Milan Kundera, Ali Smith, and the Novel as an Anti-Cartesian Art Form

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What is the Novel?

In his biography of the novel, Michael Schmidt (2014) wrote more than 1000 pages in an attempt to define what the novel form is, which perhaps is a lesson in itself. While the name derives from the fact that it was a once new art form, in the twenty-first century this is at best an interesting piece of trivia. Something that Schmidt reckons to be over 700-years old—and calculated to be much older by those with a less English-language-centric view of these things—cannot in fairness be called new by any but an immortal. Schmidt's book charts the twists and turns the form has taken over the centuries; the developments, the tangents and the dead ends. A reader looking at Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1100) and *The Goldenacre* (2022) by Philip Miller would be forgiven for thinking that the two have little in common, yet both are labelled "novels" and there must be a reason for that beyond simple bookshelf convenience. It may just be something to do with length, a metric that differentiates it from a short story or novella, though that seems superficial. Rather, I would argue, there is a kernel, a single coordinate where the Venn diagrams of every novel converge, and that point is the definition of the novel as a literary form.

In *The Art of the Novel* (1986/1988), and in further detail in *Testaments Betrayed* (1993/1995), *The Curtain* (2005/2006), and *Encounter* (2009/2010), Milan Kundera proffers his conclusions on the novel form from a lifetime of not only writing novels, but of writing novels that deliberately and openly engage with the novel: novels about novels, novels that are explorations of the novel form peopled with characters that facilitate the journey, like the shrunken submarine crew in *Fantastic Voyage* (1966) traveling the blood vessels of their host. Published in French in 1986, it is an essay in seven parts that is "a guide to Kundera's conception of the history of the novel as it is embodied in his own work" (Doyle, 2019, para 2).

While Kundera doesn't limit himself to novels in the English language, as Schmidt does, Kundera—a Czech writing mainly in French—still pulls his horizon tight around him, his interest never straying beyond the boundaries of Europe, going so far as to claim "The novel is Europe's creation" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 6). Still, he is much more willing than Schmidt to nail his colours to the mast: "The sole *raison d'être* of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover. A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral"

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(Kundera, 1986/1988, pp. 5–6).

Being and Complexity

In the first part of *The Art of the Novel* (1986/1988), an essay entitled "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes", Kundera casts his eye over the history of the European novel and outlines exactly what it is that only the novel can discover: the nature of being. Kundera uses "being" in an overtly existentialist sense, though referencing Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) rather than the more famous and likely—given Kundera's Francophilia and long residence in Paris—*Being and Nothingness* (1943) by Jean-Paul Sartre. Heidegger's concept of being coalesced around the idea of human existence rooted in its physical embodiment and historical context. Kundera explicitly places this in direct opposition to Descartes's (1996) dualism that separated being from the world. In a Cartesian conception of human existence "man's concrete being, his 'world of life' (die Lebenswelt), has neither value nor interest" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 4). Heidegger describes this as "the forgetting of being" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 4) and was insistent that language was "the vehicle through which the question of being can be unfolded" (Korab-Karpowicz, n.d., para 2). The novel therefore is "nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 5). Philosophy and science abandoned the search, and religion doesn't warrant a mention in Kundera's pages. The novel, he argues, expanded to fill the space left. The history of the novel is the history of this investigation, so it's no surprise that when philosophy did return to the subject in the twentieth century, the existentialists wielded the novel rather than the meditation:

> 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 into human behaviour and decisions. It probes time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examines the role of myths from the remote past that control our present actions (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 5).

The novel is an artistic form developed down the centuries with the aim of exploring what it is to be human (Kundera, or at least his translator Linda Asher, uses the out-dated "man" to stand for all humanity, although given that he never mentions a single female novelist and the famously problematic nature of his representation of women (O'Brien, 1995), perhaps he does mean only men). If this is the job of the novel—and Kundera is adamant that it is—then by extension it is not the job of other art forms or, at least, other art forms don't do it as well. So what is it about the novel that lends itself to this mission?

Kundera offers one reason: complexity. Being is a messy business. "The novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not as simple as you think.' That is

the novel's eternal truth" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 18). Descartes (1996) attempted to reduce all of being to a single sentence: I think, therefore I am. While his conclusion may be intellectually appealing it is far from satisfactory as a description of existence. The world may be an illusion created by a vengeful demon but so what? How does that help us to live? Existentialism brought the world of life back into the picture and in doing so forever destroyed the idea of a universal truth, a Platonic ideal, and broke the binary world of European thought into jagged fragments. Life is complex; being is uncertain.

> To take, with Cervantes, the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in imaginary selves called characters), to have as one's only certainty the wisdom of uncertainty (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 6).

This is what the novel teaches us. The novel contains multiple truths, overlapping contradictions.

For Just (2016), this approach can be termed "maturity". Maturity "is for Kundera a state of lucidity and self-awareness in the perception of oneself and reality" (Just, 2016, p. 239). In other words, an acceptance of complexity, an understanding of multiplicity and the incorporation of that understanding into life: "Maturity is a lucid pursuit of an always different, broader, and more satisfying existence" (Just, 2016, p. 247).

Unsurprisingly, given Kundera's own history, he explicitly links this to a rejection of totalitarianism, a political system built around the belief that the universe can be reduced to a few simple principles and therefore controlled. The Soviet Union, he argues, produced no fiction of value (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 14), a sweeping statement at which one feels Solzhenitsyn would raise an eyebrow. I suspect he means officially sanctioned novels rather than the underground dissenting samizdat literature of whose lineage he may see himself part after fleeing Communist Czechoslovakia in 1975. "Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate… the spirit of the novel" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 14).

Implicit in this stance is the logical formulation "therefore Totalitarianism is immoral." His own novel *The Joke* (1967) embodies this: Ludvik Jahn makes a throwaway satirical comment that is met not only with an absence of laughter but with his expulsion from the Party, from university, and from society. A system that doesn't have a sense of humour is unlikely to have much time for the chaotic reality of being or an art form devoted to it.

Ownbey (2020) argues that Kundera's quest is to make the novel apolitical, by which she doesn't mean that it avoids the subject of politics, but rather that it actively fights against simple classification, a prerequisite of any political programme. His theory of the novel is, in this reading, an argument against simplification and reductionism. "I have spent twenty years of my life in a country whose official doctrine was able only to reduce any and every human problem to a mere reflection of politics" (Kundera, 1984a). Of course, as Ownbey (2020) points out, being apolitical is itself a political stance. It is not the conclusion that matters here, but the initial impulse: the rejection of any kind of reductionist tendency. Are Kundera's novels political? Of course, but they

are not *only* political, they are also complex, multifaceted, and mature.

This is, in effect, Bakhtinian. Polyphony is an old idea in fiction and is, according to Bakhtin (1981), inseparable from it. By attempting to represent the world, it is necessary to represent multiple voices, perspectives, social realms, languages and cultures. Some are given greater prominence than others but it is polyphony and polyglossia that allows the reader to accept realism in fiction as being an accurate and reliable representation of the 'real world'. Complexity is inherent in the world and therefore is inherent in the novel, which aims to represent the world as we (the self) experience it.

This is the complexity that Kundera writes about, which Just (2016) calls maturity. A novel which only has a single voice would fail, would be Cartesian, solipsistic and unreal.

The novel then, for Kundera, is "nothing but one long interrogation. Meditative interrogation (interrogative meditation)" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 31) but, of course, the search for the self must end in dissatisfaction. Whether Bloom, K., Clarissa or Don Quixote, the self will always elude, since it cannot be reduced to a single voice, a simple I. It is this that drives development and change in the novel, as each generation climbs down into the pit to take the proffered trowel and brush, and try once again to uncover some previously unexamined artifact of existence. How do you grasp the self, Kundera asks, when being is unbearably light? Pending advances in neurobiology and technology, the novel, certainly for Kundera, is the best tool we have.

The Unbearable Complexity of Being

For Kundera, the novel is engaged in the same pursuit that drove Descartes (1996) down his well of doubt but it takes a fundamentally divergent track, eschewing the desire to strip away layers to reveal a nugget of truth. Rather it accepts the polyphony of existence, embraces the idea that truth is multifaceted, subjective and potentially unknowable.

The genre "psychological novel" is badly named and something of a distraction. All novels are necessarily psychological. The novel became psychological early on, whether through Richardson's exploration of the "secret life of feelings" (Kundera, 1968/1988, p. 5), through Defoe's attempts to trick readers into believing *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was a memoir, or Don Quixote tilting at windmills. From the first pages of the earliest novels authors were exploring the motivation behind actions and the internal consequences of them. This wasn't the first time humans had ever thought of doing this, of course. Religion and philosophy had long dallied in these streets but by the rise of the novel, as Kundera (1986/1988) describes, had long moved on. Theatre since the Greeks had also been casting its line into these pools, but always through stylised means—the chorus for Sophocles, the soliloquy for Shakespeare. Culminating in Descartes, the theorists couldn't get outside their heads and into the real world. On the other hand, artists couldn't get inside the mind and show thought in action. It took the novel to bridge the gap, and it did so by embracing complexity.

Kundera isn't alone in considering the novel to be a rejection of Cartesianism. Paulson (1991) argues, following on from Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la terreur dans les lettres* (1941), that "the dualism of Cartesian metaphysics… separates mind from its objects [but] in confronting the

common-places of rhetoric, where thought and language fuse, neither the mind's separation from its objects nor the reduction to simplicity are possible" (Paulson, 1991, p. 37).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the novel rose to pre-eminence in the same era that scientific inquiry was replacing religious certainty. The idea that you could sit in your oven like Descartes (1996) and think your way towards understanding the nature of being took a big hit when scientific discovery after scientific discovery produced a picture of reality infinitely more complex than anything hitherto imagined, culminating in the mind-boggling nature of quantum mechanics about which Niels Bohr famously said, "Those who are not shocked when they first come across quantum theory cannot possibly have understood it" (Heisenberg, 1971, p. 206).

This is a connection explicitly drawn in *Chaos and Order: Complex dynamics in literature and science* (Haynes (ed.), 1991), a collection of essays described in the blurb as being on how "changing ideas of order and disorder enable new readings of scientific and literary texts." One of the central tenets of the scientific method is the observer effect which breaks any possible separation between observer and effect, and thereby forever destroyed the Newtonian concept of the "scientific observer, uncontaminated by its objects" (Paulson, 1991, p. 38). The mind cannot be separated from reality, it is intrinsically connected with it. As Paulson asks, "Where in the brain does neurophysiology stop, and psychology begin?" and continues:

> Since this question has no clear answer, it becomes impossible to identify what has long been called "mind" with the subject rather than the object of science. And it becomes reasonable… to suppose that "mind" is the name for a particular kind of natural system, entirely realized in physical phenomena no different, ontologically, from other physical phenomena that have long been the object of science (1991, p. 39).

In other words, what Descartes calls the "mind", the religions call the "soul" and the existentialists call "being" or the "self" is inseparable from the physical nature of reality and that nature is, modern physics tells us, so bafflingly complex that it shocks the few who truly understand it. If, therefore, the spirit of the novel is to "discover the various dimensions of existence" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 5) and illuminate the self it must by necessity embrace complexity. N. Katherine Haynes goes further, summarising Paulson's argument: "increased complexity… is in fact the desired outcome of an artistic text" (Haynes, 1991, p. 20).

Paulson focuses on what physicists call noise, which in information theory can be defined as any external input that is added to an information exchange, such as light pollution when measuring the distance of stars, or interference on a radio transmission. Noise is often taken to be negative, something experimental scientists and sound engineers want to eliminate, but chaos theory contains implications that suggest noise can in some cases be a positive addition to information. When we interact with reality through our senses, we get both information and noise. Our brain filters and explains, but chaos theory shows that self-organisation also occurs—meaning arising from noise. So the equation, Paulson (1991) explains, isn't necessarily a loss of meaning (A−B), it could be an increase in information (A+B). Paulson applies this to the reading of literature:

> Literary texts inevitably contain elements that are not immediately decodable and that therefore function for their readers as what information theory would call noise. […] noise both within and outside the text can lead to the emergence of new levels of meaning neither predictable from linguistic and genre conventions nor subject to authorial mastery (Paulson, 1991, p. 43).

Haynes summarises this as “literature as communication crafted to maximize the positive role of noise” (Haynes, 1991, p. 20). A reader—regardless of how sophisticated—approaches a new text with incomplete understanding of how formal and linguistic techniques will come together to produce meaning, so that on first reading there will necessarily be some ambiguity. Ambiguity in literature acts as noise in the system. The interaction between the reader, the text and the noise “forces the system to reorganize itself at a higher level of complexity” (Haynes, 1991, p. 20). Turning noise into information—meaning—is the job of art. An artistic form that cannot encompass reality in all its varieties and levels cannot adequately represent reality. An artistic form that treats noise—ambiguity—as a positive and allows space for the reader to interact with that noise will take the longest strides towards discovering a “hitherto unknown segment of existence” (Kundera, 1986/1988, pp. 5–6).

The novel form is necessarily one that rejects Cartesian reduction. It has evolved over the centuries to explore the noisiest, most entangled system of all: the human mind, the self, the unbearable complexity of being. As the mind becomes complex and non-Cartesian it becomes difficult to portray.

> If the phenomena that we identify as emotions and ideas are truly emergent with respect to the physiological interactions of brain cells, then even complete knowledge of the brain at the neuronal level would not explain the mental level (Paulson, 1991, p. 46).

Cause and effect don’t work, determinism fails, not because they are false but because of noise in the system, because of self-organisation and chaos theory. To describe a noisy, disordered system, you need a form that embraces noise and disorder. The novelist must “speak of that for which we do not yet have an adequate language” (Paulson, 1991, p. 49).

Theory of Mind

How can the novel “speak of that for which we do not yet have an adequate language” (Paulson, 1991, p. 49)? How does the novel adequately show us the complexity of the mind without resorting to reductionism? Hoes does it therefore become the preeminent method of exploring the nature of being? It does this, in part, through the Theory of Mind (ToM).

Theory of mind is the label given to the ability to conceptualise the existence of minds similar to our own in other beings.

> ToM, mindreading in everyday parlance, is one of the subcomponents of social cognition, which embraces all the skills required to manage social communication and relationships in humans and nonhumans. It develops on the basis of certain mentalizing mechanisms and cognitive abilities and gives rise to the awareness that others have a mind with various mental states including beliefs, intuitions, plans, emotions, information, desires, and intentions and that these may differ from one's own (Korkmaz, 2011, p. 101).

It is something which develops as we grow, rather than something we are born able to do, and can be seen in less-developed stages in other primates and beyond (Zunshine, 2006). It is a fundamental part of what it means to be human and is so hard-wired into us that we find ourselves projecting minds into animals, machines and even inanimate objects. Indeed it is one of biggest areas of philosophical enquiry at the moment concerning robots and artificial intelligence since it seems humans cannot help but attribute a mind to something that looks and behaves similar to a human, even when we know that we are interacting with chips, wires and software (Zunshine, 2006).

Theory of mind explains social interactions and relationships but there is a fundamental philosophical gap at the heart of ToM—we can never actually prove our attributions are correct (Korkmaz, 2011). The Turing Test developed by Alan Turing (1950) demonstrates this problem: if a human judge cannot tell the difference between the text responses of a human and a machine, then the machine passes the test and is thus an intelligent, thinking being. As with all emergent properties, it is impossible to draw a line between a skilfully programmed piece of software and actual independent intelligence, but the Turing Test suggests that is not necessarily a problem (Zunshine, 2006). All we have on which to base our belief that other humans have minds is interaction, so why would that not also be the same for non-carbon-based beings?

Psychologists have followed this line of thinking to what many consider a *reductio ad absurdum* within the field of Behaviourist Psychology (Abramson, 2013). The fundamental idea of this theory is that human beings are born blank slates and we learn how to be human beings by observing the behaviour of those around us. The study of behaviourism is concerned only with external, observable phenomena at the expense of internal thoughts and emotions. The internal, they argue, arises from the behaviour and so is of secondary importance. Humans under this theory are no different from animals.

This is an uncomfortable theory for many (Korkmaz, 2011), as we tend to give our internal experience higher value than our external, often mechanical behaviour (particularly with regard reflex or involuntary actions). It also raises questions of morality—we treat animals differently from humans precisely because we assume they don't experience the world the way we do based entirely on theory of mind (Zunshine, 2006). A cow is sufficiently different from us psychologically that we can raise and slaughter it with few qualms. Slavery and genocide amongst humans requires dehumanisation—a denial of theory of mind—as a precondition. But Behaviourism is most often rejected with a joke that highlights the ridiculousness of its conclusions: Two behavioural psychologists are in bed and one turns to the other and says, "That was great for you, how was it for me?"

Theory of Mind explains why and how we attribute minds to others, but it does not allow us to touch those minds, to experience how they experience reality. We are always working on an assumption. Descartes (1996), perhaps understandably given the time (born 1596) and his education (Jesuit), bridged the gap with an appeal to God (Descartes, 1996). This form of argument engenders little sympathy today. Technology is beginning to help: scans showing where mental activities such as imagination and memory take place in the brain, devices that allow patients "locked in" their bodies to communicate, and early-stage reports of rendering dreams as images on computer screens give some sense that the future may allow access to the minds of others (Korkmaz, 2011). But for the moment that kind of access is still a futurist fantasy for Elon Musk and his ilk.

Some theorists take a Falsificationist approach and examine what happens when Theory of Mind breaks down or is absent (Korkmaz, 2011). For those with neurodivergent conditions, it has long been thought that ToM has failed to develop as it would in the non-neurodivergent. Autism, for example, often manifests with an inability to recognise or interpret behavioural cues in others (Savarese, 2018). When ToM is absent, thinking goes, the ability to function within human society if compromised. This breakdown can then be seen as implied indirect proof of the existence of other minds: ToM is only necessary in our development because other minds do in fact exists. If they didn't, the non-development of ToM would be irrelevant (Savarese, 2018).

This may be a satisfactory conclusion from a theoretical point of view—although the belief that people with autism lack a complex ToM is being challenged by researchers such as Ralph James Savarese whose book *See it Feelingly: Classic Novels, Autistic Readers, and the Schooling of a No-Good English Professor* (2018) explores the love of literature among some of his neurodivergent subjects—but it still doesn't give us any sense of the form other minds may take. We know they must be different from our own since people have different opinions, beliefs, dreams and fears. We understand that because your experiences and mine are different, you will perceive the world differently from me. But I can never experience *how* you perceive the world. I am forever inferring from what you say and how you behave. Even without autism, we are all fallible, capable of mistakes and misinterpretation (Savarese, 2018). I interpret your behaviour based on my own background and perspective and can therefore reason that only madness would make you leap off a bridge with elastic round your ankles. So how can the novel help?

This is the subject of Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction: theory of mind and the novel* (2006). She argues that our innate theory of mind, developed under evolutionary conditions in the absence of the novel, is triggered into action by the characters we meet in fiction. We see the outline of another mind—it doesn't have to be human, simply another entity that seems to be thinking and therefore we think it is: ToM fills in the blanks and makes the character real (Zunshine, 2006). Nolan utilises this concept in his film *Inception* (2010), where shared dreaming allows people to inhabit the same dream world. The dream world is built by an "architect". While Cobb (played by Leonardo di Caprio) is teaching Ariadne (played by Elliot Page) the fundamentals of dream architecture, she asks: "How could I ever acquire enough detail to make them think that it's reality?" Cobb explains that "You are the dreamer, you build this world. I am the subject, my mind populates it" and that the subject will "fill it with their subconscious" (Nolan, 2010).

Fiction is an act of shared dreaming in which writer and reader experience the same non-reality. The writer builds it; the reader fills it with their subconscious, imagining settings, scenes, the appearance of characters, their movements and gestures while speaking. In imagining the inner life of these characters, Zunshine (2006) suggests, we are utilising the same resources as theory of mind. This explains why writers who favour a minimalist approach to description and narration are lauded. Zunshine (2006) mentions Hemingway and Woolf, both of whom could “underrepresent [their] protagonists’ feelings” (Zunshine, 2006, p. 22) and leave only the “absolute minimum of necessary cues” (Zunshine, 2006, p. 23) because they could rely on “our evolved cognitive tendency to assume that there *must be* a mental stance behind each physical action” (Zunshine, 2006, p. 23). Roddy Doyle takes this to an extreme in most of his fiction but particularly in *The Commitments* (1987) which some have called a narratorless novel (McGlynn, 2016). Writers who don’t leave this kind of space for their readers to fill risk keeping them at a distance, rendering readers viewers outside rather than participants in the story.

In fact, novels go beyond theory of mind. As readers, we are not simply attributing consciousness to characters, we are also having an emotional reaction to them. As long as there have been novels, there have been conversations about the effect they have on readers. In the beginning they were considered abominations that would corrupt all but the most high-minded. In *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Keen cites a number of eighteenth century busybodies worried that fiction would lead to a loss of “virtue and reputation” by “stirring up passions” and “inducing indolence and indifference to real life” (Keen, 2007, p. 37). A century later Dickens and his contemporaries were not just authors but instructors bent on “the cultivation of the reader’s sympathetic imagination. Novel readers might learn, by extending themselves into the experiences, motives, and emotions of fictional characters, to sympathize with real others in their everyday lives” (Keen, 2007, p. 38).

In many ways this belief has continued into the modern period despite stratification of genres and the usurpation of its position in the market by cinema and TV: “novels get credit for the character-building renovation of readers into open-minded generous citizens” (Keen, 2007, p. 39).

There are two paths of reason that can justify this conclusion. The first is that which led early critics of the novel to be worried by the form, namely the arousal of passions.

> While poetry rides high as an appropriate vehicle for conveying feelings to the sympathetic and refined reader, the novel often arouses suspicion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so effectively does it provoke emotional responses in women, servants, and the poor” (Keen, 2007, p. 41).

The novel was seen as a form of manipulation which could only be resisted by the very strongest of minds (presumably the critics’) and novelists themselves the worst kind of Machiavel. The second, which is my argument, is that the novel provides the best means to date of experiencing what it is like to be another person, to see the world from someone else’s perspective.

This connection can be described in a number of different ways. Some readers talk about

identifying with characters either because the experience of the character echoes the experience of the reader, or because they can imagine themselves behaving in the same way. The former is often cited as a reason behind the success of literature from margainalised communities, such as the work of James Kelman or Toni Morrison (Solint, 2017). The latter can most clearly be seen in the use of reader surrogates, a character that guides the reader into the new world like Dante in *The Divine Comedy* (1320) or Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). The problem with this stance is that it ignores characters with whom we cannot or do not want to identify—the most famous example of this being in *Lolita* (1955)—and is predicated on the notion that we read in order to see ourselves reflected back (Keen, 2007). This is certainly an aspect of why we read—on the most basic level it explains why Scottish authors are most popular in Scotland, why readers tend to prefer work written by someone of their own gender, and why margainalised communities feel excluded when they are underrepresented. However, it is not the only reason why we read, otherwise work in translation would be far rarer than it is today, men who refuse to read books by female writers would be unremarkable, and science fiction and fantasy would disappear completely.

A far stronger argument concerning the benefits of reading novels can be made around the fact that in addition to all the positive aspects of seeing ourselves and our community represented in fiction, we also gain sympathy for others, perhaps even empathy. This is a position that grew in prominence in the nineteenth century when writers like Dickens used the tools of narrative fiction to expose the realities of existence for those living in poverty or suffering under the weight of industrialisation (Keen, 2007).

What theorists like Friedrich Engels tried to do with *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1854), Dickens achieved with far more penetration through *Hard Times* (1854). Where Engels's facts and figures proved, Dickens's characters and situations moved.

Since then it has been taken for granted by parents, teachers, publishers and, most especially, novelists, that reading fiction makes you a better person, as Keen (2007) explores. Her overall thesis is that while reading novels does promote empathy, sympathy and can help to make readers more socially aware, there is little evidence that this leads to actual acts of altruism in the real world (Keen, 2007). She begins by defining empathy and showing that it can be taught/learned, touching on examples in the animal kingdom and in the human classroom, and delves into the distinction between character identification and empathy. Character identification is often prized, as I discussed above, but Keen (2007) argues that it can actually turn readers off since it can cause personal distress which she says "leads people to stop reading, to put the book down, or to disengage full attention by skipping and skimming" (Keen, 2007, p. 16). In fact, she goes further and suggests that the very fictionality of the novel is itself a block on the development of altruism since a "social contract" (Keen, 2007, p. 16) between reader and character is impossible. "We may feel intense interest in characters, but incurring obligations towards them violates the terms of fictionality… the impossibility of reciprocation may interfere" (Keen, 2007, p. 16).

So while she refuses to conclude that novels may make better people, she does concede that "The capacity for human beings to engage intellectually and emotionally with imaginary worlds and their denizens places narrative empathy at the intersection of aesthetics, psychology and philosophy"

(Keen, 2007, p. 34). Novels allow access to other perspectives which I would argue is perhaps good enough. As she points out, the assumption that all novels necessarily promote altruism is naive at best. “If fictions can move our feelings, then they can push us in degrading and dangerous directions… Fiction might be bad for readers” (Keen, 2007, p. 40). She quotes Nehring in the *New York Times Book Review*: “you can learn anything from a book—or nothing. You can learn to be a suicide bomber, a religious fanatic… you can acquire unrealistic expectations of love” (Keen, 2007, p. 40). If Dickens can make you care about the downtrodden, can Brett Easton Ellis make you want to murder the homeless or Nabokov make you lust after twelve-year-old girls? It’s certainly the conclusion reached by evangelicals in the United States when banning *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997) for fear of tempting America’s youth into witchcraft or *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) over concerns the effects gay penguins could have on the Republic (Top 10 Book Controversies, 2007). Keen (2007) rightly rejects this conclusion:

> Novels can provide safe spaces within which to see through the eyes of the psychopath, to occupy the subject position of the oppressive racist, to share the brutalizing past of the condemned outcast. Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988), Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* (1974), and Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) all offer versions of this fictive extension of role-taking imagination. Such serious literary experimentation with inhabiting the perspective of stigmatized or repulsive others may play on readers’ appetites for viscous imagery or play with taboos, but it has not been generally understood as a corrupting aspect of narrative (Keen, 2007, p. 131).

Keen (2007) is on strong ground when arguing that the internal effects of reading don’t lead to real world behavioural changes every time, but to claim they never do is taking things too far. Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s novel *What is to be Done?* (1863) has been cited by Vladimir Lenin, Peter Kropotkin and Rosa Luxemburg as instrumental in inspiring their radicalisation (Weiner, 2016), while Alex Garland’s *The Beach* (1996) motivated a generation of gap year travellers to visit Thailand in search of spiritual and not-so-spiritual experiences (Astuti, 2016).

The novel, then, seems to offer a way out of Descartes (1996) solipsistic well, using theory of mind to bridge the gap between ourselves and others. This seems like a nice, neat definition: the novel explores the self/being by embracing the complexity and multiplicity of reality. It is anti-Cartesian in that it reconnects “man” with his life but Kundera’s use of the word meditation (Kundera, 1986/1988) is telling: his conception of the novel as anti-Cartesian is flawed. For Kundera the self, the forgotten being, is Heideggerian in conception and is connected to his “world of life” (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 4) thus breaking the solipsistic chain in which Descartes (1996) ties himself. But for all that he tries to recentre being in life, Kundera is still guilty of dabbling in solipsism.

Kundera’s own technique is worth dwelling on at this point. Kundera is often accused of breaking the rules of good novel writing and certainly he goes in for exactly the kind of things that many professional editors and creative writing teachers tell their clients and students to avoid. *The*

Art of the Novel (1986/1988) suggests that character and plot are not high on his list of priorities. They are only mentioned in passing and only then as afterthoughts to his theory of form. “The novel is a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters” (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 83). “Truths embodied in imaginary selves called characters” (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 6). Are the characters then to be taken as avatars for ideas? Any editor or teacher confronted with a writer who thinks of characters first as embodiments of ideas and human beings afterwards could reasonably except work that is either didactic, bloodless, or both, and these are certainly things Kundera has been accused of in the past.

In *The Art of the Novel* (1986/1988) he addresses this, citing his love of Kafka. He names Joyce, Proust and Kafka as being the canonical “holy trinity” of the modern novel only to dismiss Joyce and Proust as being lesser men. In Kafka, character isn’t an afterthought, rather character is central. Kafka, he argues, reframed the question of self in a fundamentally new, highly modernist, anti-Cartesian way: “What is it that defines K. as a unique being?” (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 26). Kafka, and by extension Kundera himself, attempt to zero in on something more fundamental to character than the normal checklist:

> Neither his physical appearance (we know nothing about that), nor his biography (we don’t know it), nor his name (he has none), nor his memories, his predilections, his complexes. His behavior? His field of action is lamentably limited… Indeed, how could it have changed K.’s destiny and attitude if he had had homosexual inclinations or an unhappy love affair behind him? In no way (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 26).

Character isn’t hair colour, number of siblings or taste in music. It is, Kundera writes, his thoughts “bent exclusively on the current situation” (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 26)—the self “is determined by the essence of its existential problem” (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 33) which in K’s case is K’s case.

A good example of this approach comes at the start of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984b). In chapter three (pp. 5–8) the narrator is thinking about Tomas and his relationship with Tereza. The narrative is in the past tense, and the events recalled are further in the past. Tomas spends a week with Tereza but after making love, she falls ill and spends the week in bed. This is all relayed in a couple of paragraphs, and the remaining three pages of the chapter are taken up with Tomas’s musing, relayed second-hand by the narrator. The following is the first sentence of the immediate subsequent paragraphs:

> Standing by the window, he looked out over the courtyard at the walls opposite him and deliberated.
>
> Should he call her back to Prague for good? […]
>
> Or should he refrain from approaching her? […]
>
> Did he want her to come or did he not?
>
> He looked out over the courtyard at the opposite walls, seeking an answer (Kundera, 1984b,

p. 6).

It goes on like this for two pages, a chain of rhetorical questions that are never answered, interspersed with Tomas moodily looking out over the courtyard, and ending with, "If we only have one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all" (Kundera, 1984b, p. 8).

The rhetorical echo of Hamlet's "to be or not to be" (Shakespeare, 1599, 2016) soliloquy is too strong to be a coincidence. Hamlet is perhaps the most famously introspective character in literature, one who is constantly avoiding action in favour of examining the existential crisis, so it's no surprise that the Dane reverberates through Kundera's masterpiece. Tomas's relationship with Tereza, like all relationships in Kundera, is a catalyst for introspection—the search for the self is a journey inwards.

That the self "is determined by the essence of its existential problem" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 33) shows the circle at the heart of Kundera's argument: the self is not defined by social relations, by the character's relationship with other characters, but rather the self's relationship with itself, with "its own existential problem". This is anti-Cartesian and non-solipsistic in that it accepts the existence of a real world—the existential problem in K's case is caused by and rooted in the external world—but for Kundera the job of the novelist is to take that existential problem and examine it from all angles leading to a mature acceptance of the situation (in K's case, obediently accepting his sentence). The external world is a catalyst for introspection; the search for the self is a journey inwards. By pushing society to one side and focusing solely on the self in isolation, Kundera is making the same mistake as Descartes, the king of infinite space bounded in a nutshell.

Out of Descartes's Shadow

Kundera's conception of the novel is in part, and indirectly, rejected by Ali Smith when she says in *Artful* (2012) that "The novel… is bound to and helplessly interested in society and social hierarchy, social worlds" (Smith, 2012, p. 29). While Kundera looks inside, mining the individual for meaning, for Smith the novel form is for exploring the relationships between people and the structures that arise from these connections. As a result, her work is often polyphonic and written in the second person, situating the reader directly in the information flow of a relationship. Thus her conception of the novel form is even more anti-Cartesian than Kundera's, since without society—without the existence of other people, other minds—there can be no definition of the self. This is true even for the ghost that haunts *Hotel World* (2001), bereft of body but, for a time, clinging to identity. When the possibility of interaction with others is removed, identity—the self—and even language break down.

For Smith, it doesn't make sense to talk about the individual and the self without talking about society. Her seasonal quartet (*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), *Summer* (2020)) can be seen to embody this, where the entire raison d'etre of the novel is to engage with society. As Smith said in an interview with *The Guardian* (March 23, 2019):

> [I said] 'Can we do a series of books which we publish really close to the time of their writing—a kind of keeping the novel novel project—returning it to the notion of 'the new'?' Smith explains. He said: 'Let's give it a go.' So I had to respond to Brexit, given that these books, this project, has ended up being about this particular time. But they are also coming on their own terms (Para. 5).

The novels don't separate the characters from their world, and there's no distancing of the kind Kundera goes in for, where characters take a step back and contemplate Brexit, Trump or COVID, the bonds between Smith's characters and the real world aren't just unbreakable: they are where the self resides.

She explores this most obviously with her use of pronouns, second person narratives and by deliberately withholding the kind of labelling information that is traditionally considered to define the self. Lezard, in his review of *There But For The* (2011) in *The Guardian* (July 17, 2012) explained: "In terms of technique, Smith is a master of what one reviewer has felicitously called "dropped stitches", deliberate gaps in the story" (para. 6). Here he is talking about the way in which Smith doesn't mention until page 319 that one of the four narrators, 10-year-old Brooke, is black. There are subtle hints throughout, nods to dog-whistle racism ("Home? Where you come from." (Smith, 2011, p. 257)), but it isn't until 319 that Smith actually states this fact. She makes her reasoning for this explicit:

> any old sentence like: the girl ran across the park, and unless you add the describing word then the man or the girl are definitely not black, they are white, though no one has mentioned white, like when you take the the out of a headline and people just assume it's there anyway. Though if it were a sentence about Brooke herself it would have to add the equivalent describing word and that's how you'd know. The black girl ran across the park (Smith, 2011, p. 319).

Smith (2011) is deliberately playing with her readers, prodding them. She is suggesting that because Brooke is intelligent, erudite, and her parents are professors, and because her skin colour is never mentioned, that the reader assumed Brooke—and by extension all the other characters—were white.

Smith regularly plays with her readers in this way. "Blank Card" in *Other Stories and Other Stories* (1999) opens with the old romantic trope of a bunch of flowers being delivered to "me" by "you". The delivery driver is definitely a man ("An old man brought them in his flower shop van" (Smith, 1999, p. 39)) and we learn indirectly that the narrator is a woman when the driver says, "I have the best job in the world, delivering flowers to ladies" and calling her "my darling" (Smith, 1999, p. 39) but the gender of the partner ("you") is only confirmed as female in the final line: "She'll know who they're from" (Smith, 1999, p. 49). On one level this plays with the reader's expectations in just the same way as concealing Brooke's colour does: the reader assumes that since the "I" is a woman—the traditional recipient of flowers, at home while "you" are at work—the partner must be a man, until the reveal in the last line. This is a common strategy employed by

queer writers to both mask and expose, but there is something deeper at work in these examples (by no means the only ones in Smith's oeuvre).

By dropping that stitch, Smith makes the reader question just what the self is. Brooke's self is her narrative voice, her love of puns, her idiosyncratic curiosity, but it's also all the dialectic relations that define her—she's "the black girl", she's the 675th visitor to the Greenwich Observatory, she is, according to her teacher, "A LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT" (Smith, 2011, p. 285). Brooke isn't "determined by the essence of [her] existential problem" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 33), she's determined by attitudes, responses and reactions. Likewise, by "hiding" the gender of the partner in "Blank Card" (Smith, 1999) she is making the reader examine the terms in which they define identity. Does the partner's self reside in her gender or in her relationship with the narrator and her act of betrayal? Does the nature of that betrayal change when her gender is revealed? Smith would argue that it does not, that it is the relationship between the two that matters, not traditional individual markers of identity. "You" is a cheat; that she is a women is neither here nor there.

Smith's novels meet Kundera's criteria as "nothing other than the investigation of this forgotten being" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 5), but do it not by meditating on existence. Rather she shows how humanity—and therefore the novel—is defined precisely in the dialectical relationships that constitute human society. She does this showing what happens to the self when those relationships are removed in *Hotel World* (2001), and by showing how the perceptions of others define identity in *There But For The* (2011) and "Black Card" (1999). For Smith it makes no sense to talk of the self outside these connections. There is no self without relationships and therefore Descartes's (1996) conclusion is rejected.

Conclusion

The novel may be the best tool we have for experiencing reality as it is perceived by another. Being a "baggy monster" (Holquist, 1981, p. xviii), the novel has both the scope and the flexibility to investigate existence and discover hitherto unknown secrets of the self, as Kundera (1986/1988) demands it must. By drawing on our innate ability to imagine ourselves into the minds of others through what neuroscientists call Theory of Mind (Zunshine, 2006), and by drawing on readers' *a priori* empathic curiosity (Keen, 2007), the novel provides a means to do what Descartes needed God's help for: bridging the gap between my mind and yours. Therefore, as Kundera (1986/1988) insists, since it *can* explore the self, it has a moral duty to do so. To shirk that role would be "immoral" (Kundera, 1986/1988, p. 6).

The question then becomes one of where the self resides and how the novelist can investigate it. For Kundera, the self is something internal that, like Descartes, you contemplate alone inside your oven (or, more accurately for the majority of Kundera's characters, alone in your room after your lover has departed). For Smith, it cannot be separated from the character's societal relations: without these dialectics, there is no self and so the novel, in order to explore the self, *must* be concerned with society. In Kundera's novels, for all their existentialist search for being and rejection of Cartesian duality, the self that is being explored exists separate from the external.

Smith's novels reject Descartes just as thoroughly, but by rooting the self in the external. Life is a complicated web of social relationships, of competing voices. This is where Smith's theory of the novel obtains. The complexity isn't *in* us; it's *between* us. Kundera's novels are solipsistic; Smiths are dialectic. Together they form a conception of the novel that is profoundly anti-Cartesian.

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