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Reviewed work(s):
Source: Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1997), pp. 71-83
Published by: Penn State University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40247094
Accessed: 08/01/2012 13:04

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Reading Oedipus in Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being

HANA PICHLOVA AND MARJORIE E. RHINE

Early in Milan Kundera’s novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the narrator states that Tomas feels as if Tereza had appeared in his life like a forlorn child cast into a basket. Although the narrator first links the motif of the “found child” to the biblical Moses, the metaphorical tie to Oedipus will prove the most significant:

Again it occurred to him that Tereza was a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent downstream. He couldn’t very well let a basket with a child in it float down a stormy river! If the Pharaoh’s daughter hadn’t snatched the basket carrying the little Moses from the waves, there would have been no Old Testament, no civilization as we know it! How many ancient myths begin with the rescue of an abandoned child! If Polybus hadn’t taken in the young Oedipus, Sophocles wouldn’t have written his most beautiful tragedy!

Tomas did not realize at the time that metaphors are dangerous. Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love. (10–11)\(^1\)

For a first-time reader who does not yet realize the importance of the Oedipus myth within the novel, the narrator’s warning suggests that it is love that endangers the ever-womanizing Tomas. In other words, the danger that is said to reside in the metaphor comparing Tereza to a found child, specifically to Oedipus, seems connected to the strictures and risks of love. Later, however, Tomas will know all too well that the dangers of

\(^{1}\) COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDIES, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1997.
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this metaphor extend beyond the realm of love (when his article comparing the Czech communist leaders to Oedipus gets him into trouble with the secret police), and the reader, too, comes to grasp more fully the impact of the myth of Oedipus upon many of the characters' lives in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. In fact, Sophocles' play serves as an important intertext, appearing in many key scenes as a catalyst of the action that unfolds.2

In grappling with the significance of Oedipus in Kundera's novel, the possibility that Oedipus constructs himself as guilty although he is never proven guilty is of utmost importance. As one critic explains, "It is, then, possible that Sophocles' Oedipus was never wholeheartedly trying to establish his innocence at all, but that he felt compelled to make the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother come true."3 Oedipus makes the prophecy come true by rashly accepting others' unreliable accounts of his past. For example, as a young man in Corinth, Oedipus is quick to believe the words of a drunkard who raises questions about his parentage; later he readily accepts the messenger's version of the recovery of the baby on the mountain. Reading the past in this way proves to be dangerous: "the single man who plays prosecutor, judge, and agent of punishment quickly comes to regard himself as the accused. . . . The charges against Oedipus are based entirely on his own testimony against himself and unsupported hearsay" (Ahl 220–21).

The idea that Oedipus "plays" the parts of prosecutor, judge and punitive agent is clear from a close look at the play. Once questions about character motives are raised, it becomes easy to speculate that Creon's protestations that "What can the despot throne confer more sweet than peaceful sway and princely influence?" (Oedipus 592–593) is likely an exaggerated denial, because Creon, as brother to Jocasta, would have become ruler if Oedipus had not so conveniently arrived in Thebes (Ahl 189). Similarly, it is odd, as Oedipus himself points out, that Teiresias did not mention the identity of the killer earlier if he has in fact known it all along: "That day this wise man did not breathe it. Why?" (570). While not conclusive, this suggests that Teiresias may be manipulating or toying with Oedipus during the complex interrogation scene in which he finally accuses Oedipus of the murder. Perhaps the seer resents Oedipus, who has usurped Teiresias' status as problem solver because of his victory over the Sphinx (Ahl 91, 102), a possibility Oedipus himself considers in lines 390–400. Also, as noted above, the messenger who finally reveals the story of the baby which he received from Laius' shepherd and handed over to the royal family of Corinth is not necessarily a reliable
source of information either. In fact, he is clearly in Thebes to receive gifts as a reward for his information about the death of Polybus, King of Corinth: “That was my chief thought in coming here, to do myself some good on your return” (Oedipus 1006). This messenger listens carefully as Oedipus voices his anxieties; he is on stage while Oedipus explains to Jocasta that he still fears he may fulfill the second half of the prophecy by marrying whom he thinks is his mother (Merope, Queen of Corinth). The messenger is eager to get recompense for his news by convincing Oedipus to go back to Corinth and claim the throne. He quickly begins to question Oedipus about his fears (989), trying to allay them by proving that Merope is not his mother. The reliability of the messenger’s story is also suspect because although he claims to know the old shepherd who supposedly gave him the infant Oedipus quite well, the shepherd, when asked if he recognizes him, responds “I saw him? Saw him when? What man, my lord?” (Oedipus 1129). When the frustrated Oedipus presses the point by explaining, “Yonder!—Did nothing ever pass between you?” (1130), the shepherd sticks to his original story: “No—speaking out of hand, from memory.” The messenger jumps in to remind—or perhaps persuade?—the shepherd that they know each other: “Small wonder he forgets! Come, I’ll remind his ignorance, my lord” (1132–1133).

Although it would be hard, if not impossible, to argue that Oedipus is entirely innocent (the scars on his ankles suggest otherwise), it should be clear from the above examples that Sophocles’ play is as much about his ultimate self-deception as it is about his final self discovery. Through his rash judgments, Oedipus allows others—the drunk at a banquet, Creon, Teiresias, the messenger—to define his identity and his past. He is thus responsible for the outcome, not because of a definitively proven guilt, but because he resigns the freedom of self-determination, opting to accept others’ versions of his past and his actions (Ahl 55).

Tomas of Kundera’s Unbearable Lightness of Being reads Oedipus in a way that seems to leave no question of Oedipus’ guilt. For instance, the narrator summarizes, “Little did he know that the man he had killed in the mountains was his father and the woman with whom he slept his mother” (175–76). However, critical readings which target Oedipus’ insistent and dangerous misreadings of his past yield provocative insights into the question of the role or purpose of Oedipus as intertext in Kundera’s novel.

Within the world of this novel, Oedipus and what one might call “Oedipus-texts” operate as puzzling signs: characters try and most often fail to “read” their significance and relevance. For example, when Tomas
writes in a newspaper article that the Czech communist leaders should be like Oedipus (rather than arguing over whether or not their past actions are crimes, they should instead responsibly acknowledge their guilt for the consequences), he naively underestimates the political ramifications of his article, thinking that it is merely clever. In turn, Tomas' article and the consequences of its public reading (the pressure to retract it and his subsequent interrogation by a secret police agent) intensify the private meanings now “weighting” Oedipus as text and sign. This perhaps explains why Oedipus plays such an important role in three encounters that follow in the wake of the publication of Tomas' article: Tomas' interrogation by the secret police, Tereza's fall into a seductive premeditated scenario, and Tomas' awkward meeting with his son, Simon. In each of them, Tomas or Tereza is misled into dangerous terrain, in which the threat of compromise and the elusiveness of freedom are paramount. Given the historical situation in which Kundera's characters find themselves (the oppressive hard-line regime reinstalled after the 1968 Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia), difficult questions about their own and their country's past, and about freedom and guilt, are inevitable. Because the regime has stripped away the possibility for public dissent, the only space left in which to protect and cherish freedom is the “intimate world of thought,” and it is this world which is most endangered by the staged encounters that occur in several key scenes in Kundera's novel.

The first passage in which Oedipus is discussed at length focuses on the inspiration behind Tomas' article. It dramatizes how “metaphors are dangerous,” especially in a political climate that limits freedom of expression. Through thinking and writing about Oedipus, Tomas enters a treacherous space, jeopardizing not only his career but also his “intimate world of thought.” Because of his words he is lured into various scenarios in which his integrity is put at extreme risk.

Tomas' article is inspired by his earlier metaphor linking Tereza to a child who had been put in a bulrush basket. The narrator explains how these thoughts become linked not only to the myth but also to the text of Sophocles' Oedipus:

The image of the abandoned child had consequently become dear to him, and he often reflected on the ancient myths in which it occurred. It was apparently with this in mind that he picked up a translation of Sophocles' Oedipus. (175)

Just as the narrator has earlier emphasized that “If Polybus hadn't taken in the young Oedipus, Sophocles wouldn't have written his most beautiful tragedy!” (11), so if Tomas hadn't taken in Tereza, he wouldn't have
read the article. Love itself, then, is not why metaphors might be dan-
gerous. Thinking about Oedipus does not lead Tomas to a deeper love of
Tereza; rather it leads him to a "dangerous," publicly voiced interpreta-
tion of the political situation:

When Tomas heard Communists shouting in defense of their in-
nner purity, he said to himself, As a result of your "not knowing,"
this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and
you shout that you feel no guilt? How can you stand the sight of
what you've done? How is it you aren't horrified? Have you no
cyces to see? If you had eyes, you would have to put them out and
wander away from Thebes!
The analogy so pleased him that he often used it in conver-
sation with friends, and his formulation grew increasingly precise
and elegant. (177)

When even a weekly newspaper published by the Union of Czech Writ-
ers continually rehashes the question of whether or not the Czech Com-
munist leaders knew at the time that their actions were crimes, Tomas
sits down and writes his Oedipus-inspired musings—"whether they knew
or didn't know is not the main issue; the main issue is whether a man is
innocent because he didn't know"—and sends them off to the newspaper
for publication (177). Tomas' essay reveals what one might call a histori-
ography of sorts: his theory of history focusses not on what did happen
but on what should have happened, the necessity of responsibly acknowl-
edging guilt and the consequences of one's actions.
The first effect of the publication of Tomas' provocative articu-
lation of the connections between history, responsibility, and guilt is pres-
sure from the chief surgeon, at the hospital where Tomas works, to retract
his stance. Allowed one week to make the retraction decision, Tomas
interprets the smiling faces of some of his fellow doctors at the hospital
who "had retracted something, . . . or were prepared to do so" as "the sheep-
ish smile of secret conspiratorial consent" (181). Tomas, who has "never
had the reputation of being a conformist," is unable to bear the thought
that he too will join their ranks, and thus prove that "cowardice was
slowly but surely becoming the norm of behavior" (181). A colleague
who smugly assumes that he himself would never compromise explains to
Tomas how a retraction will be not only a compromise of his personal
integrity but also a trap that will continue to control and inhibit his en-
tire life:
“But even after the statement is safely filed away, the author knows that it can be made public at any moment. So from then on he doesn’t open his mouth, never criticizes a thing, never makes the slightest protest. The first peep out of him and into print it goes, sullying his good name far and wide. On the whole, it’s rather a nice method. One could imagine worse." (182)

Although this comment is not exactly from a reputable source, it does make clear that Tomas has now been pulled deep into a dangerous arena, a space in which words—remember that “metaphors are dangerous”—can wreak havoc. His colleague’s words suggest that Tomas’ retraction, were he to write it, would function as a script, dictating and controlling his future actions. Although Tomas is not necessarily influenced by this particular man, he does realize the extent to which signing the retraction would curtail his freedom and compromise his integrity. Consequently, Tomas resists the pressures and refuses to sign, taking full responsibility for his article. The effects are harsh: he is professionally demoted to a post on the outskirts of Prague and is prohibited from performing surgery.

The Oedipus-inspired article resurfaces a year later as the seeming focus of an interrogation scene which is staged by a man from the ministry (a secret police agent) in order to compromise Tomas and to implicate the editor of the article. Initially, Tomas is misled by the theatrically produced scene as a result of the cunning acting of the man from the ministry and his own inexperience. As the narrator explains, “It is a tragicomic fact that our proper upbringing has become an ally of the secret police. We do not know how to lie” (187). The reader, however, avoids falling into the man’s verbal traps because of the narrator’s descriptions of the man’s voice and emotional treble. These descriptions allow the reader to maintain an ironic distance and emphasize both the agent’s duplicity and the theatrical staging of this scene. For example, the narrator does not say that the man scolds Tomas, but that he speaks “as if scolding,” nor does the narrator say that the man speaks in a sad voice, but that his voice “was meant to sound very sad.” Moreover, the narrator does not describe the man as shocked, but says that he “appeared sincerely shocked” (186–87). Thus the reader understands the scene to be a staged interrogation before Tomas comes to this understanding. It is the style of the agent’s questions—they are short and sharp—that brings Tomas to the realization that he has been led to the edge of a dangerous abyss:

“. . . Did they put you up to it?”

“To writing it? No. I submitted it on my own.”
"Do you know the people there?"
"What people?"
"The people who published your article."
"No."
"You mean you never spoke to them?"
"They asked me to come in once in person."
"Why?"
"About the article."
"And who was it you talked to?"
"One of the editors."
"What was his name?"

Not until that point did Tomas realize that he was under interrogation. All at once he saw that his every word could put someone in danger. (187)

Even though Tomas once again successfully negotiates a risky terrain, maintaining his integrity and managing this time to slip through the tightening noose of the secret police, words continue to be a hazard, for this and another encounter with the agent lead to a further reduction in Tomas' professional opportunities: no longer allowed to practice medicine at all, he becomes a window washer.

Oedipus also appears as an intertext in an important scene involving Tereza, in which she too comes across an edition of Sophocles' play (although she reads only the title on the spine of the book). Once again Oedipus is linked to staging or theatricality, functioning as a prop in a compromising scenario that Tereza can only understand after the fact.

Tereza is seduced into meeting a "self-styled engineer" (164) at his flat for what she thinks will be a chance to exact a sexual revenge against Tomas for his infidelities. The engineer's flat is very theatrical: "The entire flat consisted of a single room with a curtain setting off the first five or six feet from the rest and therefore forming a kind of makeshift anteroom" (153). Once inside, Tereza tries to calm her turbulent emotions by looking over the impressive array of books:

> From childhood, she had regarded books as the emblems of a secret brotherhood. A man with this sort of library couldn't possibly hurt her. . .

> He disappeared behind the curtain, and she went over to the bookshelves. One of the books caught her eye at once. It was a translation of Sophocles' Oedipus. How odd to find it here! Years ago, Tomas had given it to her, and after she had read it he went on and on about it then he sent his reflections to a newspaper, and
the article turned their life upside down. But now, just looking at the spine of the book seemed to calm her. It made her feel as though Tomas had purposely left a trace, a message that her presence here was his doing. (153–54)

Throughout the novel, books operate for Tereza as signifiers of a higher, more meaningful existence (hence the importance of books as “props” in her first meetings with Tomas). Tereza reads Sophocles’ Oedipus as just such a sign, as a “trace” or mark of what Tomas represents in her life and of the possibility that she might be able to converse with the engineer on a higher plane:

When the tall engineer came back into the room, she would ask him why he had it, whether he had read it, and what he thought of it. That would be her ruse to turn the conversation away from the hazardous terrain of a stranger’s flat to the intimate world of Tomas’s thoughts. (154)

The terms the narrator uses to describe the oppositions Tereza imagines here—“hazardous terrain” versus “intimate world of Tomas’s thought”—are representative of the spaces available to Tomas and Tereza throughout the novel: a treacherous public space in which compromise is only a word away and an inner space that is the last stronghold of freedom. These terms are literalized in Tereza’s encounter with the engineer, because she has entered an unfamiliar physical space. In fact, her physical body, not only her integrity, is under assault: the engineer brusquely takes the book from her hands and forces her into the sexual act.

Tereza is unable to understand just what this encounter was about until her friend, a former ambassador, interprets it as one act in a “prearranged scenario.” As he explains, “The third function [of the secret police] consists of staging situations that will compromise us” (163). With this friend’s help Tereza sees the drama as much more complicated, with roles played not only by the engineer but also by a seemingly love-struck drunken boy, another man who had accused her of providing alcohol to a minor, and the engineer, who had rallied to her defense against the accusatory man and had thus won her trust: “So all three had been playing parts in a prearranged scenario meant to soften her up for the seduction!” (164). She begins to reevaluate the props and scenery:

How could she have missed it! The flat was so odd, and he didn’t belong there at all! Why would an elegantly dressed engineer live in a miserable place like that? Was he an engineer? . . . Besides,
how many engineers read Sophocles? . . . The whole place had more the flavor of a flat confiscated from a poor imprisoned intellectual. (164)

Oedipus serves not as a legible or meaningful "trace" but as part of a misleading set-up, a stage prop, a trap.

The last staged encounter in the novel involves Tomas and his son, Simon, and once again, Oedipus plays a central role. This time it is not the "spine of the book" that recalls the myth but Tomas' article. Simon functions as both stage director and actor:

Often Simon would wait long hours to arrange an accidental encounter with Tomas. But Tomas never stopped to talk to him.

The only reason he became involved with the big-chinned former editor was that the editor's fate reminded him of his father's. The editor had never heard of Tomas. The Oedipus article had been forgotten. It was Simon who told him about it and asked him to persuade Tomas to sign the petition. The only reason the editor agreed was that he wanted to do something nice for the boy, whom he liked. (271)

It is ironic that Simon wishes to talk with his father about an article based on a reading of Oedipus, for Simon himself is Oedipus-like, having been coldly rejected and left behind by Tomas after a divorce (figuratively if not literally sent down the river in a basket). Just as Tereza is trapped earlier and misled into an apartment that seems to be a "stage" complete with a volume of Oedipus as a prop, so Tomas is led into a staged encounter with Simon, a performance complete with dramatically raised voices for the benefit of the assumed-to-be-listening secret police. Tomas has earlier been asked to sign a retraction of his article; now he is asked to sign a petition to free political prisoners. As Tomas reaches for a pen, however, he is stopped short by Simon's exaggerated comments in praise of the effects of his Oedipus article:

As if rewarding him for his decision, the editor said, "That was a fine piece you wrote about Oedipus."

Handing him a pen, his son added, "Some ideas have the force of a bomb exploding."

Although the editor's words of praise pleased him, his son's metaphor struck him as forced and out of place. "Unfortunately, I was the only casualty," he said. "Thanks to those ideas, I can no longer operate on my patients." (217)
Simon's misreading of the power and consequences of words is based on his perception of his father as a hero; he has mythologized his father and thus overestimates the potency of the metaphor of Oedipus that Tomas used in the article. True, the metaphor turned out to be dangerous, but Simon fantasizes that the danger lies not only in the impact of the metaphor on Tomas' life but also in its power to assassinate, to have a dangerous impact in the political realm.

Simon's reading of the article and of his father is influenced by a method of interpretation which operates according to clear-cut, black and white categories, in which there can be no ambiguity or instability of signification. Simon says to his father,

"You know the best thing about what you wrote?" . . . "Your refusal to compromise. Your clear-cut sense of what's good and what's evil, something we're beginning to lose. . . . No one could be more innocent, in his soul and in his conscience, than Oedipus. And yet he punished himself when he saw what he had done." (218)

Tomas responds irritably to Simon's interpretation:

"But it's all a misunderstanding! The border between good and evil is terribly fuzzy! I wasn't out to punish anyone, either. Punishing people who don't know what they've done is barbaric. The myth of Oedipus is a beautiful one, but treating it like this . . ." He had more to say, but suddenly he remembered that the place might be bugged. He had not the slightest ambition to be quoted by historians of centuries to come. He was simply afraid of being quoted by the police. Wasn't that what they wanted from him, after all? A condemnation of his article? He did not like the idea of feeding it to them from his own lips. Besides, he knew that anything anyone in the country said could be broadcast over the radio at any time. He held his tongue. (218)

Tomas holds his tongue, silencing his own words to protect his "intimate world of thought," safeguarding both this realm from the acquisition and control of the secret police and his ideas from possibly being broadcast into public space. At this point in the novel Tomas has learned from painful experience that private thoughts (his Oedipus article inspired by his metaphor comparing Tereza to Oedipus, inspired in turn by his love for her) become muddled, misread, and lead to danger when they spill out in the hazardous terrain of a world full of actors operating under the directorial control of the Communist regime.
Similarly, what Tomas might say about Oedipus were he to complete his sentence is withheld from the reader by a puzzling ellipsis. The reader is thus frustrated, prevented from accessing Tomas' ideas and interpretation of Oedipus, foiled, perhaps, from forming a more definitive understanding of just what the intertext of Oedipus signifies in this novel. In fact, the reader of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, like the characters within the novel, stumbles over strategically placed "Oedipus-texts" and is thus pulled into a performance of sorts, compelled to enact readings of both Oedipus and Tomas' article that are mirrors of the readings performed by the characters within the confines of the narrative. Just what these readings—the characters' readings of Oedipus, our readings of their reading of Oedipus—suggest might be clearer if we look in conclusion at yet one more critical insight into Oedipus' appropriation of guilt:

Rather than an illustration of the myth, the play is a critique of mythogenesis, an examination of the process by which one arbitrary fiction comes to assume the value of truth. . . . Oedipus discovers that he is guilty of parricide and incest—he translates what the Herdsman tells him into the mythic fulfillment—less by uncovering certain hitherto obscure empirical facts than by voluntarily appropriating an oracular logic which assumes he has always already been guilty. (Goodheart 67)

Questions of Kundera's authorial intention aside, critical readings which target Oedipus as a play that examines the process by which "one arbitrary fiction comes to assume the value of truth," suggest that Oedipus in The Unbearable Lightness of Being can be read as intertextual sign marking or highlighting the dangers inherent in any interpretative gesture which assumes one version of history or political reality to be the truth. In all the misreadings involving Oedipus we have examined here—the misreadings of Tomas' article, Tereza's misreading of her situation, and Simon's of his father, which leads Tomas into a trap he almost fails to read—arbitrary fiction(s) generated or manipulated by the Communist regime are taken to be true or come dangerously close to being taken as such. When this happens, Kundera's characters risk compromising the only space in which they might imagine their own fictions, remember and cherish a history different from that promulgated by the regime. What they give up is comparable to what Oedipus gives up by "appropriating an oracular logic which assumes he has always already been guilty":

We readers [of Sophocles' Oedipus] may become Oedipuslike if we assume that the myth is a "given," that it is "fate," and that the
hero, the self, is the only character who has motives and ambitions. We can remain as oblivious to its [the play's] pluralism as Oedipus. But we do not have to. (Ahl 265)

So too, readers of Kundera's novel do not have to remain as oblivious to the possible dangers of misreadings as the characters within the novel are.

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NOTES


5. Cynthia Chase emphasizes the prevalence of “textual acts” in her article “Oedipal Textuality: Reading Freud’s Reading of Oedipus,” Diacritics 9 (1979): “While an extraordinary sex act is one major component of Oedipus’ drama, text acts are just as major and extraordinary a component of the story... Oedipus reads his guilt in a palimpsest compounding the oracle told to him by Jocasta and Laius with the oracular definition of his parentage that first drove him from Corinth. What convinces him is a constricting network of texts: the Herdsman’s word that he helped ‘save from a dreadful fate’ the exposed child entrusted to him by the queen, the messenger’s news that he was Polybus’ and Merope’s adopted heir, his wife’s confession to exposing her child, and above all, the words of the oracle, the Pythia’s dreadful structural account of ancestry, and Apollo’s fearful designation of a particular infant aggressor” (59).

6. In 1948 the communists seized power in Czechoslovakia and installed a totalitarian regime. The country became closed to Western influences, freedom of speech was abolished and strict censorship was implemented. Only twenty years later did the population experience partial relief, but “socialism with a human face,” directed by the progressive wing of the Communist Party, ended with the Soviet invasion of 1968. The seventies and eighties were again marked by ideological dogmatism. In 1989, the Velvet Revolution, masterminded by university students, brought back the democratic ideals Czechoslovakia was built on in 1918.
7. This is perhaps best described by the novel's heroine Sabina: "Living in truth, living neither to ourselves nor others, was possible only away from the public: the moment someone keeps an eye on what we do, we involuntarily make allowances for that eye, and nothing we do is truthful. Having a public, keeping a public in mind, means living in lies. Sabina despised literature in which people give away all kinds of intimate secrets about themselves and their friends. A man who loses his privacy loses everything, Sabina thought. And a man who gives it up of his own free will is a monster. That was why Sabina did not suffer in the least from having to keep her love secret. On the contrary, only by doing so could she live in truth" (112–13).


8. Here the translation coincides precisely with the Czech text.

9. In the seventies and eighties, the Czech intellectual dissidents frequently staged censored theatrical productions in their own apartments.