

Kundera's typologies of immortality, love and chance: An encoded cultural theory

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Abstract

Fourfold typologies at various levels govern the narrative structure of Milan Kundera's novel *L'Immortalité*. Besides giving the novel a semantic framework, they suggest deep analogies between the structure of love relationship, communication, epoch, and narration. They also demonstrate that social life and literary art are better understood by dividing their manifestations into four types. *Immortality*, therefore, turns out to be an in-deep cultural study.

The following analysis of Milan Kundera's novel *L'Immortalité* (1990) concentrates on a striking accumulation of quadruplications at various levels in it. Thus, four figures represent four forms of love experience. Four other figures represent four complementary love concepts. The novel distinguishes four phases of love communication and four ways of dealing with erotic ambiguity. These quadruplications culminate in four ways of understanding the titular immortality. Last but not least, the autofictional character 'Kundera' metapoetically divides coincidence into four forms, which can be understood as instructions for dealing with events in narrative prose. However, quadruplications are nothing unusual in literature. We find them, for example,

in Goethe (who also plays a prominent role as a character in Kundera's novel) in *Elective Affinities* and in Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, but not so explicitly, not in such an accumulation and not on so many different levels. Beyond the basic function of quadruplication, effective in Goethe and Tolstoy, of giving the novel a semantic framework through crisscross relations of equivalence, this accumulation suggests an implicit cultural message of the novel: that social life and literary art are better understood by dividing them into four basic types.

This message, in turn, coincides with my research to examine the function of quadruplications in cultural and social studies. In this research, I have found some evidence that these quadruplications might be subject to a specific logic, which can be called 'relational'. According to this logic, a relationship can assume four states: separation, fusion, hierarchy and dialogue. Cultural and social sciences would then be 'relational sciences' that study phenomena subject to this logic. My analysis of Kundera's novel is therefore also intended to examine whether the areas of relationship that unfold in it – love, eroticism and the dimensions of their communication, the social implications of posthumous fame, and also the interpretation of events as accidental or necessary – can be understood in the light of this relational logic.

Therefore, what interests me about the fourfold subdivisions found in Kundera's novel *Immortality* is, if and if yes how the four types which can be distinguished on so many levels of the novel fit into the paradigm of fourfold typologies I found in cultural and social sciences, i.e. can Kundera's types be assigned to separation, fusion, hierarchy, and dialogue. Furthermore, I am interested in the implications of Kundera's fourfold distinctions for the social and cultural areas they involve – the psychology of love, the understanding the social dynamics of communication, and the narratology of events. Last but not least characters in the novel seem to represent literary epochs, an observation which on the thematic level of the novel is supported by, first, the fight between Goethe's classicism and Bettina's romanticism, and second, the contrasting juxtaposition of Goethe and Beethoven. Why not have similar contrasts – between avant-garde and postmodernism – on the other time level of the novel?

1. *First typology of love: love experience*

Pragmatically and in terms of plot, Kundera's novel *Immortality* is quite traditionally set up as a set of two love triangles, as two competitions between women for a man. The sisters Agnès and Laura compete for Paul, and Christiane Vulpius and Bettina Brentano compete for Goethe. These two love triangles virtually form a quadriga of loving women – Agnès, Laura, Bettina and Christiane. Their understanding of love obviously diverges, but there are, as I will demonstrate, striking symmetries. In this context, Doris Boden speaks

of striking binary oppositions in the novel – she includes here Rubens, Agnès's lover, who has some parallels with her husband Paul – but all these oppositions would be 'destroyed' in the novel, as the analogies «level them» (2006, 114). I take a different view: the binary oppositions, as will be shown, are not leveled by the analogies but lifted by them into quadruple typologies in which every opposition is countered by an analogy and every analogy by an opposition.

Therefore, the symmetries are not of simple opposition, but of typology. This means that an analogy between two types on one level meets an opposition of them on another level. Thus, the female quadriga is, first, characterized by the opposition 'physical-spiritual', with Agnès and Bettina being 'spiritual' lovers, Laura and Christiane being 'physical' lovers. In the triangle around Goethe, Christiane is the representative of physical love and Bettina of an ostensibly spiritualized love. In the triangle around Paul, Laura is the physical lover and Agnès the spiritual lover. This opposition is now intertwined with another opposition. Laura's physical experience of love is – as also her name, which is derived from Petrarch's beloved, suggests¹ – a subjective feeling, while Christiane's physical experience of love is dialogic, directed entirely toward Goethe and his sexual needs. Bettina's experience of love, how spiritual it might be, is nevertheless narcissistic, Goethe is needed for her only as a trigger for her own spiritual exaltation. Agnès also experiences love spiritually, but as a release from her body. According to her name, she is related to the Holy Agnes of Rome, a martyr of virginity, who was saved from rape by a veil of light: «[angelus...] qui locum claritate nimia circumfuisit sibique stolam candidissimam prae paravit» (Jacobus a Voragine 115) [(the angel's...) radiance filled the place with light and formed a shining mantle about her]². Thus, we read about Agnès's experience of sexual love: «Pour Agnès, le corps n'était pas sexuel. Il ne le devenait qu'en de rares moments, quand l'excitation projetait sur lui une lumière irréelle, artificielle. [...] Mais regarder son corps inondé de lumière est un jeu perfide» (Kundera 1990, 150-151) [For Agnes, the body was not sexual. It became it only in rare moments, when the excitation projected on him an unreal, artificial light. [...] But looking at one's own body flooded with light is a perfidious game].

This saves Agnès, like her namesake, from experiencing physical love as a form of rape. Agnès' spiritualization of love is, other than Bettina's, dialogical. Agnès' love, or more precisely her ideal of love which she could not realize with her partners available, is the maximum relationality of love. The Other is the meaning of love. Agnès suffers from the fact that her partners, especially her

¹ «[il] poeta traduce il proprio cuore nella pittura ch'ei fa dell'amore [...] Petrarca sollev[a] questa passione all'altezza della propria mente» (Foscolo [1827] 2015, 11) [the poet translates his own heart into the painting he makes of love [...] Petrarch raises this passion to the height of his own mind] (translation mine).

² All translations mine.

husband Paul, do not know and do not experience this relational dimension of love. That is why she decisively answers ‘no’ to the all-important question of the guest from heaven, whether she and Paul want to live their next existence together again.

Novel character	metaphysical base	connectivity
Agnès	Spiritual	dialogic
Bettina	Spiritual	narcissistic
Christiane	Physical	dialogic
Laura	Physical	narcissistic

Here, not only psychological profiles are modeled, but also profiles of epochs, because epochs provide specific concepts of the self, embodied by the novel characters. Romanticism, historically and structurally represented by Bettina, achieves its spiritualization through a metaphorical leap. Modernism, represented by Agnès, achieves spiritualization by escaping into a world of meaning in which completely different laws prevail. Laura realizes the narcissistic body reference of neo-avant-garde and refers with her name to its origin in Petrarch’s concept of love. Christiane represents the dialogic body reference of Winckelmannian classicism – which she also explicitly defends in a dispute against Bettina.

Novel character	metaphysical base	connectivity	Epoch
Agnès	Spiritual	dialogic	Modernism
Bettina	Spiritual	narcissistic	Romanticism
Christiane	Physical	dialogic	Classicism
Laura	Physical	narcissistic	Avant-garde

2. *Second typology of love: structural types of love*

We can find in the novel, in addition to the quadriga of the four women, representing forms of love experience, another quadriga, which refers to structural types of love. The two sisters Laura and Agnès participate also in this typology. The other two types are represented by Paul and Rubens.

According to this table of love types, Laura’s and Agnès’s versions of love are both related to the Other, but in opposite directions. Agnès’ Love is relationship – this is what I call the cultural dimension of love, if we understand culture as

the between of human relationship³, the relational side of our existence. Agnès is all culture, that is, herself would dissolve in love. This is why in the course of the novel the gesture of love she embodies detaches from her completely, becoming also the leitmotif, with which the novel begins and ends. This gesture represents the cultural dimension of love. Its eternity represents the eternity of art. Kundera here implicitly refers to the concept of art as a «semantic gesture» by his compatriot Jan Mukařovský⁴. Explicitly, her gesture is called «aussi parfait, aussi achevé qu'une œuvre d'art» (Kundera 1990, 63) [as perfect, as complete as a work of art]. Agnès's gesture thus embodies the postmodern version of the old topos *ars longa vita brevis*, since *ars* is now a pure form completely detached from its bearer.

Laura needs the Other as a social You who gives her value; she depends on the love and admiration of another person. Thus, this love is an entirely social function; the social Other gives me my value through his love. Laura's first husband, Bernard, is able to fulfill this function for a time, but he lacks the fan identity that Laura's star identity requires; he is too independent or self-centered to remain her unconditional fan. Not coincidentally, Kundera builds into the description of Laura's love an anecdote about the self-mirroring of Czech Lacan students during the Soviet occupation in 1969. The mirror stage, first described by Lacan in 1936 in Czechoslovakia at a conference in Mariánské Lázně, forms the «imaginary ego» of «primary narcissism» (Lacan 1949). This produces, according to Lacan, a division of the ego into «I for myself» (*moi*) and «I for the others» (*je*). The «*je*» wants to reach the ideal of the «*moi*», i.e., the perfect devotion of the you to the ego. Laura needs and demands exactly this kind of devotion. This type of love is hierarchically structured and represents the third type of love relationship. It demands unconditional submission so that the ideal of «*moi*» can be completely realized. From Paul, Laura will eventually receive this submission.

Thus, Paul embodies absolute identification with the Other, love as a fan. Kundera writes: «Rimbaud n'a donc été son [Paul's] amour esthétique et peut-être n'a-t-il jamais connu un amour esthétique. Il s'était enrôlé sous la bannière de Rimbaud comme on s'enrôle sous un drapeau, comme on adhère à un parti politique, comme on devient supporter d'une équipe de football» (Kundera 1990, 212) [Rimbaud was not his (Paul's) aesthetic love and maybe he never knew an aesthetic love. He had enlisted under Rimbaud's banner as one enlists under a flag, as one joins a political party, as one becomes a supporter of a soccer team]. This love is infantile, an expression of early childhood mother symbiosis. Paul's love is symbiotic. In human psychological development symbiotic love takes place before the mirror stage. With his wife Agnès, Paul cannot realize this form of love, because Agnès' concept of love demands the autonomous

³ Cfr. Cioflec 2012.

⁴ Developed in Mukařovský 1948.

Other who turns to her freely and self-determinedly. But we should be careful to evaluate Paul's kind of love negatively. In Kundera's novel, Paul embodies at the same time the childlike carelessness to which the avant-garde lent its voice – this is why Laura with her avant-garde physicality is his ideal partner. Paul loves the paradoxes that history produces, he loves the agreement of the incompatible, and his sexual love, which the narrator describes as «stupid-headed», is benevolent and grateful. The equal value of types is an essential feature of typologies.

The autofictional character 'Kundera' claims as much in the sixth and last part of his novel: «J'attends impatiemment la sixième partie. Un nouveau personnage va surgir dans mon roman. Et à la fin de cette sixième partie, il s'en ira comme il était venu, sans laisser de trace» (ivi, 352-353) [I am looking forward to part six. A new character will appear in my novel. And at the end of this sixth part, he will leave as he came, without a trace].

This is to announce the person to represent the missing forth type of love, Rubens. At first glance, this announcement is a postmodern polemic against the enslavement of narrative by causality, by the plot. But the narrator here advocates by no means just a suspension of the plot. Despite the 'cycling' of the plot, rushing toward its goal, the poetic function, the equivalence function, as described by Roman Jakobson, emerges. And in it, the figure that is pointed out here, Rubens, will play a weighty role. Rubens expands the classical love triangle – here Paul between Laura and Agnès –, which without fail generates a plot, into a love typology, i.e., into a scheme capable of expressing the ambivalences of love. In the novel, Rubens is unnecessary for the plot, but he is absolutely necessary to turn the plot into an aesthetic artwork of equivalence. The plot is even demonized in *Immortality*:

Je regrette que presque tous les romans écrits à ce jour soient trop obéissants à la règle de l'unité d'action. Je veux dire qu'ils sont tous fondés sur un seul enchaînement causal d'actions et d'événements. Ces romans ressemblent à une rue étroite, le long de laquelle on pourchasse les personnages à coup de fouet. La tension dramatique, c'est la véritable malédiction du roman parce qu'elle transforme tout, même les plus belles pages, même les scènes et les observations les plus surprenantes, en une simple étape menant au dénouement final, où se concentre le sens de tout ce qui précède. Dévoré par le feu de sa propre tension, le roman se consume comme un feu de paille (ivi, 352).

[I regret that almost all novels written to date are too obedient to the rule of unity of action. I mean that they are all based on a single causal sequence of actions and events. These novels are like a narrow street, along which characters are chased with a whip. The dramatic tension is the real curse of the novel because it transforms everything, even the most beautiful pages, even the most surprising scenes and observations, into a simple step leading to the final denouement, where the meaning of everything that precedes is concentrated. Devoured by the fire of its own tension, the novel burns like a fire of straw].

Even the argument between 'Kundera' and his character Paul on the complexity of Mahler's music, constructed as a metalepsis, plays the structure

against the plot: [Paul:] «il [Mahler] était persuadé que son œuvre serait foutue si, dans le second mouvement, la mélodie était jouée par la clarinette et non par le hautbois». – «C'est exactement cela», dis-je en pensant à mon roman» (ivi, 490) [(Paul:) «he (Mahler) was convinced that his work would be ruined if, in the second movement, the melody was played by the clarinet and not by the oboe». – «That's exactly it», I said, thinking about my novel]. Paul disputes this, since the structure of the work overtaxes the listener. But Kundera shows himself here to be a staunch supporter of Walter Benjamin's «no poem is for the reader, no picture for the viewer, no symphony for the listener» (Benjamin 1961, 56). The limited abilities of receptions have no relevance for the semantic potential of a work of art.

Rubens, the forth, missing 'physical' type of love, is introduced after the fact, after Agnès' death, as her former secret lover. Kundera reinforces the artificiality of the novel construction 'against' the plot by this switch. Physical love, like its psychic dimension, obeys a dimension to which the cultural and social dimensions of love are immune: time. While the psychic dimension is characterized by maturation, by becoming an adult, the transformation of its physical dimension, on the other hand, is characterized by decay. That is why Kundera calls the sixth part of his novel, which is about Rubens, «Le Cadran» (The clock) and builds into it a long excursus on transience (chapter 2).

Rubens does not simply embody the crude practice of physical love. He documents the overcoming of romantic love as an inflated emotion; he understands love in a post-romantic but, in terms of cultural history, rather in a pre-romantic way – he understands it as the art of erotic communication. In this respect, Rubens– as a failed painter he is also an artist – is an alter ego of the anti-romantic author. That is also the reason why he calls Agnès «lutenist» - a metapoetic allusion to music which explains why Agnès and Rubens temporarily harmonize, despite their fundamentally different concepts of the self. Physical and spiritual love, painting and music, visuality and rhythm must come together in a work of art, that is why love 'sparks' between Rubens and Agnès, and that is why it also 'sparks' at the end between Paul and Laura.

We come to the following scheme:

Typology of love concepts			
Rubens	Paul	Laura	Agnès
biological	psychic	social	cultural
descending in time	ascending in time	taking in	dialogical
bodily	mentally	bodily	mentally

3. *Third typology of love: Phases of love communication*

Rubens not only represents the necessary fourth structural type of love, which the plot of the novel had not offered so far. He also stands for a typology by himself, since he has lived through four phases of communicating physical love, an experience which he recapitulates in the sixth part of the novel. These phases can be related first, to the author's problems and possibilities to display the notion of physical love in his text, and, secondly, to the four stages of development of the infant. Rubens's first 'phase of athletic muteness', characterized by purely physical gestures during the sexual act, corresponds to the earliest, schizoid phase of early childhood development; the 'phase of metaphors', in which tender paraphrases of love dominate, corresponds to the symbiotic phase of infant development, the 'phase of obscene truth', in which crude obscenities are uttered during physical love, correlates with the phase of revolt, of naysaying in early childhood, and the 'phase of silent mail', in which two friends send each other messages via the expressions they use while making love to the same partners and which the latter then repeat to the other partner, finally, with the dialogical or oedipal phase of child development. This 'development', which Rubens experiences, parodies both him and the scheme of developmental stages. But there is a fifth stage that transcends them all, the 'mystical' stage, in which all physical lovers participate in the universal sign pool of love of all languages and peoples. This sign pool, it is said, is collected in a kind of encyclopedia of the (erotic) fairy tale.

4. *Typology of erotic ambiguity*

On the pages of *Immortality*, there are six people involved in scenes of women sitting on a man's lap. Bettina von Arnim sits on Goethe's lap, Laura sits on the lap of her brother-in-law Paul. Agnès's daughter Brigitte sits next to Laura on her father's other leg, and Agnès watches the both sitting on her husband's knees. Neglecting Goethe's and Brigitte's role in these situations, Kundera concentrates on Bettina's, Laura's, Paul's and Agnès's attitudes towards lap-sitting, thus forming a quadriga which inspires me to discuss it as another typology Kundera's novel offers: the typology of erotic ambiguity⁵. The reason for lap-sitting of the women coincide in both cases in one important point – in playing the child, which conceals the erotic subtext of their action. In this way,

⁵ In the French original «ambiguïté», in Czech imprecisely «mnohoznačnost», plurivalence. The relationship between the Czech and the French versions of *Immortality* is discussed in Doris Boden (2006, 111). Since Kundera reportedly started to write the novel in French, the French version will be my original.

they make their relationship to the man ambiguous. However, there is also an important contrast between them. Bettina's sitting on Goethe's lap is part of her intellectually masterful intrigue in order to 'conquer' his immortality, that is, to get control over his legacy. Goethe senses the danger and has to parry Bettina's hidden attacks over and over again. Laura, sitting on the lap of her brother-in-law Paul, has no intellectual goal. For her, her childish behavior perfectly conceals the pleasure of erotic contact with the man she secretly desires. Laura is erotically stimulated by the ambiguity of the situation.

The starting point of this typology is the fact that eroticism needs ambiguity in order to function. In all four cases of lap-sitting, the woman actively sets up the situation. Kundera, however, is not content with the ambivalence 'innocent child – seductress', but distinguishes four ways of dealing with erotic ambivalence: Agnès, watching the scene, «lucide» (farsightedly) realizes the sexual prompting character of the ambiguous situation. Bettina also realizes it, but uses it as a weapon to seduce the notorious 'homme à femmes' Goethe. Laura on Paul's lap enjoys the ambiguity of playing a child while being an adult woman. She is absorbed in this ambiguity as an addict. Finally, Paul does not grasp the erotic dimension of the situation; he raises his knees «pour bien convaincre les deux sœurs de son enjouement de tonton» (Kundera 1990, 253) [to convince the two sisters of his playing the nice uncle]. He is the 'fool' of ambiguity. Nevertheless, what unites him with the refined Bettina is that they play – Paul naively, Bettina consciously. For Laura and Agnès, on the other hand, the erotic ambiguity of riding on the man's lap is serious – inviting for Laura, threatening for Agnès.

Typology of understanding erotic ambiguity			
Paul	Laura	Bettina	Agnès
fool	addict	director	observer
unreflected	unreflected	reflected	reflected
game	serious	Game	serious

This seems at first to be a minor typology, almost anecdotal. However, it gains its significance from the fact that the lack of ambiguity is fatal for eroticism but also for literature; literature, too, relies on ambiguity. The way the four characters deal with the erotic ambiguity of the situation can therefore be translated into the way we deal with the ambiguity of literature. There are readers for whom literature is simply fiction making, a nice game. Like Paul, they do not understand the abyss of its ambiguity. Then there are addicted readers who read vicariously through the principle of identification. The ambiguity of literature excites them, but like Laura, they have no understanding of their own excitement. Then there are authors who play with their readers. Like Bettina, they use the ambiguity of literature as a manipulative tool. Finally, there are

authors who know the depths of ambiguity and nonetheless allow it in their work because they know that literature cannot function without it. The latter would most likely be the self-image of the author, who for this very reason makes Agnès partially his mouthpiece and lets Agnès understand in the novel what terrible ambiguity is hidden in Goethe's poem *Ein gleiches*.

5. Typology of immortalities

The female quartet Agnès, Bettina, Christiane and Laura is, above all, assigned to a typology of the main theme of the novel, to a typology of immortality. In this typology, Agnès represents 'gestural' immortality. She will be forgotten as an individual and in fact she already is forgotten by Paul and Laura as soon as she is dead. She herself wants to disappear absolutely, to be erased, like her father, who destroys all documents of his existence before his death. Goethe's *Ein gleiches* not only plays the role of a coded death message from the father to his daughter about his coming death, but also contains a metapoetic message, which is prominent elsewhere in the novel as well: there should be no immortality for the poet himself – «Die Vögelein», the birds, metapoetically representing authorship, «schweigen im Walde», are silent. Immortality should be reserved to the poet's œuvre. Just as only the œuvre remains of the poet, so, according to Kundera's novel, of the human individual only the gesture detached from him as a person is immortal. This is why after Agnès death remains only her gesture, imitated by her sister Laura on the thematic level, but in fact, on semantic level, transferred to her.

Despite Kundera's Bettina fights with all means for the 'great immortality' of celebrity, famed Goethe and Hemingway declare in the novel that it is a thoroughly double-edged matter. After all, they want their work to survive and not their biography. Goethe's nightmare that everyone is only watching him play the puppet show and no one is watching the puppet show itself which he is performing fits into this intention. Bettina wants to achieve biographical immortality by proxy – through metonymic contact with a famous person, without regard to whether she appreciates his work or not. For some 'celebrities', however, working on their own myth to become immortal as an individual is characteristic in Kundera's novel. One means of doing so is the 'petite phrase', which outlasts the speaker, but which, unlike the anonymous gesture, remains associated with the name of the person who coined it. Kundera quotes Napoleon's well-known petite phrase «voilà un homme», uttered towards Goethe. There is an abundance of petites phrases attributed to Napoleon, and most probably he was aware of their function for his 'great immortality'. Marcel Proust, in his novel *In Search of Lost Time*, links the concept of petite phrase to music. For Swann, a musical phrase is firmly linked to his beloved

Odette. A petite phrase thus creates a fixed associative link; it does not wander freely and anonymously like a gesture⁶. In contrast to the 'great immortality' in the memory of those who did not know us personally, 'little immortality', to which Laura aspires, is in the consciousness of those around us. Explicitly, this immortality is characterized in the novel as our afterlife in the memory of our friends and relatives. It thus seems to correspond to communicative memory in Aleida Assmann's typology of the external dimensions of memory. Assmann's «cultural memory» (2002) would then seem to correspond to Kundera's 'great immortality'. Typologically, however, Assmann's distinction is problematic, since in her model, there is no typological, but only a gradual difference between communicative and cultural memory, a difference of dimension. Gradual differences do not establish a typology. For typologies, systematic differences are necessary. But if we start from the quadrangle of the female characters in Kundera's novel, it becomes apparent that there is indeed a systematic difference between the – little – immortality sought by Laura and the – great – immortality sought by Bettina.

Laura expands her ego to include things, people, and other living beings with whom she comes into contact. Examples in the novel are her cat and the white piano. These things are metonymically absorbed by Laura. The immortality that Laura thereby acquires is not anonymous like that of gesture, and it does not live in collective consciousness like the great immortality, but it resides in objects. It thus corresponds to the dimension of 'objects with history' in Assmann's typology. In contrast, Agnès's anonymously inherited gesture corresponds to Assmann's memory type of 'imitation of action'. In addition to Assmann's quantitative distinction between communicative and cultural memory, however, another immortality is found in Kundera's novel – the ridiculous immortality. Is this a separate type within a real typology? Christiane, Goethe's wife, stands for it as a female figure in the novel. She is remembered as the «la grosse saucisse» (Kundera 1990, 78) [the fat sausage] who knocked Bettina von Arnim's glasses off her nose. Other examples in the novel include Tycho Brahe bursting his ureter (ivi, 82), Jimmy Carter suffering a heart attack while jogging (ivi, 81), and Robert Musil dying while lifting dumbbells (ivi, 82). What unites all four at first glance is the narrator's blatant sympathy, which becomes pity in the face of their ridiculousness. Their much more important, indeed crucial, structural commonality, however, is that they all have to do with the reification of the human being. This reification is a major theme in Kundera's prose. People become ridiculous through their reification as early as in *Žert* (1965) [*The Joke*], in *Směšne lásky* (1970)

⁶ One might think that in Proust's *Recherche* Dr. Cottard «en levant les bras avec une gravité simulée» (Proust 1913-1927, vol. 2, 77) [rising his arms with simulated gravity] uses a gesture in a similar way. However, Dr. Cottard did not borrow this gesture from anybody. Rather, everything he does looks simulated because he is unable to be authentic.

[*Laughable Loves*], and still in *La Fête de l'insignifiance* (2014) [*The Feast of Insignificance*], in which the Russian revolutionary Kalinin is characterized by his incontinence. Thus, Kundera's concept of ridiculous immortality is the counterpart of the small immortality in things. While small immortality humanizes things (e.g., Laura's piano), ridiculous immortality reifies people. As reified being, frozen in a ridiculous situation, we endure as things. Thus, we can say, that the typology of immortalities in Kundera's novel both illustrates and modifies Assmann's typology of the external dimensions of memory. There are two relations to things that effect immortality. They are represented, not coincidentally, by the characters Christiane and Laura, as defined by their bodies. And there are two spiritual relationships as the basis for immortality, represented by the 'spiritualized' figures Bettina and Agnès. We can see that the narrator's sympathy or antipathy does not matter at all here. In each category there is a 'sympathetic' and an 'unsympathetic' woman. And the two immaterial relations, like the two material ones, are opposed to each other by the distinction between expansive and implosive immortality. In the novel *Immortality*, the latter distinction is documented primarily through the juxtaposition of Agnès and Laura in the chapter «L'addition et la soustraction» [«Adding and Subtracting»], which deals with identity formation. The implosive identity formation, which Agnès stands for, wants to subtract all the accidents until the pure essence of the 'I' remains. The expansive identity formation adds all elements to the self which are connected with it – identity is then the sum of its aspects added by these elements.

character	immortality	direction
Agnès	gestural	implosive
Bettina	big	expansive
Christiane	ridiculous	implosive
Laura	small	expansive

The narrator's voice blatantly takes sides with subtraction, but just as we add our cat or our favorite food to our ego, so we last in the objects of microhistory. The bread knife is great-grandmother's bread knife, the ink stain is Luther's ink stain, the quill is Goethe's quill. There is nothing objectionable about that. Even «l'étrange paradoxe don't sont victims tous ceux qui recourent à la méthode additive pour cultiver leur moi» (ivi, 153) [the strange paradox of which are victims all those who resort to the additive method to cultivate their self], that we, as propagandists of our attributes, resemble others more and more instead of distinguishing ourselves from them, is only apparently true: propaganda of our attributes is only needed for the weak ego, for those whose ego does not diffuse into things of its own accord like Goethe into his quill or Luther

into his ink stain. Of course, Laura is ego-weak in Kundera's novel, but this is not a necessary condition for expansive immortality, but rather a symptom of its failure. Bettina's expansive-metonymic immortality campaign, on the other hand, succeeds, to the obvious displeasure of the narrator. But Kundera's Napoleon, too, is expansively immortal without becoming unsympathetic as a result. In the two subtractive immortalities of reification on the one hand and continuing to live in gesture on the other, things, on the one hand, or the social world, on the other, make our 'I' disappear. From the existential starving artist (just like in Kafka's story *Ein Hungerkünstler* [*A Hunger Artist*]), Agnès, literally the 'sacrificial lamb', is left nothing but the sympathy of the narrator and the vague memory of Rubens. She dissolves. Because before Kundera we hardly knew Tycho Brahe with a burst ureter but only as an astronomer, and Kalinin never incontinent but only as a revolutionary, we cannot avoid the impression that Kundera here essentially promotes what he diagnoses. However, the effect of reification in the ridiculous immortality is as much a destruction of the ego as gestural immortality is its dissolution. This is not to be evaluated here; it is only to put the narrator's evaluations in Kundera's novel into perspective without questioning the typologies observed in it.

6. *The metapoetic typology of chance in narrative*

The novel's polemic on the function of plot culminates in the fifth part of the novel, entitled «Le hasard» [Hazard], in a typology of the writer's treatment of chance. Thematically, similar to the introduction of the character Rubens, it is an apology of the freedom of the author that he is allowed to manipulate the fate of his characters at will. But the autofictional 'Kundera' confesses to Professor Avenarius that he «rêve d'écrire là-dessus un grand livre: une Théorie du hasard. La classification de divers types de hasards» (Kundera 1990, 332) [dreams of writing a great book on this subject: a Theory of Chance. The classification of various types of chance].

The classification that is then presented is a real typology, however, first of all, not of the isolated chance, but of coincidence. No example that Kundera gives is isolated and thus itself by chance. All his examples concern relations between two events. If Kundera nevertheless uses the word «hasard» (and in Czech correspondingly «náhoda» and not 'coïncidence' or 'concoirs' or in Czech 'shoda' or 'koincidence', it is in order to establish an intertextual relation to Mallarmé's prose poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897) [*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*]. I cannot elaborate on all aspects of this intertextuality here. However, Mallarmé is also concerned not only with metaphysics, but also with metapoetics. Thus, like the throw of the dice, the verse is «starborn» (issu stellaire), a «constellation». Mallarmé, like

Kundera, is concerned with the dialectic between event (coup) and equivalence (constellation, conjonction suprême).

Second, Kundera is not concerned with coincidence in general, but with its literary use, or, in other words, with the author's synchronization of events.

Typology of the literary use of chance			
separation	Fusion	hierarchy	Dialogue
blind/mute chance	poetical chance	storybuilding chance	contrapuntal chance
paradigmatic	paradigmatic	syntagmatic, producing the line of action (plot)	syntagmatic, producing the line of construction (sujet)
producing interference	producing equivalence	producing interference	producing equivalence

The first form of chance, blind chance, is absolutely senseless. Each event taken by itself makes chance asemantic, it expresses no relation at all. Nevertheless, this form can become literary – either as a protest against the compulsion of necessity, as expressed by some of Dostoevsky's heroes, or in the way Aleksandr Čudakov postulates it for the role of chance in Anton Čechov's prose (1971)⁷. Or, to speak again with Mallarmé, «du fond d'un naufrage» (Mallarmé 1914, 5) [at the bottom of a shipwreck], that is, as a gesture of human failure to establish meaning in an absurd, blind world.

The second, 'poetic' form of chance owes its name in Kundera to a metaphorically or symbolically generated equivalence between the two coinciding events. Kundera's example of the «première feuille morte⁸ tombait dans la ville de Chicago» (1990, 333) [the first dead leaf fell in the city of Chicago] charges the simultaneous event when Professor Avenarius gets into the swimming pool with the 'mélancolie' of the onset of autumn. This refers to the 'autumn of life', that is, to Professor Avenarius' aging. The semantic relationship between the two events is thus metaphorical. However, symbolically or metonymically generated poetic coincidences are also possible, for example, in Dostoevsky's *Krotkaja* (1876) [*The Gentle*], where the young woman jumps out of the window to her death at the very moment when the pawnbroker is retrieving the foreign passports for their joint trip to Boulogne. The jump out of the window symbolizes the journey to death, while the ferry port of Boulogne is metonymic for the crossing to England. The autodiegetic narrator comments despairingly: «Главное, обидно то, что всё это случай — простой, варварский, косный случай» (Dostoevskij [1876] 1982, 34) [What is so awful is that the whole thing was just an accident – an ordinary, horrible, senseless accident!]

⁷ For the English translation cfr. Čudakov, Aleksandr Pavlovič, [1971] 1983. *Chekhov's Poetics*, Ardis, Ann Arbor.

⁸ In Czech not «dead» but «žlutý», «yellow».

(Dostoevskij, [1876] 1915, 249). What appears to be a 'senseless accident' from the narrator's perspective is an artfully constructed poetic coincidence from the perspective of the work's structure, in other words, of the Abstract Author. This leads us to the general insight: within the reality of the fictional world, there is only blind chance; all other forms of chance are literary constructions.

This is especially true of the third type of coincidence Kundera cites, but which appears in our table as a fourth category: contrapuntal coincidence. Here, Kundera explicitly refers to musical composition: «C'est comme si deux mélodies s'unissaient en une même composition» (Kundera 1990, 333) [It is as if two melodies were united in the same composition]. His literary example cited at this point elucidates his own compositional style overall, as the interweaving of the story of Agnès's death journey in the Alps with the story of his conversation with Professor Avenarius dominates the entire fifth part of the novel. Musical composition exists also on the thematic level of the novel, in which Beethoven is disregarded as a pompous formless romantic. Musical composition in fact, as we learn from Kundera, culminated in Johann Sebastian Bach⁹.

But how does the contrapuntal coincidence work? Kundera states only that the two events «s'accordaient» (ivi, 333) [were in agreement]. Two events that are neither causally nor even metaphorically or symbolically connected nevertheless form an equivalence, a pure equivalence, as it were, of contrast and analogy between two events (Schmid 2021, 243). To decipher such an equivalence requires interpretation. The counterpoint between Agnès' death journey and the conversation between the autofictional 'Kundera' and Professor Avenarius lies in the contrast between comedy and tragedy, here more precisely between elegant conversation and farce-like setting on the one hand and the inexorable fate of evading a suicide fatality on the other. The counterpoint forms at the same time an opposition between strict plot orientation with respect to Agnès, an orientation that is almost figuratively realized by the detail «[Agnès] mettait sa voiture en route» (Kundera 1990, 333) [(Agnes) was putting her car on the road], and the extensive parenthesis so popular with Kundera, introduced here by: «C'est ainsi que les événements se synchronisent» (ivi, 332) [This is how the events are synchronized].

The fourth type of chance that Kundera mentions, the plot-forming coincidence («hasard générateur d'histoire», ivi, 334), is the most conventional in literature. That is why it is said immediately afterwards that it is particularly appreciated by novelists. This coincidence is used by authors primarily to bring characters into contact with each other, between whom an intrigue, a friendship, a love or at least a business relationship then develops. Striking examples abound. Wronsky and Anna's paths and gazes cross at the train station in Moscow fairly

⁹ Kundera in *The New Yorker*, Jan 1, 2007: «Polyphonic music [i.e. the art of counterpoint] had its beginnings in France, continued its development in Italy, attained incredible complexity in the Netherlands, and reached its fulfillment in Germany, in the works of Bach».

early in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Myškin and Rogožin happen to be sitting in the same compartment of the train from Warsaw to Petersburg at the beginning of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*. By the end of the novel, they will be sitting in brotherly embrace next to the corpse of Nastasya Filipovna. For something to happen, the usual circles of life must be left, and then unknown elements meet. Plots emerge from this. This would not be possible without chance, which throws the elements out of their usual orbit. The autofictional 'Kundera' himself does not appreciate much this type of coincidence, «particulièrement cher aux romanciers» (ivi, 334) [especially dear to novelists], in accordance with his polemic against plots. In any case, his example, the meeting of Laura and Professor Avenarius in the Metro, does not generate a story. What is special about it is again only structural: it is a metalepsis, since the autofictional 'Kundera' communicates this example from his novel to one of the novel characters involved, namely Avenarius. It is true that Avenarius has probably slept with Laura, but that is nothing special in Kundera's world.

Karen von Kunes calls Professor Avenarius «a manager of chance» (von Kunes 2019, 80) because he appoints Bernard «complete ass» and because he systematically slashes car tires, which leads to Paul not finding the injured Agnès alive in the hospital. Von Kunes writes: «Paul loses the most valuable time, the last moments together with his wife» (ivi, 81). The «complete ass» has nothing to do with coincidence. Rather, the diploma Avenarius issues Bernard shows that the author must not condemn his characters, even if he would like to. In postmodern fashion, Kundera delegates to Avenarius his antipathy towards Bernard already implied in the second chapter of the novel. Avenarius does everything that Kundera would like to do, but which his artistic conscience forbids him. To declare Avenarius Kundera's 'alter ego' (*ibid.*), however, is inaccurate. As a human being Kundera may think like Avenarius, but as an artist and author definitely not.

In the second case, Avenarius is indeed «a manager of chance». To make him out to be a «producer of bad deeds» (ivi, 80), however, makes no sense. The slashing of Paul's car tire is indeed, from Paul's point of view, a 'blind chance' that drives him to despair: «Le peu de temps qui se séparait des derniers instants d'Agnès exacerba son désespoir» (Kundera 1990, 397) [The short time that separated him from Agnes' last moments exacerbated his despair]. Like the pawnbroker in *Krotkaja*, Paul arrives crucial minutes too late and finds his wife already dead. But from Agnès's perspective, this is a blessing: «en cet instant elle désira violemment, passionnément, qu'il ne la vît plus» (ivi, 395) [In that moment she wished violently, passionately, that he would not see her anymore].

The fact that Avenarius punctures Paul's car tires exactly before Paul is desperate to leave for the hospital appears to be a plot-forming coincidence, but it does not set the plot in motion; rather, it fulfills Agnès's last wish and with this preserves her form of immortality: to disappear completely into anonymity, so that only her gesture remains.

What makes Kundera's four types of literary use of chance in *Immortality* a true typology is, once again, the possibility of forming a correlation. The poetic and contrapuntal uses of chance, as we have seen, produce equivalences. Blind chance seems to generate nothing at all, and yet it has something in common with story-forming chance: it creates an experience of interference, that is, it makes explicit the irrevocable difference between an outside and an inside view. Blind chance is at home in the immanence of the story. Viewed from outside the fictional world, it points to its limits. Story-creating coincidence also points to interference, in this case between authorship that causes the characters to collide and the characters for whom this encounter is indeed coincidental. There is no such interference in contrapuntal and poetic uses of chance, since neither is part of the fictional world. According to the second characteristic, the types group differently. The story-forming and the contrapuntal use of chance both depend on the flow of time. Story-forming chance produces the temporality of the plot (formalistically speaking, the story); contrapuntal chance produces the temporality of artistic construction (formalistically speaking, the *sujet*, i.e. the narrative construction).

Thus, we have found not less than six typologies in Kundera's novel. They all prove to be true typologies in the sense that the types complement each other and are grounded in a set of two altering characteristics. Also, they all obey the scheme of separation – fusion – hierarchy – dialogue. They govern the poetic structure of *Immortality*, and they show deep analogies between the typological structure of love relationship, communication, epoch and narration. Where does it come from? I would say that certain styles of relationship – of which love is the most instructive variety – are reflected in certain epochs, and they require certain styles of communication and certain styles of narrative expression. *Immortality*, therefore, turns out to be an in-deep cultural study, which makes it Kundera's chef-d'œuvre, as he himself admits on the pages of the novel. Indeed, when Avenarius asks the autofictional 'Kundera' about the title of his new opus, he answers:

- L'Insoutenable Légèreté de l'être.
 - Mais ce titre est déjà pris.
 - Oui, par moi ! Mais à l'époque, je m'étais trompé de titre. Il devrait appartenir au roman que j'écris en ce moment.

(ivi, 353)

[- The Unbearable Lightness of Being.
 - But this title is already taken.
 - Yes, by me! But at the time, I had the wrong title. It should belong to the novel I am writing at the moment].

The Unbearable Lightness of Being may be his most popular work, but *Immortality* is his deepest look into Being, and Kundera knows it.

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