⁸⁸ *ULB*, p. 248.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 244.

We have already seen how kitsch is reflected through the two modes of *homo sentimental* – imagology and graphomania. If there is any doubt as to the connection that these modes bear with kitsch, let us dispel them thus: 'When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme.'¹⁹⁰ Kitsch is the force that tugs at the heartstrings, that coerces Bettina into writing her love into immortality, that causes one to deify the design of nature, that jerks tears from the eyes of all:

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.¹⁹¹

We have now discovered the most important ingredient in Kundera kitsch: universalizability. Kitsch motivates the will to create an 'idyll for all...where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man nor man against other men, where the world and all its people are molded 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.'¹⁹² As a novelistic phenomenologist, Kundera uncovers kitsch, the desire to eradicate all that is unacceptable to its aesthetic notion of existence, as the driving force behind all vestiges of absolutism whether

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 250.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 251.

¹⁹² *BLF*, p. 8.

ideological or political. Once kitsch reaches these levels of power it can be classified as totalitarian kitsch: the type of kitsch that banishes all individuality (as we can see occurring with the rise of imagology depicted in *Immortality*), all doubt, and all understanding that is not derivative from feeling. For Kundera, it is the novelist's responsibility to combat totalitarian kitsch wherever it appears: '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.'¹⁹³ It is with an eye toward this nuance, then, that I want to turn attention now to one of Kundera's texts in order to examine the extent to which those who ask questions, not just through the medium of the novel, are necessarily enemies of the regime of kitsch. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* presents us with two characters who deal directly with the theme of kitsch in vastly different ways. Sabina, an artist whose paintings combat kitsch, is contrasted with Franz, a professor who finds himself enmeshed in the desire to participate in the grand march of history and revolutionary progress. Kundera uses these two stories as parallel methods of demonstrating the ultimate reality of kitsch and the impossibility of completely eradicating its effects on life.

¹⁹³ *ULB*, p. 254.

The Road to Golgotha

When we are first introduced to Sabina it is as the mistress of the main character in the book, Tomas.¹⁹⁴ Sabina describes the methodology of her paintings, a process born out of a fortuitous dripping of paint on top of an already started project as a way of revealing an 'unintelligible truth' behind the 'intelligible lie' of the surface.¹⁹⁵ According to the political interpretation of her art that Kundera assures the reader is mistaken, Sabina battles the Communist kitsch of the time that sought to encourage only realistic art as 'art that was not realistic was said to sap the foundations of socialism';¹⁹⁶ however, we can see that Sabina's actual intent was metaphysical in nature as the goal of her paintings was to subvert the viewer's expectations and reveal the falsehood of the surface image. Although Communist kitsch was the most pervasive form dealt with by Sabina's work, she understood that kitsch appears in a multitude of forms according to various ideologies. Kundera lists several of these: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national, international; the list could go on to include any idea that has been systematized by imagologues into an easily digestible piece of thought for the masses. As an artist, however, Sabina's own interpretation of her work is ignored by her commentators and replaced by yet another form of kitsch – the

¹⁹⁴ The story of Tomas and Tereza will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter as their stories revolve around the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return and do not directly bear on kitsch as such.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 63.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 63.

kitsch of the exiled émigré forced to abandon her home by tyrannical forces. 'Her paintings are a struggle for happiness' reads the summation of her work in a biography found in an exhibition catalogue.¹⁹⁷

After this treatment of her paintings Sabina begins to fictionalize her biography in order to prevent any kitschification of her life by others. However, it is impossible to free oneself from all aspects of kitsch. As Sabina's story comes to a close, she finds herself living in America at the home of an old married couple who like her paintings and offer her room for a studio on their farm. Here we discover Sabina's own, personal form of kitsch: it is 'her image of home, all peace, quiet, and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and wise father.'¹⁹⁸ It would seem that Sabina, too, falls prey to the power of kitsch; however, Sabina never loses sight of the fact that this idyllic image of the homestead is nothing but a beautiful lie and this, for Kundera is the key to living with the irreplaceable fact of kitsch:

As soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it moves into the context of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness. For none among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely.¹⁹⁹

Although kitsch is ever present in human reality its existence does not have to be solely one of negativity. Those who, like Sabina, are able to see through its aesthetic mask manage to free themselves from the stronghold of kitsch and are

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 254.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 255.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 256.

able to continue doing so throughout their lives. What are the consequences for those who do not see through kitsch? What is the motivation behind kitsch's preservation of lies and smokescreens? What is the final truth that kitsch obscures? These are the questions we will address in trying to understand Franz.

Throughout the novel, Sabina is contrasted with her lover, Franz. In a section entitled 'Words Misunderstood,' Kundera relates the varying degrees of miscommunication and incomprehension characterizing their relationship. One of the most important of these words is 'parade.' We have already seen Sabina's view of parades in the description of the May Day celebration above. Franz, on the other hand, is engrossed with the image of the parade as a representation of progress, as 'the image of Europe and its history.'²⁰⁰ Here we have the archetypal image of the political kitsch that Kundera calls the Grand March:

The fantasy of the Grand March that Franz was so intoxicated by is the political kitsch joining leftists of all times and tendencies. The Grand March is the splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness; it goes on and on, obstacles notwithstanding, for obstacles there must be if the march is to be the Grand March... What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March.²⁰¹

Again, Kundera's sarcasm reveals the overwhelming ability of kitsch to unite large masses of people under one banner. The totalitarian ascendancy of the image of the parade creates a sense of futurity, of a single chain stretching

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 99.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 257.

onward into the distance. Sabina, as the novel's truth revealer, sees the image of raised fists marching in unison as something terrifying, as something revealing of the basic evil that kitsch obfuscates behind pretty pictures. What follows in the narrative of the novel is a spectacle of imagology and idealistic kitsch, with a parade of photographers, actors, and intellectuals marching on the road to Cambodia in order to allow Western doctors to help the suffering people on the other side of the border. However, the dissonant clatter of the grand march is met only with the non-receptive, death silence that Tamina once found so enticing. Although this silence was comforting for Tamina, who sought to escape from the eyes of the public, the Grand March feeds on the attention brought to it by imagology. The death knell of silence has caused monumental history to lose its epic quality with the absence of viewers and to expend itself in rapidly accelerating processes. In Kundera's vision, the Grand March has lost its efficacy and begun to collapse in on itself 'until one day it will be reduced to a mere dimensionless dot.'²⁰² As Le Grand points out, what Sabina has known and fought against throughout her life, the predominance of totalitarian kitsch and the obliteration of meaning, is only realized by Franz days before his death as he begins to understand the true function of kitsch.²⁰³

This, then, is the final mask that kitsch wears: it is a 'folding screen set up

²⁰² *Ibid*, p. 267.

²⁰³ Le Grand, p. 27.

to curtain off death.²⁰⁴ As we have seen in the case of Agnes' forget-me-not, the beautiful lie that kitsch tells obscures the fact of one's death from view of those without the ability to see.²⁰⁵ Kitsch, the great aesthetic force, the drive to create totalitarian systems, the categorical agreement with being that would deny the existence of shit, has its final say once the individual is dead. Death tears the individual out of the stream of time, making it possible to put a toe tag on the being of the deceased as something categorizable, only an image of the individual that once was. As we have seen in the second chapter, the image of us that remains after death can never approach the reality of the person as they were in life and this is where kitsch finds its final victory:

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.
What remains of Franz?
An inscription reading A RETURN AFTER LONG WANDERINGS.
And so on and so forth. Before we are forgotten, we will be turned
into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion.²⁰⁶

Kitsch is the ultimate form of forgetting because it makes any substantive remembering impossible. It is with this in mind that I want to turn attention yet

²⁰⁴ ULB, p. 253.

²⁰⁵ We find a similar thought expressed in *The Book of Laughter & Forgetting*: "Those who are fascinated by the idea of progress do not suspect that everything moving forward is at the same time bringing the end nearer and that joyous watchwords like "forward" and "farther" are the lascivious voice of death urging us to hasten to it." p. 246.

²⁰⁶ ULB, p. 278.

again to Nietzsche and bring the two authors into convergence for the first time so far in an investigation of Nietzschean kitsch.

Nietzsche and Kundera

Up to now we have traced different paths through the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Milan Kundera using their treatments of memory and forgetting as threads through some of their most important ideas. Nietzsche's philosophy attacks traditional morality as an antipode to life, rooting out the nihilistic tendencies of all previous moralities in preparation for a revaluation that can only take place once the unhealthy aspects of the past have been actively forgotten. Kundera's novelistic phenomenology runs the opposite direction, striving to preserve memory in a world of forgetting and inescapable kitschification. As part of their methodologies of unconcealment, both of these thinkers have taken great pains to reveal unintelligible truths behind intelligible lies: for Nietzsche, this entails a sounding out of Christianity's hollow doctrines²⁰⁷ in order to pave the way for the creation of a more naturalistic ideal; for Kundera, this involves the discovering of kitsch as a smokescreen obscuring ugliness and death through its symptoms of imagology and graphomania. What I wish to accomplish in what follows is to place Nietzsche and Kundera in close proximity in order to understand both of them as philosophical muckrakers

²⁰⁷ Although this particular thread is not treated in this thesis its importance is not to be overlooked. More central to the current work is the latter aspect of Nietzsche's thought.

operating within two different discourses: the discourse of the philosophical text and that of the novel. Through doing so, it is my hope to express some of their shared affinities as well as the areas in which they diverge and oppose one another.

The final chapter of Alan White's *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth* deals with the question of kitsch and begins with an attempt to free Nietzsche from possible classification beneath Kundera's Grand March brand of totalitarian kitsch. In seeking to clear Nietzsche from this charge White addresses primarily the section from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* entitled 'On the Thousand and One Goals.' Here Zarathustra speaks about the *Übermensch* as the one goal that humanity is lacking and raises the question 'if humanity still lacks a goal – is humanity itself not still lacking too?'²⁰⁸ White then quotes from earlier in the same section a passage that ensures the reader does not view Zarathustra as a self-serving tyrant: it is the 'loveless ego that desires its own profit in the profit of the many – that is not the origin of the herd, but its going under.'²⁰⁹ This passage, especially when viewed in light of Zarathustra's description of the positive form of the lust to rule as ascending to 'self-sufficient heights'²¹⁰ certainly presents Nietzsche's prophet in a more amiable light. Viewing this passage as an admonition against egoistic ruling that would seek subjects instead of creators, White is successful in vindicating Zarathustra of recommending the *Übermensch* as a form of

²⁰⁸ Z:1 "On the Thousand and One Goals"

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ Z:3 "On the Three Evils"

totalitarian kitsch; however, I am not sure the same can be said of Nietzsche himself. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, Nietzsche presents the reader with an either/or in *Twilight of the Idols* that very clearly delineates between ascending and descending types using language heavily characterized by metaphors of health. Through describing the descending types as suffering from 'decay, chronic degeneration, sickening,'²¹¹ Nietzsche adamantly displays a preference for those who would fall into what we may call the kitsch of the genius whose ability to affirm life is due to their 'great health.'²¹² The danger with expressing such preferences, especially when couched in metaphors of health and redemption, is that Nietzsche can come across as a Socrates begging for his Asclepius, a redeemer from the ills of this life, as can be seen in the following passage:

This man of the future, who will redeem us not only from the hitherto reigning ideal but also from that which was bound to grow out of it, the great nausea, the will to nothingness, nihilism; this bell-stroke of noon and of the great decision that liberates the will again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man; this Antichrist and antinihilist; this victor over God and nothingness — *he must come one day.* —²¹³

The problem with totalitarian kitsch, as I see it, does not lie primarily in its overt political implications, but in its ability to foster either/ors and idylls for all that

²¹¹ *TI*, "Expeditions" § 33.

²¹² *GM*, II, § 24.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

transform those who do not share in the idyll into exiles or lepers. While I feel that White is successful in defending Zarathustra, I also feel that he commits the error of not delineating clearly enough between the teachings of Zarathustra and the teachings of Nietzsche himself, something that Nietzsche takes care to do in his later works and especially in *Ecce Homo*. The implications of Nietzsche's attempts to justify his own most famous and misunderstood work will be examined below; however, I want to return now to White's comparison with Kundera. There is one more aspect of Grand March kitsch that I want to touch on here. White insists that Nietzsche is freed from Grand March kitsch because of Zarathustra's concentration on non-exploitational forms of rule.²¹⁴ While I agree with White that Zarathustra does not represent a form of totalitarian kitsch, I cannot agree with him in reference to the Grand March. Let us remember that Kundera defines the Grand March as something that 'goes on and on, obstacles notwithstanding, for obstacles there must be if the march is to be the Grand March.'²¹⁵ Here we have a sense of progress as something that does not require a goal; the Grand March continues indefinitely, searching after new ends until it ends in the death of its participants.²¹⁶ Unmasking the kitsch of the Grand March allows us to see how all forms of kitsch rely upon a desire for eternity that can not be fulfilled. Taken in this light, it would seem that Nietzsche's notion of the

²¹⁴ Alan White, *Within Nietzsche's Labyrinth* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 118.

²¹⁵ *ULB*, p. 257.

²¹⁶ See footnote 156 above.

ever becoming *Übermensch* as well as the Eternal Return both fit into Kundera's Grand March kitsch. We will examine this possibility further in the next chapter.

One of the affinities between Nietzsche and Kundera touched on by White is their shared status as unmaskers of the illusions upheld in life, especially as regards the body and its natural functions. As the majority of this chapter has sought to explain, Kundera unmask kitsch as the great obfuscator of the existence of shit in the world. A world without shit is nothing but a metaphysical lie that ultimately affects the way in which we relate to death. Zarathustra speaks of the body as a 'great reason' that is opposed by that 'little reason' which is called spirit, soul, ego, or any of the other otherworldly metaphysical categories invented by philosophers and sages.²¹⁷ Later in the book, Zarathustra speaks directly of the world as being full of filth; however, this does not mean that we should simply obscure this filth from view with kitsch but that it too should be overcome and redeemed:

There is wisdom in this, that there is much in the world that smells foul: nausea itself creates wings and water-divining powers. Even in the best there is still something that must be overcome. O my brothers, there is much wisdom in this, that there is much filth in the world.²¹⁸

As White points out, as does Kundera in his theological discourse, it is the Christian tradition that has characterized life as soiled by the filth that exists as a natural function and this is what Nietzsche argues against throughout the

²¹⁷ Z:1 "On the Despisers of the Body"

²¹⁸ Z: 3 "On Old and New Tablets"

Genealogy of Morals. The taming of the body that the civilized animal has undergone throughout time is what the forgetful animal of Nietzschean culture would overcome.

On his way to becoming an “angel” (to employ no uglier word) man has evolved that queasy stomach and coated tongue through which not only the joy and innocence of the animal but life itself has become repugnant to him – so that he sometimes holds his nose in his own presence and, with Pope Innocent the Third, disapprovingly catalogues his own repellent aspects (“impure begetting, disgusting means of nutrition in his mother’s womb, baseness of the matter out of which man evolves, hideous stink, secretion of saliva, urine, and filth”).²¹⁹

Nietzsche’s objections to the Christian subjugation of animal instinct and the ‘great reason’ of the body to the ‘little reason’ of the mind and ascetic ideals resemble his admonitions against positivistic teleological thinking, discussed in the third chapter, that would impose order where none inherently lies. Against these lines of thought Nietzsche warns us that ‘the conditions of life might include error.’²²⁰ A Kundera formulation of this same idea might be that the conditions of life might include shit.

White then proceeds to address the definition of kitsch that Kundera offers as a categorical agreement with being. For Kundera, this agreement is based on a basic faith whose roots lie in the book of Genesis ‘which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good, and that we are

²¹⁹ *GM*, II, § 7.

²²⁰ *GS* § 121.

therefore entitled to multiply.'²²¹ A paragraph later, however, Kundera introduces the problem that Genesis does not provide an answer for and that is the problem of shit discussed earlier in this chapter. The existence of kitsch as the obscurer of shit implies an essential agreement with the unacceptability of creation. What Nietzsche's critique of Christianity shows is the detrimental effect that such a view has toward life itself and how the creation of a new, naturalistic ideal that would not despise the body or subjugate the forgetful animal is necessary if it is to be successfully overcome. Life, for Nietzsche, does not resemble the image presented in religion or metaphysical positivism, but contains error. Kundera's own critique of kitsch and its obfuscation of truth behind distorting imagery clearly displays the falsity of the Christian doctrine that would seek to characterize the world as acceptable without accounting for contradictory evidence. The argument that Kundera utilizes here is similar to Hume's argument concerning the existence of evil: God, as the architect of the universe, either purposefully created a flawed product, or else it is the creator that is imperfect and the product remains flawed. Either creation is acceptable and shit is not something to be obscured, or creation is unacceptable and shit should be hidden. The existence of kitsch supports the latter option. White seems to misinterpret Kundera's own position in regards to the overcoming of metaphysics, insisting that Kundera's use of the Genesis story implies a belief in the creation of the world, either as proper or improper.

²²¹ *ULB*, p. 248.

The move beyond viewing the world as created or uncreated is the move beyond what I have been terming metaphysics – this, it seems to me, is the move that Kundera, for all his agreement with Nietzsche and his amplification of him, does not fully make...A non-metaphysical world would not be a world without shit, but it might be a world in which there would no longer be any reason to lay down one's life for shit.²²²

What White does not acknowledge is that Kundera's account of Stalin's son's death is told under the sign of weight, which, for Nietzsche, is an undesirable trait. The fact that Kundera tells this story in a chapter marked by irony and sarcasm belies its nature as something he is critiquing. Elsewhere in the novel, Kundera takes a view that necessarily stands in opposition to any metaphysical belief in creation. Rather, Kundera claims that 'chance and chance alone has a message for us. Everything that occurs out of necessity, everything expected, repeated day in and day out, is mute.'²²³ Once again, Kundera resembles Nietzsche in his affirmation of Lord Chance and his novelistic approach to the unmasking of false metaphysical ideals.

There is one other aspect of White's analysis that I wish to touch on here and that refers to yet one more type of kitsch described by Kundera. Quoting from an interview, White cites Kundera as defining kitsch as 'what has already been described a thousand times over in a light and lovely manner.' Kitsch is 'the beauty of "a thousand times already told."²²⁴ What White accomplishes here is a

²²² White, p. 144.

²²³ *ULB*, p. 48.

²²⁴ White, p. 139.

description of the process by which writers as evocative and startling as Nietzsche have been watered down over time through the dissemination of their works that gradually dissimulates the content of their thought. After all, Nietzschean phrases continually appear in books of great quotes and have even popped up on t-shirts or in pop psychology texts; however, this is not due to any bland superficiality on the part of Nietzsche's actual thought. Rather, as White states, 'if Nietzsche boils down to mental junk food, that is not because he offers us no intellectual nutrients, but rather because we will have boiled them away. Whatever is provocative or challenging in any philosophical teachings will be lost if the teachings are reduced to two words, be those words "individualism" and "tolerance," or any others.'²²⁵ Kundera has shown us how all attempts at controlling our images, whether the image we portray through writing or painting, is futile not only in the eyes of the public, but in the face of death as our ownmost possibility. With this in mind, then, why the constant drive to explain away, to possess the rights to interpretation? Why the urge for justification and redemption that appears over and over again? Interpretation is an issue of prime importance to both Nietzsche and Kundera, as we will see a bit later. Before we approach this question, however, it is time to examine their two different takes on eternity with a discussion of that most uncanniest of notions – the Eternal Return. The question of return will bring to the forefront all of the themes of weight, lightness, memory and forgetting that have been present in varying

²²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 138.

degrees throughout this thesis. As both Nietzsche and Kundera will point out, the extent to which the challenge of the Eternal Return affects those who encounter it will largely depend upon how good a memory the individual possesses. In addition, I will return to the question of kitsch and raise the question of whether or not it is possible to forge an ideal that is not, to some extent, fictional. To this extent, I will follow Bernd Magnus in examining the Eternal Return as a mythological counter to the Christian and Platonic mythologies that Nietzsche constantly battles. It is my hope that, in confronting the Eternal Return from both Nietzschean and Kunderan perspectives, we will be better able to come to terms with the concept of recurrence and understand its mythological significance along with the implications that this bears for philosophy in general.

V Promises Of Eternity

From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads *backward*: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever *can* walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before?²²⁶

Introduction

Nietzsche's riddle, his 'highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable,'²²⁷ the Eternal Return of the same, is one of the most widely discussed ideas that the philosopher set forth. As the highest affirmative gesture that one can make the Eternal Return is Zarathustra's darkest thought as it is the one thought that can willfully bind one to the earth, not for a linear eternity stretching infinitely, but for an eternity played on a constant, identical loop. First making its appearance at the end of the fourth book of *The Gay Science*, the thought of the Eternal Return becomes the 'fundamental concept'²²⁸ of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and remains prominent in the remainder of Nietzsche's works; however, the fact that the most thorough treatment of the idea is found in the poetic writing of *Zarathustra* has led many commentators to study the *Nachlass* material in order to find clarity as to what exactly the Eternal Return is supposed

²²⁶ Z:3 "On the Vision and the Riddle"

²²⁷ EH, "Zarathustra" § 1

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

to mean. What these studies have yielded is a wide variety of thought experiments written with the aim of making the thought of recurrence into a scientific, cosmological theory. Since none of the theories proposed in the notebooks turn out to be scientifically viable this failure has been taken to indicate Nietzsche's shortcomings as a thinker, as well as his inability to properly complete his thoughts.

Other commentators have focused on interpreting the Eternal Return as a normative, ethical imperative—a Nietzschean challenge to change the way we live. Using Bernd Magnus' work as an outline, I will offer a brief description of the cosmological interpretation of the Eternal Return before exploring the text of *Zarathustra* as a means of drawing out the existential implications of recurrence. Finally, I want to examine Magnus' critique of the Eternal Return as an instance of kronophobia while tying this notion into the Kunderan description of kitsch as discussed above. The second half of this chapter will focus on the Eternal Return as it appears in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Through this novel, Kundera's fiction yields another implicit critique of return that has been commented on in several places. I will examine some of these commentaries, while making the assertion that the comparisons to date have not granted Kundera his full due as a thinker as a result of focusing too narrowly on the text of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to the exclusion of Kundera's other work. In the end it will become apparent that Kundera's critique leaves us once more with a slew of questions that might never be answered.

Deciphering Nietzsche's Code

The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! What does this mad myth signify?²²⁹

With this quote, found at the beginning of his most famous novel, Kundera poses the question that will haunt the remainder of his text and that has, inevitably, laid in wait throughout the whole of this thesis. To deal with the Eternal Return is to deal with a living thought, a visceral question that came upon Nietzsche as a sudden insight—a flash occurring at a moment existing ‘6000 feet beyond man and time.’²³⁰ Nietzsche’s mad myth is one meant to elicit an immediate response; its effectiveness becomes diluted if one’s response is procrastinated by contemplation. On the surface a simple idea to comprehend, when placed within the context of Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole the Eternal Return takes on much deeper significance as a hypothesis. This being said, let us now examine the first appearance of this thought, quoted in its entirety:

The greatest weight.—What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment

²²⁹ ULB, p. 3.

²³⁰ EH, “Zarathustra” § 1.

and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?²³¹

The first proclamation of the Eternal Return is presented as a dramatic hypothetical exchange between the reader and a demon. Immediately we are placed in situation, engaged in dialogue with an entity we most likely would rather not have encountered. Nietzsche presents the reader with two possible ways of reacting to the demon's entreaties: to despair the possibility of recurrence or to embrace the demon's pronouncement. One would either master the thought of recurrence or be crushed by its weighty implications. No matter which choice is made, the call of Eternal Return is not something that can be ignored and our response to its call will determine the way we lead our lives. Nowhere is this existential quality of the Eternal Return more evident than in the text of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which we shall discuss below; however, before we can begin this exploration I want to take the time to briefly discuss the rationale behind treating the Eternal Return with an existential approach.

²³¹ GS § 341.

Bernd Magnus, in his *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*, spends the first portion of his book in a historical examination of the idea of recurrence before examining the *Nachlass* material pertaining to the empirical, cosmological version of the theory that Nietzsche worked on in the notebooks. Magnus goes to great lengths in illustrating how the thought experiments of the notebooks are incomplete and conceptually ambiguous. As such, Magnus points out that past commentators have been divided between considering the Eternal Return as an empirical fact or an ethical imperative. Those who have focused on the empirical interpretation 'attempt to interpret the doctrine of eternal recurrence as itself an attempt to offer a theory of the universe.'²³² This interpretation, however, has the least authoritative evidence in its favor as it relies wholly upon unpublished notes that should not be held in the same esteem as their published counterparts. Nietzsche's published references to the Eternal Return, Magnus maintains, are always written in hypothetical language, which lends credence to what he calls the normative interpretation. This is the interpretation that admonished us to act as if recurrence were a fact, regardless of its actual facticity. The problem that Magnus sees with this interpretation is that, despite its insights into the existential implications of the thought of recurrence, it too is entwined in the purported truth-value of the doctrine. Both the cosmological and the normative interpretations ask us to accept the truth of the Eternal Return as a crucial aspect

²³² Bernd Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 140.

of its importance. The interpretation that Magnus suggests, and that I want to discuss here, is one that views the choice that the Eternal Return forces upon the reader as emblematic of the attitude that reader has toward life; it is the Nietzschean doctrine that reveals one's health and status as either ascending or descending; it is Nietzsche's contra-Darwinistic selective tool and the 'being-in-the-world of *Übermenschen*.'²³³ With this in mind, let us turn to the text of *Zarathustra*.

The Cycle of Redemption

In coming to understand the role of the Eternal Return in Nietzsche's thought it is necessary to examine three crucial sections from *Zarathustra*: 'On Redemption,' 'On the Vision and the Riddle,' and 'The Convalescent.' An inspection of these passages, under the guidance of Bernd Magnus and Peter Berkowitz's interpretations, should provide insight into the character of this doctrine. It should be noted here that both Magnus and Berkowitz view Zarathustra's formulation of the Eternal Return as a means of redeeming the future of mankind from the spirit of revenge with which it has been poisoned hitherto.

For *that man be delivered from revenge, that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms.*²³⁴

²³³ *Ibid*, p. 142.

²³⁴ Z:II 'On the Tarantulas'

Aside from boldly stating the importance that overcoming revenge holds for Zarathustra, this passage suggests that deliverance from revenge is only a bridge toward the fulfillment of his highest hope, implying that what Zarathustra ultimately wishes to see is something far more radical still. Later in the same section Zarathustra cautions the reader to 'mistrust all in whom the impulse to punish is powerful.' Recall that in the first chapter of this thesis we discussed how punishment breeds the memory of bad conscience into the naturally forgetful animal, thereby taming the animal through the spirit of revenge, which turns its back on life. Here, too, the tarantulas preach equality, seeking to bring about the calculability of the herd that will enable the tarantulas to rule, as Nietzsche will elaborate later in the *Genealogy of Morals*. What the tarantulas display here is a corrupted will to power that is characterized by revenge as its lust to rule masks itself behind the virtuous notion of equality. This masked spirit of revenge forges the bad conscience through punishment resulting in what Nietzsche will later call the ascetic ideal—a condition in which the ultimate judgment is brought down upon life itself—'willing itself and all life were supposed to be—a punishment.'²³⁵ Life as punishment is the judgment brought down by those infected with the spirit of revenge: it is the final Socratic evaluation and, indeed, the evaluation shared by all transcendent metaphysical norms, whether those of Platonic philosophy or Christian morality. The Platonic philosopher, at least, becomes partially liberated in the cave allegory; however,

²³⁵ Z:II "On Redemption"

they do not remain so for long. To Nietzsche's mind, the vengeful drive that would force those liberated back into metaphysical chains is an inability to suffer 'time and its "it was."' ²³⁶ Indeed, Zarathustra admits that he, too, finds the weight of the past to be unendurable and that he would not be able to live if he 'were not a seer of that which must come.' And so, Zarathustra offers the baldest definition of his task:

To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it' – that alone should I call redemption. Will – that is the name of the liberator and joy-bringer; thus I taught you, my friends. But now learn this too: the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? 'It was' – that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy.

According to Zarathustra it was metaphysical madness that preached life as a punishment, which taught the necessity of redeeming becoming and, when this proved impossible, decided upon eternal punishment as a replacement. The redemption that would lead away from the spirit of revenge will only be brought about when 'the creative will says to [time], 'But thus I willed it.' Zarathustra's redemptive prescription is one that will replace the Darwinistic 'dreadful accident' of existence with a new, self willed creative attitude toward time. The mark of this new attitude will be embodied in the thought of Eternal Return,

²³⁶ *Ibid*

which, as Magnus writes, 'heightens, intensifies, —and eternalizes —'²³⁷ one's experience through its self-willed character. Let us now continue to examine *Zarathustra* to see how this intensification unfolds.

Zarathustra, the prophet of recurrence, spends much of the book unable to voice his 'most abysmal thought.'²³⁸ In order to understand how Eternal Return acts as a diagnostic tool by which to measure the worth of the person called upon to respond to its challenge we must explore the moments when Zarathustra himself tries to vocalize his thought. Through this examination, I believe, we can begin to comprehend the weight that this doctrine held for Nietzsche before we draw out some of its broader philosophical implications. Magnus turns his attention to 'On the Vision and the Riddle,' where we witness Zarathustra's first attempt to rid himself of the thought of Eternal Return. Relating the tale of his vision to his disciples, Zarathustra speaks of his ascent through the wilderness, accompanied only by the spirit of gravity anthropomorphized as a dwarf who taunts Zarathustra throughout his journey. Finally, Zarathustra summons his courage in order to voice the Eternal Return.

"Behold this gateway, dwarf!" I continued. "It has two faces. Two paths meet here; no one has yet followed either to its end. This long lane stretches back for an eternity. And the long lane out there, that is another eternity. They contradict each other, these paths; they offend each other face to face; and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is inscribed above: 'Moment.' But whoever would follow one of them,

²³⁷ Magnus, p. 154.

²³⁸ Z:III "On the Vision and the Riddle"

on and on, farther and farther — do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?"

"All that is straight lies," the dwarf murmured contemptuously. "All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle."

"You spirit of gravity," I said angrily, "do not make things too easy for yourself! Or I shall let you crouch where you are crouching, lamefoot; and it was I that carried you to this *height*."

"Behold," I continued, "this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads *backward*: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever *can* walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before — what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come? Therefore — itself too? For whatever *can* walk — in this long lane out *there* too, it *must* walk once more."

"And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things — must not all of us have been there before? And return and walk in that other lane, out there, before us, in this long dreadful lane — must we not eternally return?"

Zarathustra's first attempt at silencing the dwarf with the presentation of past and future conjoining in the present spurn the dwarf to make what Magnus refers to as a pronouncement of the cosmological theory of return. The dwarf makes it easy for himself by ignoring any deeper meaning that return may have; instead suggesting that time itself is a circle. The Eternal Return does not have enough visceral effect when kept on the cosmological level — the dwarf's intellectualization of recurrence brings him out of the moment in which he and Zarathustra stand. The Eternal Return as a purely intellectual hypothesis is clearly not what Nietzsche has in mind: consider *Ecce Homo*, where Nietzsche

says that 'this doctrine of Zarathustra *might* in the end have been taught already by Heraclitus.'²³⁹ Some of Heraclitus' followers have ascribed a cyclical cosmology to him; however, as a cosmology, any theory of return lacks the existential import required for it to impact the hearer of the doctrine. Thereby, the dwarf's proposition can never move beyond the level of hypothesis. So as to underline the meaning that Zarathustra is approaching, he continues to reveal his conception of recurrence as an event that burdens one's life with the actuality of repetition. Echoing the details of the demonic encounter in GS, Zarathustra speaks of spiders and moonlight and the specific meeting of Zarathustra and the dwarf; however, Zarathustra is not yet ready to answer his own inquiries. Each of his lines ends in a question mark as with the madman who proclaimed the death of God. Zarathustra is not yet strong enough to affirmatively announce the Eternal Return and he collapses into a nightmare immediately after raising the question of recurrence for the return cannot be spoken by one who still possesses hatred, nausea, and pity.

The next instance where Zarathustra attempts to voice the Eternal Return as more than a series of questions comes at the end of Part II in the section called "The Convalescent." Once again, Zarathustra is overcome by nausea immediately upon summoning his abysmal thought and he collapses into a coma for seven days. When he awakes, it is to the presence of his animals, who have watched over him throughout the course of his ailment and have now decided

²³⁹ EH "Birth of Tragedy" § 3.

that the time has come to converse once more. Zarathustra's first words to his animals upon awakening regard forgetting, which, as Pierre Klossowski writes, is 'the source and indispensable condition not only for the appearance of the Eternal Return but *for transforming the very identity* of the person to whom it appears.'²⁴⁰ For Klossowski, the Eternal Return can only be answered by someone who has forgotten themselves as they were in order to re-will themselves in such a way that they can will the recurrence of the same. The fact that this affirmation is borne out of forgetfulness ensures that its status as a visceral, shocking moment is maintained. In this way, the thought of return is always a surprise, its intensity never dwindling despite the fact that it must have been uttered many a time before. Zarathustra, then, can be seen as awakening to the thought of return again for the first time. The fact that he has necessarily forgotten his prior attempts at voicing the Eternal Return prompts his animals to utter the words for him.

"O Zarathustra," the animals said, "to those who think as we do, all things themselves are dancing: they come and offer their hands and laugh and flee – and come back. Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being. Everything breaks, everything is joined anew; eternally the same house of being is built. Everything parts, everything greets every other thing again; eternally the ring of being remains faithful to itself. In every Now, being begins; round every Here rolls the sphere There. The center is everywhere. Bent is the path of eternity."²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Pierre Klossowski, "Nietzsche's Experience of the Eternal Return" in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), p. 107-120.

²⁴¹ Z:III "The Convalescent"

Magnus is quick to point out that the animals here voice merely another instance of the Eternal Return as cosmological theory. Zarathustra recognizes this fact and chastises his animals for turning his thought into a hurdy-gurdy song. The animals, too, speak without fully comprehending the import of the Eternal Return, thereby kitschifying Zarathustra's most abysmal thought. Zarathustra, not yet recovered from his redemptive illness, begins to remember that his disgust with man came from the thought that recurrence entails even the return of the small man that Zarathustra scorned because the small man had not yet been able to attain the status of *Übermenschen*. Once again, Zarathustra begins to experience the pangs of nausea; however, before he can collapse the animals urge him to sing new songs, now that he is convalescing. Again, the animals turn Zarathustra's new position as the teacher of eternal recurrence into a hurdy-gurdy song as they claim kinship with his knowledge:

"Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an eternal number of times, and all things with us. You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a monster of a great year, which must, like an hourglass, turn over again and again so that it may run down and run out again; and all these years are alike in what is greatest as in what is smallest; and we ourselves are alike in every great year, in what is greatest as in what is smallest.

Interestingly, Magnus ends his interpretation of *Zarathustra* here, with the animals singing a kitschified version of what Zarathustra himself may have said if he were to voice recurrence on his own; however, Zarathustra still has not come to the point where he is able to proclaim recurrence without experiencing

nausea. Peter Berkowitz, following Heidegger, claims that Zarathustra's ultimate embracing of eternity in 'The Seven Seals' betrays Zarathustra as having given in to the spirit of revenge that he has simultaneously battled and been poisoned by throughout the book. Beginning with the section 'On the Tarantulas,' wherein Zarathustra is bitten by revenge, Berkowitz argues that Zarathustra is plagued with a disgust for man and consequent love for the otherworldly that he is never able to overcome and eventually succumbs to when he does not attempt to correct the animals and their final hurdy-gurdy song. According to Berkowitz, Zarathustra takes the place of the animals as buffoon and barrel organ when he sings the Yes and Amen Song and consummates his affair with eternity. Zarathustra does succeed in deifying the earth, but this success itself is just another instance of revenge 'for what is the ambition to surpass the human, if not a confession of hatred for the human condition?'²⁴² Berkowitz acknowledges the influence that Heidegger's reading of the eternal return as the most spiritual form of revenge has had on his own interpretation; however, his conclusion differs from Heidegger's in that Berkowitz sees any attempt at abolishing or transcending revenge as enslavement to the spirit of revenge that will always end fruitlessly.²⁴³ The highest hope that Zarathustra speaks of with such passion, then, is a fool's hope that will always end up eating its own tail as it attempts to proceed. Zarathustra's ultimate embracing of eternity is itself an instance of

²⁴² Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 178.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

unfortunate kowtowing before long established metaphysical idols. Magnus, too, allows that Nietzsche's myth of Eternal Return remains such because the philosophical tradition, by and large, assumes that 'eternalizing something consecrates and sanctifies it.'²⁴⁴ In this sense, Nietzsche's fundamental thought remains firmly entrenched in an eternalistic philosophical tradition. This failure to overcome traditional eternalism belies what Magnus terms *kronophobia*, the condition that characterizes humans as despisers of time. It is this kronophobic impulse that drives people to create eternalistic myths and prevents them from authentically confronting the finitude of time. Magnus would have us ask the question 'Do you want this *once* and once *only*?',²⁴⁵ and suggests that an affirmative response to this inquiry would be, in turn, a much more difficult burden to bear than the consoling thought of return. Nietzsche's thought of return, while potentially powerful and significant, loses some of its effectiveness once it is realized that Eternal Return fictionalizes the most definitive aspect of human existence—its finitude. The will to fictionalize, then, appears in Nietzsche's most crucial doctrines as a flaw in their ability to fully comprehend human reality: the *Übermensch* and its concomitant will to power appear as teleological fictions imposed upon a world where teleology is supposed to be unthinkable as an explanatory premise; as has been shown, the Eternal Return cannot be taken seriously as a cosmological hypothesis and, as such, has force

²⁴⁴ Magnus, p. 185.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 190.

only, but not merely, as a philosophical countermyth. How, then, to reconcile human reality in a way that does not rely on fictionalized existential explanations? With this question in mind, let us turn to Kundera's novelistic investigations into the thought of recurrence and eternity.

Lightness and Weight

Out of all the books in his corpus, it is Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being* that most directly confronts Nietzschean themes, naming the philosopher on the first page of the novel along with the work's central question: how should we live in a world where recurrence cannot be said to exist? As has been discussed above, the Eternal Return has its strongest philosophical thrust if we are to treat it as a philosophical countermyth to those propounded by Platonism and Christianity. Certainly, the consequences of return's truth value are great, whether we choose to accept it or not, as Kundera shows here:

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. We need take no more note of it than of a war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century, a war that altered nothing in the destiny of the world, even if a hundred thousand blacks perished in excruciating torment.²⁴⁶

Throughout the book, Tomas, the protagonist, is torn between two conceptions of existence: one in which recurrence can be thought to be false, which leads to

²⁴⁶ *ULB*, p. 3.

the unbearable lightness of being, and another wherein recurrence can be thought to exist, which results in an entirely different set of consequences that Kundera states as follows in a formulation that Nietzsche himself may have appreciated:

If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens (*das schwerste Gewicht*).²⁴⁷

Whatever our individual decision as to the truth value of return and, therefore, the extent to which we allow the idea to effect our lives, Kundera asks us to agree that 'the idea of eternal return implies a perspective from which things appear other than as we know them; they appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature.'²⁴⁸ According to this interpretation, then, Nietzsche's fundamental thought requires us to betray his equally important notion that all is becoming; it is, as Heidegger warns, the most insidious instance of the spirit of gravity's revenge against time itself. Kundera's novel puts into question the decision that all must make who are faced with the problem of return: which is more positive — lightness or weight? Through examining the text of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, then, it is my goal to uncover what Kundera's recommendations may be for dealing with this enigmatic problem. In doing so, I will make use of an article by Erik Parens that fleshes out the ways in which the

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 5.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 4.

lightness/weight opposition relates to the Eternal Return as it is dealt with through the story of Tomas.

Lightness

Tomas is the character that we are introduced to immediately after Kundera's introductory thoughts on the question of Eternal Return, and it is his existential code that most explicitly bears the quality of lightness. When we first meet this character, he is faced with the choice of whether or not to call a girl back to come live with him in Prague; however, Tomas is faced with a most stunning case of intellectual constipation borne directly out of the consideration of return. Kundera's gloss on Tomas' thought helps to flesh out Tomas' own more succinct formulation of '*Einmal ist keinmal*,' which is translated in the text as 'If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all.'²⁴⁹ This formulation will find its way into the remainder of the text as one of the most characteristic markings of Tomas' existential code. Kundera's own explication follows:

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, like an actor going on cold. And what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself? That is why life is like a sketch. No, "sketch" is not quite the word, because a sketch is an outline of something, the groundwork for a picture, whereas the sketch that is our life is a sketch for nothing, an outline with no picture.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 8.

Tomas' belief in the lightness of existence does not prevent him from making decisions, however, and soon after Tereza's unannounced arrival in Prague he asks her to marry him. Shortly after their marriage the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia occurs, and the two abscond to Geneva in an attempt to escape from the Communist regime. There, Tomas' habitual womanizing wears on Tereza to the point that she decides to return to Prague, accompanied only by their dog, Karenin. It is at this point, when Tomas is faced with another fateful decision, whether or not to pursue his wife to Prague, that the issue of lightness comes back into play. It is only after making the choice to return that the reader is allowed to glimpse the further implications of a life lived under the sign of lightness. Contrary to the *Es muss sein*, or 'It must be,' of Beethoven's last quartet, we are told, is the statement '*Es konnte auch anders sein*', or 'It could just as well be otherwise.'²⁵¹ It is this phrase that occurs to Tomas when he thinks of the events leading to his falling in love with Tereza. After remembering everything that must have fallen into place in order for them to meet, Tomas realizes that his love is borne of fortuity, rather than the necessity that most lovers tend to assign to their relationships. For Tomas, the one aspect of his life that truly seems to exemplify the weighty proposition of *Es muss sein* is his work as a surgeon. Like Sabina and her paintings, Kundera surmises that Tomas was led to this work due to a desire to know what lies hidden; what lies hidden inside of God's creation

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 35.

and, perhaps, what lies hidden behind the imperative of *Es muss sein*.²⁵² In order to understand the point to which Tomas' desire leads him, I will now turn to Parens' article on what is arguably the most important episode in Tomas' story line.

Part Five of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* opens with reflections on the role of Communism in Central Europe that firmly connect politics with kitsch. Kundera tells us that the work of the Communist regimes was not merely the work of criminals; rather, it was accomplished by 'enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise. They defended that road so valiantly that they were forced to execute many people. Later it became clear that there was no paradise, that the enthusiasts were therefore murderers.'²⁵³ This is a prime example of what occurs when totalitarian kitsch is unmasked; however, once the lie becomes clear the people demanded that the Communists take responsibility for their actions. Of course, the Communists, who were merely enthusiasts, claimed that they did not know what they were doing and that, therefore, they were not responsible for their actions. Recalling the story of Oedipus, Tomas publishes an article in a Czech paper inspired by the following thought:

When Tomas heard Communists shouting in defense of their inner purity, he said to himself, As a result of your "not knowing," this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and you shout that you feel no guilt? How can you stand the sight of what

²⁵² *Ibid*, p. 196.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 176.

you've done? How is it you aren't horrified? Have you no eyes to see? If you had eyes, you would have to put them out and wander away from Thebes!²⁵⁴

The Communists react negatively to Tomas' article and dismiss him from his position as a surgeon.

As discussed in the fourth chapter, kitsch is the denial of anything unacceptable in human existence that springs from a falsified categorical agreement with being. Parens argues that it is the claim to inner purity leveled by the Communists in Kundera's novel 'that enables those on the Grand March to Paradise to deny that in themselves which ought to disgust them.'²⁵⁵ The desire to portray oneself as innocent is the desire to embrace kitsch and conceal anything negative. It 'enables them to ignore those of their acts – such as depositing their enemies in septic tanks called gulags or forgetting that the refuse created by their guillotines is human – which would otherwise disgust them.'²⁵⁶ A feeling of innocence, therefore, is concomitant with the inauthentic face of kitsch. It is at this point that Parens breaks away from discussion of the book's plotline and begins to connect the questions raised by Kundera with Nietzsche's thinking. Quoting BGE 56,²⁵⁷ an aphorism that connects the thought of eternal return with the thought that will later be formulated as *amor fati*, Parens claims

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 177.

²⁵⁵ Erik Parens, "Kundera, Nietzsche, and Politics: On the Questions of Eternal Return and Responsibility" in *Philosophy Today*, Fall 1993; 285-297.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 292.

²⁵⁷ '...the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity...'

that Kundera seeks a middle path between Christianity, whose thinking would deny the existence of shit, and Nietzsche, whose own doctrine would demand affirmation of shit's eternal return. After making this claim, Parens turns his attention toward one final strain in Kundera's novel that I will come to shortly; however, before I do so I want to raise a few questions that Parens does not.

Given the notion of kitsch discussed in chapter four, it seems to me that Kundera's reasons for not affirming the eternal return of the same are connected specifically to the notion that kitsch is a categorical agreement with being. To affirm the eternal return of the same, with its required attitude of *amor fati*, is to not only categorically agree with being, but to desire it to recur for all eternity. The eternal return of the same may very well be the ultimate form of kitsch, as we can see in Zarathustra's hurdy-gurdy song of eternity. Although Kundera might find the acceptance of shit in this case to be admirable, it is pure folly to assume that, in acknowledging that error is a part of life, this new attitude toward existence imbues the affirmer with an innocence that lies beyond good and evil. This is not to say that Kundera would have us deny the existence of kitsch itself, for 'none among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely,'²⁵⁸ but it does not mean that the only alternative is to accept mythological imperatives toward existence, whether they be Christian or Nietzschean. A Kunderan alternative will be explored below; however, I want to briefly address the reception that this disagreement with Nietzsche has received.

²⁵⁸ ULB, p. 256.

In attempting to evade this potential accusation in his book, White effectively waters down the extremity of the demands that Nietzsche places upon those who would encounter the Eternal Return by stating that 'the Nietzschean makes no agreement with being, but rather, at least, accepts being.'²⁵⁹ Parens argues similarly to my observation in a footnote, claiming that the aphorism from *BGE* mentioned above, as well as those to be found in *EH*, 'makes clear how heavy is his heaviest of thoughts. The heaviest of thoughts is that we must not merely get along with the fact that life is this way, but that we must learn to affirm it.'²⁶⁰ To engage Nietzsche's thought with such a question is not to repudiate it, but to challenge an opponent in the spirit of the *agon*. Kundera's argument continues as we return to the text.

After being dismissed from his position as a surgeon, Tomas takes up a new job as a window washer. It is at this moment that Tomas begins to realize the positive side of existence's light character. In giving up the *Es muss sein* of his career as a surgeon, Tomas rejects what he had previously considered to be his life's mission, or, to use existentialist terms, his project, as a vampire sucking his blood.²⁶¹ In stepping down from the Grand March of missions and political progress, Tomas learns to live with the unbearable lightness of being. It is possible to see, so far, that Kundera's disagreement with Nietzsche stems from his thoughts on kitsch; it seems that Kundera would go so far as to accept the

²⁵⁹ White, p. 144.

²⁶⁰ Parens, p. 297, fn. 14.

²⁶¹ *ULB*, p. 197.

terms of existence, but would not wish to affirm the Eternal Return in all of its weight. To do so would be to give in to a philosophical kitsch that still masks a desire for human reality to be other than what it is. Despite these reservations, however, Kundera does come to a resolution with Nietzsche, as will be discussed below.

A Dog's Life

The final section of Kundera's novel finds Tomas and Tereza living in the Czech countryside with their dog, Karenin. Before I go into the particulars of this section, I want to highlight a few moments throughout the book that help to clarify the relation of Kundera's thoughts on animals with the explicit philosophical problem here of eternity. For Kundera, the difference between human and nonhuman animal's lives is not merely one of physicality, but one of temporality:

Dog time cannot be plotted along a straight line; it does not move on and on, from one thing to the next. It moves in a circle like the hands of a clock, which – they, too, unwilling to dash madly ahead – turn round and round the face, day in and day out following the same path.²⁶²

Animals have the benefit of truly living in a temporal flow that repeats, a progression that abhors change and remains ever the same. Contrasted with this image is the temporality of human reality, which Kundera channels through Heraclitean imagery. Human time is a river of becoming, indifferent to the affairs

²⁶² *Ibid*, p. 74.

of humans which 'play themselves out to be forgotten the next day, while the river flows on.'²⁶³ Forgetting is the plight of human temporality, while the animals are gifted with a memory that continues to repeat on into eternity. Kundera's thoughts on temporality end with a statement that simultaneously disagrees with the eternal return, while proclaiming its deep-rootedness in the existential code of human reality. 'Human time does not turn in a circle; it runs ahead in a straight line. That is why man cannot be happy: happiness is the longing for repetition.'²⁶⁴ It is clear, then, that the relationship between human and animal, with its connection to the question of return, holds great importance for Kundera's relationship with Nietzsche. It is my hope that what follows will begin to make this connection clearer.

Kundera begins the second part of the section with reflections upon the famous passage from Genesis which states that God created man to have dominion over the animals. Tereza, however, holds a different attitude toward Karenin and, indeed, the other animals she comes into contact with as well. Contrary to a worldview in which man is lord over other animals, Tereza envisions this relationship as a test:

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.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 170.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 298.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 289. This relationship between human and animal, especially as regards dogs, comes up in several of Kundera's books, most notably in *The Joke* and *Farewell Waltz*.

These ruminations are not meant to belie any sort of ecological soft heartedness on Kundera's part; rather, they are situated in the book as a direct counter to the view of animals set forth by Descartes. As Parens points out in his article, Kundera is taking up a Heideggerian reading of Descartes that focuses on Descartes' thought that animals are nothing but automatons or soulless machines. The world that Tereza lives in, where cows have no names and are forced to live in sheds, has proved Descartes correct. Parens goes on to observe that 'If Heidegger is right, and Nietzsche's thought of will to power is the culmination of the Cartesian conception of humankind's relation to nature as one of mastery, then we have seen Tereza's – and I want to suggest Kundera's – argument with "the Nietzsche" of the thought of will to power.'²⁶⁶ Unlike Parens, I do not see in this aspect of Kundera, any crucial disagreement with Nietzsche; rather, I see this part as a disagreement with Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche as well as a different interpretation of one of the most talked about aspects of Nietzsche's biography. In Kundera's own words:

Tereza keeps appearing before my eyes. I see her sitting on the stump petting Karenin's head and ruminating on mankind's debacles. Another image also comes to mind: Nietzsche leaving his hotel in Turin. Seeing a horse and a coachman beating it with a whip, Nietzsche went up to the horse and, before the coachman's very eyes, put his arms around the horse's neck and burst into tears.

That took place in 1889, when Nietzsche, too, had removed himself from the world of people. In other words, it was at the time when his mental illness had just erupted. But for that very reason I feel his gesture has broad implications: Nietzsche was trying to

²⁶⁶ Parens, p. 294.

apologize to the horse for Descartes. His lunacy (that is, his final break with mankind) began at the very moment he burst into tears over the horse.

And that is the Nietzsche I love, just as I love Tereza with the mortally ill dog resting his head in her lap. I see them one next to the other: both stepping down from the road along which mankind, "the master and proprietor of nature," marches onward.²⁶⁷

Kundera here does not espouse admiration for the Nietzsche that Heidegger felt could lead mankind, once and for all, beyond nihilism, but for the Nietzsche who did not stay on the Grand March of history and whose own life would later be distorted by imagologues (the Nazi party) and graphomaniacs (Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth) due to the aphasia brought on by insanity. Should we read this kind of meaning into Nietzsche's biography? Is it right of Kundera to turn his attention to life events instead of maintaining a focus on Nietzsche's written word? These, I am afraid, are questions for another time and another place.

²⁶⁷ *ULB*, p. 290.

Conclusion

This thesis was written in order to bring into focus the connection between two thinkers whose writings span centuries and genres. In bringing Nietzsche and Kundera together in this manner it has been my hope to uncover not only the common themes that these thinkers share, but to shed some light on the ways in which philosophy and literature can effectively pursue common goals through differing methods of investigation. In order to meet this end, I have entered into the work of these thinkers through the themes of memory and forgetting and proceeded to explore how these themes develop and influence the larger ideas at work in their writings. By placing these two thinkers into such close proximity, I have attempted to use each as a counterpoint for the other. An understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy helps to imbue Kundera's fiction with an added dimension, an extra bit of weight that allows the importance of his novels to come to the fore. Conversely, I have tried to show how Kundera's subversive fiction, which holds no figure too sacred to go unquestioned, turns a critical eye not only on one of Nietzsche's most important themes, but gazes upon redolent problems that lie within Nietzsche's text and have only been either hinted at by other commentators or strangely avoided. For example, there is still the question of Zarathustra's apparent turn to philosophical eternalism and the possibility of teleological thinking behind some of Nietzsche's most important concepts. These are questions that I have not attempted to answer here,

but feel that the exploration of Kundera's work has helped to illuminate, at least for myself.

I want to stress once again that this thesis was written not only to open the connections between Nietzsche and Kundera, but to help lend further credence to the presence of philosophical thought in fiction and vice versa. As discussed in the introduction and, to a more subtle extent, in the fifth chapter, philosophical thought may very well be inherently linked to and dependent upon the creation of various fictions. Whether these are conscious creations, as in the case of novelists like Kundera or creative philosophers like Nietzsche, or otherwise, the fictional impulse shines forth as an essential human drive. In this regard, both fields can lead to the exposure of the most important areas of human reality—our finitude and struggle with temporality. In attempting to draw out these questions I have used several works of each thinker throughout the course of this thesis; however, there is still more to say. For example, I have left out an analysis of several of Kundera's novels and could very well have gone deeper into Nietzsche's books as well, and I have pointed out several places throughout the body of this thesis in need of elaboration that I may take up in the future. At the very least, I feel that the research presented here has enabled me to discover important connections that I feel are worthy of exploration. While this statement does not leave us with very definitive conclusions, it may be the most honest way of ending this work. I am left, once again, with questions—questions of a higher caliber, perhaps, and that is a most desirable end point to have reached.

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