

# **A Literature of Modern Suffering**

## **Suffering in the Work of Feodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus & Milan Kundera**

**Elisabeth Powell**

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*This thesis is dedicated to Maria Angel, for restoring my self-confidence, and Hamish Ford, for being there to support me through a very long and difficult journey.*

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the treatment of the theme of suffering by three modern authors: Feodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, and Milan Kundera. The analysis proceeds through the identification and examination of three primary concepts which I will argue are at the heart of their work, and which provide the conceptual foundations for their depictions of suffering: the wretched, the absurd, and the banal. These concepts will be used as an avenue through which to explore and articulate their treatment of suffering. It will be argued further that the work of these three authors forms a conceptual series, in that each contributes in an important way to the evolution of a modern secular way of thinking about suffering by producing portraits of suffering informed by concepts appropriate to specific moments in the modern era. The sense of wretchedness which emerges from Dostoevsky's work is inextricably linked with the late-nineteenth-century crisis-of-faith. The concept of the absurd ties Camus to the early-twentieth-century existentialist tradition, while the sense of banality in Kundera's novels locates him in an era which has witnessed both the horrors of World War Two and the decline in the humanist tradition. The factor that unites them and gives order to their differences, however, is a common concern with questions of meaning. The loss of meaning in the modern era, and in particular the loss of meaning in relation to suffering, is a thread which develops progressively throughout the series. It is, as will be argued at the outset, what binds these three disparate authors together and what gives their work and their treatment of suffering a particular modern character.

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## Introduction:

# Suffering in the Work of Three Modern Novelists

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Human suffering is one of the enduring themes of Western literature. From the ancient epic to the modern novel, literature has been concerned with depicting the torments and anguish to which the human individual may be subjected. Homer tells us of the trials of his hero in *The Odyssey*; William Shakespeare portrays the sorrow and doubt of his protagonist in *Hamlet*; the Marquis de Sade describes the ordeals of his child victims in *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*; Charlotte Brontë reveals the frustrations of a woman struggling against the constraints of her society in *Jane Eyre*; Honoré de Balzac deals with the pain wrought by excessive paternal love in *Old Goriot*; Marcel Proust renders in epic proportions the amorous torments of his protagonist in *Remembrance of Things Past*; James Joyce chronicles the aches and pains of an ordinary man in *Ulysses*; Sylvia Plath exposes the distress of a young woman suffering a mental breakdown in *The Bell Jar*; and recent Nobel laureate JM Coetzee represents the pain of both oppressor and oppressed in *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

There is hardly a work of literature that does not deal in some way with suffering, and modern writers have come increasingly to recognise and comment on the pervasiveness of this theme. In *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Thomas Mann's character Settembrini is engaged in the task of compiling an encyclopaedia of suffering in which he intends to provide an analysis of all of the masterpieces of world literature that have sought to instruct us on the subject of suffering. "It is a work very broad in scope", he explains, "since literature has regularly chosen to depict suffering, and even second and third rate masterpieces treat of it in one form or another" (246). Yet no two works are identical in their treatment of suffering. Leo Tolstoy's rendering of the horrors of war in *War and Peace* is at a vast remove from Jaroslav Hašek's description of the same experience in *The Good Soldier Švejk*; while the agony of unrequited love as represented by Johann Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is depicted quite differently by Milan Kundera in *Life is Elsewhere*. Despite the apparent similarities in the circumstances of their characters and in the types of suffering they endure, these novels present

radically different portraits of suffering. While they each deal with the *theme* of suffering, their *concepts* of suffering vary.

There has been some debate within the field of literary criticism regarding the proper usage of the terms *theme* and *concept*. David Perkins notes the fact that critics often conflate the two terms, using the word *theme* to mean “a very general concept” or “a nexus of concepts” (1993:110). Claude Bremond, on the other hand, points to the importance of maintaining a distinction, while recognising the relationship between the two:

[The concept] is aiming to release the essence of a notion at first seen as caught in a mire of multiple contingencies; it takes off from the varied concrete and goes towards abstract unity. [The theme] tends to exemplify a supposedly defined notion by immersing it in the context of various situations; it takes an abstract entity and makes it the point of departure for a series of concrete variations (Bremond, 1993:46).

Shakespeare’s concept of romantic love, according to this definition, is something abstract. It is an idea he uses in his literature. His idea of romantic love is exemplified through its thematization in his work; or, to put it another way, his concept is given concrete expression through its thematization. Theme thus performs a kind of work with concepts. Behind various thematizations of love, death, and suffering in literature, there are abstract concepts. These may be the concepts of the author or the ideas of the time. This thesis recognises the importance of both. These concepts are always there in the background; informing and directing the action of the work, the relationships between the characters and the situations that eventuate. Different authors and different times produce different concepts, and these concepts have a crucial role to play in determining how a particular theme is treated in a piece of literature. As has been said, all literature deals with the theme of suffering, but the treatment of this theme will vary depending on the concepts informing the work. For a novel to deal with the theme of suffering, according to Bremond’s definition, it must set out to “exemplify a supposedly defined notion” of suffering.<sup>1</sup> The notions of suffering may vary, but we may nevertheless say that the

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<sup>1</sup> Bremond uses terms such as concept and notion interchangeably. This thesis does the same. While these terms have slightly different nuances (notion is often used to refer to a less well defined concept) both refer to the abstract mental constructs through which we theorise experience.



work deals with the theme of suffering. To discuss a concept of suffering in a piece of literature, on the other hand, demands that we look beyond the “concrete variations” to the particular concepts informing the treatment of the theme. Concepts have a crucial role to play in determining the treatment of a theme in a piece of literature - but they are not themes themselves. They inform the treatment of themes. Themes are also crucial to concepts, as it is through their thematization in particular texts that concepts are exemplified.

The relationship between theme and concept, however, is not as straightforward as it may appear. An author does not simply pluck a preformed concept from the air and put it to work in a piece of literature. Bremond makes the crucial point that a concept is formed, at least in part, through the process by which it is taken up and used as a theme in literature: “Considered in its multi-faceted dynamism [...] theme overflows and incessantly calls into question the concepts forged in order to apprehend it” (1993:48). Bremond discusses the way in which the concept of adultery, for example, has been shaped and changed by its thematization in literature (1993:49). This type of analysis can be applied to any literary theme, including the theme of suffering. This thesis sets out to examine the way in which the concept of suffering has been shaped and changed by the various literary works that have taken it as a theme. It focuses in particular on the work of three modern novelists: Feodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, and Milan Kundera. The concepts of suffering that emerge from the work of these authors mark both a deliberate departure from the notions of suffering dominating what is referred to here as the literature of the lyric tradition, and an attempt to come to an understanding of suffering more in keeping with an increasingly secular world. It is the contention of this thesis that the work of these authors contributes to a conceptual shift in literature around the theme of suffering. Their particular concepts of suffering and the factors that influenced them will be defined further in the course of this introduction. However, before embarking on this path, it is necessary to provide a brief discussion of the validity of thematic and conceptual analysis in the field of literary criticism.

As a number of authors have recognised, both theme and concept have suffered a decline as critical and analytical tools in the field of literary criticism in recent decades. The formalists led the charge against the thematic approach, arguing that it focused too much on extra-literary conditions at the

expense of the literary work itself. This criticism still survives to some extent.<sup>2</sup> However, some critics have recently rediscovered the usefulness of thematic analysis. Menachem Brinker, for example, argues that themes may be used as a way of investigating the semantic relationship between texts. We may compare, for example, the way in which two novels deal with the theme of mental illness. But the analysis need not stop there; we may even compare the way in which this theme is treated by both literary and non-literary texts. “Themes”, argues Brinker, “are loci where artistic literary texts encounter other texts: texts of philosophy or the social and human sciences, texts of religion and social ideologies, journalistic texts, including gossip columns, and personal texts such as diaries and letters” (1993:26). What brings such disparate texts as Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and Sigmund Freud’s *Studies on Hysteria* together is the fact that they deal with a common theme - the theme of mental illness. Of course thematic analysis is not content with recognising this fact, but probes these texts further to examine the way in which they treat their theme. What factors have influenced their understanding of mental illness? Do they conceive of their subject in the same way? Thematic analysis thus leads directly to a consideration of concepts, even if only on the level of asking what the author means, for example, by love or suffering. In fact, it is almost impossible to talk about themes without also discussing concepts. To return to an example used by Claude Bremond, one of the factors that link novels such as “*Tristan and Isolde*, *La Princesse de Cleves*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*” is not simply the fact that they deal with the theme of adultery, but that they make use of a similar *concept* of adultery (1993:49).

Like thematics, conceptual analysis has also undergone a decline in literary criticism. When Foucault advocated the abandonment of the study of the history of ideas in favour of what he termed archaeological analysis (Foucault, 1972:138), it came to be regarded by some as naive to talk about concepts. However, in recent years there has been at least a partial reversal of this attitude. In her book *Travelling Concepts*, Mieke Bal argues that “every academic field, but especially one like the humanities that has so little in the way of binding traditions, can gain from taking concepts seriously” (2002:24). Concepts are not simply vague notions floating about in the ether, they are theories about the world conceived in specific situations. “Concepts”, she argues, “offer miniature theories, and in that guise

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<sup>2</sup> Menachem Brinker notes that the “extraliterary origin of themes is one reason why some theorists show such a reluctance to discuss thematics” (1993:31).

help in the analysis of objects, situations, states, and other theories” (2002:22). Bal is interested primarily in examining concepts such as hybridity, which have figured prominently in the field of cultural studies. However, concepts such as love, death and suffering, which form the basis of both literature and our everyday discourse, are also worthy of analysis. They too have the power to “organise phenomena” (2002:32) and to theorise experience. The concepts of suffering that emerge from the Christian narratives of the first and second centuries, for example, tell us something about the way in which many Christians theorised the experience of suffering at the time of the early Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Of course it is not surprising to find that the concepts of suffering exemplified in a first century Christian text differ substantially from those found in a twentieth century European novel. This brings us to another important point - concepts are not transcultural or transhistorical; they are culturally and historically specific nodes of thought on a particular subject, and as such, are liable to change over time. “Between historical periods”, writes Bal, “the meaning and use of concepts change dramatically” (2002:24). The claim of historical contingency is not disproved by the uncanny appearance of concepts belonging to one period in the work of another. Concepts can migrate - a modern novel, for example, may borrow conceptually from a romantic text, but the concepts it borrows will nevertheless retain the trace of the earlier era. The cultural and historical specificity of concepts is part of what makes them interesting objects of analysis; they tell us something about the way in which particular groups of human beings have conceived of themselves, their surroundings, their experiences and other human beings at particular places and moments in time.

In the humanities, concepts have traditionally been thought of within the context of theoretical disciplines such as philosophy.<sup>4</sup> However, they have never belonged solely in these domains; they can also be found in the field of literature. Literature can provide concepts as useful in the analysis of an object as any theoretical treatise. Albert Camus, for example, reveals just as much about the nature of rebellion in his novel *The Plague* as he does in his philosophical work *The Rebel*, and his concept of

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<sup>3</sup> In her book *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*, Judith Perkins (1995) argues that suffering was thought of by Christians in the early Roman Empire as an empowering and ennobling experience. Perkins is primarily interested in the role such literature played in the discursive construction of a particular type of subjectivity (the self as sufferer). Her approach is influenced primarily by discourse theory (in particular by the work of Michel Foucault), and is thus very different from my own concept based approach. However, she does draw attention to the way in which suffering was represented in this literature, and her work has prompted to some extent my own thinking about the representation of suffering in modern European literature.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari argue that “philosophy is the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts” (1994:2).

absurdity is developed equally in the novel *The Stranger* and the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Along with thematic analysis, the analysis of the concepts found in literary works is also returning as an important part of the academic study of literature. This renewed interest in concepts is especially interesting in the field of literary history. According to David Perkins, there are various types of conceptual literary histories; some see the development of ideas in literature as following a logical sequence from one period to the next, while others are “strongly influenced by Foucault’s theory that history jumps from one episteme to another” (1992:49). Nevertheless, all conceptual literary histories have in common the fact that they recognise the historical specificity of various concepts. “Conceptual literary history”, writes Perkins, “is the mode that views the eighteenth century as the Age of Reason and displays eighteenth-century texts as particular moments of this idea” (1992:49). Conceptual literary history thus provides a means for examining the shared conceptual character of the works of a particular period. Such an approach to the study of literature offers a useful way in which to investigate the development of ideas in the novels examined here.

While this thesis is not an attempt to produce a literary history in the sense in which that task is defined by literary historians such as David Perkins, it is interested in the development of ideas in the literature of a particular period.<sup>5</sup> It is interested, more specifically, in the emergence of a particular group of concepts in the work of the aforementioned modern novelists: Feodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus and Milan Kundera. These authors were not writing at a single moment in time, nor do they share a common nationality - Dostoevsky was Russian, Camus French and Kundera Czech. The style and content of their work varies enormously, and the authors themselves have no particular fondness for one another - Camus, at least in his later life, admitted he preferred Tolstoy to Dostoevsky, Kundera wrote that Dostoevsky’s “universe of overblown gestures, murky depths and aggressive

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<sup>5</sup> The task of literary history, as described by Perkins, is to classify the works of a particular historical period into groups according to criteria determined by the literary historian. The role of the literary historian is to help in this process of classification by proposing various taxonomies or classificatory groupings. These “classificatory constructions”, according to Perkins, “have three parts: a name (e.g. Romanticism), a concept or characterization (e.g. what Romanticism is), and a canon of writers or set of texts included in the classification” (1992:87). The focus of literary history, as described here, is very broad in that it seeks to construct categories that can explain the similarities exhibited by all of the works encompassed within the defined group or category. This thesis, on the other hand, is focused more narrowly on the evolution of a particular group of concepts within a limited number of works from a particular period. While it relies to some extent on literary categories such as “modernism” and “romanticism”, it does not seek to undertake an exhaustive analysis of the literary canons of these periods with a view to further delineating the categories themselves.

sentimentality repelled [him]” (Kundera, 1985:1) while, in an interview, he stated that Camus’ *La Peste* was “almost the model of what [he didn’t] like” (Kundera/Oppenheim, 1989:9). Nevertheless, these three authors do have something in common, in that they each deal in a similar way with the theme of suffering in their novels. It is the contention of this thesis that their work shares a common conceptual character which stems from their attempts to grapple with the problem of suffering in a world witnessing a decline in both religious and secular forms of faith. It will be argued that the concepts which underlie their treatment of the theme of suffering (the concepts respectively of *wretchedness*, *absurdity* and *banality*) are concepts for theorising the experience of suffering in a modern and increasingly secular age.

Each of the authors examined here confronts the problem of suffering at progressive moments in the modern era: Dostoevsky was writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the questioning of faith was still in its early stages. He challenges the notion that suffering can be understood as a meaningful and necessary part of the divine plan. Rather than bringing them closer to God, the experience of suffering alienates the characters concerned. Suffering as staged in his novels is a *wretched* experience. Writing more than 50 years after the death of Dostoevsky, Camus attempts to capture the experience of suffering at a later point in human history. In the world of his novels the sufferer is not merely exiled from God; God is nowhere to be found. Camus’ characters must come to terms with the fact that they suffer in an empty and indifferent universe. In such a world there can be no divine justification for their suffering; it is *absurd*. Kundera is writing in a more contemporary time period, well after the initial shock of the absurd. His characters must confront the meaninglessness of suffering in a world witnessing the disappearance of the last vestiges of metaphysical thinking. The notion of a meaningful and sublime suffering is shown to be unsustainable in this world - even in literature - one of the last bastions of metaphysics. The concept of *banality* that arises from his work offers a means for theorising the experience of suffering in a modern world made mundane by the absence of any avenue for transcendence.

The term *modern* is notoriously difficult to define and its meaning is often contested. Some historians argue that the modern era started with the fall of the Roman Empire, others maintain it began in 1450, while still others use the term to refer to the period after the industrial revolution. In literature the term is commonly used to refer to works of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries - the period

following Romanticism. However, the word modern has also been used to designate a quality characteristic of the values and ideas of what is variously defined as the modern era. The term modern, as used in this thesis, borrows from a number of these definitions. It is used to refer to the literary works of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but more specifically to the conceptual character that permeates these works, allowing us to recognise them as modern. How is this conceptual character to be defined? The loss of faith in both religious and secular doctrines must play some part. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed an increasing scepticism towards both religious belief and secular forms of faith. This scepticism has come to be seen as characteristic of modern thought, so much so, in fact, that the modern era is often seen as the era of nihilism. “There is no doubt”, writes Henri Lefebvre, “that nihilism is deeply inherent in modernity. No doubt one day it will be proved that modernity was the period of nihilism, and that something emerged from it which nobody could predict” (Lefebvre, 1995:225). The term “nihilism” has had a long and varied history. Charles Moser (1964) provides a detailed account of the evolution of the term in Russia in the 1860s, where it was used to refer to the beliefs of a group of Russian radicals interested in the overthrow of the old order and the liberation of the people from political and economic oppression and religious dogma.<sup>6</sup> Since that time it has acquired a range of different meanings. The work of Friedrich Nietzsche provides perhaps the clearest expression of this emerging modern thematic. His philosophy denies the notion that human existence has any inherent or underlying purpose or meaning, and much of his work is devoted to the critique of those doctrines that attempt to ascribe a false order to it. The term nihilism acquires much of its contemporary meaning in connection with his philosophy.

The experience of nihilism has defined the conceptual character of much modern thought, and nowhere has its influence been more evident than in the literature of the modern era. J.Hillis-Miller argues that “the death of God is the starting point for many twentieth century writers” (1968:274), while Irving Howe ventures so far as to proclaim that nihilism “is the central preoccupation [...] at the heart of modern literature” (1967:25). This thesis argues that, like many modern novels, the novels examined here engage in an exploration of nihilism; they are particularly interested, however, in the dramatising of the impact of this phenomenon on the experience of suffering. These novels are

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<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion of nihilism and its social and historical context see Charles Moser (1964) “The Nihilist World of the 1860s: Nihilism in its Historical Connections” and “The Nihilist Milieu of the 1860s” in *Antinihilism in the Russian novel of the 1860s*.

permeated by a modern loss of faith in the ability of either faith or reason to explain or justify the existence of innocent suffering; in these novels innocent suffering is presented as completely lacking in meaning. Nietzsche also wrote extensively about the “senselessness of suffering” (1967[b]:68) / “meaninglessness of suffering” (1967[b]:162), and the difficulty human beings have in coming to terms with this fact. Some of his ideas in this regard find expression in the work of the authors examined here; they share his conviction about the senselessness of suffering, and it is this conviction that provides the underlying framework for their depictions of suffering as wretched, absurd, and banal. While this thesis does not aim to provide a detailed explication of Nietzsche’s ideas on suffering, which were many and varied, it does acknowledge the importance of some of his ideas for the work of the novelists examined here. In a sense, these novels are a dramatisation of the problems Nietzsche explored in more theoretical terms.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore fitting that this thesis provides a brief discussion of some of those ideas.

According to Nietzsche, human beings cannot bear to contemplate the notion that existence, with its joys and its sorrows, means nothing. In the *Genealogy of Morals* he argued that it is not the existence of suffering in itself that is the cause of anguish and despair for human beings, but the meaninglessness of suffering:

Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* repudiate suffering as such; he *desires* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind [...] (1967[b]:162).

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche’s influence on the work of Camus and Kundera is indisputable. They had both read Nietzsche, and had referred specifically to his philosophy in their work (Camus discusses Nietzsche in both *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, while Kundera deals with some of his philosophy in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). There is no evidence that Dostoevsky had read Nietzsche (though Nietzsche had read Dostoevsky and had referred to him in *Twilight of the Idols*), but his work nevertheless deals with the human doubt about the lack of inherent meaning in the world, which was central also to Nietzsche’s philosophy (though for Nietzsche there *was* no inherent meaning in the world, while for Dostoevsky there was *doubt* about the existence of such meaning). Janko Lavrin justifies the fact that Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are often mentioned together, writing that “both of them were among the acutest anatomists of our cultural, social and moral crisis” and that “most of the vital problems which Dostoevsky had projected into the characters of his own novels were also probed by [...] Nietzsche” (1969:160-1).

Nietzsche also recognised the central role art has played in disguising the meaninglessness of suffering. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he argued that the dramatic arts in the ancient world were born from a desire to disguise the base and meaningless nature of human suffering, and to make it appear sublime. “[A]rt approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror and absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live” (1967[a]:60). According to Nietzsche, the Ancient Greeks dispelled the horror they felt at the senselessness of human suffering by turning it into art. At the core of Greek tragedy, he argued, was a “substratum” of human pain and misery over which was thrown a veil of beauty. Suffering and beauty were inextricably linked in it; tragedy could not exist without suffering, which was its basis and inspiration, but neither could it exist without the aesthetic principle which gave it its form. Thus there are these two elements in Greek tragedy: the Dionysian and the Apollinian. Dionysus points us to the senselessness and gratuitousness of the human condition, and Apollo, “with his sublime gestures [...] shows us how necessary is the entire world of suffering” (1967[a]:45).

It was not just in art, however, that suffering was made to appear meaningful. Religion and philosophy have also devoted themselves to the denial of the senselessness of human existence. Christianity, argued Nietzsche, sought to justify suffering in terms of the ascetic ideal, which stated that suffering was a means to achieving salvation. From this idea, suffering attained its value and purpose:

[T]he ascetic ideal offered man meaning! [...] In it, suffering was interpreted; the tremendous void seemed to have been filled; the door was closed to any kind of suicidal nihilism [...] man was saved thereby, he possessed a meaning, he was henceforth no longer like a leaf in the wind, a plaything of nonsense (1967[b]:162).

Philosophy fulfilled the same function for a more secular age, argued Nietzsche, by approaching the existence of suffering as an “epistemological problem” (1967[b]:69) to which it then sought to provide answers. Like art and religion, it satisfied the human desire for meaning. So successful were these human inventions that, according to Nietzsche, they banished any awareness of the senselessness of suffering from the human imagination: “[N]either for the Christian, who has interpreted a whole mysterious machinery of salvation into suffering, nor for the more naive man of ancient times [...] was there any such thing as *senseless* suffering” (1967[b]:68).



The authors examined here have also studied the ways in which human beings attempt to deceive themselves about the senselessness of the human predicament; the work of each recognises the human desire to attribute a meaning to their suffering in a metaphysical sense. “I want to be here when everyone suddenly discovers why it has all been the way it has”, says Dostoevsky’s Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. “All the religions of the earth have been founded on that desire, and I believe” (280). In the midst of the gratuitous and incomprehensible suffering of *The Plague* Father Paneloux encourages his parishioners to see the divine will as “a small still flame in the dark core of human suffering” (83). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera ponders the human propensity to imbue experience with weight, purpose and meaning. Tereza’s determination to see the workings of fate in every chance occurrence underscores her desperation for a meaningful existence. Even Tomas eventually gives in to the same desire: “*Es muss sein*” (It must be) (32), he tells the director of the hospital when he decides to follow Tereza back to Prague. The desperate attempts of these characters to maintain a belief in the meaningfulness of existence, however, are shown ultimately to fail. In the worlds they inhabit, meaning does not exist in a metaphysical sense. These characters discuss, debate, and wonder at the meaning of suffering without success. Their failed epistemological endeavours act as a narrative catalyst inviting the reader to consider the potentially painful proposition that human existence is without final meaning.

These authors inherit the secular world Nietzsche calls forth with his much quoted passage regarding the death of God: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche, cited in Hollingdale, 1969:14). Dostoevsky’s character Ivan commits a similar symbolic act of deicide with his refusal to accept the meaning of God’s creation; and he destroys with him the possibility for a theodical understanding of suffering. Ivan thus resembles the value destroying lion in Nietzsche’s parable “Of the Three Metamorphoses” in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “how the spirit shall become a camel, and the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child” (1961:54). The camel represents the human being laden down with values. The lion destroys those values, and the child seizes this freedom to “create new values” (1961:55). The novels examined here are populated with characters who bear a symbolic resemblance to the figures described in “The Three Metamorphoses”. If Ivan is the value-destroying lion, Camus’ character Meursault (*The Stranger*) is the child, creating his own values in an absurd universe. Like the child he represents “innocence and forgetfulness” (1961:55). He does not understand or recognise the rules of the society in which he lives - he makes his decisions according to

his own scale of values. Kundera portrays characters like Sabina, who celebrate their freedom from burdensome values, but then also Franz, who has grown tired of his freedom and longs for the weight of truth and meaning. For such characters, however, meaning is impossible. They are seeking truth in a world that refuses to deliver. Through his ideas on the senselessness of suffering, Nietzsche is a more or less unspoken presence in the work of each of these authors. The senselessness of suffering is a key factor in understanding the wretchedness of suffering in Dostoevsky, its absurdity in Camus, and its banality in Kundera.

With their nihilistic vision of suffering in a world devoid of metaphysical meaning, these authors undertake a departure from what is referred to in this thesis as the literature of the lyric tradition. The term lyrical, as used here, is strongly influenced by Milan Kundera's discussion of lyricism in literature and the lyrical attitude in general (1993:138), both of which will be discussed further in the course of this introduction, and later in this thesis. I will confine myself here to giving a brief explanation of Kundera's use of the term and a definition of the way in which it is used in this thesis. When Kundera talks about the lyrical attitude in literature, he is not using the term *lyrical* in a traditional sense. He does not use it to describe the function of a lyric poem in giving expression to the subjective thoughts and feelings of its author, nor does he use it to describe the songlike style of certain types of poetry.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, his understanding of lyricism does borrow something from both of these definitions. Kundera understands the lyrical attitude in literature as an attitude characterized by a fundamental agreement with or approval of the nature of creation. He has in mind those odes and sonnets which sing the praises of the beauty of nature and the universe. Kundera is fundamentally opposed to the attitude motivating such poetry because he sees in it a refusal to recognise the banality of everyday life. He is critical of its metaphysical and affirmational spirit, its fundamental agreement with the order of the universe, and its denial of the less than pleasing aspects of human existence.

Kundera's definition of the lyrical attitude resonates strongly with some of the religious and philosophical views on the subject of suffering which have already been discussed briefly in this introduction (the religious justification of suffering as a necessary and meaningful part of the universe

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<sup>8</sup> M.H. Abrams defines the term lyric as follows: "Greek writers signified by 'lyric' a song rendered to the accompaniment of a lyre. The term is now used for any fairly short, nonnarrative poem presenting a speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling" (1985:97).

appears particularly lyrical according to this definition). Such views are central to my own definition of the lyrical attitude. The term lyrical, then, is used here and elsewhere in this thesis to describe a way of thinking characterized by its affirmation of the order of the universe - a way of thinking intimately connected with certain religious and philosophical views. It is an attitude which is perhaps best demonstrated in the literature of the Romantic Movement. For the writers of this movement, the universe was seen as a place of divine order in which every seemingly insignificant occurrence was sanctioned by the divine will. Mary Wedd argues that “Coleridge believed that the spirit of God was in everything”, while “Charles Lamb basically went along with the Christian Theodicy” (1998:66-7). These writers saw human suffering as a necessary and meaningful part of the universe; they believed that, through it, the sufferer could attain redemption. Underpinning the depiction of suffering in this literature were the concepts of the *meaningful* and the *sublime*. These concepts dictated the attitude one was expected to take towards suffering. It was deemed unacceptable, on the other hand, to treat suffering as trivial, vulgar or mundane. While this attitude both pre-dates and post-dates the Romantic Movement to some extent, it finds its strongest expression therein. In 1674, we already have Nicholas Boileau giving this advice to his readers in his *Art of Poetry*: “In all you write be neither low nor vile; / The meanest theme may have a proper style” (Boileau, cited in Sollors 1993:4). The lesson is repeated again by John Milton, in the prelude to *Samson Agonistes*, where he instructs his audience on the grave error of “intermixing comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons” (180). These things are irreconcilable with the vision of suffering to which many writers of this era subscribed. In his *Paradise Lost* Milton writes that “suffering for truth’s sake is fortitude to highest victory, and to the faithful death the gate of life” (177).

This lofty vision of suffering was the mainstay of much of the literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and its prevalence alone is a fact which warrants its questioning. It figures prominently in the work of English and German Romantics such as William Wordsworth, Johann Goethe, and Friedrich Schiller, French neo-romantics such as Gustave Flaubert and nineteenth century novelists such as Leo Tolstoy. The works of these authors are beautiful and engaging, but their beauty is lyrical. It is the type of lyrical beauty that lends an attractive and meaningful guise to suffering. The lyrical attitude is not confined to literature, however, it makes its influence felt also in theological, philosophical, political and private discourses. It is present, for example, in the euphemistic and noble sounding phrases of politicians sending troops off to war. This more sinister political

manifestation of the lyrical attitude is an object of particular concern for authors such as Camus and Kundera. They ask how sustainable it is in an increasingly secular age, especially considering its reliance on outmoded metaphysical notions regarding the value and meaning of suffering.

A fundamental aspect of the work of the authors examined here is their antilyrical attitude. Dostoevsky's narrator in *The Brothers Karamazov* comments critically on the lyrical depiction of the suffering and death of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, while Tarrou, in Camus' novel *The Plague*, derides the euphemistic accounts of executions contained in novels and newspaper reports. The questioning of the representation of suffering in literature reaches a critical point during the twentieth century, with modern technology providing new ways for producing mass suffering, and the mass media providing the opportunity to witness the real suffering to which human beings are subjected. The concentration-camp faces of the victims of the holocaust captured on celluloid, photographs of children burned by napalm in Vietnam, and television footage of starving people in Africa call into question the types of values informing the representation of suffering.<sup>9</sup> What role does literature have in relation to this type of suffering? What responsibilities does it have to the victims? Is it possible for art to betray the sufferer by rendering their pain as something which is necessary, rather than something which ought to be alleviated? These are questions increasingly being asked of literature in the modern era. Milan Kundera is particularly aware of such questions. In *The Art of the Novel*, he takes issue with the work of authors such as Apollinaire and Mayakovsky, modern poets who approach the world in "lyrical ecstasy" (1993:140). He sees in the work of these authors as a blind veneration of the modern world and everything in it, and a determination to see even the worst aspects of human existence as beautiful and worthy of praise. Kundera decries the lyrical tendency to make suffering appear sublime. He makes the contempt he feels for such a tendency clear in the postscript to his novel *Life is Elsewhere*: "When an executioner kills, that is after all normal; but when a poet [...] sings in accompaniment, the whole system of values we considered sacrosanct has suddenly been shaken apart" (310).

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<sup>9</sup> These forms of mass media provided a new opportunity to witness the real suffering of the victims of war and persecution in a way not possible previously. They allowed viewers to confront the realities hidden behind the euphemistic phrases often employed to describe them. This was the aim of American Civil War photographers such as Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan. According to Susan Sontag, the intention of their work was clear: "Here are the dreadful details! Let them aid in preventing such another calamity from falling on the nation" (2003:47).

The antilyrical attitude of the authors examined here determines to a large extent their approach to suffering. With their focus respectively on the *wretched*, the *absurd*, and the *banal*, Dostoevsky, Camus and Kundera challenge the lyrical notion of suffering as an experience both *meaningful* and *sublime*. Rather than offering us an understanding of suffering, they test the limits of our understanding. Their novels stage scenes of misery and degradation so dismal they seem to defy any attempt to make sense of them. Rather than providing explanations, they invite the reader to contemplate the hopelessness and senselessness of the situations in which their characters are involved. They oppose the construction of suffering as meaningful and sublime because they are aware of the possible consequences of overlooking the fact that it is a fundamentally aversive experience. If suffering is depicted as meaningful and sublime, it is less likely to be opposed, and may even become something which is advocated or sought. The representations of suffering these authors produce are based at least partially on an awareness of these possibilities. In their novels they set out to challenge the affirmational and euphemistic tendencies of earlier literature and to reconceptualise suffering in a way more in keeping with the values and ideas of the modern era. While Kundera's novels represent the end point of this project, both Dostoevsky and Camus play a crucial role in the process - their concepts respectively of the wretchedness and absurdity of human suffering are positioned in this thesis as stepping stones in the evolution of a modern and antilyrical conception of suffering; a conception of suffering as banal, and entirely without meaning. All three authors take part in the progressive stripping bare of those metaphysical illusions which had given suffering a sense of purpose and meaning. Kundera completes the trajectory. In his novels the last vestiges of meaning are discarded; suffering, for his characters, is a banal affair. Kundera's depiction of suffering as banal is at the furthest remove from the lyrical notion of suffering as meaningful and sublime; with his work the conceptual shift towards a modern secular conception of suffering is completed. Part of the aim of this thesis is to trace the trajectory of this shift in thinking, and to examine what each author contributes to it; to examine, that is, what they contribute to modern thought on the subject of suffering at the particular moments at which they were writing.

The first part of this thesis will look at the concept of the *wretchedness* of suffering in the work of Feodor Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky examined the way in which the questioning of religious faith in an increasingly secular age led to a challenging of the theological notion of suffering as a meaningful and necessary part of human existence. For the faithful, even innocent suffering was conceived of as

serving the divine will, and it derived its justification from this belief. Dostoevsky challenged this type of thinking, most notably in his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this novel, one of the protagonists launches an open rebellion against the Christian theodicy, and, in so doing, begins a process in literature in which human suffering is alienated from the will of God. While Dostoevsky was himself a Christian, many of his portraits of human suffering are devoid of the sense of divine purpose that gave some Christians comfort, and the strength to endure their suffering. Many of his characters are exiles from God, and their suffering is made wretched by this fact.

The second part of this thesis will look at the concept of the *absurdity* of suffering in the work of Albert Camus. Camus continued Dostoevsky's critique of those metaphysical doctrines that sought to deny the senselessness of human suffering. The world of his novels is a world from which God has departed. Camus' critique of metaphysical thinking, however, went beyond the religious doctrines Dostoevsky had challenged, to focus also on the secular political and philosophical doctrines of his own age. In these doctrines he found the same sorts of justifications of suffering propagated by the Christian faith, only here they took a form more in keeping with the values of his own secular society. Rather than being explained in terms of the divine will, human suffering was justified in terms of the rational progress of history. Camus took issue with these secular doctrines as much as he did with their theological counterparts; both are shown in his novels to be unsustainable in a demystified world. Camus highlights the epistemological lack exposed by the disappearance of these doctrines, which had previously provided an understanding of suffering; in his novels the search for any kind of meaning, whether in religious or secular terms, is shown to be futile. Suffering in these novels is an absurd phenomenon.

The third part of this thesis will investigate the concept of the *banality* of suffering in the work of Milan Kundera. The world of Kundera's novels is entirely secular; a place in which the modern loss of faith in both religious and secular doctrines has made existence "unbearably light". However, there is at least one last bastion of metaphysical thinking that remains in these novels: the literature of the lyric tradition. Some of Kundera's characters still manage to find a sense of purpose and meaning in their suffering by turning to this type of literature, and this is precisely where Kundera aims his attack. Kundera's work, with its focus on the banality of human suffering, brings to its completion the conceptual shift begun over one hundred years earlier by Dostoevsky, with his questioning of faith.

In concluding, the final part of this thesis will consider some of the ethical consequences of the modern conceptual shift to which the work of these three authors have contributed, through an examination of the relationship between the literary treatment of suffering and the phenomenon of compassion.

## Part One



Feodor Dostoevsky:

The Wretchedness of Suffering



## Chapter 1:

# The Wretchedness of Suffering

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This chapter will begin to examine the emergence in Dostoevsky's work of a sense of the wretchedness of human suffering. It will focus primarily on defining the concept of wretchedness, particularly in terms of the significance it attains in relation to religious formulations of suffering, and in relation to the late nineteenth century crisis of faith. The chapter will then move on to investigate some of the factors which shaped the representations of suffering we find in Dostoevsky's work, and to locate these representations within a literary context. The second half of the chapter will consider some of the approaches Dostoevsky critics have taken in examining the treatment of the theme of suffering in Dostoevsky's work, before pursuing further my own analysis in relation to this critical context.

## **The Concept of Wretchedness in Dostoevsky**

Dostoevsky is considered by many of his readers and critics to have been a devout Christian and a deeply religious author. His spiritual views, according to V.V. Zenovsky, "provided the foundation for his intellectual life and theoretical constructions" (1962:130). He professed his faith in many of his letters and journals, and it is evident in much of his fiction. Nevertheless, it is also a fact that he admitted frequently to having "doubts" and to being "tortured by God" (Dostoevsky, cited in Zenovsky, 1962:130). This doubt was nowhere more evident than when it came to the question of innocent suffering. More than anything else, this posed the greatest challenge to his faith, for how was he to reconcile the existence of innocent suffering with the idea of an all-powerful and loving creator? This was a problem which had interested theologians and philosophers for centuries. In 1710, Leibniz had written a work entitled *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, in which he attempted to address this problem. "[O]ne must confess that there is evil in this world which God has made", he writes, "and that it would have been possible to make a world without evil or even not create any world, since its creation depended upon the free will of God" (1952: 378).

Leibniz denies, however, that the existence of evil in the world can be taken as proof that “God was lacking in power, or knowledge, or goodness” (1952: 377). “I would justify this denial”, he writes, “by pointing out that the best course is not always that one which tends towards avoiding evil, since it is possible that the evil may be accompanied by a greater good” (1952: 378). Of suffering, (the second of the three categories of evil he addresses)<sup>10</sup>, he writes the following:

[O]ne may say of physical evil [suffering] that God wills it often as a penalty owing to guilt, and often also as a means to an end, that is, to prevent greater evils or to obtain a greater good. The penalty serves also for amendment and example. Evil often serves to make us savour good the more; sometimes too it contributes to a greater perfection in him who suffers it, as the seed that one sows is subject to a kind of corruption before it can germinate [...]. (1952: 137)

Following Leibniz, other writers and philosophers offered their own *theodicies*, in which they too attempted to explain the existence of innocent suffering as consistent with the belief in a powerful and just creator. The term theodicy thus came to be used to describe any attempt to provide a vindication of the justice of God in creating a world in which innocent suffering exists.

Some critics have argued that *The Brothers Karamazov* is Dostoevsky’s theodicy. The arguments for and against this idea will be considered in the following pages, along with a range of other arguments which attempt to determine what Dostoevsky’s position was in relation to the question of innocent suffering. Suffice it to say for now that such a proposition cannot be accepted as unproblematic. There is much evidence to suggest that Dostoevsky struggled with the idea that innocent suffering could be explained as a necessary part of the divine plan, and nowhere can this struggle be seen more plainly than in *The Brothers Karamazov*. This novel will thus form the basis of much of the following analysis. It will be argued in the course of the proceeding chapters that the portraits of suffering we find in this novel, and to some extent in Dostoevsky’s other novels, are underpinned not by a belief in the dictates of his Christian faith, but by a questioning of his religious beliefs. In his novels, suffering is an experience that is miserable and degrading. There is little evidence in his work of the influence of the types of

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<sup>10</sup> “Evil may be taken metaphysically, physically, and morally. *Metaphysical evil* consists in mere imperfection, *physical evil* in suffering, and *moral evil* in sin.” (1952:136)

formulations of innocent suffering cultivated by Christian Doctrine, such as the idea that suffering is empowering or ennobling.<sup>11</sup> Nor does he offer any support for the Christian belief that suffering brings one closer to God. Many of Dostoevsky's characters are unable to reconcile the fact of their suffering with the idea of an all-powerful and loving creator. The suffering they experience acts as the catalyst for a questioning of faith which ends ultimately by bringing about their separation from God. These characters suffer as if in an indifferent and empty universe. Their pain is the pain of those who have been exiled from God, and this is what it means to say that their suffering is *wretched*.

The concept of wretchedness is central to my analysis of the treatment of suffering in Dostoevsky's work. The word *wretch* comes from the Old English word *wrecca*, meaning "a banished person" or "exile" (OED, 1989:625). When applied to Dostoevsky's novels it attains the added religious connotation of one who has been exiled from God. In his *Divine Comedy* Dante refers to the "*miseri profani*" or "wretched reprobates" (*Inferno*, Canto 6, line 21) who inhabit the third circle of hell. The term refers directly to the misery of those who have been exiled from God. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is described as an "inhuman wretch", (*The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.4) a label which marks him both as an exile from humanity and from the Christian society in which he lives. While Dostoevsky did not explicitly identify the concept of wretchedness as underpinning his representations of suffering (as Camus identified the concept of absurdity as providing the foundation for his early work), it will be argued in the following chapters that a particular sense of wretchedness can nevertheless be identified as informing his work, and that an investigation of this concept in relation to his work can help further elucidate his treatment of suffering.

The concept of wretchedness is intimately bound up with the modern questioning of faith, and in particular the questioning of the answers faith provides in order to explain the existence of innocent suffering. To question one's faith is to take the first steps out into the secular wilderness; it is to relinquish the comforts faith provides, especially the comfort of feeling that one's suffering has a meaning in terms of the divine plan. Suffering, as it is depicted in these novels is neither meaningful (in a metaphysical sense) nor sublime. As will be discussed, both proper meaning and sublimity require

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<sup>11</sup> In her book *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*, Judith Perkins examines the fact that innocent suffering is often constructed as empowering or ennobling (1994:104-123).

that the sufferer have faith in a force greater than themselves, and these notions cannot, therefore, be reconciled with the wretchedness of suffering in a secular world.

### **The Socio-Political Milieu**

It is difficult to analyse a piece of literature without having recourse to the wider socio-political milieu in which it belongs. As David Duff says in his analysis of Romantic literature of the 1800s: “All literature bears traces of the historical moment which gave rise to it” (1998:23). This is particularly the case with Dostoevsky’s novels. The latter half of the nineteenth century was a time of great upheaval in Russia; and a number of Dostoevsky critics have commented on the role his novels play in providing a literary record of what was occurring, both in terms of actual events, and changes in attitudes and ways of thinking. Georg Lukács writes about Dostoevsky’s “poetic grasp of the change of the times, of men, of their psychology and world-view” (1962:147). Some of these changes are summarised by Charles Moser, who writes that the reign of Alexander II (1855-1881) saw “far-reaching reforms” (1964:13) in the economic, political and social spheres of life. He refers to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 (1962:13), the relaxation of censorship and the wider dissemination of ideas that followed (1962:13-14), the violent reaction against religious dogma by certain sectors of society (1962:16), and the questioning of inherited belief systems by a rising generation of young radicals labelled alternately as “nihilists” or “new men” (1962:18-20). All of these elements of a changing society are reflected in Dostoevsky’s novels, along with an examination of their impact on the spiritual and moral character of both the individual and the society as a whole. As Lukács argues, Dostoevsky’s novels “stated [...] all the problems of human culture at its highest point, stirred up ultimate depths, and presented a totality hitherto never achieved and never since surpassed, embracing the spiritual, moral, and philosophical questions of that age” (1962:146).

In particular, Dostoevsky’s work examined the effects of the increasing secularisation of Russian society, and the consequences of the transition from religious to secular ways of thinking. As in all areas of thought, the way in which we think about suffering at any historical moment is determined, at least in part, by the concepts made available to us through the discourses in which we participate. Christian theology had encouraged a certain understanding of suffering through a specific set of religious concepts: it emphasised the value of suffering for salvation, and propagated the view that

innocent suffering was a necessary and meaningful part of the universe. This view was enormously influential in the heavily religious environment of early nineteenth century Russia. However, the decline in the power of the church led inevitably to a decline in Christian thinking. The increasingly secular climate that ensued saw the rise of new discourses that challenged traditional religious understandings of suffering, especially innocent suffering. The emergence of these new discourses led to a proliferation of ideas on the subject of suffering. One discourse that was particularly influential was that of liberal humanism. The views on suffering expressed by characters such as Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* were consistent with this discourse, which rejected the Christian notion that innocent suffering could be recompensed in heaven, and demanded that the welfare of human beings be addressed on earth. Dostoevsky's own views on suffering were also influenced by these ideas. In his personal writings he expressed sympathy for the suffering of the poor and a concern at the squalid conditions in which they lived. Joseph Frank notes that, as a child, Dostoevsky lived with his family in a "small cramped apartment" on the grounds of the Mariinsky Hospital for the poor, where his father worked as a doctor (1976:9). He thus came into contact, at a very early age, with the city's poorest people and, like a number of his contemporaries, he chose to portray their situation in his novels. The abject conditions in which they lived, combined with the fact that they could often barely manage to eke out a paltry existence, contributed in his work to a sense that these were people who had been abandoned by God.

### **Literary Influences**

Dostoevsky was not the only author to have turned his attention to the suffering of the poor. Concern for the poor and downtrodden can be found in the work of a whole generation of Russian authors. In 1790 the Russian writer Alexander Radishchev wrote the following in the dedication to his work *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscov*: "I looked around me - my soul was afflicted by the sufferings of humanity ... and I felt that all may take part in helping their fellow-men" (Radishchev, cited in Kochan and Abraham, 1983:147). These words, according to Lionel Kochan and Richard Abraham, became "the leitmotif for generation after generation of the intelligentsia" (1983:147), who took up the cause of the long suffering poor in their work. The Russian poet and writer Aleksandr Pushkin, much admired by the young Dostoevsky, also addressed the subject of poverty and suffering in his writing. His short story *The Station Master* tells of a poor man who stands by helplessly as his daughter is

seduced and carried off by a member of the aristocracy. Joseph Frank comments that “the figure of the heartbroken old man, helpless to assert his rights against the all-powerful nobleman, is delineated by Pushkin with genuine sympathy for his suffering” (1976:152). The “genuine sympathy” which marked Pushkin’s portraits of the poor would become a prominent feature of Dostoevsky’s own work.

Another author whose literary treatment of suffering had made a particular impression on Dostoevsky was Nikolai Gogol. In 1842 Gogol wrote *The Overcoat*, a short story about the life and death of a low-level civil servant in St Petersburg. Akaky Akakievich, the story’s protagonist, is a copyist in a government department who, despite his age and years in the service, is destined never to proceed beyond the lowly rank of titular councillor. At work he is ignored by porters and mocked by junior clerks who tell jokes at his expense and “shower his head with little bits of paper” (74). A particular object of ridicule among his colleagues is his overcoat, which is patched all over and threadbare in places. When his tailor indignantly refuses to mend the old coat one more time he manages, with much sacrifice, to raise the sum necessary to buy a new one. However, the coat is stolen from him on the very same day he takes possession of it. He reports the theft to the authorities who virtually ignore the matter. He is even abused and humiliated by the government official to whom he turns for help. So devastated is he by his loss, that he falls into a fever and dies. Dostoevsky said that Gogol’s rendering of the miserable and degrading circumstances of this poor clerk, abused by all who knew him, had had a decided influence on a generation of writers, himself included, who would continue to portray with sympathy the plight of society’s downtrodden. Later he would say of himself and his contemporaries “we have all come from under *The Overcoat*” (Dostoevsky, cited in Wilks, 1972:13).

Dostoevsky shared with authors such as Radishchev, Pushkin and Gogol a sympathy for the suffering of the poor and downtrodden. These authors had been influential in shaping his own ideas about suffering, and by his own admittance, they had had a substantial influence on his work. However, what is noticeably absent from their accounts of human suffering is the sense of metaphysical abandonment and exile that is so central to Dostoevsky. As has been stated, the sense of suffering alone, and the feeling of futility that is associated with it, is crucial to the sense of wretchedness that can be found in many of Dostoevsky’s novels. The sense of this is especially conspicuous in his portraits of innocent suffering. Whereas criminal characters such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* may experience

salvation through suffering, there is no such redemption for the innocent in his novels. The suffering of these characters is shown to be utterly without purpose or meaning. Rather than bringing them closer to God, the experience of suffering leaves them feeling alienated and alone. Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk*, explores the humiliating effects of suffering on a lowly government clerk (whose position is remarkably similar to that of Gogol's character). The novel was praised by the Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky for its sympathetic rendering of the condition of the downtrodden. It shows that suffering for the poor was not the sublime experience it was shown to be in Christian literature. Suffering in many of his novels is an experience that humiliates and degrades the character concerned. In subsequent novels, Dostoevsky continued to explore the degrading effect of suffering on the underprivileged. *Notes From Underground*, for example, charts the crippling effect of poverty on the character of a retired civil servant. The novel opens with the following words from the protagonist: "I am a sick man ... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man" (15). The ensuing narrative reveals that it is this character's own history of pain and humiliation that has had such a degrading effect on his character. *The Insulted and Injured* recounts the stories of a number of impoverished individuals, including Elena Smith, a child of twelve or thirteen, ruined and forced into poverty by a proud mother, a spiteful grandfather, and a ruthless and unprincipled father. In this novel, as in *Poor Folk* and *Notes from Underground*, suffering is shown to have a devastating effect on the individuals concerned. *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's last novel, contains his most forceful rendering of the wretchedness of human suffering. In this novel Dostoevsky has one of his characters deliver a monologue to a young monk in which he recounts a number of stories about the torture of children. These children are flogged, kicked, beaten and even hunted down and killed for sport. The reader is told that they have "nowhere to go and no one to turn to" (278). They cry out to "dear father God" (278) for protection but there is no answer. These are the most wretched of creatures, truly alone in their suffering. The storyteller defies his listener to make sense of their fate in terms consistent with the idea of a powerful and loving creator. The novel as a whole challenges the reader to do the same. This novel with its wretched characters stands as a challenge to the Christian notion of suffering as a meaningful and sublime experience; it thus marks an important shift away from the traditions of Christian literature, with its sublime visions, its asceticism and its justifications of suffering.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Not all critics agree on this point. It has been argued that Dostoevsky's graphic and brutal depictions of suffering

## Some Trends in Dostoevsky Criticism on the Theme of Suffering

While there is very little secondary material dealing with suffering in the work of either Camus or Kundera, Dostoevsky's treatment of suffering has interested a broad range of critics. Authors such as Robert Belknap and John Simons have written articles dealing specifically with this topic, but the theme of suffering has also been addressed by many other Dostoevsky critics in the context of political, historical, and religious readings. The remainder of this chapter will consider some of the approaches critics have taken in attempting to articulate the views of suffering which inform Dostoevsky's work. In doing so, I will attempt to locate my own position, to show where I am departing from the available critical literature, and to show where my own analysis has been helped by and builds upon the work of other scholars.

One of the earliest attempts to deal with the theme of suffering in Dostoevsky's novels was made by Nikolai Mikhailovsky in his 1882 article "A Cruel Talent". The piece offers a rather crude psychological analysis of Dostoevsky's novels, arguing that their obsession with suffering was a result of the author's abnormal and perverse taste for cruelty. According to R.F. Miller, Mikhailovsky "depicted Dostoevsky as a sadist, addicted to the portrayal of suffering and torture" (1986:8). The Marxist critic Maxim Gorky followed Mikhailovsky's approach in his 1913 article "On Karamazovism", in which he condemns Dostoevsky as "a mighty torturer and a man with a sick conscience" (Gorky, cited in Belknap, 1982:30). However, as Robert Belknap notes, there is no evidence of Dostoevsky's real-life sadism: he "could be abusive and vicious when he lost his temper, but his documented behaviour outside of his writing offers little support for the theory Gorky and Mikhailovsky proclaimed" (1982:31). Furthermore, the sympathetic way in which Dostoevsky renders the suffering of his characters is one of the most striking features of his writing and directly contradicts the theory of sadism.

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have something in common with the iconography of early Christian literature. Robert Belknap, a prominent Dostoevsky critic, suggests that *The Brothers Karamazov*, with its "catalog of tortured children", rivals the Old Testament story of Job, which he had considered previously to contain "the most spectacular display of innocent suffering in literature" (Belknap, 1990:137). It will be argued in the following pages, however, that there are important differences between Dostoevsky's portraits of innocent suffering, and the biblical rendering of the suffering of characters such as Job. The suffering of the children in Ivan's story is shown to be utterly without sense or purpose, while the suffering of this biblical protagonist attains a meaning and a purpose in terms of his faith.



More recently, Mikhail Bakhtin, in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, has offered some support for the thesis of Dostoevsky's sadism, though he ultimately rejects Mikhailovsky's earlier approach as simplistic. While he ignores speculations regarding Dostoevsky's real life sadism, Bakhtin admits that the orchestration of the suffering of his characters is a function of Dostoevsky's artistic purpose: the revelation or laying bare of the hero's consciousness. Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky inflicts a "special sort of moral torture" on his heroes "in order to force out of them that ultimate word of a self-consciousness pushed to its extreme limits" (1963:54). This reading is more sophisticated than those offered by Mikhailovsky and Gorky. Nevertheless, interpretations that concentrate solely on demonstrating Dostoevsky's sadistic tendencies, whether they are seen as an indication of his real-life sadism (as Mikhailovsky and Gorky argue) or a function of his art (as Bakhtin suggests), tell us very little about the types of representations of suffering found in his work.

A more prevalent critical trend has seen theorists speculating about the types of ideas Dostoevsky held on suffering, on the views of suffering advanced in his novels, and on the way in which Dostoevsky's writing supports or challenges traditional thinking on the subject of suffering as it existed at the end of the nineteenth century. Consideration of these types of questions is central to this thesis, as they impact directly on the way in which the suffering of his characters is represented.

Within the critical literature on Dostoevsky, one large group of material represents Dostoevsky as an advocate of voluntary suffering. Proponents of this view argue that Dostoevsky depicted the characters in his novels in conditions of adversity and distress in order to demonstrate what he perceived to be the various merits associated with voluntary suffering. Critics maintaining this position range from those who saw Dostoevsky as a mystic and an ascetic propounding the value of suffering for salvation, to those who saw him as a forerunner of existentialism, defending the necessity of suffering for freedom.

According to the ascetic ideal, suffering leads to redemption. This is the message contained in the stories of the saints and martyrs. As Judith Perkins notes, the Christian author Tertullian writes in the second century A.D. of those of his faith who sought voluntary martyrdom at the hands of the Romans in order to achieve salvation. He addresses the following words to the Roman persecutor: "But nothing whatever is accomplished by your cruelties, each more exquisite than the last [...]. Who,

on inquiry, does not join us, and on joining us does not wish to suffer, that he may purchase for himself the whole grace of God ...?” (Tertullian, cited in Perkins, 1995:35). Dostoevsky creates his own late nineteenth-century version of these early Christian sufferers in the character of Dmitri Karamazov, in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dmitri believes in both the empowering and purifying properties of his own suffering; for instance, after he has been falsely accused of the murder of his father, he says “I accept the torment of the charge and of my disgrace before the nation, I wish to suffer and to purify myself through suffering” (586). And later, while in gaol awaiting his trial he confides to his brother Alyosha “I am not afraid of [suffering], even though it be numberless [...] it seems to me that there is so much of this strength in me now that I shall vanquish everything” (682). Here there is another allusion to the empowering properties of voluntary suffering, a notion we find emphasised repeatedly in the stories of the saints and martyrs. Judith Perkins refers to the story of Saint Perpetua, and “her empowerment through suffering” (1995:105). She also cites a passage from the *Acts of Lyons and Vienne*, which describes the torture of a slave woman named Blandina: “Blandina was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her ... admitted they were beaten” (1995:114). What these stories have in common, is that the sufferer is shown to have been empowered and purified through voluntary suffering. Those readings of *The Brothers Karamazov* which seek to prove that Dostoevsky was a proponent of the value of voluntary suffering for salvation often emphasise the fact that Dmitri does not attempt to avoid his suffering. They argue that what the novel seeks to demonstrate is that it is only through his voluntary acceptance of suffering that the eldest of the three brothers finds redemption. The link made between suffering and salvation in many of Dostoevsky’s novels was a popular theme in early reviews, and an aspect of Dostoevsky’s work that was often criticised by his contemporaries. In his paper “A Mystico-Ascetic Novel”, one of the earliest commentaries on *The Brothers Karamazov*, M.A. Antonovich argued that the novel was nothing more than a pamphlet pushing those ascetic ideals he considered “alien to the spirit of the age” (Leatherbarrow, 1990:8). Antonovich treats with irony the high moral value some of the characters place on their suffering:

Mitya’s decision to suffer innocently in order to be morally resurrected, and by this suffering to redeem the suffering of others, at first glance seems capricious, the whim of a sick fantasy, and no sort of general moral principle with any serious basis. But in fact, it turns out that this decision is a real moral principle and that it is seriously and passionately preached by such a profound moralist as the elder Zosima, in his teaching,

composed, of course, by the author of the novel (Antonovich, cited in Belknap, 1982:30).<sup>13</sup>

Dmitri does seek his own suffering, and in a sense he is the embodiment of the ascetic ideal. However, it is not at all clear that Dostoevsky was advocating voluntary suffering for salvation. Within the novel Dmitri is counseled against taking this path by his brother Alyosha. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that he does find salvation. On the contrary, after the sentence of the court is announced, he falls ill with a nervous fever.

Other critics who claim that Dostoevsky advocated voluntary suffering take a more secular approach. Before Dostoevsky wrote *The Brothers Karamazov* a number of theorists had already attempted to explain suffering in secular terms by emphasising the role it played in relation to personal freedom. The theories so developed have formed the basis for a number of readings of Dostoevsky's novels which seek to elucidate the relationship in his work between suffering and freedom. Some argue that Dostoevsky depicts suffering in his novels in an attempt to prove the proposition that freedom can be attained through suffering, while others argue that suffering is shown in his work to be the consequence, and not the cause, of freedom. In either case, argues Philip Rahv, "genuine freedom" in his novels is "unthinkable without suffering" (1957:270). Joseph Frank argues that *Notes from Underground* is an attempt to demonstrate the idea that freedom can be attained through suffering. He argues that Dostoevsky conceived this novella as an answer to the ethics of "rational egoism" advanced by the Russian radical Nicolai Chernyshevsky in his utopian novel *What is to be Done?* (1961:51-2). In this work Chernyshevsky imagined a population whose actions are all dictated by reason, and who are utterly incapable of acting in any way contrary to their own rationally calculated self interest (Frank, 1961:55). Frank interprets the Underground Man's apparent masochism - his

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<sup>13</sup> The irony in this passage find resonance with the views Nietzsche expressed in regard to the ascetic ideal in his *Genealogy of Morals*. According to Nietzsche, "poverty, humility, [and] chastity" were not originally counted as virtues, but were given the appearance of virtues by those who found these conditions "most appropriate and natural" and most beneficial in their own lives (1967[b]:108). Nietzsche argues further that the ascetic ideal arose out of the need of the weaker parts of society to feel that their suffering had a meaning and a purpose. The ascetic ideal gave the individual a reason for their suffering by linking it to their salvation. In this way, suffering attained its justification and its purpose. "[T]he ascetic ideal offered man meaning!", declared Nietzsche. "It was the only meaning offered so far; any meaning is better than none at all [...] In it, suffering was *interpreted*; the tremendous void seemed to have been filled" (Nietzsche, 1967[b]:162).

desire, for example, to be thrown out of a window in a bar room brawl - as a rebellion against Chernyshevsky's deterministic law. If the freedom to suffer is the only freedom he has, the underground man would rather choose suffering than not choose at all. In this sense, suffering which is voluntarily entered into becomes a mechanism for attempting to secure one's freedom. The only problem with this reading is that the character of the Underground Man is hardly presented as a model of human behaviour. On the contrary, he is presented as embittered and foolish. His desire to be thrown through a window may well have been intended to illustrate the view that freedom from deterministic laws can be attained through suffering, but if this is the case, it seems clear that Dostoevsky is parodying rather than advocating this position.

In his essay "The Nature of Suffering in Schiller and Dostoevsky", John Simons appears to support in part Joseph Frank's analysis that the Underground Man would rather choose a path of suffering than act in accordance with what his reason and self-interest dictate (Simons, 1967:164). However, in describing the Underground Man's rebellion, Simons makes less of his stubbornness and bitterness than Frank, choosing instead to emphasise the nobility of his endeavours to secure his freedom. Through his suffering, argues Simons, the Underground Man "attains to sublimity and freedom" (1967:164). Simons argues that a correlation exists between the ways in which both Schiller and Dostoevsky conceived of suffering and freedom: "For Schiller, freedom can be experienced only through the process of voluntary suffering. Dostoevsky had the same conviction" (Simons, 1967:161). Simons argues that Dostoevsky's concept of suffering was influenced by Schiller's notion of pathetic freedom, a concept which "embodies both suffering and sublimity" (Simons, 1967:162). According to Schiller's theory, the determination to free oneself from natural and social laws requires a nobility of mind, but at the same time it involves a supreme suffering resulting from "the realization that the laws of nature and society are irrefutable" (Simons, 1967:162). Schiller described this hopelessly sublime striving for freedom as pathetic.<sup>14</sup> Simons recognises the same sense of pathos in the actions of those of Dostoevsky's heroes who decide upon a path of rebellion even while they admit the apparent futility of their endeavours. The Underground Man is one example: "Although he recognises the possible

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<sup>14</sup> The word *pathetic* as used by Schiller has none of the modern connotations; it does not refer to a suffering that is pitiful or abject. Schiller seems to use the term more in the sense of the Latin *patheticus*, or the Greek *páschein*, meaning "liable to suffer" (1975:1511).

existence of the laws of nature, he refuses to accept them even though they are irrefutable” (Simons, 1967:163). Simons cites the following passage from *Notes From Underground* to illustrate his point:

Good God! but what do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic, when for some reason, I dislike those laws and the fact that two times two makes four? Of course I cannot break through a wall by battering my head against it if I really do not have the strength to break through, but I am not going to resign myself to it simply because it is a stone wall and I am not strong enough (1967:163).

A similar sense of pathos is bound up with Ivan’s rebellion. Ivan accepts the possibility that the suffering of innocent children may be somehow reconciled with the natural order, that it may even have a *sense* in terms of God’s plan; but even though he admits such a possibility, he refuses to accept it. Ivan’s rebellion is consistent with the striving for pathetic freedom Schiller describes. The following passage renders, even more compellingly than in the case of the Underground Man, the suffering involved in such a rebellion:

I understand what a shaking must rend the universe when all that is in heaven and under the earth flows together in one laudatory voice and all that liveth and hath lived exclaims: ‘Just and true art Thou, O lord, for thy ways are made plain!’ And the mother embraces the torturer who tore her son to pieces with his dogs, and all three of them proclaim in tears: “Just and true art Thou, O Lord,” then, of course, the day of knowledge will have dawned and all will be explained. The only trouble is that it’s precisely that I cannot accept [...] and so I decline the offer of eternal harmony altogether. It is not worth one single small tear of even one tortured little child [...] I do not want harmony, out of a love for humanity I do not want it [...]. Let me remain with my unavenged suffering and unassuaged indignation, *even though I am not right* (282).

In this passage Ivan displays the kind of nobility of mind that is associated in Schiller’s work with the notion of pathetic freedom. Dostoevsky had read Schiller, as Simons notes, and had even referred to

his views on suffering explicitly in *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that he was influenced by Schiller's idea of pathetic freedom when he composed some of the speeches delivered by Ivan. However, it is unclear as to whether Dostoevsky actually advocated the type of suffering Schiller describes, or whether he merely made use of the idea of pathetic freedom in an effort to provide more of an insight into the character of his protagonist.

Other critics have argued that suffering in Dostoevsky's novels is shown to be a consequence of freedom, and not the reverse. Ivan's Grand Inquisitor claimed to have relieved men of freedom, and of the burden of choice associated with that freedom, in order to secure their happiness. For the Grand Inquisitor there was nothing "more unendurable to man [...] than freedom!" (290). The "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" thus seems, at least on the surface, to advocate the view that freedom leads to suffering. Rahv argues that this particular conception of the relationship between freedom and suffering anticipates some of the ideas of existentialism:

For Dostoevsky, as for the existentialists, it is above all through the experience of choice and decision [i.e., the experience of freedom] that the individual comes to self-realization. But this grasp and possession of one's being, which is the human creature's truest rapture, is at the same time inescapably associated with anxiety and suffering (1957:270).

For the existentialists, suffering was an unavoidable consequence of coming to terms with one's freedom. The individual suffered, they argued, from the realisation of the groundlessness of human existence. But this suffering attains a positive value by the very fact that it is associated with freedom. This is not necessarily the case in Dostoevsky's work. Dostoevsky was much less at home with the idea of the senselessness of the universe, and there is little evidence that he was able to take comfort in the idea that suffering was a consequence of freedom. While the existentialists saw freedom as paramount, there is less evidence that Dostoevsky held it in such high regard. The "Legend of the Grand

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<sup>15</sup> Simons notes that, in *Crime and Punishment*, Porfiry describes enthusiastically to Raskolnikov the value of voluntary suffering. When Raskolnikov smiles suddenly, Porfiry asks "Why are you smiling again? At my being such a Schiller?" (Cited in Simons, 1967:170).

Inquisitor”, in “Book Five” of *The Brothers Karamazov*, seems rather to betray the author’s doubts about whether freedom was really worth the suffering it inevitably entailed.

A number of theorists have argued against the claim that Dostoevsky advocated suffering for the attainment of either redemption or freedom. In his book *The Religion of Dostoevsky*, A. Boyce Gibson argues that although Dmitri espouses a belief in the “curative value of suffering” (1973:170), it is his younger brother Alyosha who, in advising him against the course of martyrdom, speaks “Dostoevsky’s final word” on the subject (1973:175). In his work on the theme of saintliness in *The Brothers Karamazov*, George Panichas claims that the behaviour and teachings of Zosima the Elder are presented within the novel as a direct challenge to the ideals of religious asceticism and its cult of suffering. Panichas draws attention to the fact that Zosima’s compassionate nature is compared favourably with the “religious extremism of Father Ferapont” (1977:169). Ferapont is the true embodiment of the ascetic ideal - “kneeling all day long at prayer without looking round, living on bread and water, and wearing irons weighing thirty pounds under his coat”, yet Panichas claims that it is Zosima who “understands completely the nature of suffering” (1977:169). As evidence for this claim, he cites a passage which testifies to Zosima’s extraordinary ability to understand and heal suffering: “Alyosha noticed that many, almost all, went in to the elder for the first time with apprehension and uneasiness, but came out with bright and happy faces” (1977:169).

According to Panichas, there is a connection in Dostoevsky’s novels between the capacity to understand suffering and the ability to heal it. This is a point which has often been made in the body of criticism that opposes the idea that Dostoevsky was an advocate of suffering. According to Robert Belknap, Dostoevsky cultivates in his novels the notion that a true understanding of suffering will lead to the belief that suffering should be healed rather than sought. Belknap proposes that it is Zosima, “who lives a life of comfort in his cell that has flowers around it, and who treats suffering as something to be healed” (1982:38), who represents Dostoevsky’s own ideas about suffering. In his 1982 article “The Didactic Plot: The Lesson about Suffering in *Poor Folk*”, Belknap argues that Dostoevsky depicts suffering as a negative experience by demonstrating its effects on certain characters in the plot outcomes of his novels. According to Belknap, the majority of Dostoevsky’s characters are shown to be “morally and spiritually worse after a series of experiences that can be summed up in one word - suffering” (1982:38). Two pertinent examples may be found in the

characters of Fyodor Karamazov and Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Fyodor Karamazov, the patriarch of the family, is described as “a nasty buffoon” (4) and a man who “had never succeeded in liking anyone” (18). His first wife leaves him as a result of his debauched behaviour. He neglects his children, and drives his second wife to an early grave, only to then forget where he has buried her (20). Alyosha sees that there is suffering behind the old man’s malicious behaviour and bad temper, and treats him kindly. His compassion is shown to have a healing influence on his father; it is “as though inside this premature dotard there had awoken some element of that which had long ago expired within his soul” (21). Though Fyodor Karamazov is certainly not presented as a positive figure, Dostoevsky creates the impression that he may not always have been bad, and that he has only become so after so many years of being ridiculed and abused. Alyosha’s compassion acts as an antidote to all of those years of suffering. “I feel you’re the only person in the world who hasn’t condemned me” he says to his son (24). Seemingly beyond redemption, however, is Smerdyakov, Fyodor Karamazov’s illegitimate son. He is described as a man “of haughty temperament”, who seems to “view everyone with contempt”, a “cruel monster” who as a child was “very fond of stringing up cats [...]” (141). Smerdyakov is embittered by poverty and jealousy. He suffers from the injustice of his situation and ends by murdering his father. He provides a perfect example of the debilitating effects that too much suffering can have on the character of the individual.

For the majority of the characters in Dostoevsky’s novels, the experience of suffering leads neither to redemption nor freedom. According to Belknap, there is only one exception to this pattern in Dostoevsky’s work: “only one group of people consistently benefits spiritually and morally from suffering. This group is the redeemable murderers” (1982:38). Characters like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, for example, are shown to benefit from suffering. Even within this category, however, there are exceptions. Ilyusha, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, suffers moral torment after he murders a stray dog by feeding it a piece of bread with a pin in it. He confesses the act to his friend Kolya, who in turn relates it to Alyosha, describing as he does the terrible impact the incident has had on his friend: “He confessed to me what had happened, wept and wept, put his arms round me, shaking all over, and saying: ‘He yelped as he ran, he yelped as he ran’ – that was all he could say, so deeply had that scene appalled him” (614). The guilt Kolya suffers as a result of this event leads to a rapid decline in his health. His suffering is not shown to have any benefit, either in terms of the expiation of guilt, or in any other terms. He is tormented by the thought of his own cruelty and the dog’s suffering. He cannot



bear to think of it; we are informed that the mere mention of the dog's name impacts on him as "a physical blow" (624).

Nevertheless, it would be untrue to say that Dostoevsky never advocated suffering. He did believe in the benefits of suffering in some cases, as in the case of Raskolnikov. However, he neither believed in nor advocated the benefits of innocent suffering. Innocent suffering in Dostoevsky's novels is always distinct from the voluntary suffering sometimes necessary for the expiation of guilt. The problem of innocent suffering initiated its own set of questions for Dostoevsky and for those critics who sought to address the theme of suffering in his work.

For Dostoevsky, the problem of innocent suffering was a problem of theodicy. This problem, as has been discussed, may be summed up as follows: If there is a benevolent and almighty God, why does innocent suffering exist? Many critics have examined Dostoevsky's attempts to deal with this question in his novels. Some have argued that his work is an attempt to prove the justice of God in allowing innocent suffering to exist, while others have argued that his position is more in keeping with the secular views of liberal humanism, which insisted on the inadequacy of any theodicy. A range of these views will be considered in the following pages. Much of the critical literature generated around a consideration of the question of theodicy in Dostoevsky's work has been devoted to an analysis of *The Brothers Karamazov*, as it is this novel that deals most comprehensively and explicitly with the problem of innocent suffering.

In his 1981 study, *A Karamazov Companion*, Victor Terras argues that Dostoevsky intended his last novel as a refutation of the intellectual skepticism of the age, and a vindication of the justice of God in creating a world in which innocent suffering exists. According to Terras, Dostoevsky's theodicy takes the form of a dialogue between characters such as Zosima, who believe in the justice of God, and others like Ivan, who do not. Terras claims that Dostoevsky's own position is made clear by the fact that Zosima refutes every one of Ivan's challenges. For instance, where Ivan indicts God on behalf of suffering children, Zosima "paraphrases the *Book of Job*, where God seems frivolous and cruel but in effect only reaffirms His approval of His creation: His is the best of all possible worlds, so long as man allows it to be so" (Terras, 1981:57). He seeks further support for his argument by noting the novel's

epigraph, which is taken from the *Book of John*: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it dies, it bringeth forth much fruit.” According to Terras, the epigraph “tells us that suffering and death are necessary so that there can be resurrection” (1981:58). In the epigraph, and at various points throughout the novel, death and suffering are linked to renewal, with the idea that the suffering of the individual will be transformed into the future fruit of humanity. However, this view is problematised a number of times in the narrative. Ivan protests against the very notion, suggested by the epigraph, that one person’s suffering will become the ground for another’s happiness. Referring to the suffering of tortured children, he remarks “why should they have to purchase harmony with their sufferings? Why have they also ended up as raw material, to be the manure for some-one else’s future harmony?” (281).

Ivan’s rebellion against innocent suffering exists in stark contrast to the blind faith advocated by characters like Zosima. A number of critics have argued that, in pitting Zosima against Ivan, Dostoevsky was in fact setting faith against reason on the question of innocent suffering. The question of whether Dostoevsky himself advocated faith or reason in this novel has been a matter of contention. Those critics who perceive Dostoevsky’s bias to be with Zosima argue that the novel privileges faith over reason. This would make it consistent with other more traditional theodicies. In the chapter “Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky” from his 1949 work *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*, Lev Shestov draws a parallel between Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, arguing that both men had rebelled against the rational philosophy championed by the European proponents of the Enlightenment in the nineteenth century. At the centre of this philosophical tradition, argues Shestov, lay the philosophy of Hegel (1967:7). What Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard found unacceptable in Hegel’s rational philosophy, he argues, was its inability to give a satisfactory account of “all the victims of circumstance in life and history”, all those whom “the wheel of the historical process crushes”, all those who suffer innocently (1949:7-8).<sup>16</sup> According to Shestov, both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky

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<sup>16</sup> In his essay *The Rebel*, Albert Camus argues that Hegel does in fact provide an explanation of innocent suffering. In Hegel’s philosophy, argues Camus, innocent suffering is explained in terms of the rational progress of history. According to Camus, Hegel provided a justification of suffering very similar to the one put forth in the Christian theodicy. Camus cites Nietzsche in arguing that Hegel’s achievement was to invent “a pantheism in which evil, error and suffering could no longer serve as arguments against the divinity” (1970:70) Both the Christian theodicy and Hegelian philosophy required a certain amount of blind faith because we could no more know where history was

abandoned the rational philosophical tradition, which they claimed could not explain the existence of innocent suffering, and turned instead to the fathers of faith - to Job and Abraham (1949:14).

Shestov compares *The Brothers Karamazov* to the *Book of Job*, which Zosima quotes at length in his own vindication of God. With the consent of God, Job, whose goodness and innocence are proclaimed in the book's preface, suffers the loss of his wealth and the death of his children, his skin is covered in painful boils and finally he is exposed to the taunts of his friends. Though he is unable to find an adequate reason for his suffering, Job bears his pain without renouncing God. When he calls God to account for his suffering he receives his answer in the form of a theophany. God speaks to Job from the heart of a tempest, and though no rational explanation is provided for his suffering, Job is nevertheless satisfied that his suffering is meaningful. Eventually his faith is rewarded with the restoration of twice his original wealth and the birth of seven children. Shestov argues that *The Brothers Karamazov*, like the *Book of Job*, maintains the idea that faith enables one to come to terms with innocent suffering, whereas reason is incapable of providing any real explanation. Reason is limited, according to Shestov, and there are certain things that remain incomprehensible to human knowledge. "Belinsky sought an account of all the victims of chance", he writes. "But is such an account the concern of knowledge? Would knowledge be able to render such an account? On the contrary [...] as Aristotle said; where the realm of the impossible begins, there must human seeking end" (Shestov, 1949:13). When confronted with innocent suffering, the powers of reason are limited. Medicine, for example, can provide facts about suffering; it can identify the causes of illness and can sometimes find cures, but it cannot provide an ultimate meaning or justification for the existence of suffering. Ivan admits the limitations of his own human reason to Alyosha when he says of himself: "Oh, with my pathetic, earthly, Euclidean mind I only know that there is suffering" (280). Richard Peace, in his examination of the theme of justice and punishment in *The Brothers Karamazov* argues that Ivan distinguishes between his own human understanding, which cannot come to terms with innocent suffering, and a higher divine knowledge that can. Peace explains Ivan's position thus:

the rationalistic mind of Ivan grasps at a mathematical analogy. In 1833 the Russian mathematician Lobachevsky had challenged Euclidean geometry, and had proved that

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headed than we could know the mind of God. Camus' views on the similarities between Hegelian philosophy and the Christian theodicy will be discussed further in a later part of this thesis.

parallel lines can meet in infinity. The difference between human justice and divine justice is therefore seen by Ivan as the difference between a lower Euclidean truth and a higher Lobachevskian truth (1971:272).

In admitting the existence of a divine logic able to make sense of innocent suffering, Ivan appears to be acquiescing to the same blind faith as Abraham and Job who, when faced with the apparent meaninglessness of innocent suffering, nevertheless accepted the righteousness of a justice beyond their comprehension. However, Ivan's position differs fundamentally from theirs. Although he does not question the existence of a divine logic capable of justifying the existence of innocent suffering, a logic he himself is unable to comprehend, he refuses to accept that logic. He refuses it without having understood it. Even if he could understand that logic, he says, he would reject it: "Even if the parallel lines converge and I actually witness it", he says, "I will witness it and say they have converged, but all the same I shall not accept it" (271).

A number of commentators have argued that Dostoevsky's own position is represented in Ivan's rebellion against the notion that innocent suffering can be somehow justified. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes: "One commentator (Boris de Schloezer) correctly pointed out that Dostoevsky is on Ivan's side and that the affirmative chapters took three months of efforts whereas 'the blasphemies' were written in three weeks in a state of excitement" (1975:101). A number of critics who subscribe to this view have argued that *The Brothers Karamazov*, rather than being read as a theodicy, should be seen as Dostoevsky's attempt to present the problems involved in the very notion of a theodicy. Belknap argues that Dostoevsky's last novel testifies to the impossibility of sustaining a traditional theodicy in an increasingly secular age. According to Belknap, the presentation of a theodicy requires the refutation of a proposition Dostoevsky believed to be undeniable: "My hero takes up a topic I consider irrefutable", wrote Dostoevsky in a letter to his publisher, "the senselessness of the suffering of children" (Dostoevsky, cited in Belknap, 1991:128). In *The Book of Job*, as Belknap notes, this problem was dealt with "not by [the discovery of] new information or by new ways of using it, but by a theophany" (1990:137). Unlike the writers of much earlier theodicies, he argues, Dostoevsky "lived in an antimystical age, with a nonmystical mind, and could not invoke the voice of God after a whirlwind" in order to justify a world in which innocent suffering exists (1990:137).

Ivan's rebellion, according to this reading, might be seen as a problem of faith resulting from what Nathan Scott referred to as "the modern excursion into unbelief" (1957:1). However, as many of the novel's critics have recognised, Ivan, while he initially denies the existence of God (153) does in fact eventually declare his acceptance of God and his faith in "His supreme wisdom and His purpose" (270). In his 1977 work *Atheism and the Rejection of God*, Stewart Sutherland, notes the fact that Dostoevsky does not insert into Ivan's speech any of the traditional arguments against the notion of a theodicy: he does not deny "the omnipotence of God", nor does he attempt to prove the injustice of God, as such questions are, by his own admission, beyond the limits of human comprehension (1977:74). Ivan rejects the possibility of an adequate theodicy not due to a lack of faith, but because he considers such an attempt to reconcile ourselves with suffering to be unacceptable in moral terms. As Sutherland argues, Ivan rejects all attempts

to produce a theodicy which can somehow make suffering intelligible by reconciling it with a loving creator in terms of some cosmic plan which will offer an eschatological solution to, or recompense for, the suffering of the innocent [...]. The theories thus spun, he argues, are only countenanced at the expense of 'the facts', at the expense of moral blindness, the dulling of the moral sense. These theories try to make comprehensible what is incomprehensible (1977:29).

So, although Ivan states his rebellion in apparently epistemological terms ("I have a Euclidean earthly mind, and how could I solve problems that are not of this world?"), his rebellion is, according to Sutherland, moral rather than epistemological (1977:30). It is on moral grounds that Ivan rejects the notion of a meaningful suffering. His stories of tortured children deny any attempt to attribute a meaning to them, because the proposition that they could be explained in terms of a divine plan is abhorrent to him. His refusal to resort to metaphysics in order to explain the incidents of cruelty and violence he reads in the newspapers derives not from an absence of faith, but from his conviction that such crimes should not be justified. Ivan may thus be described as a Christian in crisis. While he professed his belief in God, his views on innocent suffering were derived specifically from the questioning of the answers his faith provided. He refused to accept the theological proposition that suffering was a necessary and meaningful part of the universe.

Ivan's crisis of faith provides the focal point for my own analysis of the theme of suffering in Dostoevsky's work. As the preceding pages indicate, much has been written by Dostoevsky critics on the question of Ivan's crisis of faith, a crisis which is invariably seen as a consequence of his confrontation with innocent suffering. There has also been much debate, as has been discussed, on the question of Dostoevsky's own position on the problem of innocent suffering. Did he see it as a necessary and meaningful part of the universe, or as a senseless phenomenon? Much of this debate has tended to focus on determining which of these opposing points of view are presented more convincingly within his final novel. The problem with this approach is that both positions are presented vigorously, so that one will always find support for one's own point of view. It might be argued that Dostoevsky created this confusion deliberately; that he knowingly set out to produce a novel which would refuse a single definitive interpretation. Ivan's article on the ecclesiastical courts, a work championed by both religious and atheistic characters within the novel, could thus be read as a caveat for the interpretation of his own work. It cannot go unnoticed that the narrator's comments on the reception of Ivan's article foreshadow exactly the critical response to his own work: "Many of the proponents of the Church cause really considered the author to be one of their own. And then suddenly, along with them, [...] the atheists themselves began for their part to applaud" (14).

It is unlikely that we will ever know for certain what Dostoevsky's own position truly was on the question of innocent suffering, and equally unlikely that we will ever be able to ascertain his own true views on matters of faith. It would seem then that any further analysis of the treatment of the theme of suffering on Dostoevsky's work must take another approach. One method of analysis which has been too little explored in this area is one which would focus, not (or at least not solely) on the opinions stated by various characters within the novel, or on the opinions of the author as stated in extra-literary material, but on an examination of the concepts which underlie the novel's treatment of the theme of suffering. In this type of analysis questions of faith or the loss thereof become not simply a personal matter of the author's private beliefs, but an historical contingency which, when examined, can help elucidate the conceptual basis of the visions of suffering we find in his novels. It is to this type of analysis which I will now turn my attention.

## A Crisis of Faith

Dostoevsky, as has been discussed, has been praised as a chronicler of his times. Georg Lukács and Charles Moser have noted the fact that his novels capture the ideas and the spirit of his age. One of the things he captured was the crisis of faith being experienced in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. It will be argued in the following chapters that the concepts which inform Dostoevsky's representations of suffering are concepts born of this crisis of faith. Regardless of the conclusions he came to at the end of his days on matters of religious belief, Dostoevsky had an intimate understanding of the growing religious doubt engulfing his society, particularly with reference to how it might influence one's views on the question of innocent suffering. As has been discussed, Dostoevsky admitted himself to having "doubts" and to being "tortured by God" (Dostoevsky, cited in Zenovsky, 1962:130). My aim in returning here to the matter of Dostoevsky's personal experiences is not to attempt to ascertain his final position on the matter of religious belief, but to show that he at least had an intimate understanding of what it meant to suffer a crisis of faith (regardless of whether or not he managed to resolve it in the end), and of what such a crisis might mean in terms of a person's views on innocent suffering. The Russian film maker Andrei Tarkovsky argues that Dostoevsky suffered "all his life" from a crisis of faith. In an interview about a film he was planning to make based on Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, Tarkovsky made the following remarks:

Many things have been ascribed to Dostoevsky which just aren't true. For example, people everywhere – including Moscow – think of him as a religious writer. But it does not seem to have occurred to them that he was not so much religious as one of the first to express the drama of the man in whom the organ of belief has atrophied. He dealt with the tragedy of the loss of spirituality. All his heroes are people who would like to believe but cannot ... He managed never to talk about this directly, but all his life he suffered because he was unable to believe. (Tarkovsky, cited in Ian Christie, 1989: xxii)

Faith, as conceived of here, is not simply a matter of stating one's belief in the existence of God. Dostoevsky did this on many occasions, yet by his own admission he was far from confident in his faith. He certainly does not display the kind of faith shown by biblical exemplars such as Abraham and Job. To have true faith, according to the model they provide, is to accept without question; it is to

believe in the dictates of one's faith despite the evidence. While it would be controversial to propose that Dostoevsky was an atheist when we have his own testimony to the contrary, it is another matter entirely to propose that he may have suffered a crisis of faith similar to that which he describes in his character. Ivan does not deny the existence of God, he merely refuses to accept the justice of God in creating a world in which innocent suffering exists. It is not beyond the realms of possibility to suggest that Dostoevsky found himself in the same position.

When it comes to speculating on the question of Dostoevsky's faith, many commentators make reference to the mock execution to which the author was subjected in 1849, and to his subsequent four year imprisonment and exile in Siberia. The story is well known. As a young man, Dostoevsky was arrested and interrogated over his involvement with the Petrashevsky Circle, considered by the authorities at the time to be a hotbed of radical ideas (at least two among their number were atheists). The specific charge against Dostoevsky was that he had read aloud at one of these gathering a letter by Belinsky in which the author criticized the Russian Orthodox Church, and that he had planned to disseminate this letter in print. After spending some time in prison Dostoevsky was found guilty and sentenced to death. He was taken out into the snow with a number of his fellow prisoners, where a firing squad was waiting. The first three prisoners were tied to the posts and blindfolded, as Dostoevsky looked on. At the last moment, a reprieve was announced, and the death sentences were commuted to varying periods of imprisonment in Siberia.

The most prominent critics describe this episode as a turning point in Dostoevsky's life, in which he relinquishes his youthful flirtation with radical ideas and renews his faith. Joseph Frank argues that, if Dostoevsky had suffered from a crisis of faith in his youth, it was overcome as a direct result of his ordeal.

Faith in Christ had supported him at the moment he had confronted death; it had proven to be a crucial link between himself and his fellow Russians, both inside and outside the prison camp; and it had rescued him from the ghastly prospect of living in a universe without hope. All of Dostoevsky's doubts as a "child of the century" [...] had



simply been overpowered by his new comprehension of the psychic emotive demands of the human spirit. Such doubts could no longer shake his faith [...]. (1983: 161)

It is true that Dostoevsky was very eager after his ordeal to give evidence of his faith. His letters to his editor, as has been discussed, are full of claims in this regard. However, there is also the possibility that these protestations of faith may have been calculated to ensure his survival in a climate hostile to religious dissent. He had come close to death once already due to his sympathy for radical ideas. He would have been anxious not to repeat that experience.

Another possibility that many critics seem to have overlooked is that the mock execution and imprisonment may have contributed, not to a renewal of Dostoevsky's faith, but to a crisis of faith. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, psychiatrist and author Judith Herman argues that it is very rare for faith to survive such traumatic ordeals, and that it is more often than not the case that victims of imprisonment and abuse will suffer a "crisis of faith" (1992: 35).

There are people with strong and secure belief systems who can endure the ordeals of imprisonment and emerge with their faith intact or strengthened. But these are the extraordinary few. The majority of people experience the bitterness of being forsaken by God. The Holocaust survivor Wiesel gives voice to this bitterness: "Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget those things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never. (61-62)

Ultimately we cannot know, we can only imagine, how the trauma Dostoevsky experienced might have affected his faith in the long term. We can, however, read his work. Whether or not he eventually resolved his crisis in the end is immaterial, the doubt of his age was captured by him and survives in his novels. The representations of suffering we find therein, as will be discussed, speak to us not of religious faith, but of a questioning of religious belief. The following chapters will consider more

precisely how the crisis of faith to which he so eloquently gives voice impacted on the way in which suffering is represented in his work.

## Chapter 2:

# Senselessness and Suffering

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The previous chapter began with a discussion of the nineteenth-century crisis of faith. It was proposed that this crisis of faith was intimately bound up with a sense of wretchedness, which was identified as the key conceptual characteristic underpinning Dostoevsky's treatment of suffering. The concept of wretchedness was discussed in terms of the sufferer's alienation from God, and in this it was shown to borrow something from the traditional religious formulations of the wretchedness of the damned. However, the sense of wretchedness we find in Dostoevsky's work also departs, in significant ways, from such traditional religious formulations. This chapter will explore one important point of difference, which has to do with the notion of senselessness. The suffering of the damned in Dante's *Divine Comedy* made perfect sense; it was understood as retribution for the sins of earthly life. Dostoevsky's last novel marks an important shift on this point. It is concerned predominantly with the suffering of the innocent, and this is chiefly where we encounter the problem of the senselessness of suffering.

In examining the relationship between senselessness and suffering, this chapter will focus on answering two primary questions: 'What does it mean to say that suffering is senseless?' and 'How does the senselessness of suffering contribute to a sense of its wretchedness?' Existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom argues that human beings are sense-seeking beings: "Decades of empirical research have established that our perceptual neuropsychological organization is such that we instantaneously pattern incoming random stimuli [...]. We experience dysphoria in the face of an indifferent, unpatterned world and search for patterns, explanations, and the meaning of existence" (1980:462-3). According to Nietzsche, as has been discussed, this craving for meaning is nowhere more evident than in relation to suffering. Nietzsche argues that human beings have been preoccupied from Ancient times with the question of why innocent suffering exists. In religious periods, they looked to faith to provide answers, and faith obliged in ways which have been discussed briefly in the preceding chapter. Of course the degree to which one will find these explanations satisfying depends in large part on the strength of

one's religious faith; where faith is lacking, traditional religious explanations break down, and suffering is robbed of its sense. This does not answer completely, however, the question of what we mean when we say that suffering is senseless. In order to answer this question we must look at what we are demanding we when ask: 'Why is there suffering?' On a basic level, we are looking for a logical explanation. How do I account for the fact that suffering exists? How do I reconcile the existence of suffering with what I know of the world? On another level, we are also looking for an ethical explanation; as suffering is a fundamentally aversive experience, we want to be assured that, where it exists, its existence is justified. We want to be assured, in other words, that people do not suffer unjustly. This seems on the surface an eminently reasonable question. However, the fact that it appears reasonable is in itself a curious matter which warrants some consideration. Why should suffering be just? Why do we refuse to accept the existence of unjustified suffering? If we are to consider the question within a religious context, the answer is easy. If we accept the proposition that the world was created by a just, infallible and all-powerful God, it must be a perfect world, and all the suffering within it must also be just and necessary to its perfection. Innocent suffering, in this context, must appear as a logical and ethical absurdity. Yet innocent suffering exists. This clearly presents a problem for religious thinkers, a problem they set about addressing with various theories which attempt to make sense of innocent suffering. To make sense of suffering within this context is, in an important sense, to *justify* suffering as a *necessary* part of the universe.

### **Ivan's Rebellion**

The character Ivan, as has been discussed, rebels against the proposition that innocent suffering can be justified as a necessary and meaningful part of the universe; it is, in his view, utterly senseless: "I confess with all due self-disparagement that I am quite unable to understand why everything is ordered thus", he declares. "It is quite impossible to understand why [children] should have to suffer" (281). In "Book V" of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan relates a number of incidents which function in the narrative as a testimony to the wretchedness of innocent suffering. His recounting of these incidents is prefaced as follows: "[W]ell, you see, one of my hobbies is the collecting of certain little facts; what I do, if you can credit it, is to note down and cull together from newspapers and reports, whatever the source, little anecdotes of a certain sort" (274). He presents these "anecdotes" as proof of the senselessness of

innocent suffering. He does not attempt to explain them; in fact, he explicitly states his inability to do so. His knowledge of suffering is limited to what he calls “the facts” (280); it is limited, that is, to what his reason will allow him to know of suffering. All it can tell him is that “there is suffering” (280). Ivan presents his stories of torture and cruelty to his young brother Alyosha in order to test his faith; to test, that is, whether his understanding of innocent suffering in theological terms can stand up to a confrontation with “the facts” as he presents them. First he lists a number of the atrocities committed by the Turks in Bulgaria, including “burning, knifing, raping women and children, nailing convicts to fences by their ears and leaving them there until morning, when they hang them” and “cutting [babies] out of their mother’s wombs [...], throwing [them] in the air and catching them on bayonets before their mothers’ eyes” (274). Then, seemingly dismissing these acts of cruelty committed far from his home, he continues with a list of atrocities that concern him more deeply, because they were committed by “men of European and progressive education” (278). Ivan tells his brother of parents who flogged their daughter with a birch until she could no longer cry out, and others who tortured their child of five, beating and kicking her, and locking her all night in a freezing latrine, smearing her face all over with faeces, and making her eat those faeces. Topping it all off, he recounts the story of a general who murders a young boy of eight, because he had thrown a stone and wounded his favourite hunting dog. The boy was taken from his mother and kept all night in a lock-up. The next morning the general came out on his horse in full hunting dress, with a pack of hounds. The boy was stripped naked and ordered to run, at which point the general shouted “Tally ho!” and “unleashed at him a whole pack of borzoi hounds. He hunted him down in front of his mother, and the dogs tore the child to little shreds!” (279).

Incidents such as these challenge the claim that innocent suffering is either necessary or meaningful. In the face of these facts, even the saintly Alyosha has his faith temporarily shaken. The idea of a retrospective divine justice, in which all will be made right in heaven, seems inadequate to him in the light of these stories. “I think the general was put in ward”, says Ivan.

‘But ... what should one have done with him? Shot him? Shot him in order to satisfy one’s moral feelings? Tell me, Alyosha, my lad!’

‘Shot him!’ Alyosha said quietly, raising his eyes to his brother with a kind of pale, distorted smile (279).

“A fine schemonach you are!” Ivan taunts. “It was a preposterous thing for me to say”, says Alyosha. “There you have it”, shouts Ivan.

You ought to realize, novice, that preposterous things are all too necessary upon earth. The world rests on preposterous things, and indeed it’s possible that without them absolutely nothing would ever have come into existence (279).

Ivan’s reference to the necessity of “preposterous things” is intended as a mocking critique of the Christian doctrine which insists that even the most patently senseless incidents of violence and cruelty are a necessary and meaningful part of the divine plan. According to this doctrine, innocent suffering is seen as a means to an end; through it humanity will find redemption, knowledge, eternal peace and an end to suffering. Ivan also desires these things, but he questions the price that is asked. The question for him then, is one of ends and means: “[I]magine that you yourself are erecting the edifice of human fortune”, he says to Alyosha,

with the goal of, at the finale, making people happy, of at last giving them peace and quiet, but that in order to do so it would be necessary and unavoidable to torture to death only one tiny little creature [...] and on its unavenged tears to found that edifice, would you agree to be the architect on those conditions [...]? And are you able to allow the idea that the people for whom you are constructing this edifice would themselves accept their happiness being bought by the unwarranted blood of a small, tortured child, and having accepted it, remain happy forever? (282).

If innocent suffering really is necessary for the redemption of humanity, Ivan makes it clear that he would rather refuse that redemption that condone the suffering with which it is bought. “I decline the offer of eternal harmony altogether”, he says. “It is not worth one single small tear of even one tortured little child [...]. And so I hasten to return my entry ticket. And if I am at all an honest man, I am obliged to return it as soon as possible” (281&282). Through this symbolic act of rebellion, Ivan

effects his own exile from God. To do so is painful for him, as he admits to Alyosha: “One can’t live in a state of mutiny, but I want to live” (280). Nevertheless, he chooses exile over the Kingdom of God because he refuses to submit to a divine order that sanctions the suffering of children. In effecting his own exile, he becomes himself one of the wretched. It is not simply paradise that he gives up, however. His faith had offered an explanation for the existence of suffering - an explanation he found profoundly problematic, but an explanation nonetheless. In stepping out into the secular wilderness, he relinquishes the ability to understand suffering in metaphysical terms. This loss of meaning, as will be discussed, brings its own suffering.

### **Confrontations with the Absurd**

Ivan’s struggle with the problem of innocent suffering has been understood by a number of existentialist writers as a confrontation with the *absurd*. While the use of the term in this context is not strictly accurate (Ivan, who professes his belief in God, is a broadly religious character, whereas the experience of the absurd, according to the existentialists, could only be encountered upon relinquishing one’s religious beliefs) it is nevertheless useful in highlighting an important aspect of Dostoevsky’s work – the anguish his characters experience when confronted with incidents which defy their desire to make sense of them. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) Camus describes *The Brothers Karamazov* as “a work that propounds the absurd problem” (1975:100). According to Camus, all of Dostoevsky’s heroes are concerned with the question of the meaning of life and death, and this, for him, is where the problem of the absurd arises. For Camus, the “world itself is not reasonable” (1975:26), yet humans still seek to find reason in it. Camus suggests that the experience of the absurd occurs in this clash between an illogical object and the human epistemological drive, that is, in “the confrontation with the irrational and the wild longing for clarity that echoes in the human heart” (1975:26). According to Camus it is not the world that is absurd, but the desire to find meaning in a world that is meaningless. From this proposition we may derive another: it is not suffering itself that is absurd, but the human habit to seek meaning in suffering. Ivan is not immune from this mortal desire to know. He declares to Alyosha: “I want to be here when everyone suddenly discovers why it has all been the way it has” (280). He admits, however, that such understanding is beyond the limited powers of his reason. Ivan’s experience of the absurd comes, therefore, in the confrontation between his heartfelt desire to know, and his equally deep conviction that suffering is senseless.

In his work on French literary existentialism, Richard Lehan suggests that writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus found in Dostoevsky's Ivan a model for some of their own characters; characters such as Roquentin, Brunet, Meursault and Dr Rieux, who, like Ivan "confront and struggle against their sense of absurd existence" (1972:xiii). Lehan describes this sense of the absurd as follows:

The absurd occurs when man admits that his reason is limited, that it cannot supply answers to questions that are both metaphysical and personal. Accident, suffering, death - all invoke the absurd by challenging what we know, what we can understand with what is bewildering [...]. The absurd results when meaning is overwhelmed by the unexpected and the unknown. Melville's Ahab experienced it when he was maimed by Moby Dick, Conrad's Lord Jim when he jumped from the *Patna* [...], Camus's Dr Rieux during the plague, Sartre's Brunet in a German concentration camp, Hemingway's Lieutenant Henry and Jake Barnes on the battlefield (Lehan, 1972:xiv).

For the existentialists, suffering had a special place in relation to the absurd, because it was in suffering that one experienced the greatest conflict between the human desire to know and the unknowability of the world. While there are important differences between the concept of the wretchedness of suffering in Dostoevsky and the absurdity of suffering in Camus (the concept of wretchedness, as used here, is associated with an essentially Christian understanding of humanity's alienation from God whereas the concept of absurdity, as understood by the existentialists, is an entirely secular idea) there is a sense in the work of both authors of the conflict between a senseless phenomenon and the human epistemological drive. Ivan experiences this conflict when reading newspaper reports about the torture of innocent children. His desire to understand is frustrated by his awareness of the gratuitous and meaningless nature of such events. Ivan's brother Dmitri experiences the same conflict in a dream. In this dream Dmitri is being driven through the snow in a cart when he passes a peasant village that has been burned to the ground. An emaciated woman is standing in the snow holding her crying infant. As they dash past, Dmitri asks his driver why the child is crying and the driver explains that they are poor, their village has been burned, and that they have no clothes or food. But Dmitri still does not understand, and continues to question his driver:



‘No, no,’ Mitya said [...]. ‘What I want you to tell me is: why are those homeless mothers standing there, why is everyone poor, why is the bairn wretched, why is the steppe barren, why do they not embrace one another, kiss one another, why do they not sing songs of joy, why are they blackened so by misfortune, why is the bairn not fed?’ (584-5).

In his dream Dmitri experiences this scene of suffering in total bewilderment. He is unsatisfied by the perfectly valid socio-economic explanations offered by his driver, indicating perhaps that the object of his concern is not with the material circumstances that cause this one or that one to suffer, but with the metaphysical question of why innocent suffering exists at all. Dmitri’s capacity to understand human existence is overwhelmed by the scene he witnesses. The wild way in which he repeats his enquiries suggests that he does not really expect an explanation, that he has realised instinctively the impossibility of finding answers to such questions. This is what Lehan means when he says that suffering invokes the absurd.

Of course, as the existentialists realised, the conflict between the senselessness of suffering and the desire to understand can be in itself a source of suffering. This is the case, as Lehan notes, for a number of Dostoevsky’s characters. The sense of bewilderment from which characters such as Ivan and Dmitri suffer may be compared to what the existentialists called anguish: the despair that comes from the realisation that our existence has no inherent meaning, and that there is no stable basis for our decisions.

According to Lehan, this particular kind of anguish becomes a dominant theme in literature at a certain historical moment. It originates, he argues, at “a time when modern man seems to have exhausted the possibilities” for endowing existence with a meaning (Lehan, 1972:xviii). It originates, that is, where there is a crisis of faith regarding those doctrines traditionally responsible for providing human beings with an understanding of their lives and their suffering. The society in which Dostoevsky was writing, as has been discussed, was experiencing just such a crisis of faith. Dostoevsky writes about this crisis of faith in many of his novels, as do a number of his contemporaries. Leo Tolstoy addresses the theme in his novel *Anna Karenina*. Tolstoy’s character Levin is an agnostic and a scientist of sorts who ponders the questions of life and is troubled by his failure to find answers. His plight is that of the

modern thinking person who, when questioning religion discovers that, without belief, it is impossible to find answers to fundamental questions such as ‘Why do I live?’ ‘Why do I suffer?’ and ‘How must I act?’ Tolstoy’s narrator describes Levin’s dilemma thus:

For him the problem was this: ‘If I do not accept the answers Christianity gives to the questions of my life, what answers do I accept?’ And in the whole arsenal of his convictions he failed to find not only any kind of answer but anything resembling an answer [...]. Another thing was that, after reading a great many scientific books, he became convinced that the men who shared his views got no more out of their conviction than he did. Far from explaining the problems without a solution to which he felt he could not live, they set them aside and took up others of no interest to him, such as, for instance, the evolution of organisms, a mechanical explanation of the soul, and so forth (820-821).

Tolstoy eventually resolves his character’s dilemma with an epiphany during a storm, which leads to the restoration of his faith; this is where he differs fundamentally from Dostoevsky. In Dostoevsky’s novels the crisis of meaning is not resolved so easily. The world, as Dostoevsky saw it, was losing the religious faith that had provided a means for understanding existence. While he recognised the fundamental flaws in this faith in terms of its justifications of innocent suffering, its prospective loss nevertheless caused him a great deal of anguish. Part of this anguish concerned what he saw as the political and ethical consequences of the modern loss of faith.<sup>17</sup> However, there is another type of

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<sup>17</sup> In the modern loss of faith, Dostoevsky saw the potential for the greatest ethical and political disasters. He believed that in the absence of any firm moral ground the worst atrocities were possible. In Zosima’s cell Ivan expounds the idea that, in the absence of God, everything would be permitted: “nothing would be immoral, all things would be lawful, even anthropophagy” (76). Dostoevsky had written about the consequences of this kind of thinking in his earlier novel *The Devils*, in which the doctrine of the “all is permitted” allows a group of Nihilists to murder one of their own. In *The Brothers Karamazov* it is this same doctrine that allows the servant Smerdyakov to justify his murder of Fyodor Karamazov. “I thought that all things are lawful”, he says to Ivan after having committed the deed. “It was true what you taught me, sir, for you told me a lot about that then: for if there is no infinite God, then there is no virtue, either, and there is no need of it whatever” (729). In his closing speech to the jury at Dmitri’s trial in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the prosecution lawyer uses the analogy of a *hurtling troika* to describe a Russia in the grip of nihilism. If left unchecked, this doctrine would, he suggests, lead to the destruction of Russia and civilization. In asking the jury to produce a guilty verdict condemning the alleged parricide, the prosecutor is at the same time imploring them to pass a symbolic judgment against the nihilism of his time. “Remember that you are the defenders of our truth”, he tells the jury,

anguish which is connected in Dostoevsky's novels to the modern crisis of faith. This anguish is of a more personal nature, and concerns the loss of our ability to understand suffering. It is this type of anguish which is intimately connected to the sense of wretchedness which underlies the representation of suffering in Dostoevsky's novels.

### Dmitri's Anguish

In Dostoevsky's novels, as has been stated, the senselessness of suffering is a key component of its wretchedness. In the following pages I will examine the phenomenon of anguish as an affective response to the cognitive awareness of the senselessness of suffering, and explore the role it plays in leading certain of Dostoevsky's characters to an appreciation of the wretchedness of suffering.

Characters like Ivan point to the immorality of a doctrine that justifies the suffering of innocent children, but this loss of faith is clearly a source of great anguish for him. Many of the characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* suffer from this kind of anguish, including the alleged nihilist Dmitri.<sup>18</sup> Dmitri, the eldest of the three brothers, is tortured by the lack of moral surety he associates with the absence of God. Although he wants to believe in virtue he, like his brother Ivan, is unable to decide what constitutes a virtuous act. The realisation that traditional forms of meaning collapse in the absence of a divine arbiter is, for him, a source of suffering, a fact he admits to his brother Alyosha:

For what if [God] does not exist? What if Rakitin is right, and he is an artificial idea dreamed up by mankind? Then, if he does not exist, man is the boss of the earth, of creation, magnificent! Only how will he be virtuous without God? That is the question. I think about it all the time [...]. For what is virtue? Answer me that, Aleksey. To me virtue means one thing, while to a Chinaman it means another - it is, in other words, a thing that is relative. Or am I wrong! Is it not relative? A perfidious question! Please do

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the defenders of our holy Russia, of her foundations, of her family, of all that in her is sacred! Yes, here you represent Russia at this given moment [...]. But do not cause suffering to Russia and her expectations, our fateful *troika* is rushing headlong, and possibly to its doom (833-4).

<sup>18</sup> Dmitri is accused of being a nihilist at his trial. However, he is clearly not a nihilist. At the end of the novel, as has been discussed, he seeks refuge in the Christian belief that he can gain salvation through suffering.

not laugh when I tell you that it has kept me awake for two nights without sleep. Now the only thing that astonishes me is that people can live and yet never think about that (683).

The anguish Dmitri suffers when faced with the lack of inherent meaning in the universe is an anguish experienced by many of Dostoevsky's characters; a type of suffering that often coincides with a crisis of faith. As has been discussed, Dostoevsky himself had admitted to experiencing anguish in regard to his faith. He was marked by the experience of his doubt, and the anguish it caused him, even though he claims that, in the end, his faith survived.<sup>19</sup> His anguish is evident in his writing, and nowhere more so than in those passages in *The Brothers Karamazov* that deal with innocent suffering. Whether or not he came, at the end of his life, to accept suffering as a necessary part of the divine plan is irrelevant; the crisis of faith he experienced is preserved in his novels. In these novels, and especially in his last novel, innocent suffering appears as a gratuitous and arbitrary phenomenon, utterly without sense. In many instances in Christian literature, in hagiographic narratives, for example, the sufferer is shown to have been brought closer to God through the very act of suffering. The suffering of Dostoevsky's characters, on the other hand, seems to come not from an all-powerful and benevolent creator, but from an indifferent universe. It seems to resist any attempt to make sense of it in terms of a great cosmic plan. It does not lead to a communion with God; in fact, it leads more often to a sense of abandonment and alienation; it leads, in other words, to an overwhelming sense of wretchedness.

This chapter has pointed to the relationship in Dostoevsky's novels between the human subject's awareness of the senselessness of suffering and their alienation from the divine. Faith, as has been mentioned, gives the believer a sense of their nearness to God, allowing them to feel instinctively that their suffering has a sense and a purpose. As the world becomes increasingly secular and human beings move further from God, they lose their ability to make sense of suffering. Only the true believer can have an unshakeable faith in the meaning of suffering; when one experiences the anguish of doubt, transcendent meaning is lost. The alienation from God and the loss of transcendent meaning associated with it is thus central to Dostoevsky's depiction of the wretchedness of suffering.

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<sup>19</sup> Dostoevsky was marked by the experience of doubt, and the anguish it caused him, even though he claims that, in the end, his faith was made stronger by it: "[M]y Hosanna has burst through a purging flame of doubts" (Dostoevsky, cited in Zenovsky, 1962:130).

## Chapter 3:

# Suffering and the Sublime

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In the first chapter of this thesis, wretchedness was defined in terms of the nineteenth century crisis of faith and the human subject's alienation from God. The second chapter examined how the sense of wretchedness we find underlying Dostoevsky's representations of suffering was intimately bound up with the human subject's apprehension of the senselessness of suffering, and the anguish with which this is associated. Senselessness was thus defined as a key component of wretchedness. In this chapter I will turn to an examination of the concept opposing that of wretchedness – the concept of the sublime. Within a Christian context, as has been discussed, suffering is presented as meaningful - as having a sense and a purpose in terms of the divine plan. Suffering attains its meaning through its connection with the divine, and through this connection comes to appear sublime. The sense of the sublime, as will be discussed in this chapter, is produced when one feels oneself to be in proximity to a power greater than oneself. Wretchedness, on the other hand, has been discussed in the preceding chapters in terms of the human subject's alienation from God. The wretchedness of suffering in Dostoevsky's novels thus appears as the very antithesis of the sublime. In the following pages I will examine the concept of the sublime as it characterizes certain representations of suffering in literature before moving on to further delineate by comparison the sense of wretchedness which distinguishes the portraits of suffering we find in Dostoevsky's work.

## **The Sublime in Literature**

In his seminal work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke defined the sublime as that which is terrifying, obscure and infinite. Sublime objects, he wrote, are “vast”, “rugged”, “solid” and “massive” (1970:237-8). According to Burke, we experience the sublime when our self-preservation is threatened; thus extreme suffering can be sublime, while death is almost the definition of the sublime. “Of feeling little more can be said”, wrote Burke, “than that the

idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime; and nothing else in this sense can produce it” (Burke, 1970:159).

In his *Critique of Judgement*, Emmanuel Kant argued that it is not objects themselves that are sublime, but the sensation those objects arouse in the human mind. We experience the sublime, he wrote, when our mind comes into contact with something “absolutely large” (1987:103), something of such magnitude that it is beyond our powers of understanding (1987:109). He described the “bewilderment” and “sense of perplexity” one experiences standing before the Egyptian pyramids, or on entering St Peter’s Basilica in Rome (1987:108). He referred also to the vastness of the oceans and the great expansiveness of the universe. Our imagination, he argued, is inadequate when it comes to comprehending objects of such magnitude (1987:114). It is this very failure of comprehension in the face of something immense and powerful that is productive of the sublime. As Jean-Francois Lyotard writes in explanation of Kant’s theory: “In the sublime ‘situation’, something like an Absolute, either of magnitude or of power, is made quasi-perceptible (the word is Kant’s) due to the very failing of the faculty of presentation” (1991:136). We experience the sublime, that is, when the human mind comes into conflict with something massive and incomprehensible, something which defies our abilities to make sense of it. In such situations, our rational capacities are outstripped. Our failure to understand inspires feelings of wonder and awe, making us feel we are in the presence of something beyond us - something greater than us. But while we sense this greater presence, we do not understand it; it is only made quasi-perceptible. For the Christian, God would be an example of such an Absolute - immense and powerful, and beyond our powers of comprehension. Great suffering is also capable of producing the sublime; in it we may sense the presence of something greater than ourselves (the will of God / the power of nature / the spirit of reason).

The sublime thus requires us to see beyond mere appearance, and is therefore inherently metaphysical. When we say an erupting volcano inspires a sense of the sublime, it is not its material components that do so. Rocks and lava can be analysed and understood; they are perfectly comprehensible. It is rather our quasi-perception of something great and powerful in the workings of the volcano that produce a sense of the sublime. Similarly, it is not suffering in itself that is productive of the sublime, but our quasi-perception of the workings of something greater than ourselves in that suffering. For the Christian, who is able to discern the will of God in all things, suffering can appear sublime. The divine

will is believed by them to be of infinite power and magnitude, beyond human abilities to resist or understand. It is thus productive of the sublime. The suffering of the Christian saints and martyrs was sublime in precisely this sense. Judith Perkins notes that they regularly saw God (in a literal sense) in their suffering and the suffering of others. She cites an example from one of the *Martyr Acts*: “Agathonice, in the *Acts of Carpus, Pappylus and Agathonice*, when she watched Carpus martyred, ‘suddenly saw the glory of God ... and taking off her cloak threw herself upon the stake’” (cited in Perkins, 1995:30).

The sense of the sublime is intimately connected to the perception of existence as meaningful. To see one’s suffering as sublime, as has been discussed, is to see in it the workings of something greater and more powerful than oneself. Whether this something is the will of God, the power of nature, or the spirit of reason, it lends the appearance of meaning to suffering. Art and literature have played a crucial role in creating and maintaining such illusions. According to Nietzsche, this was precisely the role of Greek tragedy. Life in the ancient world, he argued, was full of suffering, and in order to live with that suffering, the people who inhabited that world had to be convinced to view it as sublime. “How else could this people, so sensitive, so vehement in its desires, so singularly capable of suffering”, he wrote, “have endured existence, if it had not been revealed to them [...] surrounded with a higher glory?” (1967[a]:43). Suffering is often portrayed in literature as sublime. Prometheus suffers his fate on a mountain top, while Hamlet, in his anguish, looks “truly into the essence of things” (Nietzsche, 1967[a]:60). There is nothing mundane in their suffering; they suffer respectively from divine wrath and the silence of the universe. They struggle against beings or objects of infinite power and magnitude, and their suffering is sublime.

Such literature was not concerned with what Nietzsche referred to as “the painstaking portrayal of reality” (1967[a]:58), which could be mundane, but with the construction of that reality as sublime. Those who consume these literary forms, argues Nietzsche, come to see their own suffering in the same way. Even a relatively trivial instance of suffering can seem sublime if the sufferer can detect some correspondence between it and the suffering of their fictional heroes and heroines. While this may be comforting, it can also be potentially dangerous. Dostoevsky reflects on the way in which literary representations of suffering can potentially arouse in those who consume them a desire to

suffer. In *The Brothers Karamazov* the narrator tells a story of a young woman so inspired by the death of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that she throws herself into a river to emulate her heroine:

You see, I once knew a certain young unmarried woman, back in the last 'romantic' generation, who after several years of mysterious love for a certain gentleman [...] ended by inventing insuperable obstacles, and on a stormy night throwing herself from a lofty bank, resembling a cliff, into a rather deep and fast-flowing river and perished in it really for no other reason than her own caprice, solely in order to emulate Shakespeare's Ophelia; and one might even say that had this cliff [...] been not so picturesque, and had there been on its site merely a flat, prosaic bank, then her suicide might possibly never have taken place at all (4).

In this instance, the young woman was apparently under the spell of an illusion so sublime she found it impossible to resist. Through it, her suffering was given meaning. Such visions can be found in abundance in both Hellenic and Elizabethan drama. They are also the stock in trade of Romantic literature, whose origins, according to George Steiner, are to be found in the "explicit attempt to revitalize the major forms of tragedy" (1961:108). Steiner provides a valuable insight into the construction of suffering within Romantic literature. He examines the way in which the tragic vision of a noble and suffering humanity is taken up in the work of Byron, Schiller and Hölderlin. "The romantic pantheon", he argues, "is like a gallery of the sublime" (1961:187). Stephen Bygrave and Mary Wedd also discuss the role of the sublime in Romantic literature. Bygrave defines it as "the experience of a power in nature or religion that is greater than oneself" (1996:118), while Wedd describes it as the "consciousness of a deeper reality than that of everyday material and mundane existence" (1998:71). Again, the perception of such a "reality" lends meaning to suffering. Nicola Trott provides an analysis of the concept of the sublime in both the literature and philosophy of the Romantic Movement. She examines the way in which the sublime was connected in the works of Burke, Schiller, Milton, Coleridge, Blake and Wordsworth with grandeur of thought or conception, a vehemence or intensity of passion, and a nobility of soul or character (1998:78). Like its Hellenic and Elizabethan predecessors, Romantic literature presents the individual with an airbrushed version of reality, a lyrical vision in which the senseless and mundane aspects of suffering are denied.



While the notion of the sublime in literature is associated most often with tragic drama or lyric poetry, its influence can also be found in many of the novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While Tolstoy was a contemporary of Dostoevsky, his work is firmly rooted in the lyric tradition. It is only through their sublime illusions that the two protagonists in *Anna Karenina* are able to bear their suffering. Karenin is initially inconsolable after having discovered his wife's adulterous affair. His fate initially appears senseless to him. He quickly learns to take pleasure in his suffering, however, after the Countess Lydia Ivanovna explains to him that his humiliation is, far from being shameful, the very thing that is "the highest degree of perfection in a Christian" (538). "[H]e that humbleth himself shall be exalted", she says, quoting the scriptures (538). Her words enable Karenin to see a divine purpose in his suffering; all of a sudden his humiliation appears sublime, and he is saved by this illusion. As the narrator explains:

for Karenin it was a necessity to think thus: it was so essential to him in his humiliation to have some elevated standpoint, however imaginary, from which, looked down upon by all, he could look down upon others, that he clung to this delusion of salvation as if it were the real thing (539).

In Tolstoy's novel, individuals must sustain these illusions about themselves in order to survive their suffering. Only Anna sees briefly past them. On her journey to meet Vronsky, she thinks to herself "I couldn't conceive a situation in which life would not be misery, [...] we were all created in order to suffer, and [...] we all know this and all try to invent means for deceiving ourselves. But when you see the truth, what are you to do?" (799). Shortly afterward, Anna commits suicide by throwing herself under a train. However, despite her last minute revelation and the temporary suspension of her illusions, her death fits perfectly the mould of the tragic/romantic heroine. Her life may have been miserable, but her death was sublime. The entire drama of her suicide is played out beforehand in her head; she imagines Vronsky's betrayal, her tragic death, and the remorse he and the others would feel later. In death, that ultimate experience of the sublime, she finds release from the wretchedness of life.

## Poverty and Suffering

A sublime suffering is transcendent; through it the sufferer escapes the terrible mundanity of everyday life. A wretched suffering, on the other hand, is defined as much by its mundanity as its senselessness. Suffering in Dostoevsky's novels is made mundane by the absence of anything in it resembling the sublime. In Greek Tragedy, the suffering of the protagonist took place under the eyes of their gods. The same was the case for the saints and martyrs of Christian literature. The heroes and heroines of Romantic poetry suffer in wide open spaces, on threatening precipices, or in vast oceans. In all of these literary forms, the suffering of the individual takes place in confrontation with the sublime, (whether this is understood in terms of nature or the divine). Dostoevsky's characters, in comparison, suffer against the backdrop of cramped apartments and the oppressive atmosphere of poverty and degradation.

The notion of the alienation from the divine, as has been discussed, was at the centre of many of Dostoevsky's portraits of innocent sufferer. However, this idea becomes particularly pronounced in his depictions of poverty. The conception of the poor as distanced from God was not uncommon among the aristocracy of his era, many of whom subscribed to the idea that existence was ordered like a "great chain", with God at the top and human beings arranged underneath, with their closeness to God determined by their position in the social hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> Dostoevsky dramatises this type of thinking in his depictions of suffering. His poor characters are presented both as exiles from God and human society; it is almost inconceivable to imagine them experiencing the same kind of sublime suffering experienced by the great figures of Romantic and tragic literature. However, his portraits of poverty are not merely a naive reflection of the aristocratic biases of his times. As has been discussed, they were influenced more by the progressive views of liberal humanism than any other kind of thinking.

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<sup>20</sup> According to Nietzsche, this scale was reversed by Judeo-Christian morality, which allowed the poor and downtrodden to feel that it was they, rather than the aristocracy, who were closest to God. Nietzsche is scornful of the reversal, as is evidenced in the following passage:

It was the Jews who, with awe-inspiring consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value-equation (good = beautiful = happy = beloved of God) and to hang on to this inversion with their teeth [...] saying 'the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lonely, alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly, alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone - and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, to godless to all eternity' (1967[b]:470).

While his treatment of poverty as wretched seems to confirm the notion of the poor as removed from God, his novels do not present this alienation as a natural phenomenon, but rather as something which has been manufactured by those in society who stand to benefit spiritually from it: the aristocracy. It is the aristocracy who, in order to maintain their position as the favoured of God, consign the poor to an inferior position and an inferior type of suffering. Dostoevsky advances this view explicitly in *The Brothers Karamazov* through the character of Ivan, who distinguishes between two types of suffering: a lower sort, to which the poor are relegated, and a higher sort, which they are usually denied. He says to Alyosha:

there is suffering and suffering: degrading suffering that degrades me - hunger, for example - is something that my benefactor will permit in me, but let the suffering be of ever such a slightly loftier sort, such as for an idea, for example, then no, only in very rare cases will he permit me that (272).

The reader is told that the benefactor is greatly disturbed by the possibility that the beggar, who “smell[s] bad” and has “a stupid expression on [his] face” (272), could feel a great and ennobling suffering, a suffering that lifts him out of his paltry and meagre existence and elevates him to the status of the saints and martyrs. In Dostoevsky’s novels, the maintenance of the social hierarchy requires not only that a part of the population be kept in material poverty so that another part may enjoy relative material wealth, but also that the poor are denied the spiritual comforts afforded the rich in their suffering. In order to maintain a sense of the sublimity of his own suffering, the benefactor must feel himself to be near the top of the ladder - close to God. He therefore has not only a material but also a spiritual interest in maintaining the social hierarchy and perpetuating the degradation of the poor. The sublimity of his own suffering is built on the wretchedness of the lower classes.

The former second grade captain Nikolay Ilyich Snegiryov in *The Brothers Karamazov* is typical of many of Dostoevsky’s poor and downtrodden characters. Dismissed from the Russian infantry for an unnamed disgrace, Snegiryov lives in impoverished surroundings with his entire family, including his mentally ill wife, his two daughters, and his sick consumptive son. All of them live together in one airless, foul smelling room. They have barely enough to eat, and three of the five are in desperate need of medicines the father cannot afford to buy. These are characters who appear to have been forgotten

by God. In describing their circumstances, the narrator creates an overwhelming sense of the wretchedness of their situation and the crushing effect that too much poverty can have on the human spirit. Snegiryov, for instance, is described thus:

The gentleman was dressed in a dark, thoroughly inferior nankeen overcoat of some kind, darned and with stains on it. The trousers he was wearing were extremely light in colour, of a kind that no one wears nowadays, checked and of some very thin material, rumpled below and therefore riding up, as though he had, like some small boy, grown out of them [...]. He resembled a man who had long been submissive and endured much [...] a man who would horribly like to deal you a blow but who was horribly afraid that you might deal him one back (227).

Dostoevsky's narration of the incidents in which this character is involved is designed to draw attention to the wretchedness of his suffering. He describes, for example, how Snegiryov was mocked and abused in public by Alyosha's brother Dmitri, who beat him and pulled him around the town square by his beard. This humiliating incident is in itself more than Snegiryov can bear. What torments him most of all, however, is the fact that all this occurred before the eyes of his son, who is thereby made a witness to his shame. Snegiryov describes the scene of his torment to Alyosha, in humble and submissive tones, and the reader is left in no doubt at the end of his testimony as to the degrading nature of the incident:

'Well sir, you see, sir, that day your dear brother Dmitry Fyodorovich took to pulling me about by my little beard, hauled me out of the inn onto the square, and just at that moment the schoolboys were coming out of the school, and Ilyusha was with them [...]. He caught at me, embraced me, tried to tear me away, shouting at my insulter: "Let go, let go, this is my papa, my papa, forgive him" [...] I remember that moment, and the expression on his little face, sir, I have not forgotten it' (233).

Snegiryov's loss of dignity before his son is central to his wretchedness. Whereas the heroes and heroines of Romantic literature were ennobled by their suffering and brought closer to God through it, the suffering this character is subjected to has the opposite effect. A number of Dostoevsky's novels

explore the crippling effects the loss of dignity can have on the human character. The Underground Man becomes spiteful and vicious after a number of degrading incidents; Snegiryov, though he tries desperately to be defiant, is really a cowering and defeated man; Natasha, in *The Insulted and Injured* is mortified by the insult she is dealt by Prince Valkovsky and falls into a fever that lasts for three weeks; while children such as Ippolit in *The Idiot*, and Elena in *The Insulted and Injured* are rendered incapable of accepting love or friendship as a result of having been scorned and abused. Kolya Krasotkin, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, falls into this last category. The thirteen year old Kolya appears proud, brash and pompous, but beneath his hard exterior is a desperate desire to be liked. His pride is clearly a defence mechanism. We are told that he was bullied at school and found it difficult to make friends. He is even shown resorting to rash and dangerous acts of bravado, such as lying on the train tracks while a speeding train passes over him, in a bid to be accepted by older boys. He desperately wants to be liked, but is careful to conceal this fact in case others think him weak. He is constantly worried about how he must appear to those he regards as his superiors, and is tormented by the idea that they might despise him or find him childish. His humiliations as a younger child have clearly left him damaged. “Oh, Karamazov, I am deeply unhappy” he confides to Alyosha, “I sometimes imagine God only knows what, that everyone is laughing at me, the entire world, and at such moments, at such moments I am quite simply ready to annihilate the entire order of things” (641).

The suffering these characters experience has nothing in common with the sublime suffering described in the literature of the lyric tradition. In exploring the degrading nature of the suffering of the poor and downtrodden, Dostoevsky reveals what was often repressed by such literature. Suffering in his novels is not an experience that elevates the individual; it does not allow them rise up out of the mud to become closer to God. It is a degrading experience that binds them firmly to the squalor of their earthly existence.

### **The Forgetting of Suffering**

Nietzsche wrote more than once about the debilitating effect the constant memory of a painful experience could have on the human psyche; the memory of such an experience, he argued, was capable even of impeding the instinct for life. In *Genealogy of Morals* he expounded the virtues of “active forgetfulness”, without which, he claimed, “there could be no happiness, no pride, no *present*”

(1967[b]:58). According to Nietzsche, it was essential that human beings learn to forget their suffering in order to be able to live. It was one of the functions of art to induce such a forgetfulness. Art's sublime illusions, he argued, were designed for those who felt "profoundly the weight and burden of existence" and needed to be "deluded by exquisite stimulants into a forgetfulness of their displeasure" (1967[a]:110). The individual need not forget their suffering entirely, however, merely its wretched and degrading aspects. A sublime suffering, argued Nietzsche, was something which could be endured; it was the wretchedness of suffering that was impossible to bear.

A number of Dostoevsky's characters attempt to delude themselves into "a forgetfulness" of the wretchedness of their situations with sublime illusions that lend dignity and meaning to their suffering. While the effort is shown to be ultimately futile (they are depicted struggling constantly with the wretchedness of their situations), their illusions do provide them with some temporary comfort. The protagonist of *The Gambler*, for example, gains a certain pleasure from seeing himself as a righteous man unjustly persecuted. When he is abused and humiliated by the woman he loves, the gambler tells her: "[B]eing your slave is a joy to me, for there is joy in the last degree of abasement and humiliation" (49). The joy he experiences, however, does not derive from the experience of humiliation in itself, but from his imaginary relationship to his humiliation: he imagines himself as a good and noble person wrongly and callously humiliated. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Grushenka reveals that she was once humiliated and forsaken by a man with whom she was in love. Like the gambler, she admits to taking pleasure in her suffering: "It may be that I'm fond only of the assault upon my honour", she says, "and not of him at all" (410). Like so many of Dostoevsky's downtrodden characters, she even aggravates her feelings of injury in order to heighten her sense of the tragic injustice of her situation:

I shall mutilate myself and my beauty, I shall burn my face and lay it open with a knife, I shall go and beg for alms [...] and if I want to I shall send back to Kuzma everything he's given me, including all his money, and shall go and work all my life as a daily drudge! (411).

Her desire for greater suffering is really a desire for the sublime. It is as if she cannot bear the triviality of her suffering, and wishes to increase it until it reaches sublime proportions. In *The Insulted and Injured*, the narrator describes the way in which both Elena and Natasha, in their own ways, exacerbate

their suffering to attain a similar end: Elena by begging in the streets when she could accept the charity of her friends, and Natasha by submitting to the woman her lover has chosen over her. Dostoevsky's characters are all affected in some way by the degrading circumstances of their lives. Elena is poor and humiliated, her clothes are torn and she begs in the streets for her spiteful grandfather; Natasha is confined alone for days on end in the pitiful lodgings her lover keeps her in; the gambler is a hopeless addict forced to seek work as a lackey in order to support his habit, and often with not enough money to feed himself and clothe himself decently; Grushenka is scorned by her friends, and ostracised from society. These characters are crushed by the wretchedness of their suffering - they wish to suffer greatly, because this is the only way they can escape the wretchedness of their situations. "This aggravation of suffering, and this reveling in it I could understand", says one narrator, "it is the enjoyment of many of the insulted and injured, oppressed by destiny, and smarting under the sense of its injustice" (*The Insulted and Injured*, 279).

The illusions these characters maintain about themselves in their suffering may be sublime, but as the narrators and some of the characters themselves recognise, they are only illusions. The more wretched the suffering, the more sublime the illusion. Nietzsche argued that wherever we find beauty, there also we find suffering. In the concluding section of *The Birth of Tragedy* he implies that the amount of suffering endured by a people will determine the degree of beauty in their art. Marvelling at the magnificent architecture of Ancient Greece, he asks: "how much did this people have to suffer in order to become so beautiful!" (1976[a]:144). The beauty of a people's art, he suggests, must be powerful enough to make them forget the wretchedness of their suffering. How great an artwork, in this case, would be needed to bring about a forgetfulness of the suffering of all the countless individuals throughout history? According to Christian doctrine, God has invented a work of art so sublime that it is sufficient to wipe away the memory of the entire sum of human suffering. The Christian vision of paradise is the perfect manifestation of the Apollinian aesthetic: a place of eternal harmony in which there is a complete absence of "that which is ugly and disharmonic" (Nietzsche, 1967[a]:140). The character Ivan prefaces his stories about the torture of children with a reference to this sublime vision: "[A]t the moment of eternal harmony, there will occur and become manifest something so precious that it will be sufficient for all hearts, for the soothing of all indignation" (270). At that moment, he says, "our sufferings will be healed and smoothed away [and] the whole offensive comedy of human conflict will disappear like a pathetic mirage" (270). However, it is precisely his

desire *not* to forget the wretchedness of suffering that leads Ivan to reject the sublime vision of paradise. To forget suffering, he believes, would be horribly unjust. According to Ivan, we owe it to those who have suffered innocently to maintain a sense of outrage against the injustice they have endured. So, rather than accept a paradise in which suffering would be forgotten, he chooses to be left alone with his memory and his outrage. “I do not want harmony”, he says, “out of a love for mankind I do not want it [...]. Let me rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unassuaged indignation” (282).

### **A Putrid Smell**

Exposing the “substratum of suffering” (1967[a]:46) that lay beneath the art and culture of Ancient Greece was part of Nietzsche’s aim in writing *The Birth of Tragedy*. Dostoevsky had a similar aim in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Part of his purpose was to expose the wretchedness of the suffering of the poor. But wretchedness is not only associated with poverty in this novel. Ivan’s stories of torture and cruelty attempt not only to reveal the senselessness of suffering, but to expose the subterranean horror on which his supposedly civilised culture rested. Ivan begins his “mutinous” tirade with a speech about the barbarous Russian pastime of flogging:

You know, with us it takes the form of flogging, the birch and the lash, and that is a national phenomenon: in our country the nailing of ears is unthinkable, we are Europeans, after all, but the rod and the lash - they are Russian and cannot be taken away from us [...]. In our country the torture of flogging is a historical, direct and most intimate source of pleasure. Nekrasov has some lines about a muzhik lashing his horse with a knout on the eyes, ‘on its meek eyes’. Who has not seen such a thing, it is a russime [...]. But after all, human beings may be flogged too (275-6).

As has been discussed, Ivan recounts a number of stories in which children are flogged, kicked, beaten, tortured and killed. Such incidents cannot be reconciled with the conception of a civilised society. Yet, as Dostoevsky testified in a letter to his publisher, all of the stories were true and happened in his own time: “All the stories about children occurred, were printed in the papers, and I can show you where;



nothing was invented by me” (Dostoevsky, cited in Belknap, 1990:128).<sup>21</sup> Ivan’s monologue, like the novel as a whole, takes part in a revelation or laying bare of the wretchedness and brutality the author found at the heart of his own culture. The presentation of the gruesome details of the crimes he recounts is designed to shock the reader, and to destroy in advance any attempt to construe that suffering as meaningful or sublime.

To dispense with the illusions that hide the miserable and degrading realities of suffering is, according to the character Zosima, an essential prerequisite to brotherly love. Zosima differentiates brotherly love, or *active love* as he calls it, from another type of love which he refers to as *fanciful love*. Fanciful love is capable of responding only to an idealised vision of a suffering humanity, but disdains the wretched suffering of an individual. In order to illustrate this fanciful love, Zosima refers to the case of a certain doctor who, though he loved mankind in general, was incapable of loving individual human beings. He speaks to Zosima of his “fervent plans of devotion to mankind” (61) but admits that when he comes into contact with a sick man, he has nothing but disdain for his symptoms and is even capable of hating him “because he has a cold and is perpetually blowing his nose” (61). In opposition to the fantastic and whimsical love with which the doctor is associated, Zosima pits the active love he recommends for his followers. Active love, he explains, does not deny the loathsome and unattractive face of suffering, and is capable of loving the sufferer even when he is at his most wretched. The virtue of active love is exemplified in the novel by the story of Ioann the Almsgiver, which is recounted by Ivan during his tirade on innocent suffering:

I once read somewhere concerning ‘Ioann the Almsgiver’ (a certain saint) that when a hungry and frozen itinerant came to him and asked him to warm him, he put him to bed in his own bed, got into it together with him, put his arms around him and began to breathe into his mouth, which was festering and foul with some terrible disease (272).

Though he tells this story, Ivan cannot believe such a love is humanly possible: “In my view, the love that Christ showed towards people is in its way a miracle impossible upon earth. It is true, he was a

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<sup>21</sup> Neither can these tales be dismissed as aberrations in an otherwise civilised society. Ivan notes that one of these cases was taken to court, but that the jury condoned the act by bringing back a verdict of not guilty. “The members of the public roar with happiness that the torturer has been acquitted”, says Ivan. “I wasn’t there, damn it, or I’d have bellowed a proposal that a stipend be founded in the torturer’s name” (277).

God. But we are not gods” (272). According to Christian mythology, Christ loved all of society’s outcasts - the poor, the prostitutes, and the lepers - and loved them in their suffering no matter how repugnant it was. Ivan, like the doctor who loved humankind, is able to love only an idealised image of humanity. The appearance of real humans, he argues, with all of their defects, makes love impossible: “In order to love a person it is necessary for him to be concealed from view; the moment he shows his face - love disappears” (272).

However, the attitudes and actions of a number of characters within the novel contradict this view. Zosima is able to love human beings even when he comes into contact with their suffering in all its abject reality. Zosima regularly goes out from his monastery to the people and enquires about the specific details of their suffering. Crippled people, sick people, wailing women, poor folk driven mad with grief at the death of their infant children - we are told that “he blessed them all and engaged some of them in conversation” (51). He even seems purposely to seek out the most miserable in the crowd. On one occasion the elder speaks to a particular woman for a long time; she is described as “a woman who was not at all old yet, but was very thin and emaciated, with a face that was less burned than wholly blackened by the sun” (51). Rather than repelling his love, the appearance of the worst of suffering seems actually to arouse it. The novice Alyosha follows his mentor’s example in seeking out the worst of suffering. After Zosima’s death, he leaves the monastery, in accordance with his elder’s wishes, in order to abide among and to love the suffering. He loves those sufferers whom others find it difficult to love: the foolish and pathetic Snegiryov, the spiteful Grushenka, and his own mean, vindictive and bad tempered father. Neither Alyosha nor Zosima shrink from the odious face of suffering; both embrace the sufferer in all his wretchedness.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky aims to destroy the fanciful notions of suffering and death prevalent in the culture in which he was writing. The portraits of human wretchedness contained within the novel function to deny that suffering is a sublime experience. One narrative incident makes this purpose clearer than the others. In describing the death of Zosima, Dostoevsky presents his final word on the notion that suffering and death are sublime. Zosima’s death is initially seen as a glorious event by a number of his followers and is accompanied by the expectation of miracles. People from the town arrive to witness these expected miracles, and among them there appears a general unwillingness to admit to the ungodly realities of death and bodily decay. When the corpse is prepared

for burial and placed in its coffin, a number of those tending the dead man wonder if the windows should be opened. The question is quickly dismissed however, for it is believed by them that “to expect putrefaction and a putrid smell from the body of such a sleeper was a truly preposterous notion” (378). Their sublime illusions are quickly destroyed, however, because by the afternoon the body begins to emit a distinctly putrid odour. The smell that issues from Zosima’s rotting body, which is impossible to ignore and which so grossly offends many of those present in the monastery, stands as a reminder that behind the sublime illusions with which we attempt to obscure sickness, suffering, and death, there is a reality that is loathsome and vile. These earthly aspects of suffering do not elevate the sufferer or bring him closer to God; on the contrary, they tie him to a mundane material reality.

*The Brothers Karamazov* presents an overwhelming case against the proposition that suffering is meaningful or sublime. The sense of abandonment and exile that characterises the suffering the author explores denies such a notion. Dostoevsky’s vision of suffering has influenced a number of authors, who build upon the questions and doubts he explored, especially in his last novel. The senselessness of suffering in a demystified universe, the lack of transcendent meaning, and the sense of abandonment the sufferer experiences in a secular world have all come increasingly to be seen within literature as defining the modern experience of suffering. Albert Camus says of Dostoevsky’s characters that “they are modern” in that they struggle with questions regarding “the meaning of life” (1975:95). This thesis will now move on to examine the way in which Camus builds on the work of Dostoevsky in developing his own ideas about suffering.

## Part Two



Albert Camus:

*The Absurdity of Suffering*

## Chapter 4:

# The Absurdity of Suffering

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The concept of the absurd is crucial to Camus' characterisation of death and suffering. Rieux is struck by the senselessness of suffering during the plague; Caligula is driven mad by the gratuitous and arbitrary nature of his sister's death; while the fundamental character of the murder committed by Meursault in *The Stranger* is its absurdity. Camus' particular understanding of the absurdity of the human condition in a secular world makes him an important figure in a literature of modern suffering. In the chronology presented within this thesis, he represents a bridge between Dostoevsky's vision of the wretchedness of suffering in a world undergoing a crisis of faith, and Kundera's vision of the banality of suffering in a world devoid of religious or secular forms of meaning. The overall aim of the following chapters is to examine the particular sense of absurdity that arises from Camus' representations of suffering, and to consider its significance in terms of the broader context of the literature examined within this thesis. This chapter will explore the development of Camus' own understanding of the absurd, and the central part it played in the representations of suffering we find in his novels. I will begin by considering briefly the work of some of those philosophers who may have influenced Camus in his understanding of the absurd: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers and Sartre. I will also reflect on Camus' personal encounters with poverty and suffering as a young man in Algeria, and on the role these experiences played in the formation of his convictions regarding the absurdity of suffering. Finally, I will attempt to differentiate Camus' ideas about the absurd from those of Franz Kafka, whose work has also been considered as an attempt to deal with the absurdity of the human condition.

## **A Background to Existentialism and the Notion of the Absurd**

Though he denied he was an existentialist, Camus shared some of the principles Walter Kaufmann identified as being at "the heart of existentialism": "The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy" (1975:12). Underlying these principles was a fundamental

belief in the absurdity of human life and suffering. Camus thought it imperative that human beings come to terms with the fact that life was not inherently meaningful, and he consequently exhibited a deep mistrust of those doctrines that sought to prevent an awareness of this fact by attempting to explain away everything in human existence that seemed illogical, incongruous, and absurd. Happiness, suffering and death recur in his work as extremes of the absurd; they are the moments of the greatest conflict between the human desire for meaning and the absence of any inherent meaning within the world, and they thus provide the best opportunity to show how individuals can be shaken from the false security that belief in various doctrines provides.

The absurdity of the human condition and the role both religious and secular doctrines played in concealing that absurdity was a subject that occupied many of Camus' predecessors and contemporaries; a fact well documented by Walter Kaufmann in the introduction to his edited compilation *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Søren Kierkegaard is considered by Kaufmann to be one of the fathers of existentialism, revealing in his works a deep concern with the absurdity of life and the absurdity of his own Christian beliefs (1975:16). The fate of the individual, according to Kierkegaard, was to be burdened with the necessity of making choices. In these situations, he argued, one could blindly obey the dictates of one's faith, like the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling*, but that faith could not provide one with a reasonable basis for choosing one course of action rather than another. Faith, he argues, meant blindly obeying the commands of God, no matter how irrational they appeared: "Abraham did not doubt", writes Kierkegaard, "he believed the preposterous" (1994:16). According to Kierkegaard, the Christian doctrine could not provide a rational ground for interpreting the world. In the modern world, as far as Kierkegaard was concerned, the heavy burden of making choices had to be borne by the individual alone. "When I behold my possibilities", writes Kaufmann in explanation of Kierkegaard's position, "I experience that dread which is 'the dizziness of freedom,' and my choice is made in fear and trembling" (1975:17).

Though it would be false to label Friedrich Nietzsche an existentialist, a number of his ideas were also important in the development of existentialist philosophy and the notion of the absurd. His critique of Christianity in particular found resonance with both Sartre and Camus. For Nietzsche, faith meant deceiving oneself about the lack of inherent meaning in the world. "There have always been many sickly people among those who invent fables and long for God", he writes, "they have a raging hate for [...] that youngest of virtues which is called honesty" (1961:61). These remarks seem to roughly

prefigure Sartre's own critique of "bad faith". Nietzsche despised doctrines, such as Christianity, which sought to impose their own morality and world-view on the mind of the individual in order to take away their freedom to think and act. He denied that the world was governed by a divine order, and argued that the morality in accordance with which actions were often determined and judged was merely a human invention: "Truly, men have given themselves all their good and evil", he writes. "Truly, they did not take it, they did not find it, it did not descend to them as a voice from heaven" (1961:85). Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche believed that there was no sure metaphysical ground upon which to base one's decisions. However, he approached this uncertain state of affairs without the sense of foreboding which pervades the work of his Danish forebear; as Kaufmann notes, "he made much less of dread and death" than did Kierkegaard (1975:21).

While Kaufmann suggests that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had sown the seeds for a philosophy of the absurd, he claims that it was not until the work of Karl Jaspers that these seeds "grew into existentialism" (1975:22). Jaspers, an older contemporary of Camus, developed an entire philosophy dedicated to the questioning of doctrines. According to Kaufmann, he was the most rigorous of all philosophers in his refusal of any system that sought to furnish humans with an overall understanding of their world. Jaspers was critical of the role religion played in deceiving human beings about the real conditions of their existence, but he also turned his critique on philosophy itself. He believed that the true role of philosophy was to make individuals confront the meaninglessness of the world, and not to provide them with a set of theories that would make sense of existence. Consequently, he had no interest in explaining the world in his own books. Kaufmann argues that Jaspers' self-professed aim was "to illuminate the reader about his condition [...] and to appeal to him to face it with as much nobility as he [could] muster" (1975:30). In this, he argues, Jaspers was like Socrates; when addressing an audience, he "made them feel dissatisfied with their existence and the doctrines others offered. He liberated others from confusions and a blind trust in untenable beliefs" (1975:25-6).

Jean-Paul Sartre was also opposed to any doctrine which sought to provide an all-encompassing explanation of the world. The belief in the general absurdity of existence was an important part of his philosophy, and a recurring theme in his fiction. In *Being and Nothingness*, one of the seminal philosophical texts of Existentialism, he argued the importance for individuals of recognising the nothingness at the centre of their existence. According to Sartre, the individual is constantly faced with

possibilities and choices. There is no ultimate foundation upon which to base these decisions, only an endless stream of open-ended possibilities. However, the individual behaves as if there were no choice. The alarm clock rings, she gets out of bed, and she goes to work. In this way she avoids the anguish associated with choice; it is as if the alarm clock has made the decision and she is merely responding to its “summons” (Sartre, 1956:38). “In the same way”, writes Sartre, “what we might call everyday morality is exclusive of ethical anguish” (1956:38). Morality allows one to avoid the anxiety involved in making ethical decisions because it takes the burden of choice away from the individual; like “alarm clocks, signboards, tax forms [and] policemen”, morality, he argues, is merely another one of “so many guard rails against anguish” (1956:39). Despite the anguish which the recognition of one’s freedom aroused, the groundlessness of human existence was, according to Sartre, a necessary fact to be confronted by every individual who sought to come to terms with the real conditions of their existence, while the decision to avoid this reality by seeking comfort in a doctrine that made life appear inherently meaningful was a sign of “bad faith”.

### **Camus and Sartre: Suffering and the Absurd**

Sartre’s conviction regarding the absurdity of life was one of the things he shared with Camus. However, there were a number of differences between their particular notions of the absurd. Camus was not led to the absurd primarily by philosophy, as perhaps Sartre was, but arguably by his experiences as a young man in Algeria. Camus spent the early part of his life, after the death of his father, in one of the poorer parts of Algeria. In his unfinished novel *The First Man*, he describes his youth, evoking on the one hand the joys associated with his childhood memories of sun and sea, the pleasure of water “gentle and warm” and “the glory of the light [that] filled [...] young bodies” (1996: 41); and, on the other hand, the boredom and fatigue of poverty, “the curse of work so stupid you could weep and so interminably monotonous that it made the days too long and, at the same time, life too short” (1996:210). In *Betwixt and Between* (1937), his first published collection of essays, Camus acknowledged the equal influence of both poverty and the sun on the formation of his ideas about the absurd. Poverty represented for him all of the suffering and injustice of the world, while the sun reminded him of the joy that made life worth living. For Camus, there were always these two sides to the absurd; both suffering and joy seemed inexplicable to him, and both hence played an important role in his concept of the absurd.



It was partly his ability to apprehend equally the beauty and the horror of the world that prevented Camus from resigning himself to a vision of the absurd as pessimistic as Sartre's. Camus' more ambivalent approach to the absurd is evident in the characters he created in his novels. While Sartre's Roquentin experiences only nausea at the gratuitousness of life, characters like Meursault in *The Stranger* and Dr Rieux in *The Plague* experience both joy and horror. Even in the midst of the plague Rieux is able to appreciate the simple pleasure of swimming in the sea with his friend Tarrou, while Meursault delights in the joy of a cool breeze on a summer evening as he waits for death in his prison cell. Neither Rieux nor Meursault deny that suffering is absurd, they merely recognise that there are also elements in life that make it worth preserving. Suffering, especially innocent suffering, convinces us of the absurdity of life, but it is only joy, an experience no less absurd, that tells us life is worthwhile.

In his play *Caligula*, Camus imagines the consequences of approaching the problem of the absurd solely from a negative perspective. As a result of the death of his sister and lover Drusilla, Caligula stumbles upon what he claims is the essential truth of human existence: "Men die; and they are not happy" (40). Caligula apprehends the absurd in wholly negative terms: for him, the world appears as a cruel place in which human beings suffer and die for no reason. When Caligula's friend and confidant Helicon tries to cheer him by observing that people are nevertheless able to enjoy a meal despite "this truth of yours", Caligula answers: "All it proves is that I'm surrounded by lies and self-deception" (41). Caligula declares that he will enlighten his subjects about the absurdity of existence. He henceforth goes about declaring famines and executing people arbitrarily in order to create a world that conforms to his wholly negative vision of the absurd - a world dominated by death and suffering. In creating this grotesque fictional dystopia, Camus provides a compelling case for a balanced view of the absurd.

It was possibly Camus' more ambivalent approach that allowed him to accept the absurdity of life. Sartre, on the other hand, who focused more on despair and anguish, is often accused of having betrayed the absurd. In her 1972 work, *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment*, Germaine Brée argues that despite his proclaimed belief in the absurdity of human existence, what Sartre sought to provide was "a complete and definitive account of reality", something completely alien to Camus whose "own mode of thought rested on the premise that this could not be done" (1972:11). Brée cites Sartre's

support of Communism in the 1950s as evidence of his desire for “universal systems” and his preference for order over the absurd. Brée was not alone in her criticism of Sartre in this regard. Camus also saw Sartre’s defense of Communism as a betrayal of the absurd, and his association with the Communist Party became one of the factors in their split. According to Brée, Camus differed from Sartre in that he “had started by relinquishing what Sartre sought: a single unified frame of understanding” (1972:135). Brée argues that while Camus recognised the human need to establish systems that made life appear meaningful, he also recognised that the need for such systems didn’t prove their validity. When, as a young man in 1935, he joined the Communist Party, it was not in the hope that it would provide him with an understanding of suffering. He joined, rather, because he wanted to put an end to the terrible pain and misery associated with poverty. Camus was convinced that suffering was an absurd fact of existence, and he did not seek an explanation for it. He wanted only to alleviate suffering, and his attraction to Communism was driven by this pragmatic aim, rather than by any desire to understand the existence of suffering (whether in terms of exploitation and class struggle, or in any other terms). In his biography of Camus, Herbert Lottman cites a letter, dated 1935, in which Camus explains his involvement with the Communist Party to his friend and one time teacher Jean Grenier. “It seems to me”, he writes, “that, more than ideas, life itself often leads to Communism ... I have such a strong desire to help reduce the sum of unhappiness and of bitterness which empisons mankind” (Camus, cited in Lottman, 1997:94).

It may be argued that Camus’ commitment to the cause of alleviating poverty is in itself something which involves him in an act of meaning making. Irvin Yalom has stated that “dedication to a cause” (1980: 434-5) is one of the ways in which human beings attempt to attribute a “secular” and “personal” meaning to their lives (1980:426). However, there is an important difference between this type of secular and personal meaning making, and what Yalom identifies as “cosmic” (1980: 424) meaning making, which seeks to understand all of existence in terms of an overriding pattern or plan. This is a crucial distinction when it comes to the question of suffering. Dedicating oneself to the cause of alleviating suffering, while it may give meaning to one’s life, does not require one to attribute a meaning to the experience of the sufferer. In fact, the ability to see suffering as meaningless could be argued to be an important precursor to the development of a desire to alleviate suffering. The distinction, in any case, is important for understanding Camus’ approach to suffering. Camus’ sole aim

in relation to the problem of suffering was the diminishing of suffering. He concentrated in particular on the suffering of the poor.<sup>22</sup> Eliminating poverty, and the suffering it caused, was also one of the stated aims of Communism. However, the Communist doctrine was also a political philosophy which attempted to *explain* that suffering in socio-economic terms. Camus fell out with the French Communist Party when he came to form the view that the alleviation of suffering was not always its primary aim.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the specific grievances he had with Communist doctrine, Camus maintained a general mistrust of all philosophical and religious doctrines, a position largely motivated by his belief in the importance of recognising the absurdity of suffering. Doctrines which presented an ordered view of a meaningful universe, he argued, shielded human beings from the recognition of that absurdity because they provided a framework through which the world could be understood. Such views were dangerous because attributing a meaning to human suffering tended to encourage an acceptance of that suffering. It was this conviction that was behind Camus' attack on both Communism and Christianity, two powerful doctrines claiming, ironically as far as Camus was concerned, to be sympathetic to the problem of suffering. Rather than alleviating suffering, he argued, they provided it with a justification. Christianity explained the existence of innocent suffering in terms of a divine plan and even proscribed suffering for the salvation of the soul, while Communism contributed to the acceptance of human

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<sup>22</sup> Even before his involvement with Communism, Camus had been a crusader against poverty. Among his earliest published writings are a set of eleven journalistic articles in which he reported on the plight of the Arab and indigenous Berber populations of Kabylia in his native Algeria. V.C. Letemendia argues that it is in these articles that Camus' "disgust and indignation at the plight of the poor emerges most forcefully" (1997:3).

<sup>23</sup> According to Letemendia, Camus believed that poverty was a "form of suffering" which was "neither inevitable nor natural", but was rather something which "could be significantly alleviated, if not fully eradicated" (1997:2). While he initially saw Communism as a movement dedicated to this goal, his personal experiences led him to alter his opinion. According to Roger Quilliot, Camus discovered, within a year of having joined its ranks, that the French Communist Party was "more intent upon rationally exploiting suffering for the profit of the home office than upon progressively abolishing it" (1962:40). Its goal of establishing a communist utopia at some time in the future meant that it was often not interested in accepting what they considered short-term solutions in dealing with the problem of suffering. The alleviation of suffering, in other words, was not the primary or immediate goal. In November 1937, as Lottman notes, Camus resigned from the Communist Party after it reversed its policy on French colonialism in Algeria in a strategic move, the aim of which was to contribute to the formation of a much needed alliance between France and the Soviet Union. The Communist Party had previously supported cries from within Algeria to put an end to those French colonialist policies which discriminated against the non-French population of Algeria, and the sudden withdrawal of their support for this movement signified, for many, a betrayal of that suffering population. Camus could not consent to see people suffer for the sake of a future society when there was a possibility that their suffering could be alleviated in the short term. He therefore decided, as Quilliot writes, that "the Communist method was not the most desirable one" (1962:40).

suffering by attributing a meaning to that suffering in terms of the rational progress of history. In this sense, Communist doctrine performed the same function as the Christian theodicy. A discussion of Camus' critique of both the Communist and Christian doctrines will be provided in the course of the next two chapters. The rest of this chapter, however, will be dedicated to further delineating Camus' concept of the absurd, and the important role it played in the formation of his ideas about death and suffering.

### **Camus and Kafka: Variations on the Absurd**

When discussing the importance of the concept of the absurd in relation to Camus' ideas about suffering, it is necessary to be specific about the particular concept to which we are referring. As has been discussed, Camus' notion of the absurd differed from the one adhered to by Sartre in that it was less pessimistic about the situation of the individual in an absurd world. It also differed from that of Franz Kafka. Kafka is a seminal figure in what might be called the 'literature of the absurd', and his particular understanding of the absurdity of the human situation has been enormously influential. Camus also has a place in such a literature, but his concept of the absurd is very different from the one popularised by Kafka. When Camus wrote about the absurd, he was not simply referring to humanity's inability to comprehend their joys and their sufferings, as Kafka arguably was. His first novel, *The Stranger*, is dedicated to the exploration of an absurd universe which differs substantially from the merely incomprehensible worlds created by Kafka. In order to properly understand Camus' own concept of the absurd it is necessary to differentiate it from the one developed by his literary forebear. The remainder of this chapter will undertake this task in the form of a comparative analysis of two novels, both of which have been seen as expressions of the absurd: Kafka's *The Trial* and Camus' *The Stranger*.

In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera describes the universe inhabited by Joseph K. in *The Trial* as "a world that is nothing but a huge labyrinthine institution [he] cannot escape and cannot understand" (1993:101). Thomas Kavanagh describes this same universe as "one fallen prey to an epistemological crisis"; a place in which human beings are confronted by facts they are ill-equipped to interpret and understand (1976:89). Both of these readings refer to a general sense of opacity or ambiguity of meaning within the novel. Maurice Blanchot offers an alternative analysis. In his paper "Reading

Kafka”, Blanchot argued that “[w]hoever reads Kafka is [...] necessarily transformed into a liar [...]. We fall immediately into a false position, which we imagine we can avoid: We struggle against it (by the juxtaposition of contrary interpretations), and this effort is delusory; we consent to it, and this weakness is treason” (1976:14). The act of interpretation, argues Blanchot, places the reader of Kafka in the impossible position of attempting to make sense of works of fiction which are nevertheless seen (almost unanimously according to Blanchot) as expressions of the absurd. Blanchot declares that the attempt to make sense of these works is treason, because it means imposing order on what is conceived of as disordered and meaningless. Interpretation, he argues, attempts to do away with the absurd by turning it into something comprehensible. “At the moment thought encounters the absurd”, he writes, “this encounter signifies the end of the absurd” (1976:14).

How then is the reader to approach a novel like *The Trial*? Thomas Kavanagh argues that the role of the reader, when confronted by the “extensive, discontinuous and unorganized” discourse of the novel, is to “choose a perspective, a point of view” (1976:88). This is the delusory effort Blanchot describes above. He argues that the critic cannot avoid the dilemma involved in interpreting Kafka’s works by admitting that one’s reading is only one of many possible interpretations, because *any* act of interpretation, he argues, involves the imposition of meaningful patterns where there are supposed to be none. It would seem then, that, at least according to Blanchot, the only faithful reading of *The Trial* would be a reading in which one relinquished any intention to interpret from the outset.

I would argue that, in his uncompromising opposition to the act of interpreting Kafka’s work, Blanchot is conflating the sense of absurdity embodied in novels like *The Trial* with the sense of the absurd popularised by his own contemporaries, the existentialists. This, I believe, is an error. The absurd world portrayed by Kafka was by no means as refractory to all attempts at interpretation as the world created by authors such as Sartre and Camus. James Rolleston agrees on this point. He suggests that *The Trial*, rather than prohibiting exegesis, seems actually to invite it. Rolleston notes that “Kafka’s ever more concise narrative structures, far from resisting interpretation through the mystery at their center, urge us to dissect them, to speculate on the more enigmatic links in the tight fictional chain” (1976:1). He argues that the author invites such an approach through the example of “the actual characters of the narrative who obsessively interpret their situations” (1976:1). So, rather than constituting a betrayal of the work, as Blanchot suggests, the task of interpretation, in which both

reader and character participate, seems to lie at the very heart of the novel. Rather than simply seeing K.'s quest for meaning as the effort of a deluded individual, we are encouraged to reflect on the methods he employs and the frustrations he encounters in attempting to reach his goal. Though he ultimately fails to gain an understanding of his situation, the protagonist's hermeneutic endeavours are of central importance to the novel.

The fact that K.'s attempts to understand his situation are ultimately unsuccessful has led some commentators to conclude that there never was any sense behind his bizarre trial. They take his obsessive attempts at comprehension to be indicative of the human desire to find meaning in an arbitrary world of suffering and death. The point of the novel, they argue, is that such phenomena are inherently meaningless and cannot, therefore, be understood. At the other extreme, there are those critics who claim that K.'s trial and execution are perfectly comprehensible and open to explication. Russell Brown, for example, interprets *The Trial* "as an allegory of class struggle" (1988:28), in which K., the representative of the bourgeoisie, is called to account for his crimes against the working class.<sup>24</sup> What both of these types of readings fail to take into account, however, is the staging of the protagonist's own experience of his situation. Fundamental to this situation is the fact that the world appears to him to contain a meaning which, despite his best endeavours, he is destined never to grasp. K.'s experience during the trial is characterised by a total lack of comprehension. He never reaches a moment of epistemological satisfaction in terms of his trial and execution; the charges against him are never stated, and there is never any revelation capable of making his position clear to him. He goes to his death destined never to understand his fate. All of Kafka's protagonists are in the same situation. For Kafka, this is what it means to live in an absurd universe.

According to Sartre, the difference between *The Trial* and what he considers to be the truly absurd works of writers such as Camus, is that in the latter the universe is entirely devoid of meaning, while the universe of the former is full of signs that point to the existence of some kind of truth (1962[a]:116). In Kafka's work, the protagonist's inability to decipher the signs around him is not an indication that the world lacks order. The problem is not one of the absence of meaning, but of the

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<sup>24</sup> As evidence for this claim Brown cites the fact that K. only ever attends one hearing of the court, and at that hearing only one question is put to him: "the magistrate's question 'you are a house painter?' to which he indignantly replies 'No, I'm the junior manager of a large bank'" (Kafka, cited in Brown, 1988:26). "A literal reading of the text" argues Brown, "would be that his occupation alone suffices to condemn him in the eyes of the court" (1988:27).

human inability to grasp that meaning. In Kafka's short story "Investigations of a Dog", the canine protagonist tries to discover where his food comes from. He devotes himself completely to discovering the answer to this question, just as a human might become obsessed with understanding the meaning of life and death. "For all the senseless phenomena of our existence", says the dog, "and the most senseless most of all, are susceptible to investigation" (295). The dog's situation is not unlike the situation of the protagonist in *The Trial*. Both human and dog are involved in a quest for knowledge. The dog's inability to solve his dilemma is in no way an indication of the absence of answers. The same may be said for the protagonist of *The Trial*. The truth does exist, it is simply that the protagonist is unable to attain it. In his article "The Semiotics of the Absurd" Thomas Kavanagh argues that the "adventure of Josef K. is the adventure of a semiologist in spite of himself" (1976:89). Thinking of K.'s character in this way provides a useful insight into the novel. According to Kavanagh's reading, Joseph K. appears as a type of detective who seeks the truth by examining the signs around him. Like Brother William in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, he searches for the truth at the heart of a labyrinth. However, unlike Eco's protagonist, K. is unable to find his way through to the centre of the maze where "truth" is thought to be located. The figure of the labyrinth appears on a number of levels in *The Trial*. The offices of the court are a web of corridors and tiny rooms in which K. becomes lost. Although he does manage to find a way out, he must leave without having discovered what he went in to look for. Language also figures within the novel as a maze. André Brink, for example, has referred to the "the all-encompassing labyrinth of text and language" (1998:194) which must be navigated by the protagonist in order to get to the truth. According to this view, the truth exists in the utterances of those around him, which K. must decipher if he is to understand his situation. However, the court officials and others with whom he must deal speak in riddles that seem designed to obscure the information they pretend to proffer. When he visits the advocate, for instance, he is confronted by a deluge of words in which "absolutely no sense is communicated" (Brink, 1998:194). It is the same with the arresting officers who first notify him of his trial. "[I]t is expected that [their] words would function as a clarification and explanation", writes Kavanagh. "Their direct statements have, however, exactly the opposite effect" (1976:87). The novel's narrator makes mention of the fact that the protagonist was on more than one occasion "wearied out by [his] lawyer's volubility" (135). K. himself seems to recognise quite early on the futility of his attempts to seek any semblance of truth in the words spoken by his lawyer; "words", he realises, "which were obviously well calculated to lull [him] and keep him in a helpless state" (137). Nor can he

hope to find the truth in any of the court's legal documents, which even his lawyer admits are "difficult to understand" (213). Nevertheless, K. continues to appeal to language in his search for the truth, asking questions, attending interviews and listening to speeches, even though "not a single [...] conversation truly [...] provides understanding" (Brink 1998:193).

K. is destined never to grasp the truth, but the narrative is driven by his compulsion to seek it. This is central to an understanding of the character and his situation. Within the novel there are a series of vignettes whose purpose seems to be to emphasise this aspect of his predicament. The legend of the doorkeeper, which appears in chapter nine, is one such case. While visiting a cathedral, K. meets a priest who tells him the story of a man who comes from the country to gain admittance to the Law. To gain access he must pass through a series of open doors. At the first door, however, he finds a doorkeeper whose sole duty is to stop the man from entering:

The door-keeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at the side of the door. There he sits and waits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be allowed in and wearies the door-keeper with his importunity. [...] Finally his eyes grow dim and he does not know whether the world is really darkening around him or whether his eyes are only deceiving him. But in the darkness he can now perceive a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the door of the Law. Now his life is drawing to a close (235-6).

The man never does gain admittance to the Law, though he dedicates his entire life to the project. At the very end of his life, the door is shut before he has a chance to reach the light. The anecdote is enlightening in terms of K.'s situation, and it also tells us a lot about Kafka's concept of the absurd. The man from the country is an individual engaged in a futile search for an unattainable truth. The universe in which he exists, however, is not devoid of meaning. It seems to me that the "radiance that streams inextinguishably" (235) from behind the door of the Law is intended to suggest that the truth he seeks may really exist. There has always been a strong association between light and truth in the popular imagination; an association grounded at least partially in religious symbolism. In the *Gospel of John*, Jesus says to Thomas: "I am the way, the truth, and the light" (John, 14:6). Kafka cannot have been immune from the influence of such symbolism; indeed, his description of the inextinguishable



stream of radiant light in the passage above is full of religious connotations. The fact that the story is told by a priest reinforces these connotations. An even more striking biblical correlation can be found in *The Book of Revelation*, which states that, at the end of time, God will appear to light the world: “And there will be no more night; they need no lights of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (*Revelation*, 22:5). It is at this moment, according to Christian theology, that truth will be revealed. It therefore seems significant that the man from the country sees a stream of light at the end of his days. Of course it could be argued that he simply imagines it; Kafka after all does not provide the reader with any certainty about whether the light really exists or whether the man’s eyes are in fact “deceiving him”, nor does he offer any definitive information about the source of the light. Nevertheless, the fact that Kafka includes this vision in his story at all is interesting. It presents a challenge at least to the idea that Kafka was an atheist and lends weight to arguments about his lack of certainty in matters of faith. Rather than being interpreted as a testimony to the meaninglessness of the universe then, I would suggest that *The Trial* should be read, as Cyrena N. Pondrom argues, as an expression of its author’s own “fundamental agnosticism about man’s ability to know the truth” (1976:84). It is not the existence of truth that is being questioned, but the human subject’s ability to grasp it.

Kafka’s vision of the absurd is fundamentally different from the one developed by Camus. While a number of critics have observed similarities between the works of Kafka and those of Camus, these similarities often prove superficial. It is often mentioned, for example, that both novelists seem concerned with the human endeavour to seek meaning in a world that, for one reason or another, fails to deliver. Philip Thody argues that both *The Trial* and *The Stranger* are “exact expressions of the human condition in their treatment of the same incomprehensible condemnation which hung over modern man” (1957:112). What these comparisons fail to take into account, however, is the fundamental atheism of Camus’ position, as compared to the quasi-religious attitude of Kafka. The religious symbolism in Kafka’s vignette about the man from the country, for example, would be unthinkable in *The Stranger*, where religious symbols are treated with irony or indifference (Camus’ construction of Meursault as an Anti-Christ figure, as well as Meursault’s indifference towards the symbol of the crucifix will be discussed in more detail below). In order to grasp fully the particular concept of the absurd around which Camus builds his first novel, it is necessary to untangle the Christian elements we

find in Kafka's work from the Existentialist concepts on which Camus' vision is based. The universe, according to Kafka, is not necessarily absurd in the sense of lacking truth and meaning; it is merely incomprehensible for the human subjects who inhabit it. For Camus, on the other hand, the absence of truth and meaning are at the very centre of what he understands as the absurdity of the human condition. Sartre, for one, was adamant about the differences between the works of Kafka and those of Camus. To the suggestion that *The Stranger* was heavily influenced by Kafka, he made this reply:

I confess that I have found no trace of Kafka in it. Camus's views are entirely of this earth, and Kafka is the novelist of impossible transcendence; for him, the universe is full of signs that we cannot understand [...]. For Camus, on the contrary, the tragedy of human existence lies in the absence of any transcendence. [...] He is not concerned, then, with so ordering words as to suggest an inhuman, undecipherable order (1962[a]:116).

This is the central difference between *The Trial* and *The Stranger*. In Kafka's novel events are understood to have a hidden order and a purpose which, however, cannot be discovered. In Camus' novel, on the other hand, events are random and arbitrary, though they are at times falsely conceived of as having an order and purpose. Crudely put, the difference between the two authors is that for Kafka transcendent meaning exists (albeit in the form of an unattainable truth), while for Camus it does not. As it is developed in *The Trial*, the concept of the absurd refers simply to the human subject's inability to attain an ultimate truth, while in *The Stranger* it refers to the absence of such a truth.

The views that emerge from Kafka's novel are closer to those developed in the work of Dostoevsky; they are the views of the Christian in crisis. Camus' understanding of the world, on the other hand, is patently atheist. As has been discussed above, Sartre, among others, had already identified the quasi-religious element as the central factor which differentiated Kafka's vision of the absurd from that of Camus. The argument I will now make is that the differences between Kafka and Camus, in their understanding of the absurd, become crucial when applied to an examination of their different views of the absurdity of suffering, and further, that the agnosticism of Kafka's particular world view places his vision of suffering at an in-between point in relation to those of Dostoevsky and Camus. In

Dostoevsky's novels (particularly his last novel) suffering is conceived of as containing a meaning which we refuse to understand; in Kafka it is shown to contain a meaning we cannot understand; while in Camus, it is construed as entirely devoid of meaning. K. thus occupies an intermediate position between characters such as Dostoevsky's Ivan and Camus' Meursault. Unlike Meursault, K. still believes in the existence of truth; but unlike Ivan, he does not have the option of either accepting or rejecting that truth. Ivan refuses to understand, but for K., who wants to understand, the truth has become unattainable. The situation of these characters mirrors the position of the human subject at different moments in the development of the secular world. The character of Ivan exists on the cusp of two worlds: the religious and the secular. He believes in a transcendent truth, and this truth is available to him, but he refuses it. In doing so he takes the first steps away from God. K. also believes in a transcendent truth, but as he exists in a world in which the human subject is irrevocably alienated from God, this truth is unattainable for him. Meursault does not believe in transcendent truth. He is firmly anchored in a world from which God has departed.

Meursault, the hero of Camus' novel *The Stranger*, is posed as essentially atheistic in his approach to life. While Kafka's protagonist is occupied in a vain attempt to discover meaning, Camus' character actively avoids interpreting the world in a way which would make it appear meaningful. Meursault, as Sartre has written, is "very much at peace with disorder" (1960:116). Camus himself acknowledges the differences between Kafka's vision of the absurd and his own. "Kafka's world", he writes, "is in truth an indescribable universe in which man allows himself the tormenting luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come of it" (1975:116-17). Camus has dealt with the human tendency to hope even in impossible situations in many of his essays and novels, including *The Myth of Sisyphus* - which explores the negative role hope plays for the individual who seeks meaningful resolutions in an absurd universe. The central story is the excruciatingly futile task of Sisyphus - condemned by the gods to the task of pushing a stone up a hill, knowing that each time he nears the top the stone will roll down to the bottom and he will have to begin his labours again. K.'s futile quest for meaning is just as ineffectual as Sisyphus' attempts to reach the top of the hill. However, what makes K.'s situation particularly loathsome, as far as Camus is concerned, is the fact that, finding himself in a hopeless situation, he continues to hope for an impossible outcome. Not only is such hope futile, it is also self-deceptive. According to Camus, it is "not [man's] business" to hope, but to "turn away from subterfuge" (1995:124). When faced with the impossibility of discovering meaning (whether this

impossibility is seen to stem, as Camus would have it, from the absence of meaning or, as Kafka seems to suggest, from humanity's alienation from the source of meaning), Camus would have the individual face the absurdity to which the facts condemn them, rather than deceiving themselves with unjustified hope. But subterfuge and deception are what he claims to find in Kafka's novel: "His unbelievable verdict is this hideous and upsetting world in which the very moles dare to hope" (1995:124). For the protagonist of his own novel, on the other hand, there is no such false hope. Meursault has stilled the desire for meaning within himself. According to English Showalter, Meursault is a "hero of the absurd" (1989:101), in that he seems to be quite at home with the absence of meaning Kafka's protagonist struggles against.

Meursault's commitment to the absurdity of human existence may be seen in the way in which he recounts the events of his life. As Thody argues, Meursault's narration "expresses the world of a man who has ceased to perceive life as meaningful" (1989:43). He describes the events which have impacted on him, but he does not make any attempt to analyse those events or his own part in them. His mother dies, he finds a lover, and he shoots an Arab. He relates these events through the narrative, but he does not question how or why they should have occurred. Even his crime seems to him arbitrary and accidental. According to Showalter, this is what makes Meursault different from other fictional murderers: "Meursault's originality as a character is precisely that he has no interest in telling a story that explains his crime, either to make it forgivable or to make it comprehensible" (1989:43).

Meursault's refusal to explain himself after the murder may be interpreted in a number of ways. It might be argued, for example, that his silence is a sign of arrogance - a refusal to account for his actions, as if killing a man were no more significant than stepping on an insect. However, the absence of any form of conceit in Meursault's character makes it difficult to support such an interpretation. He is genuinely concerned about the impression he makes on his lawyer, and wishes, almost naively, to have the lawyer like him. "I'd have liked to have kept him back and explained to him that I wanted to be friends with him", he says, "not so that he'd defend me better, but, so to speak, in a natural way. The main thing was, I could tell that I made him feel uncomfortable" (65). Showalter offers another explanation for Meursault's attitude: he sees his refusal to explain himself or his actions as a consequence of his laziness. During a conversation with his lawyer, Meursault notices that the man is having some trouble comprehending him. The lawyer is obviously uneasy about this, and Meursault

thinks it would be nice if he could help him to understand. In the end, however, he decides that “it was all really a bit pointless and I couldn’t be bothered” (66). Showalter claims to notice the same laziness in all of Meursault’s behaviour:

This laziness so pervades Meursault’s attitude that he assumes everything is equal if he has no feeling about it. One woman is as good a wife as another, one man makes as good a friend as another, one job is like another, to go back to the beach or not comes to the same thing, even to shoot or not to shoot (1989:72).

While Meursault does express ambivalence about some of the choices with which he is faced, Showalter makes too much of his laziness as a basis for his attitude. Meursault’s lack of enthusiasm in making decisions seems to have more to do with his conviction that there is no ground upon which to base those decisions. What is the difference between an individual at home with the absurd, and one who, through laziness, does not seek explanations? Is it possible to distinguish between them? Showalter argues, contrary to most interpretations of the novel, that Meursault is simply lazy, though his insistence on this point is rather curious, especially as it contradicts his own description of Meursault as a “hero of the absurd” - an appellation which implies a strength of conviction and bravery of action, rather than lazy indifference. Besides, evidence exists within the novel to counter this argument. If Meursault were really supposed to appear lazy, surely the author would have had him opt for the path of least effort and resistance when confronted by the magistrate during his interrogation. Within the novel, the magistrate attempts to impose his own version of events on Meursault, and it is shown to cause the accused some effort to remain faithful to his own statement about the shooting being an accident in the face of the dogged perseverance of the other. It would clearly have required less effort to simply go along with the magistrate. The fact that Meursault refuses, under pressure, to attribute any significance to his actions is a signal that he is a character with a strong conviction about the senselessness of those actions. Of course it may be argued that in refusing to co-operate with the magistrate Meursault is acting out of self-interest, rather than from a true belief in the absurdity of his crime. However, this objection cannot be substantiated. By Showalter’s own admission, Meursault also “obstructs the development of a defense interpretation of the crime” by denying “statements that construe his feelings and attitudes in exculpating ways” (1989:52). When Showalter argues that boredom and fatigue are responsible for Meursault’s lack of interest in

attributing a meaning to his crime, he has the causality reversed. If Meursault expresses boredom and fatigue, it is due to the effort of sustaining his conviction about the absurdity of his actions in the face of others, like the magistrate, who refuse to accept that conviction.

Meursault claims that his crime was senseless, in that the shots he fired served no purpose. Of course Showalter is correct in noting the ease with which we can “imagine motives for Meursault’s behaviour” (1989:42). Revenge seems to be the most likely, considering the fact that the victim had earlier wounded Meursault’s friend with a knife. However, Showalter is also correct when he argues that “[t]he point of this crime [...] is that it has no purpose and no excuse” (1989:42). As if to confirm this fact, Camus has his protagonist fire five shots. Even if we find sufficient explanation for the first, the remaining four shots are gratuitous. The fact that Meursault pauses between the first and the second shot adds to the confusion, because we cannot say that he fired off five shots in a state of panic. Were the final four shots a design of the author, intended to inhibit the court’s ability to make sense of Meursault’s behaviour? In any case, this is the effect they produce. “I vaguely understood”, says Meursault, “that as far as [the magistrate] was concerned there was only one part of my confession that didn’t make sense, the fact that I’d paused before firing my second shot” (68).

Meursault’s crime is an act of senseless violence (to borrow a term often used by the media in describing particularly brutal cases of assault and murder). He admits as much when he claims that it simply happened. For him, the crime was without sense or purpose. The court, however, refuse to accept such a proposition. As Showalter notes, it demands that “a meaningful version of the events [...] be produced” (1989:47). Victims and families require explanations, as does the public. A heinous crime is disturbing in itself; the idea that it was utterly without sense or purpose is more than we can bear. In *The Stranger*, argues Showalter, the “prosecutor appeals to the almost universal human preference for meaningful interpretation over the concept of accident and chance” (50). Like all deaths, the murder of the Arab is senseless, but as humans we demand that it be made to appear meaningful. The court’s role is to satisfy this desire by providing a logical interpretation of the crime. The court in this novel thus behaves very differently from the one in *The Trial*. In Kafka’s novel the proceedings are kept secret and the court obstructs, rather than aids, the reader and the protagonist in their attempts to come to some understanding of the crime. During Meursault’s trial, lawyers for the prosecution and the defense call

witnesses in an attempt to construct an interpretation that would make his crime seem comprehensible. However, they do not limit themselves to making sense of his crime. The defendant himself becomes the object of their hermeneutic endeavours, as they attempt to fit all of his actions and the events of his life into meaningful patterns. He becomes an enigma to be solved. Meursault resists this attempt. When the court offers an interpretation of the fact that he smoked a cigarette at his mother's funeral, he maintains that this fact is without significance. He insists that all of the events of his life are random and arbitrary. The court, however, insist just as vehemently on the meaning of those events. According to Sartre, the novel shows us

on the one hand, the amorphous, everyday flow of reality as it is experienced, and, on the other, the edifying reconstruction of this reality by speech and human reason. [...] Meursault buries his mother, takes a mistress, and commits a crime. These various facts will be related by witnesses at his trial, and they will be put in order and explained by the public prosecutor (1962[a]:115).

Within the novel it is left to the jury to decide how convincing the court's reconstruction of events is. Evidently they find it fairly convincing, because the protagonist is sentenced to death. Whether we, as readers, find it convincing is another matter. The reader of *The Stranger* is placed in a very different position to the reader of *The Trial*. In Kafka's novel we are presented with a mysterious set of events which beg for an explanation. We are then encouraged to identify with the protagonist in his attempts to comprehend those events. In Camus' novel, on the other hand, the reader is presented with a series of events, the senselessness of which is only too evident, and is forced to evaluate the attempts of secondary characters interpreting those events in terms of their own bourgeois morality.

Camus does not leave his reader's judgment regarding the court's reconstruction of events to chance; its attempts to make sense of the absurd are shown within the novel to be unconvincing. Sartre has recognised a number of clues which point to Camus' desire to make the reader aware of a disjunction between the senseless and arbitrary manner in which events *really* occurred, and the ordered account of events provided during the trial. First there is Marie's frustration at having somehow betrayed the facts by recounting them in a way that makes them appear logical and ordered. "Everything is so arranged",

according to Sartre, “as to bring on the sudden outburst of Marie, who, after giving in the witness box an account composed according to human rules, bursts into sobs and says ‘that that wasn’t it [...] that they were forcing her to say the opposite of what she really thought’ ” (1962[a]:115). The testimony of one witness, however, is not enough to give us a feeling of the absurdity of events. “In order to feel the divergence between the prosecutor’s conclusions and the actual circumstances of the murder”, writes Sartre,

we must first have been placed in contact with [...] one of these circumstances. But in order to establish this contact, Camus, like the prosecutor, has only words and concepts at his disposal. In assembling thoughts, he is forced to use words to describe a world that precedes words. [...] How is one to convey through concepts the unthinkable and disorderly succession of present instants? This problem involves resorting to a new technique” (1962[a]:115).

Sartre explains this technique using one of Camus’ own metaphors: A man is talking on a telephone behind a glass partition. We can see him gesturing, but without hearing what he is saying we cannot make sense of his gestures. They appear absurd. While the sheet of glass is transparent, and “seems to let everything through”, explains Sartre, it in fact filters out “the meaning of his gestures” (1962[a]:117). According to Sartre, the mind of Meursault is like a sheet of glass; he reports on events, but he filters out any order or significance which might have been attributed to those events. Seeing events through his eyes is like watching the actions of the man inside the telephone box. It means perceiving facts without “being able to grasp their meaning” (Sartre, 1962:118). The events we are called upon to witness thus strike us as absurd, and the court’s efforts to make those events seem comprehensible appear to us as what they are - attempts to impose order over the absurd.

### **Meursault: A Martyr for the Absurd**

Critics have remarked that Meursault is condemned to death not for the murder he committed, but because he refused to cry at his mother’s funeral. Camus himself has encouraged such a reading with his own comment on the novel: “In our society any man who doesn’t cry at his mother’s funeral is liable to be condemned to death” (1982:118). In an afterword written thirteen years after the novel’s



original publication, Camus explained this remark: "I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game" (1982:18). Not playing the game means not following the rules which require individuals to think and behave in socially acceptable ways. In behaving and thinking in the required manner when faced with a certain event, an individual seems implicitly to accept the meaning society confers upon that event. By not reacting to events in the required fashion, Meursault robs those events of the meanings they attain within the moral order of society. For example, by reacting with indifference when his boss offers him a promotion, Meursault upsets the scale of values by which one job is understood as superior to another, and in which a promotion attains its meaning as a positive event. The more inexplicable an event, the more important it is for individuals to follow the procedures which create the illusion of meaning. In the society in which the novel is set, meaning is conferred upon a mother's death by the tears shed by her relatives and friends. By participating in the required response there is an implicit agreement that the death means something, and further, that it means the same for all of us. It is thus, according to Showalter, more because he refuses to cry at his mother's funeral and less because he commits a murder that the prosecutor calls Meursault "an abyss threatening to swallow up society" (1989:50). Meursault refuses to confer proper meaning upon events, and least of all when those events seem most in need of explaining. While in prison he wonders why Marie has not written to him for several days, and he thinks casually "that she might have been ill or dead" (110). But rather than becoming distressed at the thought of her death, he thinks of it as belonging to "the natural order of things" (110). Meursault does not contemplate the meaning of life and death; according to him these things are inevitable and natural, and it makes no sense to construe them as having a meaning or a purpose. The threat Camus' hero poses to society, as Showalter argues, may therefore be summed up "in exactly the terms used by the magistrate: 'Do you want my life to be meaningless?'" (Camus, cited in Showalter, 1989:54).

Showalter argues that Meursault is sacrificed so that structures of socially appropriate meaning can be preserved (1989:55). Even more significant, I would argue, is the fact that he robs suffering and death of their meaning. As has been discussed, death and suffering belong to those painful extremes of human experience which seem to cry out for explanation. Building on the interpretation offered by Showalter (above) it could be argued that Meursault is condemned because he insists on the meaninglessness of these experiences; for him death and suffering are senseless phenomena. Meursault thus becomes a martyr for the absurd. In a much quoted remark on the novel, Camus claimed that

Meursault was “the only Christ that we deserved” (119). According to Christian doctrine, Christ died for the salvation of humanity. His death was thus seen as having a meaning in terms of the divine plan; as the magistrate reminds Meursault, while waving a crucifix in his face: “He suffered for your sake” (68). In Christian discourse, Christ is held up as the saviour of humanity, providing the chance of eternal life. I would argue, however, that in this particular instance, the magistrate is holding up the figure of the crucified Christ not only as a saviour, but as an example for his followers. His suffering is shown to have a meaning and a purpose; through his particular suffering, all human suffering is made meaningful. In this sense, Meursault is the antithesis of the crucified Christ. In fact, the magistrate refers to him several times as “Mr. AntiChrist” (70). His insistence on the senselessness of all death and suffering, including his own imminent death, is in direct conflict with Christian doctrine, which gives suffering a purpose. Meursault does not acknowledge the meaning his society confers on its god’s suffering or, for that matter, on any suffering. When the magistrate confronts Meursault with the crucifix, the Christian symbol of meaningful suffering, he is indifferent. “I have never seen a soul as hardened as yours”, says the magistrate. “The criminals who have come to me before have always wept at the sight of this symbol of suffering” (69).

Meursault refuses the consoling certainties Christianity offers about death. His own imminent death seems as meaningless to him as all of the other deaths he comes across. When the prison chaplain asks Meursault how he will face up to his death without the comforts of faith, Meursault responds: “I’d face up to it exactly as I was facing up to it now” (112). Meursault does not search for a meaning in his death any more than he had sought a meaning in his trial or the verdict handed down to him by the court. “I told him I didn’t know what a sin was”, he says, “I’d simply been told that I was guilty” (113). His trial and death are like all of the other events of his life - they occur without order or purpose. But if this fact causes him any anguish, he does not show it. Before his death, he looks back affectionately on the “absurd life” he had been leading (115). Sitting in his prison cell he contemplates the senselessness of existence, and takes pleasure in the feeling of being at one with it:

Sounds of the countryside were wafting in. The night air was cooling my temples with the smell of earth and salt. The wondrous peace of this sleeping summer flooded into me. [...] I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world. And finding it so much like

myself, in fact so fraternal, I realized that I'd been happy, and that I was still happy (116-117).

Meursault is a character very much at home with the senselessness of the universe. He accepts the fact that his life and his death are without meaning. Both joy and suffering are inexplicable to him. In his untroubled acceptance of senselessness, Meursault may appear as a creature of fantasy or science fiction; a character who belongs to the future in the same way as Nietzsche's *ubermensch*. Camus may have approved to some extent of his character's attitude, but he appeared also to understand that it was an attitude few, if any, of his contemporaries possessed. Meursault is a stranger; an outsider figure whose acceptance of the lack of meaning in the world puts him inevitably at odds with the more ordinary mortals who surround him. None of Camus' other characters are as comfortable with the senselessness of human existence as Meursault appeared to be. Perhaps Meursault would have been more at home in one of Kundera's novels, where the demand for meaning has all but disappeared, and exists only as a parody of the hopes of an earlier time. While the meaninglessness of existence is largely taken for granted by many of Kundera's characters (in the sense that they are at least resigned to it, if not accepting of it), most of Camus' characters are still engaged in open rebellion against it. In fact, the idea of rebellion became increasingly important for Camus in his later work, particularly in his essay, *The Rebel*, and his novel, *The Plague*. In these works, there is a sense in which rebellion is recommended as the proper attitude to take towards the recognition of the absurd. The following two chapters will examine in more detail his idea of rebellion and the role it played in further shaping his views about the absurdity of human suffering.

## Chapter 5:

# Suffering and Rebellion

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The previous chapter began by stating the importance of the concept of the absurd for Camus' understanding of suffering. It went on to differentiate the notions of absurdity found in the work of a number of his forebears and contemporaries from his own atheistic understanding of the absurd, an understanding informed by his own intimate appreciation of the situation of the individual in a world from which God had departed. There is, however, another important component to Camus' understanding of the absurd which has not been discussed until now. The absurd, as Camus understood it, was not a quality of an objective reality, but an experience human beings underwent in confrontation with a senseless phenomenon which frustrated their efforts to make sense of it (1975:26). It was, above all, a felt experience. The individual's experience, when faced with the senselessness of suffering in a secular universe, depends on the attitude they take towards their situation. One may accept the senselessness of the world, like Meursault, or rebel against it. According to Camus, it is by taking the second path, the path of rebellion, that the human subject truly *experiences* the absurd. An examination of the concept of the absurd in Camus' work, and its influence on his depictions of suffering, thus also requires an analysis of his ideas on rebellion. The proceeding chapter will begin this examination through an analysis of Camus essay *The Rebel*, a work which considers the various ways in which human beings deal with the absence of meaning in a secular universe, and the various forms their rebellion against this state of affairs might take.

## **Metaphysical Rebellion**

At the origins of all modern forms of rebellion, argues Camus, there lies a protest against the human condition which is metaphysical in nature. Metaphysical rebellion, according to Camus, is a rebellion not against any specific wrong inflicted by one individual on another, but a general frustration with the universe (1971:29). While a slave might rebel against "the condition of his state of slavery", the metaphysical rebel "protests against the human condition in general" (1971:29). At the core of this

metaphysical rebellion is a revolt against the senselessness of suffering: “In the eyes of the rebel, what is missing from the misery of the world, as well as from its moments of happiness, is some principle by which they can be explained” (Camus, 1971:73). Dostoevsky’s character Ivan Karamazov was a metaphysical rebel; he rebelled against the gratuitous and arbitrary nature of suffering. However, this character was also shown to be aware of the fact that an understanding of suffering often comes at a high price. Ivan resisted the temptation to understand because he realised that accepting the explanations Christianity provides would mean giving his consent to a scheme of things which requires the acceptance of innocent suffering as necessary and meaningful. Camus seeks to demonstrate that any rebellion is doomed as soon as it seeks an understanding of suffering in a metaphysical sense. All of the forms of metaphysical rebellion he discusses in his essay have this in common: they attempt to provide an explanation of the human condition in general, and suffering in particular. These secular doctrines, argues Camus, are the equivalent of the Christian theodicy, in that the explanations they provide end by implicitly or explicitly providing a justification for the existence of innocent suffering. Where Leibniz argued that suffering was a necessary part of the divine plan, the modern secular doctrines Camus discusses see suffering as necessary for the realisation of earthly ends, such as freedom or a better society.

Camus’ aim in writing *The Rebel* was to discover how modern political forms of rebellion such as Communism, which he says began as a protest against the injustice of the human condition, betrayed their origins and ended by justifying the suffering and degradation of humankind. In an attempt to demonstrate where the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had gone wrong, he turned to an analysis of Hegelian Marxism, on which he claimed they were founded. He discovered in this doctrine a theory of history that attempted to provide a philosophical justification of suffering, a justification which provided a pretext for all of the horrors carried out in the name of the revolution. As Philip Thody notes, “the constant justification of ignoble means by a noble end, and the systematic use of murder as a political weapon, all came, for Camus, from the influence of Hegel on Russian and European thought” (1957:54). Like Christianity before it, Hegelian Marxism claimed to account for, or provide a reason for, the existence of human suffering. Whereas Christianity had provided a justification along theological lines, Hegel and Marx had provided a similar justification along (correspondingly) pantheistic and then secular lines.

Hegel argues that history is the expression and realisation of a world spirit or *geist*, and that, driven by this spirit (which is sometimes referred to as the spirit of history, or the cunning of reason in history) humanity moves forward in a continuous dialectical progression, advancing, through alternating stages, towards greater perfection. But how does such a philosophy deal with the problem of suffering? Hegel's achievement, according to Camus, was to reconcile the existence of suffering with the divine will as expressed in history; to invent, in other words, "a pantheism in which evil, error, and suffering could no longer serve as arguments against the divinity" (1971:70). Hegel set out to prove, using reason, that even the most terrible events in history - the bloodiest wars, the cruellest repressions - contributed to the advancement of history. According to Hegel, history was to be regarded as a "slaughterbench" at which "the essential destiny - the absolute aim, or [...] the true result of history" was worked out (1956:21). Going one step further than Christianity, which claims that the divine will can be discerned even in suffering, Hegel argues that it is *only* in periods of suffering that this will is realised. History, claims Hegel, advances only through suffering. "The history of the World is not the theatre of happiness", he writes. "Periods of happiness are blank pages in it, for they are periods of harmony" (1956:26-27). As Frederick Weiss has observed:

Hegel is essentially a pessimist about the motive force of history. Passion, greed, ambition dominate its course. Viewed objectively, it is a pageant of horrors that makes us suffer "mental torture" unless we can discern beneath its surface confusion a pattern of rational necessity. The ancient pagans called it Fate; Jewish and Christian historians called it Divine Providence; Hegel uses both those terms, but speaks of it also as the cunning of reason in history (1977:255).

Hegel explained human suffering as a necessary and meaningful part of the universe. His philosophy thus provided a means for comprehending what might otherwise have appeared to be a gratuitous and pointless existence. It performed for a scientific age the same task that the Christian theodicy performed in a mystical one. The ability to look into the horrors of the world and to recognise the workings of God arguably saved Christians from despair. Hegel's rational philosophy extended the same opportunity to the enlightened individuals of his own time. "To recognise reason as the rose in the cross of the present", he writes, "this is the rational insight which reconciles us to the actual, the reconciliation which philosophy affords to those in whom there has once arisen an inner voice bidding

them to comprehend” (1952:12). Whereas Christianity had explained suffering in terms of punishment and redemption, Hegelian philosophy provided an explanation of suffering more in keeping with the theoretical predispositions of the rational world in which he lived. This is not to say, however, that Hegel was an atheist. He still believed in the divine will; he merely integrated the ideas of reason and progress into the theistic equation. Camus claims that it was not until Marx that the idea of the progress of history attained an entirely secular meaning.

In Marx’s dialectical materialism, the movement of history is finally divorced from the will of God. According to Marx, the path of history leads to the realisation of the classless society - a secular utopia. History is seen here to be driven not by a divine power, but by the proletariat. Nevertheless, according to Camus, this doctrine is just another form of historical messianism. The Christian and Marxist utopias, he claims, differ only in content; the role they play in terms of the justification of suffering is the same. According to Camus, the Marxist doctrine offered “the worker a historic justification of his lot of much the same value as a promise of celestial joy to someone who works himself to death” (1971:183). In Christianity, paradise is paid for by suffering on earth. In Marxism, the suffering of the present is seen as a necessary sacrifice for the attainment of the future utopian society. Belief in the city of the future is crucial for any doctrine that seeks to encourage an acceptance of suffering. Whether this future is prophesied for ten years time or for one hundred years time seems almost inconsequential. If the sufferer does not reach the future, they may at least gain some comfort from the idea that their children or grandchildren will. “If it is certain that the kingdom will come”, explains Camus, “what does time matter?” (1971:175). The perceived inevitability of a future society in which suffering will have ceased to exist is enough to convince the sufferer to submit to miserable conditions in the present. While “suffering is never provisional for the man who does not believe in the future”, says Camus, “one hundred years of suffering are fleeting in the eyes of the man who prophesies, for the hundred and first year, the Eternal City [...]. In this new Jerusalem [...], who will remember the cry of the victims” (1971:175). Both Christianity and Marxism imply consent to the suffering of individuals in the present, since it is on this foundation that the future happiness of humankind is built. “What in fact does the sacrifice of individual men matter as long as it contributes to the salvation of all mankind!” writes Camus (1971:172).

One of Camus' primary criticisms of the philosophies of both Hegel and Marx is that the individual is seen as a means to an end. When it comes to sacrificing the individual to the goals of history, he argues, Marx displays "the same airy indifference as Hegel" (1971:172). In *Reason and Revolution*, Herbert Marcuse explains that, for Hegel, human beings are merely the means by which history achieved its purpose: "Individuals lead unhappy lives, they toil and perish but [according to Hegel] their distress and defeat are the very means by which truth and freedom proceed" (1941:233). According to Camus, the views of Marx are very similar; while Marx saw history moving towards a future society which would guarantee the freedom and happiness of humanity in general, he was willing to consent to the sacrifice of individual human beings in the name of that "historic mission" (1971:172). However, as Camus points out, one crucial difference between the two philosophers is that for Hegel, history was being driven ultimately by the divine will, whereas for Marx it was being driven by human beings in social classes.

Hegel believed that human beings could comprehend the world as it actually existed, but that they could not control or predict the direction in which it was headed. In the philosophy of Hegel, the individual was merely the unwitting vehicle of the divine will - manipulated by the cunning of reason in history. Even great individuals, according to Hegel, were incapable of exerting a deliberate influence.<sup>25</sup> In Hegel's philosophy, argues Marcuse, "it is as if mind uses individuals for its unwitting tools [...] individuals are merely the agents of history" (1941:230-1). In the philosophy of Marx, on the other hand, humans are no longer considered to be the unsuspecting tools of history. For Camus, the consequences of this development are significant. Hegel's pantheism is finally emptied of the notion of the divine will, and humans replace God as the instigators of the suffering necessary for the progress of history (1971:130).

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<sup>25</sup> In Hegel's philosophy there are some individuals who exert more of an influence on the course of history than others. Individuals such as Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon. However, as Marcuse explains, "even these men of history" are seen merely as "the executors of its will" (1941:232).



## Humanism and Terror <sup>26</sup>

In Christian doctrine, and to some extent in Hegel's philosophy, the suffering of humankind was imputed to God, whose plan was said to necessitate that suffering. But since, in Marxist theory, social classes of humans were now seen to be driving historical change, it followed that the suffering of the world must be imputed to them. In this secular climate, Marxist theory fulfilled almost the same function as the old Christian theodicies, vindicating those mortals whose purpose happened to require the suffering of humanity. Many Revolutionary Marxists claimed that progress was possible only through violent revolution. And for some, since the ends towards which they were moving were considered by them to be just, any means that helped them to arrive at these ends were also considered just. In *Humanism and Terror* (1947), Maurice Merleau-Ponty sets out to provide a justification of violence as a means necessary for the pursuit of humanist goals. In particular, he sought to provide an account of the Moscow Trials of the late 1930s, in which the sacrifice of the accused could be justified in terms of the creation of a future utopia. According to Merleau-Ponty, the violence perpetrated against the opponents of the revolution (and even against its most committed advocates) could be justified in terms of the revolutionary agenda, which aimed ultimately to create a future society without violence (1969:109). This is exactly the type of logic Camus takes issue with in *The Rebel*, and in many of his other works. That the classless society would be established in the future was a certainty for the defenders of revolution, claims Camus. So what did "it matter that this should be accomplished by dictatorship and violence?" (1971:175).

Camus even argues that, in order to help history arrive at its goal, certain groups of individuals sought to increase the suffering of the proletariat for the purpose of bringing on the revolution. Camus cites the example of the nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary Sergei Nechayev, who was said to declare that

governments must be driven to take repressive measures, that the official representatives most hated by the population must never be touched and that finally the

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<sup>26</sup> The title of this section is taken from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1947 book of the same name. This work, and Camus' response to it, will be discussed below.

secret society must employ all its resources to increase the suffering and misery of the masses (1971:131).

In this instance it is no longer an absent God who is seen to be instigating the suffering of humanity, but man himself. According to Camus, Nechayev's thought marked a new period in history. Whereas Christian doctrine had justified the violence done to man by God, and Hegelian philosophy the violence done to man by history, Nechayev's "originality" lay in the fact that he justified "the violence done [by man] to [his] brothers" (1971:130). According to Nechayev, not only does man have a right to employ any method in order to further the advance of history; since he is responsible for history he has a duty to employ every method to ensure that progress continues. Camus notes that, when questioned by one of his comrades about their right to take another man's life, Nechayev responded: "It is not a question of right, but of our duty to eliminate everything that may harm our cause" (1971:142). In this policy Camus finds the seeds he claims will "give birth to the totalitarian revolution of the twentieth century" (1971:142). In the Communist revolution, every method of achieving the ultimate goal is authorised. According to Lenin, "one must be prepared for every sacrifice, to use if necessary every stratagem, ruse, illegal method, to be determined to conceal the truth, for the sole purpose of [...] accomplishing, despite everything, the communist task" (Lenin, cited in Camus, 1971:193).

It is the justification of all methods, including murder, in order to serve a political end that Camus most detested in the Communist doctrine. In particular, he objected to the killing of innocent people regardless of whether or not the cause for which they were sacrificed was seen to be just. Commenting on the terrorist methods of the rebels seeking to liberate his native Algeria, Camus declared that "[w]hatever the cause being defended, it [would] always be dishonoured by the blind slaughter of an innocent crowd" (1961:84). And again, in a lecture given in Algeria in February 1956, in which he appealed for a civilian truce in the troubled province, he claimed that "no cause justifies the death of the innocent" (1961:97). In *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty argues otherwise. He suggests that individuals are often faced with the choice of either submitting to a violent regime, and of hence perpetuating the violence it inflicts, or using violence to free themselves from it. In such situations, he claims, "to abstain from violence toward the violent is to become their accomplice" (1969:109).

According to Merleau-Ponty, human beings “do not have a choice between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence” (1969:109). Some violence, he argues, maintains the injustice of the status quo, and some is “progressive” (1969:1), in that it aims to change society for the better. The violence employed in the name of the revolution was, according to Merleau-Ponty, of the progressive variety, and could therefore be justified. Camus shared the dream of a society in which violence and suffering were a thing of the past, but he refused to justify murder and innocent suffering in the interests of attaining it. This put him in a difficult situation. How could an oppressive regime be overthrown without the use of violence? Camus attempted to overcome the dilemma by drawing a distinction between the claim that violence was necessary, and the claim that it was just. He argued that murder, while unavoidable in certain situations, should not be justified. This distinction is developed further in his play *The Just Assassins*, which was based on the life and death of the rebel Ivan Kaliayev. Camus believed there was an important distinction between revolutionaries like Nechayev, and rebels like Kaliayev. Both used violence to attain their ends, but the former insisted on justifying his actions, while the latter refused to do so. When describing the actions of Kaliayev and his friends, Camus writes that it

is possible to believe that they too, while recognising the inevitability of violence, nevertheless admitted to themselves that it is unjustifiable. Necessary and inexcusable, that is how murder appeared to them (1971:138).

The distinction is a slippery one, and has been lost on a number of Camus’ critics. Claude Mauriac claimed in his review of *The Rebel* that “the final conclusion of the book was to justify murder” (Mauriac, cited in Thody, 1957:65). Admitting the inevitability of violence, however, does not amount to proclaiming that it is just. I believe that what Camus was arguing was that it was not simply the use of violence, (something over which he felt he had little control anyway), that posed the greatest threat to morality, but the justification of that violence. The rebels of 1905 refused to justify themselves. They murdered only once, and then faced the consequences of their actions at the hands of the law. In doing so they preserved the moral value that to kill is wrong: “From their earliest days they were incapable of justifying what they nevertheless found necessary and conceived the idea of offering themselves as a justification and of replying by personal sacrifice to the question they asked

themselves” (Camus, 1971:138). Kaliayev is a less objectionable character than Nechayev because, as Germaine Brée notes, Kaliayev “sees his act for what it is, an unlawful action, imposed by exceptional circumstances” (1972:222).

In Sartre’s fiction, on the other hand, especially those works belonging to the period of his communist affiliation, violence is justified. Germaine Brée compares *The Just Assassins* to Sartre’s play, *The Devil and the Good Lord*, in order to illustrate the difference in thinking between the two authors. In *The Devil and the Good Lord*, she argues, Sartre sets out to prove that violence is justified in the pursuit of the classless society:

The play demonstrates that what counts is the future of the masses fighting to wrest their freedom from their oppressors. In the light of that future, [the hero’s] acts - even the most violent - acquire their significance and his existence its justification. They make sense (1972:229).

In *The Just Assassins*, on the other hand, the leader of the rebels denies the notion that violence can be justified. “[Y]ou must not say that anything is justifiable”, he says to one of his comrades, “thousands of us have died to prove that everything is *not* justifiable” (186). In Camus’ plays and novels, murder is only ever justified by those who function as the mouthpieces of the law (in the case of state sanctioned murder) or by revolutionary villains. In *The Just Assassins*, the character Stepan argues that the duke must be assassinated at any cost, even if it also means killing the two children travelling with him in his carriage. “Nothing that can serve our cause should be ruled out”, he tells his comrades (186). In Camus’ play *The Possessed* (a stage adaptation of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Devils*) the revolutionary Peter Verkovensky (a character based on Sergei Nechayev)<sup>27</sup> circulates a tract in which he declares that the “universal society will be improved only by lopping off a hundred million heads” (329). Characters such as Stepan and Peter argue not only the necessity of suffering, but its justice. To argue the necessity of suffering is to make a pragmatic point; it is to recognise, for example, that in order to overthrow a violent regime, one will most likely need to perpetrate violence against that regime. To

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<sup>27</sup> In his forward to the 1994 Vintage edition, Richard Pevear notes that Dostoevsky’s novel was inspired by the real-life murder in December 1869 of the acquaintance of a relative of his by Sergei Nechayev (1994:vii).

justify that violence is to present a moral argument about such a necessity. This is how rebellion betrays itself. According to Camus, rebellion is founded on the conviction that suffering is unjust. However, he argues that it usually ends by making implicit or explicit claims regarding the justice of suffering. This contradiction is at the heart of what he sees as the failure of communism, which begins with a recognition of the injustice of a class system that causes so much suffering, but finishes by perpetuating and justifying that suffering in the interests of its own ends.

Arthur Koestler, a member of Camus' circle of friends, also questioned the meaning Communism attributed to human suffering; like Camus, he denied that the suffering of the innocent could ever really be justified. In Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon*, an old Bolshevik named Rubashov awaits execution in his cell. Condemned to death by the new regime as a counter-revolutionary and traitor, he spends his last hours wondering whether the end to which he had worked during his forty years as a loyal party member had really justified the price that had been exacted in human suffering. He begins to doubt that there had been any sense at all in the long line of murders he had witnessed in his career, and admits to himself that his own impending death would be as senseless as those of countless others. As he walks back and forth across his cell, he realises that he still does not possess a satisfactory explanation for the existence of suffering. As he was pacing, says the narrator,

he was puzzling over certain questions to which he would have liked to find an answer before it was too late. They were rather naive questions; they concerned the meaning of suffering, or, more exactly, the difference between suffering which made sense and senseless suffering. [...] As a boy, he had believed that in working for the Party he would find an answer to all questions of this sort. The work had lasted forty years, and right at the start he had forgotten the question for whose sake he had embarked on it. Now the forty years were over, and he returned to the boy's original perplexity (202).

Rubashov is another metaphysical rebel - outraged at the senselessness of human suffering and driven by a need to understand it. At first he believes Communist Doctrine can satisfy that need. Rather than true understanding, however, he finds in it an attempt to justify the existence of suffering in terms of the progress of history: "History is unerring in its path. At every bend in her course she leaves the mud which she carries and the corpses of the drowned. History knows her way. She makes no mistakes"

(41). Rubashov consents to much violence and suffering in his adherence to this doctrine, but at the end of his life, he realises his error. He understands he has betrayed himself by consenting to the senseless suffering he had originally set out to rebel against.<sup>28</sup>

For Camus also, suffering would always remain an absurd fact of human existence. Christianity had failed to supply it with a lasting meaning, while the meaning attributed to it by the secular doctrine of Communism broke down under the weight of its own contradictions. Nevertheless, Camus recognised that the human demand for meaning could not be overcome easily, and that human beings would always rebel against the gratuitous and arbitrary spectacle of human suffering. Given this fact, the challenge as he saw it was to maintain a sense of outrage against the injustice of innocent suffering, while refusing to succumb to the temptation to find meaning in it. Because Camus recognised the dangers inherent in any attempt to make sense of suffering, he insisted that the demand for meaning implicit in any act of metaphysical rebellion must always remain unfulfilled. We may cry out for answers to an empty universe, but we must recognise that our demand is futile. In this way we avoid the dangers Camus believed Communism had fallen prey to. “Today I cannot see what my revolt loses by being pointless”, he wrote in his *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, “and I am well aware of what it gains” (1967:76).

In taking refuge in doctrines such as Christianity or Communism the human subject betrayed the sense of absurdity that, according to Camus, was at the origin of all rebellion. Doctrines like these made sense of the world, and it was thus important to avoid them if one were to remain true to the absurd and to suffering humanity. According to Camus, historical circumstances were conspiring to make these doctrines harder to maintain. The loss of faith that had for some time cast its shadow over Christian doctrine was extending now also to its secular counterparts. *The Rebel* had taken part in this questioning of secular faith, and its verdict was similar to the one Dostoevsky’s Ivan delivered against

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<sup>28</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s *Humanism and Terror* was written as an explicit attack on the arguments put forth by Koestler in both *Darkness at Noon* and his essay “The Yogi and the Commissar”. As has been discussed here, Merleau-Ponty argues that violence can be justified where the ultimate aim is the alleviation of human suffering. Camus did not agree. So offended was he by Merleau-Ponty’s attack on Koestler that he fell out with Merleau-Ponty and other members of the Sartre group over it. Herbert Lotmann describes the incident in his biography of Camus: “Soon after that the Boris Vians threw a party, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty was one of the guests. Camus arrived at eleven [...]. He attacked Merleau-Ponty for an article he had written against Koestler [...]. Camus accused Merleau-Ponty of trying to justify the Moscow purge trials, and Sartre defended Merleau-Ponty. ‘Camus, visibly shaken, slammed the door’. Sartre and Bost ran after him in the street, but he refused to return” (Lottman, 1997:427).

Christianity - that it had failed to deal ethically with the problem of innocent suffering. Camus came increasingly in his work to recognise that when it comes to innocent suffering, human attempts at understanding simply fail. His novel *The Plague* was an examination of this failure; this novel is the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter 6:

# The Hermeneutics of Suffering

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The previous chapter examined the concept of rebellion and, in particular, Camus' claim that rebellion against the absurdity of innocent suffering can often lead to religious and secular doctrines which justify that suffering. I argued that these doctrines thus perform the same function in a secular age as the Christian theodicy in a mystical one. Camus ultimately rejects these secular doctrines, just as Ivan Karamazov had rejected the Christian theodicy, because they betray the sufferer and the absurd. According to Camus, all the individual can do when faced with the absurdity of innocent suffering is to seek to alleviate that suffering, not explain it. The tension between the desire to know and the unknowability of the world, he argued, would remain. "Even by his greatest effort, man can only propose to diminish, arithmetically, the sufferings of the world", he writes in *The Rebel*. "But the injustice and suffering of the world will remain and, no matter how limited they are, they will not cease to be an outrage. Dmitri Karamazov's cry of 'Why?' will continue to resound through history" (1971:267). Not all protests against the absurdity of the human condition, however, end in betrayal. In *The Plague* Camus continues his analysis of rebellion. In this novel he considers a variety of responses to the absurd situation in an effort to discover a form of rebellion and a type of understanding that does not betray the absurd, but can co-exist with it.

## **The Hermeneutic Endeavour**

In *The Plague*, the reader is presented with "a despairing vision of an absurd cosmos in which human suffering is capricious and unintelligible" (Kellman, 1997:2). The epidemic that afflicts the small Algerian town in which the novel is set is presented as a random event which, by its very nature, denies understanding. Nevertheless, confronted with this spectacle of gratuitous suffering, the first response of the townspeople is to seek an explanation for their misfortune. As Raymond Stephanson has argued in his comparative study of the plague narratives of Defoe and Camus, "it is natural for humans to ask: what does the plague mean?" (1987:225). The aim of *The Plague* is to appraise and analyze its



characters' attempts to understand suffering; it may thus be read as an examination of the hermeneutics of suffering. Colin Davis offers a precedent for such a reading in his 1994 article "Interpreting *La Peste*", in which he refers a number of times to the hermeneutic endeavours of the characters. This hermeneutic activity, he argues, begins with the appearance of hordes of dead rats about the town and intensifies as the plague claims more victims. Within existentialism, hermeneutics is understood as that branch of thought which "enquires into the purpose of human existence" (Flew, 1979:146). When we speak about the hermeneutics of suffering, therefore, we are referring to our enquiries into the purpose of human suffering. In *The Plague*, the pestilence that descends on the town of Oran is an event which both instigates and frustrates hermeneutic activity. In its apparent refusal to yield to human investigation, the plague seems to confirm the impossibility of its explication, but at the same time its very opacity encourages attempts to make sense of it. Each character in Camus' novel makes an effort to understand suffering in a different way; some turn to Christianity, while others turn to science. *The Plague* examines the ways in which these discourses attempt to make sense of suffering. Ultimately however, the hermeneutic endeavours of the characters are proven to be futile. As Katherine Ramsland writes in her 1999 article "Visions of the Absurd", Camus' work demonstrates that "no matter how intensely we yearn for justice, purpose and reason, we exist in an indifferent universe that will never deliver" (1999:18).

According to Raymond Stephanson, plagues, like other natural disasters, have the quality of appearing "horribly mysterious" (1987:224). More than those man-made disasters such as war and political oppression, the causes of which are at least partially understood, plagues seem to have inspired a vast amount of activity dedicated to their interpretation. In literature, many works have been devoted to the attempt to make some sense of the suffering they cause. In such literature, argues Stephanson,

the interpretive bent is usually religious: plague is the punishment of a sinful people by an angry god. Such is the meaning of plague in Book 1 of *The Iliad* and in the opening scenes of Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Boccaccio situates the privileged storytellers of his *Decameron* near a plague-stricken Florence that suffers 'because of God's just wrath as a punishment to mortals for our wicked deeds.' The plague in *A Journal of the Plague Year* is

meant to be similarly didactic; few readers have disagreed with Louis Landa's view that plague symbolizes 'man under the wrath of God' (1987:225).

In contrast to these narratives, Stephanson posits what he sees as the less didactic fiction of Camus. "Camus's *Plague*", he argues, "is more indirect about what plague 'means', preferring ambiguity and multiple possibility to the narrow symbolism of a single doctrine" (1987:225). Part of the ambiguity of meaning in the novel arises from what Richard Shryock has identified as its polyphonic form. His reading draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of a polyphonic novel as one in which a singular authorial voice is replaced by "a series of disparate, contradictory philosophical stances, each defended by one or another character" (1984:5). In his 1990 article "Discourse and Polyphony in *La Peste*", Shryock notes that *The Plague* does not contain one single perspective from which the events in the novel may be understood, but is rather comprised of a number of "discourses" or "voices" which comment on and theorise about the epidemic (1990:59). These discourses are collected by the novel's narrator (one of the inhabitants of the town whose identity is temporarily concealed) as part of his chronicle of the plague. Whereas a more traditional narrative might provide its own interpretation of proceedings, Camus' narrator simply records and comments on the attempts of various characters within the novel to make sense of the events in which they are involved.

A number of critics have pointed to the fact that each character in *The Plague* provides a different interpretation of the events which occur in Oran. These interpretations begin with the first signs of the plague - the discovery about the town of hordes of dead rats. Colin Davis refers to "the hermeneutic activity set in motion by the appearance of the rats" (1994:3); there are many questions about the rats early in the novel and numerous attempts are made by various characters to explain their presence:

For the concierge [the appearance of the rats] constitutes a "scandale" (p.1223) and can only be explained as a practical joke: "Bref, il s'agissait d'une farce" (p.1223).<sup>29</sup> According to the old asthmatic, the appearance of the rats is due to hunger: "c'est la faim!" (p.1224)<sup>30</sup> [...] when asked by his wife: "Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette histoire de

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<sup>29</sup> In short, it was a practical joke.

<sup>30</sup> It's hunger.

rats?” (p.1225)<sup>31</sup>, [Rieux] replies: “Je ne sais pas. C’est bizarre, mais cela passera (p.1225)<sup>32</sup> (1994:3).

The strange episode with the rats does, in fact, eventually pass, but the epidemic continues, and as it does so it gives rise to further hermeneutic activity. Following the outbreak of the disease among the human population, a meeting of doctors is called in the hope that some understanding of the as yet unnamed epidemic would emerge. Rieux attempts to define the disease by an analysis of its symptoms. “We are dealing” he reports, “with a fever of a typhoidal nature, accompanied by vomiting and buboes” (44). He appeals also to the evidence of laboratory tests which suggest that the epidemic with which they are dealing may be plague, but admits finally that the results are inconclusive: “our laboratory analyst believes he has identified the plague bacillus”, he says. “But I am bound to add that there are specific modifications which don’t quite tally with the classical description of the plague” (44). In the end, no definitive conclusions are reached at this meeting concerning the exact nature of the outbreak. The agreement to treat the epidemic as plague comes as a matter of convenience and not as the result of any discovery of what it is in truth. Science fails to impose a precise meaning on what, for many, appears as a random outbreak of death and suffering. As the narrator later admits, while they were doing their best to deal with the epidemic, the doctors “were groping, more or less, in the dark” (104). At this stage there seems to be as much uncertainty among the medical community about the disease as there is among the lay population.

Of course the attempt to make sense of the epidemic is not limited to the medical community; various characters also attempt, in different ways, to gain some sort of understanding. Camus’ plague victims react in the same way as most individuals confronted with events that seem cruel and incomprehensible - they strive to wrest from their situation some kind of understanding. This even gives rise to a new newspaper, which claims to provide information about the plague. According to the narrator, *The Plague Chronicle* sets out to “inform our townspeople, with scrupulous veracity, of the daily progress [...] of the disease” and to “supply them with the most authoritative opinions available” (100). The newspaper is quickly discredited, however, when it begins to fill its columns with “advertisements

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<sup>31</sup> What’s this story about rats?

<sup>32</sup> I don’t know. It’s strange, but it will pass.

of new 'infallible' antidotes against the plague" (100). Stephanson points out that in an event such as plague, when humans are confronted by the unknown, there will inevitably be found "charlatans" who seek to profit by selling answers to a nervous and bewildered population. These peddlers of fake cures, however, are not the only individuals guilty of fraudulence and opportunism during the plague. Father Paneloux, argues Stephanson, also exploits the situation in which the townspeople find themselves (1987:230). Rather than cures, however, he peddles an understanding of suffering in metaphysical terms.

Father Paneloux is described within the novel as "a stalwart champion of Christian doctrine" (78). Over the period of the epidemic, he delivers two sermons to his congregation on the subject of the plague. The first offers a traditional religious explanation along the same lines as those offered in the plague narratives of Boccaccio and Defoe, in which the plague is interpreted as a punishment sent down on a sinful people by a just God. "Calamity has come on you, my brethren", he says in the opening lines of his address, "and, my brethren, you deserved it" (80). Paneloux then launches into a recounting of biblical stories in which plague has performed the function of divine retribution. Citing the *Book of Exodus*, he says:

The first time this scourge appears in history, it was wielded to strike down the enemies of God. Pharaoh set himself up against the divine will, and the plague beat him to his knees. Thus from the dawn of recorded history the scourge of God has humbled the proud of heart and laid low those who hardened themselves against Him" (80).

In this passage and in those that follow, Camus has his character rehearse a number of traditional religious justifications of suffering, all of which take the form of theodicies: suffering is explained first as a punishment, then in terms of salvation. "This same pestilence which is slaying you", he says, "works for your good and points your path" (83). As the duration of the plague lengthens, however, it also seems to become more enigmatic. The virus, as Rieux notes, is continually mutating and developing new strands, and it seems almost as if these mutations are aimed at frustrating the attempts to understand it. "For several weeks", says the narrator, "the disease had seemed to make a point of confounding diagnosis" (191). Even Paneloux eventually admits to the unknowability of the plague. In contrast to his first sermon, in which he confidently lectures his congregation on the meaning of the

plague, his second sermon, which is more tentative than the first, emphasises its incomprehensibility: “there were some things we could grasp”, he says, “and others we could not” (182). A child’s suffering, he declares, would always present a challenge to one’s faith, because it was beyond our human powers of understanding. In such instances there were no simple explanations to be had. In order to explain Paneloux’s apparent loss of confidence in his ability to understand suffering, and his new emphasis on the unknowability of the plague, a few words must be said about events which occurred in the interval between the two sermons.

### **The Problem of Innocent Suffering**

After Paneloux’s first sermon, Rieux and Tarrou discuss the priest’s belief that suffering can be made intelligible in terms of punishment and salvation. Rieux declares that Paneloux is only able to maintain such a belief because he has had no real experience of death or suffering:

He hasn’t come into contact with death; that’s why he can speak with such assurance of the truth - with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners, and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed, thinks as I do. He’d try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence” (106).

Unlike the country priest and the doctor, who witness suffering first hand, Paneloux is unfamiliar with the suffering of his parishioners, at least until one particular incident brings him into contact with it. The death of Othon’s child makes Paneloux falter in his belief that innocent suffering is meaningful. In the process of trialling a new cure for the plague, Paneloux and a number of other characters gather around the child’s bed in order to observe the effects of the new vaccine. Rather than improving the patient’s condition, however, the vaccine has the result of extending the duration of the illness, thus making the child suffer longer. The narrator informs us that those present had previously seen children die, but that they had always managed to remain more or less detached from the situation. The abomination of their deaths, he says, had hitherto made itself felt in a merely “abstract way” (175). In this case, however, those involved are forced to watch the “child’s agony minute by minute” (174). Slumped against a wall, Paneloux observes the situation:

And, just then, the boy had a sudden spasm, as if something had bitten him in the stomach, and uttered a long, shrill wail. For moments that seemed endless he stayed in a queer, contorted position, his body racked by convulsive tremors; it was as if his frail frame were bending before the fierce breath of the plague, breaking under the reiterated gusts of fever. Then the storm-wind passed, there came a lull, and he relaxed a little; the fever seemed to recede, leaving him gasping for breath on a dank, pestilential shore, lost in a languor that already looked like death. When for the third time the fiery wave broke on him, lifting him a little, the child curled himself up and shrank away to the edge of the bed, as if in terror of the flames advancing on him, licking his limbs. A moment later, after tossing his head wildly to and fro, he flung off the blanket. From between the inflamed eyelids big tears welled up and trickled down the sunken, leaden-hued cheeks. When the spasm had passed, utterly exhausted, tensing his thin legs and arms on which, within forty-eight hours, the flesh had wasted to the bone, the child lay flat, racked on the tumbled bed, in a grotesque parody of crucifixion (175).

After watching the boy struggling for his life, all those present are clearly affected, Paneloux not least of all:

Paneloux gazed down at the small mouth, fouled with the sordes of the plague and pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind. He sank on to his knees, and all present found it natural to hear him say in a voice hoarse but clearly audible across that nameless, never-ending wail: 'My God, spare this child ...!' (176).

Although he maintains his faith in God after this incident, Paneloux's attitude toward suffering is altered, a fact acknowledged by the narrator: "from the day on which he saw a child die, something seemed to change in him" (180). It is shortly after this experience that Paneloux delivers his second sermon in which, as has been discussed, he emphasises the impossibility of ever coming to a complete understanding of suffering. The change in attitude Paneloux undergoes in the course of the novel illustrates what Stephanson has identified as the overall narrative pattern of the work:

The structure of [the] narrative reflects this sequence: anecdotes and episodes that dramatize the initial release and flight of the imagination are followed [...] by an exploration of the inevitable deflating and closing of the imagination as it collides with an intractable physical reality (1987:241).

Camus demonstrates that Paneloux's metaphysical interpretation of the plague in terms of divine retribution could not survive an encounter with the undeniable material reality of a child's suffering. The faith-destroying properties of great suffering have been dealt with often in literature. It was the stories of tortured children he read in newspapers that caused Dostoevsky's character Ivan to question his faith in the justice of God. In Voltaire's novel *Candide*, a series of painful incidents causes the protagonist to lose his faith in the belief that this is the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire himself (as Theodor Adorno notes) was apparently shaken from his belief in the theodicy of Leibniz by the Lisbon earthquake (Adorno, 1973:361). Camus continues this tradition. From the moment he witnesses the death of the child, Paneloux acquiesces to the impossibility of ever understanding the existence of suffering. For Rieux also, the suffering of a child is something that defies understanding. The attitude he takes in relation to this fact, however, is very different from the one assumed by the priest. Paneloux's inability to understand the scene he had witnessed leads him in the end to advocate a sort of blind faith. Only "the love of God", he argues, "can reconcile us to the suffering and the deaths of children, it alone can justify them, since we cannot understand them, and we can only make God's will ours" (186). What has changed in Paneloux is his ability to comprehend innocent suffering, not his willingness to accept the religious doctrine that it is both just and necessary. "That sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding", he says to Rieux. "But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand" (178). For Rieux, on the other hand, the death of the child leads to an open rebellion against the notion that innocent suffering can ever be justified. "That child, anyhow, was innocent - and you know it as well as I do", he says to Paneloux. "And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture" (177 & 178).

Rieux's speech to Paneloux seems to contain a deliberate reference to the tirade Ivan delivered in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Both characters rebel against the notion of a divine scheme in which eternal harmony is bought at the price of innocent suffering. "I decline the offer of eternal harmony

altogether”, says Ivan. “It is not worth one single small tear of even one tortured little child” (281).<sup>33</sup> However, Rieux is not simply a carbon copy of Dostoevsky’s character. Ivan is posed as a Christian in crisis - he believes in God but refuses to accept the meaning of his creation. Rieux, on the other hand, is patently atheist. Rieux is used within the novel as a mouthpiece for Camus’ own brand of atheistic existentialism. He is resigned to the absence of God and the absurdity of suffering, and there is nothing in his attitude to suggest he suffers from the same tormented doubt as Dostoevsky’s character. While neither character is willing to accept the proposition that suffering is necessary and meaningful, their stated views on the subject differ markedly. Ivan’s statements are consistent with a belief in the wretchedness of suffering, while Rieux’s opinions point to its absurdity. While the concepts of wretchedness and absurdity are both based to some extent on an awareness of the senselessness of suffering, this senselessness stems in Dostoevsky’s work from the human subject’s alienation from the source of meaning, while in Camus, it stems from the absence of meaning. Wretchedness is thus a concept for an earlier age, in which human beings were still struggling with the remnants of their faith. Absurdity, at least in the way it was understood by Camus, is an atheistic concept built on an awareness that we are alone in the universe and that our suffering has no transcendent meaning.

Christianity is only one of many doctrines that are shown within the novel to have failed in their attempts to cover over the absurdity of suffering. Within the narrative structure of *The Plague*, as has been stated, each voice represents a different discourse which attempts to provide an understanding of suffering. Predictably, each of these discourses fails. As Richard Shryock has noted, throughout the novel we witness the gradual silencing of those voices which had attempted to provide an understanding of the epidemic. The various discourses literally die with those who had championed them. Shryock attributes the death of these voices to the narrator’s attempts to impose his own interpretation on the plague by doing away with “those voices that are not compatible with” his own (1990:60). “The elimination by the plague of the constituent voices of the polyphony”, he argues, “privileges Rieux and provides a position from which the reader can monologize the text” (1990:62).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Camus would certainly have been familiar with the speech Ivan delivers. Herbert Lotmann notes that Camus had played the part of Ivan in a stage adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov* as a young man in Algeria (1979:185).

<sup>34</sup> Shryock argues that all of the voices in the novel represent possible narrative voices. Some of these voices present an alternative account of events, threatening the narrative hegemony Rieux (as the narrator) seeks to impose. Shryock claims that “those voices that are not compatible with Rieux-narrator’s position, or which do not change to a position similar to his, are neutralised or destroyed” (1990:60).



This argument, however, cannot really be substantiated. Shryock's reading makes Rieux, the narrator, responsible for the deaths of Paneloux and Tarrou, by suggesting that he is in league with the plague. Their deaths, he argues, are the result of Rieux the narrator's desire to silence them. However, there is really no substantial evidence that would confirm even a symbolic liability on Rieux's part. In his role of doctor, he attempts to prevent Tarrou's death (Paneloux refuses medical attention). Even with Paneloux and Tarrou out of the way, however, Rieux fails to establish an enduring interpretation of the plague. The narrative cannot be said, therefore, to represent a narrowing of meaning towards one single privileged perspective, as Shryock claims. Rieux is as unsuccessful in his attempts to understand the plague as the other characters. This is a fact, as Colin Davis notes, which has not always been grasped in the critical literature dealing with the novel. "Few commentators would have difficulty", he writes, "in accepting that neither Paneloux nor Tarrou can be taken as an authoritative interpreter of the plague. It is less appreciated that the narrator's position is equally unsure" (1994:4). Within the context of the novel, the failure of those discourses dealing with the plague is due not to the imposition by the narrator of an interpretation incompatible with their own, but to their inability to explain the existence of innocent suffering. Both the religious discourse of the priest and the scientific discourse of the medical board fail in this regard. In fact, according to Davis, all attempts within the text "to restrict the interpretation of the plague" ultimately fail (1994:6). Rather than trying to impose his own interpretation, the narrator seems to discard the question of meaning altogether: "Oh, I know it's an absurd situation, but we're all involved in it, and we've got to accept it as it is" (73).

It is significant that no satisfactory explanation is offered by the narrator of the situation in which the characters find themselves. The novelistic discourse thus proves itself as incapable as any of the discourses within it of providing a coherent account of the suffering it chronicles. This is a fact that has been noted by Davis. Davis cites Frank Kermode, who argues that there is a trend in modern literature towards openness and uncertainty: "Unlike the old classic, which was expected to provide answers [the modern classic] poses a virtually infinite set of questions" (Kermode, cited in Davis, 1994:2). One of the functions of the narrator in a traditional narrative is to direct the hermeneutic activity of the reader. The narrator may direct our attention towards an element of the plot, for example, in which case our inquiries are limited to predicting the outcome. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader's curiosity is aroused in the first few pages on the subject of which of the five daughters would marry Mr. Bingley. Clues are provided in the course of the narrative, and all is

revealed before the end (Bingley marries Jane). The reader's desire for information is thus satisfied. Camus' narrative, on the other hand, seems designed to frustrate, rather than aid, the hermeneutic endeavours of the reader. When discussing Camus' novel, Davis notes the "lack of closure", "its failure to give a definitive account of itself", and "the absence of unambiguous directions to the reader regarding correct interpretation" (1994:8). "At the end of the novel", he declares,

the plague remains enigmatic, and the final descriptions of it offer bathos rather than a new understanding [...]. No authoritative reading is available; and the issue of meaning is ultimately discarded with a characteristic blend of epistemological pessimism and enigmatic posturing (1994:8).

The narrator in *The Plague* arouses our own anxiety by his lack of surety. He forces the reader to confront the epistemological lack that exists in terms of the epidemic, and on a more general level, in terms of suffering. At first there is a disavowal of this absence of meaning, illustrated by the desperate efforts of the various characters involved to come to an understanding of their situation. But rather than producing knowledge, the many attempts at understanding contained within the narrative contribute to the confusion we feel as readers. Instead of one authoritative voice providing us with the answers we desire, we have several voices, none of which provides a helpful basis on which to ground our interpretation. Eventually, as characters such as Rieux and Paneloux reconcile themselves, each in their own way, to the inexplicable nature of the events they have witnessed, the reader must do the same. The narrative quest for meaning leads into a figurative cul-de-sac where the possibilities for meaning have been exhausted. It is really no surprise that the novel ends this way, with the failure of every attempt to make sense of suffering - the impasse is the inevitable consequence of the author's atheistic existentialism. Given what we know about his views on the absurdity of suffering, the hermeneutic endeavours of the characters were destined to fail from the outset.

### **Understanding Suffering**

It may thus seem contradictory to argue, therefore, that it is at precisely this moment, when the question of meaning has been discarded by the novel, that an understanding of suffering emerges. Traditionally, understanding a phenomenon has meant grasping its meaning. Human endeavours to

understand the existence of innocent suffering have aimed to do precisely this. This type of understanding cannot be reconciled with the claim that suffering is absurd. However, there is another type of understanding - one which, rather than triumphing over the absurd, emerges from the absurd situation itself. This is the type of understanding demonstrated by characters such as Rieux. Towards the end of the novel, he claims to have understood suffering. Yet at the same time, he acknowledges its absurdity. How then, are we to comprehend this special sense of understanding?

Rieux achieves understanding in the novel through the anguish he feels in the face of the gratuitousness of suffering and death. His 'understanding' is contrasted favourably in the novel to those attempts at understanding based on metaphysics and logic. I have already discussed the failure of the metaphysical explanations Paneloux provides, and the failure of the medical board to reach an adequate understanding of the plague. Camus demonstrates that other forms of logic are equally flawed. Throughout the plague, Grand dedicates himself to keeping statistics about the disease in the hope that these figures would lead to some sort of conclusion about its meaning. However, these statistics elude analysis. As the narrator tells us: "Grand would certainly have been quite unable to say to what they pointed" (154). The attempts of other characters to make sense of suffering in the terms of religion, science, or logic are also shown ultimately to fail. They fail because they each seek some sort of metaphysical truth: "for those others, who aspired beyond and above the human individual towards something they could not even imagine, there had been no answer" (245).

Unlike characters such as Grand and Paneloux, Rieux does achieve a kind of understanding of suffering - one which can perhaps be best explained by comparing it to his understanding of other people. After the death of Tarrou, Rieux asks himself how well he had understood his friend. He wonders about the motives that had driven him to devote himself to others, or how to explain his quest for saintliness. Finally, he admits he had "no idea" of the answers to such questions, and that "it mattered little" (237). Rather than attempting to 'make sense' of his friend, he satisfies himself with two images: "The only picture of Tarrou he would always have would be the picture of a man who firmly gripped the steering-wheel of his car when driving, or else the picture of that stalwart body, now lying motionless" (237). Rieux does not try to make sense of Tarrou's life by reducing it to a set of abstract ideas. He recognises that there are things about his friend that cannot be explained. In some

senses Tarrou remains an enigma for him, yet he is able to say that he has known him. Rieux admits to having known the plague, friendship and affection all in a similar fashion; he has known them, that is, without being able to explain them.

The special sense of understanding Rieux achieves is based on his ability to recognise suffering as an absurd phenomenon. If suffering is an absurd fact of existence, suggests Camus, an understanding of suffering must involve a recognition of that absurdity. This is why novels such as *The Plague* and *The Stranger*, rather than ordering the experience of suffering according to the terms of human logic, present it to the reader unadorned. Instead of providing explanations that would make suffering appear meaningful, they strip away the abstract notions through which we understand the world. I have already discussed Sartre's explanation of the way in which *The Stranger* revealed the absurd by presenting us first with "the amorphous, everyday flow of reality" followed by the "reconstruction of that reality by speech and human reason" (Sartre, 1962:115). I would argue that *The Plague* uses the reverse technique. It starts out by presenting us with a phenomenon, the meaning of which has been over determined by the various discourses that try to make sense of it. These discourses are then discarded one by one as the novel progresses, so that eventually the plague appears to us, so to speak, in its naked absurdity.

*The Plague* deals with the limits of human understanding in relation to suffering. It highlights the strain the loss of faith in both religious and secular doctrines places on traditional understanding, yet it does not abandon the possibility of understanding altogether. The special sense of understanding which emerges from this work represents an attempt to circumvent the problems the modern loss of faith poses for an understanding of suffering; it is an attempt to find a way out of the hermeneutic impasse his thought on the absurd leads us into. The type of understanding he offers is a strictly limited understanding, but that does not detract from its value. It is even shown to be preferable in ethical terms to the more traditional forms of understanding advocated, for example, by characters such as Paneloux. Camus demonstrates that the type of understanding recommended by the priest leads to a path of resignation and inaction. Why struggle against suffering if it is a necessary and meaningful part of the plan of a just and powerful divinity? Wouldn't it be better to resign oneself to such suffering? Paneloux does exactly that; when he contracts the disease he refuses treatment and dies. Rather than

struggling against his situation, he accepts it as the will of God. The attitude Rieux displays in the face of the plague is quite different. For him, curing suffering is more important than explaining it. “A man can’t cure and *know* at the same time”, he says. “So let’s cure as quickly as we can. That’s the more urgent job” (171). The fact that he sees the plague as utterly lacking in purpose and meaning allows Rieux to be certain in his conviction that the suffering it causes should be alleviated. Rieux’s attitude does not involve a betrayal of the absurd, but neither does it involve acceptance or resignation. He both acknowledges the absurdity of the human condition, and maintains a sense of outrage against it.

It is this particular sense of rebellion against the absurdity of human suffering that leaves *The Plague* free of the pessimism that pervades Dostoevsky’s last novel. For the characters of both novels, the recognition of the senselessness of suffering is shown to be a painful experience capable of inciting rebellion. However, in Camus, the confrontation with the absurd is also shown to be the source of something positive. It is, ironically, only when Rieux comes to truly recognise the absurdity of the human condition that he finds meaning - not the “cosmic” (1980:424) meaning existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom associates with religious doctrines, but a “secular personal meaning” (1980:426) which is intrinsically tied up with the act of rebellion. Yalom explains this as follows: “A human being, Camus believed, can attain full stature only by living with dignity in the face of absurdity. The world’s indifference can be transcended by rebellion, a prideful rebellion against one’s condition” (Yalom, 1980:427). Characters such as Rieux and Tarrou find purpose and meaning in the decision to stand together in solidarity with their fellow sufferers and to rebel against their common condition. The secular meaning they find in this way is shown within the novel to be the only kind of meaning capable of being sustained. It is certainly compared favourably to the religious meaning Paneloux offers.

Through his emphasis on the failure of our hermeneutic endeavours and his insistence on the necessity of coming to terms with the absurdity of suffering, Camus prepares the ground on which a number of modern authors will build their own visions of suffering. There are many similarities, for example, between the work of Albert Camus and that of Milan Kundera. In Kundera’s novels suffering is also portrayed as a senseless phenomenon. However, there are also substantial differences between the two authors. In Camus, the failure of our hermeneutic endeavours is the source of a terrible anguish, which is nevertheless capable of inspiring positive human action on a grand scale. Perhaps Camus was

influenced in this belief, at least in part, by his own experience as a member of the French Resistance during World War Two. In Kundera, however, the failure to find meaning creates a completely different mood. Kundera's novels are set in a Post-War Europe steeped in disappointment at the perceived failure of the humanist cause to make manifest in a permanent way the utopian hopes and dreams which seemed to drive the various resistance movements in their battle against fascism. In his novels suffering is simply banal. The banality of suffering as it arises from his work will be the subject of the final part of this thesis.

## Part Three



Milan Kundera:

The Banality of Suffering

## Chapter 7:

# The Banality of Suffering

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The banality of suffering is a motif that emerges consistently in all of Milan Kundera's novels, from *The Joke* to *Ignorance*. In these novels the sublime illusion of a noble and suffering humanity breaks down under the pressure of the mundanity, ridiculousness and vulgarity of human existence. The concept of banality is central to Kundera's depictions of suffering, and crucial to understanding the place his work occupies in the chronology presented within this thesis. His work is positioned here as representing the culmination or final stage of the metaphysical rebellion which is presented in its infancy by Dostoevsky and in a later stage by Camus. In Kundera's work, the individual's alienation from both religious and secular sources of meaning is made complete, and this has a number of important implications in terms of the way in which the suffering of his characters is represented. While the portraits of suffering found in his work bear some resemblance to those found in the novels of both Dostoevsky and Camus, they also differ in important ways. Kundera's rendering of the vulgarity of suffering has something in common with Dostoevsky's portrayal of its wretchedness, and Camus' evocation of the absurdity of suffering seems to prefigure Kundera's depiction of its ridiculousness. However, despite these similarities, there are also important differences. While both Kundera and Dostoevsky write about the wretchedness of suffering, for example, the work of the former exhibits none of the sentimentality of the latter. And while both Kundera and Camus seem to agree on the absurdity of suffering, Kundera meets this recognition without pathos. I will argue that what sets Kundera apart from both Dostoevsky and Camus and marks him as a writer belonging to a later historical period is his particular understanding of the banality of life in the modern world. The concept of banality, and the way in which it is both informs and is informed by Kundera's treatment of the theme of suffering, will be explored further in the course of this chapter. I will begin by considering some of the literary and extra-literary influences which have helped to shape this concept of banality, as well as his own avowed antilyrical attitude, which impacted significantly on the way in which he chose to depict suffering.



## Suffering after Auschwitz

The term *banal* dates back to at least 1753, when it was used to designate the communal mills and ovens used by feudal serfs to grind their grain and bake their bread for the benefit of the local lord (*OED*, 919). Later it came to be used to refer to all things (including thoughts and expressions) which were “open to the use of all the community”, and were hence seen as “commonplace” (*OED*, 919). The specific sense in which the term is understood for the purposes of this thesis, however, while drawing something from this intermediate definition, did not arise until later. I am interested primarily in the particular meaning the term acquired in the period following the Second World War, thanks in large part to the work of Hannah Arendt.

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt makes the controversial claim that Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal tried and convicted in Jerusalem for crimes committed against the Jewish People, was not a monster of cruelty, as he was made out to be, but a mere bureaucrat. “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth”, argues Arendt, “and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain.’ Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all.” (1994:287). Arendt’s account of Eichmann’s trial is notable for its refusal to succumb to sensationalism. His actions, she argues, were not the actions of a demented criminal genius. In fact, they were rather mundane. According to Arendt, one of the most terrifying aspects of the Holocaust was its mundanity, both from the point of view of the murderers and their victims. The organisation of the deportation and execution of millions of Jews was so mundane a matter for Eichmann that he seemed scarcely able to recall what he had done. When twice questioned about a trip to Bratislava, for example, he remembered only that he had played bowls there with a government minister. Not until he was prompted by the prosecution did he remember the real reason for his journey: to organise the deportation of Jews. “To evacuate and deport Jews had become routine business; what stuck in his mind was bowling” (Arendt, 1994:82). The realisation that such terrible acts of cruelty could be carried out in such a matter-of-fact way, as if they were completely mundane, adds to their horror, and this horrifying mundanity is at the heart of Arendt’s understanding of the banality of evil.

It is not only evil, however, that is rendered banal in this situation, but suffering. If the deportation and execution of Jews was a mundane matter for the murderers, argues Arendt, the same was true for

many of their victims. There was nothing sensational, she claims, in the majority of the accounts the survivors provided about their suffering or the suffering they had witnessed. In relating the testimony of Zindel Grynspan, for example, Arendt comments on the “shining honesty” of his account and the absence in his statement of “anything remotely resembling a dramatic moment” (1994:230). It is important to note that, in making these observations, Arendt does not mean to diminish the suffering of the victims. The victims of the Holocaust, as she points out, suffered horrendously from fear and physical abuse. But in addition to this, they also suffered from the banality of their fate. While the saints and martyrs could be consoled in the belief that their suffering served a noble purpose in the divine plan, the suffering of the victims of the Nazis served no purpose at all.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera mentions the fact that “several members of [his] family perished in Hitler’s concentration camps” (4). While he does not deal directly with the Holocaust in any real depth (he mentions it only briefly in *Life Is Elsewhere*, and in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) he does deal in his novels with a world that has been changed by it. Kundera’s representations of suffering are located firmly in a Post-World War Two European context, and the particular sense of banality which emerges from his work owes something to this context. Historical context can also help explain some of the differences between the understanding of suffering we find in Kundera, and that which we find in Camus. Of course Camus had also dealt with the Nazi experience in his work, and his allegorical account of the Nazi occupation in *The Plague* also highlights the banality of the suffering of the victims. “The truth”, says the novel’s narrator,

is that nothing is less sensational than pestilence and by reason of their very duration great misfortunes are monotonous. In the memories of those who lived through them, the grim days of the plague do not stand out like vivid flames, ravenous and inextinguishable, beaconing a troubled sky, but rather like the slow, deliberate progress of some monstrous thing crushing out all upon its path (148).

There is nothing glorious about the suffering depicted in *The Plague*. Nevertheless, there is a sense of optimism in this novel that comes, as has been discussed, from the solidarity experienced by those characters who stand together to fight the pestilential force laying siege to their town. There is no such optimism in Kundera’s work. His best known novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, was published in

1984, thirty seven years after the publication of *The Plague*. The tone of each novel reflects its historical context. Camus had started writing his novel during the war, and had the ongoing resistance against the Nazi occupation to draw on. Kundera, in contrast, was writing well after the end of the war, in a period of disappointed aspirations. The United Nations, founded in 1945 to prevent future conflicts, had failed to establish a permanent peace. Instead, the end of the Second World War had brought about a new (cold) war which saw two vast powers battle for control of the globe. Kundera became personally embroiled in this struggle when the Soviet Union invaded his homeland, Czechoslovakia, in 1968. There was a brief moment in which his people resisted the occupying force, but eventually they were forced to submit. “[O]ne thing was clear”, says the narrator of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, “the country would have to bow to the conqueror. [...]. Workaday humiliation had begun” (26). The triumph of the “human spirit” against indomitable odds, the very thing which proved a source of inspiration for Camus and a font of personal meaning for his characters, is presented in Kundera as a delusion. Kundera thus captures in his novels a peculiar reality of life under totalitarian rule – its mundanity. Heroic acts of resistance are arguably impossible in such a climate, as German Army physician Peter Bamm noted in 1952 in order to explain his own submission under the Nazi regime:

It belongs among the refinements of totalitarian governments in our century that they don't permit their opponents to die a great, dramatic martyr's death for their convictions. A good many of us might have accepted such a death. The totalitarian state lets its opponents disappear in silent anonymity (cited in Arendt, 1994:232).

Bamm makes clear in this passage that what he is afraid of is not suffering itself, but a suffering so banal that it would go unremarked upon. In the past, great suffering was immortalised in epic poetry, and even the suffering of one's enemies received due notice. The evil of modern bureaucracies, on the other hand, is that they arrange things so that the suffering of their victims goes largely unnoticed. The tale of Arruns in Virgil's *Aeneid* is instructive here. The terrible penalty he paid for the slaughter of Camilla was to die “in an unnoticed place in the dust of the plain” (306). This curse is now the common fate of many of those who suffer at the hands of the modern state. Victims disappear, or are locked away “in an unnoticed place in the dust of the plain” where they are forgotten by the majority of the population. Their suffering is treated as mundane and unworthy of notice, and this is the terrible banality of their situation.

## The Banal in Literature

Thus far I have given a general definition of the concept of banality that informs Kundera's treatment of suffering. The work of Hannah Arendt, as has been discussed, was very important in defining this concept. She provides an understanding of the terrible banality of suffering in the modern world. However, the particular sense of banality which underlies Kundera's representations of suffering incorporates more than the sense of the mundane and the everyday which is articulated so eloquently by Arendt. The concept of banality informing his treatment of suffering is, I believe, a multi-dimensional one, comprised of three primary aspects: the ridiculous, the vulgar and the mundane. Each of these three aspects plays a part in the overall sense of banality which is at the heart of his depictions of suffering, and each will be dealt with separately in the following chapters. This section, however, will examine the work of a number of authors who have contributed to this particular concept of banality through their own emphasis on the *ridiculous*, *vulgar*, and *mundane* nature of everyday life.

One of the most remarked upon influences on Kundera's fiction has been the work of Franz Kafka.<sup>35</sup> A number of critics have commented in particular on the similarities between the two authors in the way they have used comedy to create an impression of the banality of the human predicament. In *The Trial*, Josef K. is arrested one morning in his bed by two men who divest him of his nightshirt and underwear. Thence follows his bizarre trial, strange encounters in broom closets and an execution more farcical than tragic. The apparent senselessness of his situation, as was discussed in chapter four, is part of what makes it so unbearable. His fate is equally painful, however, because it is so ridiculous. To die is one thing, but to have one's life end so farcically is insufferable because it deprives one of dignity. Many of Kafka's characters find themselves in ridiculous situations, and in addition to everything else they suffer, they also suffer from this fact. In the short story "Metamorphosis", Gregor Samsa awakes to find himself transformed into a gigantic cockroach. His transformation into an insect, a creature of the utmost insignificance, renders his suffering both grotesque and ridiculous. His mother and sister are sickened by him, and the lodgers in his parents' home smile and shake their heads when

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<sup>35</sup> Kundera has always denied any direct literary influence on his work. However, in an interview with Lois Oppenheim, he does admit that his work belongs under the "same aesthetic roof" (1989:9) as the works of authors such as "Kafka, Broch, Musil and Gombrowicz" (1989:8), while in *The Art of the Novel* he makes reference to "[t]he pleiad of great Central European novelists: Kafka, Hasek, Musil, Broch [and] Gombrowicz" (1993:124).

they first catch sight of him; the narrator tells us that they “apparently found Gregor [...] entertaining” (131). The story of Gregor Samsa is almost tragic. He is a man struck down by a terrible misfortune. He loses his livelihood and his family, and those who know him turn against him. The preposterous nature of his condition, however, prevents his story from turning into tragedy, and this very fact makes his fate harder to bear. While tragedy at least lends the illusion of weight and purpose to a person’s suffering, comedy renders it both ridiculous and demeaning. “In the world of the Kafkan”, writes Kundera, “the comic [...] deprives the victims of the only consolation they could hope for: the consolation to be found in the (real or supposed) grandeur of tragedy” (1993:104-5). Kundera illustrates the same point in his own fiction (as will be discussed in chapter eight). While the situations in which his characters find themselves are in general more plausible than those of Kafka’s characters, they are nevertheless ridiculous in their own way, and the humiliation they suffer is equally unbearable.

Robert Musil is another of Kundera’s predecessors who has dealt with the ridiculous in his work. While he is best known for his acute observations about the politics and ideology of twentieth-century Austrian society (he recognised even in his earliest work the nationalism and racism which would become so dangerously manifest under Nazism), he was also concerned with depicting the comic side of human endeavour. In his great unfinished novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, the cultural elite of Vienna gather together to take part in what is referred to as the Parallel Campaign. The object of this campaign is to find “a great, stirring idea” (113) to inspire the nation and the world, and to make people forget the mundanity of their everyday lives. The driving force behind this somewhat ludicrous project is Diotima, the socialite cousin of Ulrich, the protagonist of the novel. While Ulrich is also drawn, somewhat reluctantly, into the service of the Parallel Campaign, his training as a military engineer affords him a rather different view of the world: “Looked at from a technical point of view, the world is simply ridiculous” (33). Musil is not merely content to ridicule the actions of his characters, however, but to discover their causes. What he finds is that modern life “in times dominated by the spirit of the marketplace” is in fact banal and ridiculous, in the sense of being bereft of meaning, and that it is this very absence of meaning that drives the modern mania to “make everything mean more than it has any honest claim to mean” (441&442). The same insight is revealed in Kundera’s work through the conflicting world views of various characters. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza looks for meaning and significance in every chance encounter, while Tomas is

content with the arbitrary ebb and flow of existence; Franz searches desperately for a cause to give his life meaning, while Sabina expresses her contempt for all grand schemes and causes.

Hermann Broch is another author who has had a particular influence on Kundera. His vision is in some ways darker than that of Musil in that he highlights the banality of human existence not primarily by focusing on the ridiculous, but by creating situations in which the extraordinary is made to appear mundane. In the third part of his *Sleepwalkers* trilogy, Broch has his protagonist Huguenau stage a murder so trivial in his eyes that he forgets having committed it. In this way he challenges the significance attributed to the act of murder in other literature. If the murder committed by Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov attains its significance through his guilt and remorse, what significance can be attached to the murder committed by Huguenau? "What is crime", asks Kundera, "if Broch's Huguenau not only does not regret but actually forgets the murder he has committed?" (1993:12). Whereas the death of Kafka's K. was rendered banal through its ridiculousness, the death of Huguenau's victim is made banal through its mundanity. In a crime at once so senseless and so mundane, the death of the victim is robbed of any pathos it might otherwise have attained. In *The Farewell Party*, Kundera creates his own version of Broch's Huguenau. Jakub murders the nurse Ruzena by slipping a suicide capsule into her medication. Within the narrative structure, this murder is presented as a completely insignificant act. No sense of tragedy or dramatic tension accompanies the deed. Murder in the modern world, he implies, is far more mundane a matter than might be suggested by the great figures of nineteenth-century literature. In order to demonstrate this point, Kundera invites a direct comparison between his own protagonist and the hero of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. "Raskolnikov experienced his act of murder as tragedy", says the narrator, "and staggered under the weight of his deed. Jakub was amazed to find that his deed was weightless, easy to bear, light as air" (194-5). What is horrifying here is not only the murder itself, but the ease with which it is rendered mundane.

Jaroslav Hašek is another author whose work is interesting in terms of his depiction of the mundanity of suffering. Hašek is a master of the mundane. He treats injury, hunger and death as simply part of the tedium of ordinary life, rather than as experiences fit to inspire national pride or fervour. Hašek's novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*, portrays the terrible mundanity of suffering in war, and in doing so, challenges the accounts offered by other novels of the same genre. In his introduction to the 1974

edition, Cecil Parrott admits that he knows of “no other novel which conveys so poignantly not only the ugliness of war but the utter futility of anything connected with it” (1974:xviii). Hašek uses dehumanising metaphors to diminish the status of the individual combatants in his novel and to lessen the value of their suffering. The death of soldiers on the battlefield is likened to the domestic slaughter of animals: “Heroes don’t exist”, he writes, “only cattle for the slaughter” (300). Hašek’s novel is full of characters who, rather than glorifying their suffering, consistently emphasise its pointlessness: “The young soldier gave a heartfelt sigh. He was sorry for his young life. Why was he born in such a stupid century to be butchered like an ox in a slaughterhouse? Why was all that necessary?” (153). The narrator also mocks the notion that there is anything glorious or sublime about war. He refers derisively to the fictional tales of valour invented by journalists to inspire the troops. Such tales of valour were never read by the soldiers for whom they were intended. When they were sent to the front, he says, the men “rolled cigarettes out of them [...] or disposed of them still more appropriately, so that their use could correspond to the value and spirit of the rare examples of valour which had been so glowingly written up” (234). In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera contrasts *The Good Soldier Švejk* to other famous accounts of war, such as *The Iliad* and *War and Peace*. “In Homer and in Tolstoy”, he writes, “war had a perfectly comprehensible meaning, people fought for Helen or for Russia. Schweik and his companions go to the front without knowing why” (Kundera, 1993:9-10). Robert Porter also notes the difference between Hašek’s novel and other more traditional war narratives. “The First World War”, he argues, “produced tragic masterpieces throughout Europe, but in Czechoslovakia it produced *The Good Soldier Švejk*. [...] The external events are monumental, the individual’s response is farcically banal” (Porter, 1981:89). Hašek’s influence on Kundera can perhaps be best seen in his own attitude to war: “The Germans who sacrificed their lives to expand their country’s territory to the east”, says the narrator in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, “the Russians who died to extend their country’s power to the west - yes, they died for something idiotic, and their deaths have no meaning or general validity” (245).

The poet Czesław Miłosz is another writer who demonstrates a feeling for the mundane. In his autobiography, *Native Realm*, he writes about his own experience of war and revolution. Like Hašek’s account of the First World War, his account is an anti-epic. In a review of the memoir, E.J. Czerwinski writes that

[t]he best example of his anti-epic stance can be found in the shortest chapter of *Native Realm*, “Ten Days that Shook the World.” Only three pages are devoted to the cataclysmic event, which is described from a child’s point of view. Instead of heroic action, Milosz describes childlike innocence and concludes his laconic account with a quite unheroic observation: “The terror-stricken faces of the women, my brother’s screams from his cradle, the whole miserable family sanctuary, or rather den, turned topsy-turvy - all this was not healthy for the heart of a child” (Milosz, cited in Czerwinski, 1999:2).

Czerwinski remarks that “Milosz’s account [of the Russian Revolution] is devoid of heroic deeds and accomplishments by either side. [...] Only the results of violence and destruction are etched in his memory. The battles seem to have taken place without witness” (1999:3). The same remark could be made about Kundera’s work. A number of his novels deal with the experience of the 1968 Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, but with the exception of a few passages in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the action avoids scenes of conflict between the invading tanks and the besieged people. Even in the few passages in which this conflict is mentioned, Kundera focuses not on the heroism of his characters, which he says lasted only a brief moment, but on the painful impotence experienced by a small nation faced with a powerful invading force. Kundera makes it clear that there is nothing glorious in the suffering of his characters.

Kundera’s own emphasis on the ridiculous and the mundane, as has been stated, is central to his overall conception of the banality of suffering. However, there is a third and crucial aspect yet to be examined: his vulgarity. The concept of vulgarity which arises from Kundera’s work is complex. It is associated on the one hand with the material, bodily side of suffering, and on the other with a mundane and ordinary - as opposed to rare or exceptional - type of suffering. In his depiction of the vulgarity of suffering Kundera has had many predecessors. Hašek, for example, depicts the vulgarity of suffering in war. Švejk’s adventures occur against the backdrop of battlefields in which human remains hang from trees, and cholera wards in which men wrapped in wet sheets “struggle for breath and turn blue” before dying (506). Like Hašek, Kundera has also written about the vulgar, grotesque aspects of death and dying. In general, however, the type of vulgarity he depicts has more in common with the prosaic vulgarity of James Joyce than the macabre vulgarity of his fellow countryman.



Through a minute account of the pains and frustrations of an utterly ordinary man, Leopold Bloom, Joyce set out to demonstrate in *Ulysses* that for the average individual suffering is a vulgar and ordinary matter, and not at all the stuff of epic poetry. Joyce wrote *Ulysses* during roughly the same period in which Hašek wrote *The Good Soldier Švejk*, and for some of the same reasons. According to Declan Kiberd, *Ulysses* was a protest against the “heroic abstractions” for which men died in war (Kiberd, 1992: ix). Joyce rejected such “heroic abstractions”; for him death and suffering were mundane material matters. *Ulysses* can be read as an attempt to redress the erasure of material suffering from literature. “Men had killed and maimed one another’s bodies in the name of abstract virtues”, writes Kiberd, “so Joyce resolved to write a materialistic ‘epic of the body’, with a minute account of its functions and frustrations” (Kiberd, 1992:ix-x). So successful was he that he provoked an angry response from D.H. Lawrence, who was said to have commented derisively that Joyce had “degraded the novel into a crude instrument for measuring twinges in the toes of unremarkable men” (Kiberd, 1992:xix).

Like Joyce, Kundera depicts the sort of vulgar degrading suffering that often goes unremarked upon in everyday life; the sort of suffering that leaves the sufferer feeling weary and humiliated. Though some of his characters entertain lofty ideas about their suffering, the majority come sooner or later to an awareness of its vulgar, physical aspects. For Helena in *The Joke*, Tamina in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and Tereza in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, suffering and death are the antithesis of the sublime. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera describes the death of his own father in an attempt to debunk the lyrical illusions surrounding the subject in other literature. “Death is terrible drudgery” he says. “It took my father several days of high fever to die, and from the way he was sweating I could see he was working hard” (172). In Kundera’s novels an understanding of suffering is based as much upon an appreciation of its vulgarity as it is upon a recognition of its ridiculousness and mundanity. Each of these three aspects of banality will be examined in detail in the following chapters. Before embarking on this examination, however, it is necessary to consider one final factor which had a particular influence on Kundera’s treatment of the theme of suffering: his antilyrical attitude.

## The End of the Lyric Age

The key to understanding Kundera's work is what he refers to in *The Art of the Novel* as his antilyrical attitude. This attitude is at the heart of his appreciation of the ridiculous, vulgar, and mundane nature of human suffering. A brief discussion of his use of the terms *lyrical* and *antilyrical* will help define this attitude. As has been discussed, Kundera uses such terms in a very specific way in his work. While he borrows something from the traditional understanding of the term *lyrical* as it is used to designate the style and tone of a particular literary genre, his own understanding extends also to what he sees as its ideological and metaphysical perspective. Kundera sees in lyric poetry a tendency to sing the praises of man and of nature. He believes it is motivated by a fundamental agreement with the nature of the universe and a refusal to acknowledge the banality of everyday life. Of course, Kundera's views on lyric poetry may be debated; not all lyric poetry, for example, is as affirmative as he seems to suggest. My aim here, however, is not to debate Kundera's views on lyric poetry, but rather to examine his opposition to the *attitude* or *sentiment* he claims to find in it. The concepts of the lyrical and the antilyrical function within his work as more than mere literary descriptors; they come to signify two opposing attitudes "that man might take towards himself, the world [and] other people" (1993:138). The lyrical attitude is associated in Kundera's work with naiveté and youth. It is, according to Anne Stewart Caldwell, "the outlook of the poet, the youth, the immature person, who creates his own truth in order to avoid seeing the reality of his own miserable self" (1989:48). In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera refers to a "lyrical age" (1993:138), a time in the life of either an individual or a culture in which the world is seen in *soft focus*.<sup>36</sup> The antilyrical attitude, on the other hand, is associated with individual and cultural maturity. Caldwell describes the antilyrical attitude as the outlook of "the mature person who sees life and human actions for what they really are and who accepts a reality that is less than perfect" (1989:48). While the lyrical attitude involves a certain amount of what the existentialists would have called bad faith, the antilyrical attitude shows a willingness to face reality and to live a life devoid of those comforting illusions that stand between the individual and their recognition of the less than pleasing aspects of human existence.

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<sup>36</sup> Film theorist Louis Giannetti defines *soft focus* cinematography as "a glamorising technique which softens the sharpness of linear definition so that [for example] facial wrinkles can be smoothed over and even eliminated" (1976:462). Kundera does not use the phrase himself, but it is nevertheless useful in helping to define in visual terms the attitude he describes with a literary reference.

Kundera's second novel, *Life is Elsewhere*, originally entitled *The Lyric Age*, is devoted to an examination of what he sees as the dangers of lyricism. One of the primary dangers of maintaining a lyrical attitude in relation to suffering, he believes, is that such an attitude denies the inherent aversiveness of the experience. It lends suffering an attractive guise, and once suffering appears in such a guise, he argues, it becomes something which is sought or advocated, rather than something to be avoided. The lyrical attitude thus performs the same function as the Christian theodicy in convincing human beings of the merits of their suffering. In *The Farewell Party*, Jakub expresses his disgust for the way in which the base nature of human suffering is so often "concealed under a veil of lyricism and sentiment" (93). "A human being sends you to your death", he says. "And you go to the gallows [...] convinced that you are playing a lofty role in a tragedy worthy of Shakespeare's pen" (93). In *Immortality*, Kundera has one of his characters deliver a tirade against Chopin's *Funeral March* because it lyricises death: "And let me tell you this", says Paul, "all the evil in the world is in that *Funeral March* which is a glorification of death. If there were fewer funeral marches there might perhaps be fewer deaths" (134). The remark may seem glib on the surface, yet it does contain a serious critique of the role of art in promoting suffering and death. In war this role is paramount. It is difficult to imagine young people clamouring to enlist and go off to battle convinced of the banality of suffering in war, and this is where the lyrical skills of the artist are needed. The artist promotes the suffering the soldiers endure with lofty images designed to stir the sentiments. In lyric poetry soldiers never die of dysentery or gangrene, they always go in the clatter of enemy gunfire. The human cost of war and revolution will always be accepted more easily when adorned with beautiful phrases celebrating the heroism of those young men and women dying in the trenches or on the barricades. "For this reason", writes Kundera, "revolutions are lyrical and in need of lyricism" (1993:138).

According to Kundera, lyricism distorts reality so that the cruel seems kind, the base seems lofty, and the criminal seems just. It lends the least noble of human acts the noblest of guises. In an article printed in *The New York Times*, Kundera tells an anecdote about the Soviet invasion of his homeland in 1968 which demonstrates this principle. Driving in the countryside, Kundera is stopped by a Russian soldier who orders a search of his car. He is surprised to find that this man, rather than displaying the arrogant attitude of a conqueror to his victim, is full of love for the people whose country he has invaded. The soldier says to him: "You must realise we love the Czechs." According to Kundera, many

ordinary soldiers were under the influence of this sentiment, seemingly convinced that the Soviet army had invaded Czechoslovakia out of a feeling of brotherhood for its people. Lyricism, he implies, hides the ugly truth behind a veil of beauty, and “man, his breast swelling with lyric fervor, commits atrocities in the sacred name of love” (1985:26).

Kundera’s condemnation of the lyrical attitude, then, is partly based on the role it plays in deceiving people about the real nature of the atrocities committed in times of war or political upheaval. At such times, he claims, the population is “ruled hand in hand by the hangman and the poet” (*Life Is Elsewhere*, 270). However, while Kundera acknowledges the threat lyricism poses in matters of a political nature, he is not primarily a political novelist. He is concerned less with the way lyricism functions on the grand stage of history, than with its role in the personal lives of his characters. Jaromil, the protagonist of *Life is Elsewhere*, is a poet, and his entire life is lived under the influence of his lyrical sensibility. As John O’Brien has noted, all of Jaromil’s beliefs about the world are based “not on experience, but on literature” (1995:88). His ideas about masculinity and about romantic love, for example, are derived from films or novels. As readers, we are given access to the “suggestive phrases” that run through his mind during his romantic encounters, phrases such as “*he was a connoisseur at disrobing women; or, he unbuttoned her blouse with expert fingers*” (198). Of course it is hard to escape from the purview of such images, given their prevalence in romance literature and Hollywood movies, but what makes Jaromil more than just a harmless romantic is the violent disappointment with which he reacts when his experiences do not match his expectations. We are told that, during his first sexual encounter, Jaromil is “upset by the girl’s behaviour” when she insists on undressing herself, or that he is “seized with anger” when she instigates a game that upsets his romantic agenda (198-99).

Jaromil’s lyrical illusions extend not only to his ideas about love, however, but to his ideas about suffering. When Jaromil is insulted by another man at a party he is determined to construe the event as a mortal attack. His grandiose pretensions, however, are undermined by the narrator, who lays out the scene of the conflict against the backdrop of the duel which claimed the life of the nineteenth-century Russian poet Lermontov. Through the humorous contrast between the relatively trivial incident in which Jaromil is involved and the tragic death of a famous poet, Kundera creates an impression of the banal nature of his protagonist’s situation. Instead of a fatal bullet, his protagonist receives a kick in the

pants. “O land of the Czechs!” cries the narrator. “O land where the glory of a pistol shot turns into the joke of a kick in the pants!” (298). Even after his ignominious defeat, however, Jaromil refuses to accept the banality of his situation. Having been thrown out onto the balcony by his adversary, he decides he will stay there and freeze to death. He originally conceives the idea of suicide not only as a way of revenging himself on his persecutor, but as a way of redeeming himself through great suffering. “He knew that only the embrace of death could solace him, an embrace to which he would give himself body and soul and in which he would achieve greatness” (300). The images Jaromil associates with death are typically romantic; we are told, for example, that the “thought of suicide attracted him like a nightingale’s song” (299-300). Death and suicide appear often as the subjects of Romantic literature, and such images are familiar. As extremes of human experience, they afford the poet a particular opportunity to ‘wax lyrical’ about the human condition. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Madame Bovary* are notable for their tragic and beautiful depictions of suicide. Kundera, however, spurns such sentimental illusions. For every romantic image Jaromil conjures, Kundera contrasts details designed to disrupt. Jaromil has the idea of lying down on “the frozen concrete” and allowing death to envelop him “from below”. However, he finds that the “concrete was [...] cold” and that “after a few minutes his bottom was numb” (300). Soon after, we are told that he “felt an urge to urinate”, that with “numb, clumsy fingers he opened his fly” and that he “saw how the hand holding his penis was trembling” (300). Such details of bodily frailty and the immediacy of basic bodily functions are designed to undermine Jaromil’s lyrical vision.

Jaromil is not the only character in *Life is Elsewhere* who is prone to grandiloquent notions; his mother, who rewrites the ordinary event of her son’s conception to make it appear more poetic, is equally guilty of covering over the banality of her suffering with lofty illusions. Maman’s tragic vision of herself is based around the fact that her husband had disappeared during the war. Shortly after his disappearance, says the narrator,

Maman received an official notification from the Gestapo that her husband had been arrested. Toward the end of the war, another official notification arrived, to the effect that her husband had died in a concentration camp. Her marriage may have been a sorry affair but her widowhood was grand and noble. [...] Maman walked with a prouder posture [...] as if she carried on her head [...] the invisible urn of her husband (93-4).

After playing the part of a war widow for several years, however, Maman eventually learns that her husband's disappearance was the result, not of an act of heroic resistance, but of an affair he had been having with a Jewish girl during the war. This moment of revelation destroys the tragic vision she had sustained up until that point in the narrative. "There was no longer any reason for her to walk proudly erect", says the narrator, "there was nothing left to make her carry her head high" (103). While there is glory in being the widow of a war hero, there is none in being a deceived wife. "All the moral pathos" which had accompanied her in her widowhood evaporates, and she is left with her unadorned suffering: "The suffering Maman was feeling had no glory at all. It was a mean pain, hunched miserably inside her" (103).

Kundera's technique in representing the banality of the suffering of his characters is to point to a discrepancy between the situation of the character as that character imagines it, and the hidden "reality" of the situation as revealed by the narrator. In Jaromil's imagination the experience of suffering is mediated by images derived from poetry or romance novels. Just as Jaromil "could not imagine an act of physical love" except as it is presented to him in literature (198), he is incapable of imagining his suffering in any other way than that which is suggested to him by the romantic tales of dead poets. Jaromil thus fits perfectly Bertrand Very's description of Kundera's protagonists, in that he "wanders through an unreal world, one full of fantasies", and "does not see reality as it is, but apprehends it through the filter of his own subjectivity" (1989:81). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera introduced the concept of "poetic memory" in order to explain this phenomenon. "The brain", he writes, "appears to possess a special area which we might call *poetic memory*, and which records everything that charms or touches us, that makes our lives beautiful" (208). While this concept was not fully developed until the later novel, it nevertheless provides a useful tool for understanding the character of Jaromil, whose mind appears as a mishmash of poetic images; a "mirrored house of poetry" (289), to borrow the words of the narrator of *Life Is Elsewhere*. Within his prison house made of verse, Jaromil is cut off from the world around him. Kundera thus provides an important insight into the constraining function of the lyrical attitude. Trapped within the fictional world he has created, Jaromil is unable to see or function in the real world.

Jaromil's situation is not unique. There are many individuals in the modern world who surround themselves with illusions in order to avoid seeing life as it really is; a fact recognised by Jorge Luis

Borges. Borges proposes that humans have “dreamt the world”, in that it appears to them in images of their own invention which are then confused with reality. But the fictional nature of these images is revealed, he argues, in fissures in which elements incompatible with the image can be glimpsed:

“The greatest magician (Novalis has memorably written) would be the one who would cast over himself a spell so complete that he would take his own phantasmagorias as autonomous appearances. Would not this be our case?’ I conjecture that this is so. We [...] have dreamt the world [...] but in its architecture we have allowed tenuous and eternal crevices [...] which tell us it is false (Borges, 1964:243).

Our lyrical notions of suffering are like Novalis’ phantasmagorias. They also contain cracks which provide the possibility of their own undoing. Kundera’s aim as a novelist is to find the cracks in human illusions, and to peer through them to reveal what is hidden beneath. In *The Art of the Novel*, he claims that “writing means breaking through a wall behind which something immutable [...] lies hidden in darkness (1993:115). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the character Sabina bases her artistic technique on the same principle. This technique has been described by critics such as John O’Brien (1995) as a type of deconstruction. On the surface of her canvases she paints landscapes and steel factories constructed in accordance with socialist realist imagery. Then, in the midst of these images, she paints “cracks” opening up to reveal another, more disturbing, reality that “lurked” beneath (63). Sabina explains her paintings to Tereza in the following way: “On the surface an intelligible lie; underneath the unintelligible truth showing through” (254). In *Life is Elsewhere*, the role of the narrator is to mimic this artistic technique. The narrator must scratch away at the lyrical surface of Jaromil’s mind in order to discover what it leaves out, what it denies. The lyrical images through which Jaromil imagines his suffering correspond to the socialist realist imagery Sabina produces on the surface of her canvases. They are the intelligible lie, the sublime surface which denies its other - the banal or the mundane. The version of events produced by the narrator, on the other hand, a version based on the physical details of Jaromil’s suffering, corresponds to the more disturbing “reality” which appears through the “cracks” in the surface. In describing Jaromil’s attempted suicide, the narrator constantly refers to the physical discomfort he is feeling. A number of times he interrupts the protagonist’s poetic musings to tell the reader that Jaromil’s “teeth were chattering, his throat hurt, he could not swallow, he kept sneezing” and that he “felt an urge to urinate” (300). The point in listing such mundane details

is to draw attention to the banal “reality” of Jaromil’s suffering, which is cloaked by the “surface lie” of his sublime vision, and to disrupt that smooth surface by pointing to the vulgar bodily sensations it excludes. Throughout the novel, Jaromil’s lyrical illusions about his suffering are forced to compete with a plethora of more mundane representations. In addition to the interruptions of the narrator, he must also contend with the contrary versions of events provided by other characters. On a number of occasions, Kundera has other characters point out the quite ordinary nature of his suffering. For example, when Jaromil does eventually die (possibly as a result of the cold he had caught while out on the balcony) Kundera has another character provide an account of his death which seems designed to debunk his lofty notions once and for all. When a female character asks about the circumstances of his death, and whether it had been a suicide, the man she is talking to smiles and replies: “Oh, no, nothing like that. He just got sick and died” (278-9).

Jaromil is one of Kundera’s great liars, and his lyrical attitude is shown to be at the heart of his attempts to deceive both himself and those around him. However, it is not only on grounds of truthfulness, but on grounds of behavioural consequences that his lyrical attitude is condemned. Central to Kundera’s critique of lyricism is the proposition that the ideas and images we are subject to have an impact on the way we behave in the real world. In *Immortality*, the character Paul says that “respect for tragedy is [...] dangerous” (134). “War can only exist in a world of tragedy”, he says. “Can you imagine today’s French youth rushing fervently to fight for their country?” (135) According to Kundera, lyrical illusions in literature have a psychological impact on the reader, influencing their actions and the choices they make. Would Jaromil have been so eager to attempt suicide if it hadn’t been for the stock of romantic images he held on the subject? Or more importantly, would he have sacrificed his innocent girlfriend to the police if it weren’t for his desperate desire to act a part in a real life tragedy. Kundera seems to challenge the reader to confront these types of questions, and in so doing, to consider the ethical consequences of the lyrical attitude. Jaromil’s attempts to turn his life into a tragic masterpiece would have been merely ridiculous if his efforts had extended no further than his farcical attempts to freeze himself to death on the balcony. But his lyrical fervour also leads him to orchestrate the suffering of his girlfriend for the sheer morbid pleasure he derives from feeling himself part of a tragic spectacle:



Yes, that's literally what he told himself as he descended the long flight of stairs toward the street: I have entered the realm of tragedy. [...] He was aware that his girl was now in the hands of strange men, that she was at their mercy, that she was in danger, and that interrogation lasting several days was surely no laughing matter. [...] All these ideas and images filled him with a kind of sweet, fragrant and majestic substance, so that he felt himself growing bigger and striding through the streets like an animated monument of grief (264).

Jaromil's fantasy is morbid and sadistic, but it is lyrical as well. By betraying his girlfriend to the police, he turns, as Květoslav Chvatik has noted, a mundane relationship into "the vision of the great love which [...] he will tragically sacrifice on the altar of the revolution" (1989:31). By providing the reader with this insight into the mind of his protagonist, Kundera presents us with the greatest possible indictment of the lyrical sensibility: it allows for the justification of innocent suffering (in much the same way as the Christian theodicy), it even demands it in the name of a beautiful idea.

The question of the justification of suffering has been a common thread running through this thesis, in that all of the authors discussed here have addressed it in one way or another. Whereas Dostoevsky had questioned the role of the Christian theodicy in justifying innocent suffering and Camus had investigated the role of Communist doctrine in doing the same, in Kundera we have the converging of these two strands under a common aesthetic roof. Kundera's wide-ranging critique of the lyrical attitude allows us to see retrospectively both religious doctrine and political ideology as manifestations of the lyrical sensibility. He invites us also to consider literature in the same vein. Some literature, like religious and political ideology, has also tended to justify suffering in the name of beautiful ideas. This, as Kundera demonstrates in many of his novels (but particularly in *Life is Elsewhere*), makes its influence very dangerous and very difficult to combat, because the appeal it makes to our aesthetic sensibilities renders it immune, to a certain extent, to rational argument. If the justification of suffering along lyrical lines is to be combated, what is needed, and Kundera seems to have an innate understanding of this, is a response in the form of a particular aesthetic which would counteract beautiful images of suffering with contrary images designed to provoke an awareness of its ridiculous, vulgar and mundane reality. This, in a sense, is Kundera's project. Kundera, as has been stated, is avowedly antilyrical in his own depictions of suffering, and his antilyrical attitude forms in large part the basis for the concept of

banality which emerges from his work. A detailed examination of this concept and the role it plays in his representations of suffering will be the subject of the following chapters.

## Chapter 8:

# From the Sublime to the Ridiculous

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In the previous chapter I provided a general overview of the concept of banality informing the representation of suffering in Kundera's work, a concept which, as has been discussed, is comprised of three primary elements: the ridiculous, the vulgar and the mundane. I have discussed thus far a number of factors which may have contributed to the formation of this tri-dimensional concept, including the social and political context in which Kundera was writing, the literary influences he was subject to, and most importantly, his own antilyrical attitude. I will turn now to an exploration of the first of the elements which make up this concept of banality: the ridiculous. This chapter will examine the ridiculous quality of everyday life and the sometimes farcical nature of human endeavour as recurring themes in Kundera's work, and central aspects in his overall vision of the banality of suffering.

### **Laughter and the Lyric Tradition**

The central importance of laughter in Kundera's work is suggested by the titles of a number of his novels and stories. The word "laugh" appears in the title of one short story ("Nobody Will Laugh") and in the titles of two of his books (*Laughable Loves*, and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*), while it is at least suggested in the title of a third book (*The Joke*). Richard T. Gaughan has commented on the significance of laughter in Kundera's work: "Comedy and laughter", he writes, "are often important thematic concerns, as well as prominent qualities, of Milan Kundera's novels and stories" (Gaughan, 1992:1). According to Gaughan, laughter is a way of resisting the conformity of accepted thoughts and opinions: "[It] is a way of liberating ourselves from the oppressiveness of our ideas and beliefs. We laugh, as Bergson points out, when we see the fluidity of life outstrip some rigid definition or idea of how life should be" (Gaughan, 1992:3). According to both Bergson and Gaughan, laughter is necessary for any healthy society. "[L]aughter", argues Gaughan, "is an almost biological tool to assure the continued growth and development of the social group against all tendencies to inertia, especially the inertia of substituting fixed ideas for the dynamic flow of thought and life itself" (1992:3-4). A sick

society, he suggests, is a society in which a set of rigid ideas have come to dictate “the way experience [...] is to be ordered and understood” (1992:4). The totalitarian regime of Communist Czechoslovakia, in which Kundera has set many of his novels, was one such “sick” society. Klima, the protagonist of “Nobody Will Laugh”, exists in a climate in which thought and behaviour are dictated by the “rigid formulas” of a “pervasive bureaucracy” (Gaughan, 1992:4). “Klima’s sense of humour”, as Gaughan argues, “is [...] his way of breaking with the ‘unanimous agreement of others’ so that he can preserve his individuality and freedom in a world that demands both as a sacrifice for an abstract and narrowly defined social order” (1992:6). It is important to note, however, that in Kundera’s novels laughter acts as an antidote against all forms of dogmatism, not just dogmatism of the political type. If the liberating power of laughter can help free an individual from those beliefs and opinions dictated by invasive politics, it can do the same with ideas and opinions dictated by literature.

The lyrical vision of suffering, as has been discussed, has been enormously pervasive in Western Society - it draws its inspiration and support not only from lyric poetry, but from the traditions of tragedy and hagiography as well. In *Immortality*, Paul argues that “from the beginning of history man has known only a tragic world and has not been capable of stepping out of it” (135). Many of Kundera’s characters see themselves as martyrs or tragic heroes/heroines. In *Slowness*, he tells the story of an unnamed woman who, having been insulted by Henry Kissinger, decides to write a book in which she portrays herself as a martyr sacrificed in the name of a great cause (Kissinger’s political career). While she may not consciously recall the experiences of a particular saint or martyr, she nevertheless imagines herself as belonging to the ranks of such divine sufferers. “She was convinced she was among the elect”, says the narrator. “Being among the elect”, he explains,

is a theological notion that means: not as a matter of merit but by a supernatural judgement, a free, even capricious, determination of God, a person is chosen for something exceptional and extraordinary. From such a conviction the saints drew the strength to withstand the most dreadful tortures (42-3).

By imagining her comparatively trivial suffering as a type of martyrdom, the unnamed woman lends it value and beauty. Many of us, according to Kundera, attempt to avoid the demeaning nature of our trivial and ordinary lives by imagining our suffering to be surrounded in a mantle of glory. “[E]ach of

us suffers”, says the narrator of *Slowness*, “from the baseness of his too commonplace life [...]. All of us have known the illusion [...] that we are worthy of [a] higher level, that we are predestined and chosen for it” (43).

Despite her sublime illusions, however, the woman’s situation is patently ridiculous. Even before telling it, the narrator reveals that her story had been found lying on a shelf in a private library somewhere, bearing the label “Masterpieces of Unintentional Humour” (39). In the retelling of her story, the woman appears not as a real martyr, but only as a parody of one (like Jaromil is a parody of the dead poet); and her story (like his) evokes not horror, but laughter. The humour of her situation undermines her tragic pretensions and makes her appear ridiculous. For all of his sublime notions, Jaromil is also clearly ridiculous. At times he even seems to become aware of this fact. While he is contemplating suicide out on the balcony, he hears “derisive laughter coming through the window” (298). This laughter unsettles him. He becomes “terrified by the thought that the door might suddenly open to reveal grinning faces” (299). He begins to worry that his suicide might fail, and the idea enters his head that, “while suicide is tragic, unsuccessful suicide is ridiculous” (298-9). Laughter thus destabilises the lyrical edifice of his illusions, creating cracks that open up to allow a sobering glimpse of reality.

In his study *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Sigmund Freud examines the subversive potential of humour and laughter. His approach is highly useful here. Freud dealt with humour in the context of a repressive moralistic society, and he demonstrated the way in which humour allowed one to break with the rules of that society. Kundera also dealt with humour in its relationship to repression, as will be discussed. According to Freud, jokes work in a similar way to dreams and slips of the tongue, allowing the expression of repressed thoughts and desires. Michael Billig describes Freud’s theory as follows:

According to Freud, there is a fundamental conflict between the demands of social life and our instinctual urges [...]. Freud argued that what is repressed returns to haunt us in disguise. Jokes, like dreams and slips of the tongue, bear the traces of repressed desires. Sexual and aggressive thoughts, which are forbidden in polite society, can be shared as if they are not serious. Humour then becomes a way of rebelling against the demands of social order (Billig, 2002:452).

It is important to note, however, that jokes do not present a direct challenge to the social order. According to Freud, they merely act as the cover under which such challenges can be made. Richard Wollheim (1991) explains how this process works: “The joker makes use of the joke in order to divert attention from the impulse that seeks expression, and the joke is expected to secure this for him by the discharge of energy it can secure” (1991:262).<sup>37</sup>

Freud’s theories may be applied productively to Kundera’s work in order to extend Gaughan’s analysis of his use of humour. To begin, it is necessary to first ascertain which repressed material is seeking expression in his work, and what type of order is being challenged. Within Kundera’s novels the ridiculous, vulgar and mundane realities of human suffering may be understood as an unconscious knowledge repressed by the order of the lyric tradition. This knowledge is then released through the use of jokes made by the characters or the narrator, or indirectly by the author through the use of parody and other such comic devices. The material of the joke has no necessary relationship to the repressed material; the joke, as Freud argued, can be anything (even simply a kick in the pants), as long as it produces laughter. This laughter enables the surreptitious release of the repressed urge or thought and implicitly condones the transgression it entails.

In Kundera’s novels laughter is often contained within the narrative. In having the characters at the party laugh when Jaromil receives his kick in the pants, the author ensures the subversive intention of his “joke” is realised. In having them laugh, Kundera is in fact having them condone his own transgression of the rules of the lyric tradition (which prohibit the revelation of the ridiculous, vulgar and mundane aspects of human suffering). Laughter, as Wollheim notes, is essential to the subversive purpose of the joke. Failure to laugh on the part of the hearer is like a censure - stopping the discharge of the repressed impulse (Wollheim, 1991:263). Of course laughter, while it has a subversive potential, is not inherently liberating. Billig points out that mockery and ridicule may also play a part in maintaining the status quo: “[I]f we break social codes, we then fear that others might laugh at our infringements, mocking our inappropriate behaviour. Thus, fear of mockery may be the key means for maintaining social order” (2002:454). There is a lot of mockery and cynicism in Kundera’s novels; in

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<sup>37</sup> Wollheim is referring here specifically to what Freud calls tendentious jokes. For a discussion of the distinction between jests, jokes, and tendentious jokes in Freud see Wollheim, R. (1991) “Freud and the Understanding of Art”, in J.Neu (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

fact, Fred Misurella claims to have noticed it in “almost all his portraits of human suffering” (1993:12). The laughter to which Kundera subjects his characters, however, is not the sadistic kind Billig refers to. Kundera’s novels mock the lyrical order and those who attempt to maintain it, not those who seek to transgress it.

Kundera is aware of the disruptive potential of humour, and has often reflected upon it in his novels and essays. He discusses, for example, the different functions of comedy and tragedy in relation to suffering: “By providing us with the lovely illusion of human greatness”, writes Kundera, “the tragic brings us consolation. The comic is crueler, it brutally reveals the meaninglessness of everything” (1993:24). In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera acknowledges his indebtedness to Kafka for his ideas on tragedy and laughter. Laughter, he explains, is the reason that the situation of the engineer in Kafka’s *The Castle* appears to us as ridiculous rather than tragic: “The engineer loses his homeland, and everyone laughs” (1993:105). In many of Kundera’s novels and short stories, laughter is associated with the destruction of pretentious illusions. Jaromil is shaken from his belief in the glory of his suffering by the laughter of his enemies. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Michelle and Gabrielle lose confidence in themselves and are made to feel ridiculous by the laughter of their classmates and their beloved teacher. In *The Joke*, Kostka finally understands that his situation is not tragic, but ridiculous. “Oh God”, he cries, “is it really so? Am I really so wretchedly laughable?” (246). Klima, in “Nobody Will Laugh”, comes to the same realisation. “Only after a while did it occur to me”, he says, “that my story was not of the tragic sort, but rather of the comic variety” (92). In all of these cases, Kundera demonstrates the way in which laughter can create cracks in one’s tragic illusions through which another, more ridiculous, reality is revealed. “Kundera’s strategies of laughter and playfulness”, writes Christine Kiebuszinska, “attenuate, lighten and subvert meaning and deprive the sense of tragedy of its finality” (1992: 74). The tragic visions some of his characters entertain in relation to their suffering cannot withstand the subversive power of the laughter to which they are subjected.

### **Humiliation**

In *Life is Elsewhere*, Kundera’s narrator attempts to determine just what it is that makes Jaromil’s suffering ridiculous, while the suffering of the poet Lermontov appears tragic. “Then what

distinguishes the tragic from the ridiculous?” he asks. “What distinguishes pettiness from greatness anyway?” (298-9). In his seventh novel, *Slowness*, he returns to this question. What is it, he asks in this novel, that makes a person’s suffering worthy of veneration at one moment, and contempt the next? In *Slowness*, a group of entomologists gather for a conference at a country chateau near the Seine river in France. Among those assembled is a Czech scientist, Monsieur Cechoripsky. Although he has come to the conference to present a paper on his discovery of a new type of fly, Cechoripsky arouses the interest of the company for an entirely different reason: he is a victim. During the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia (1968-1989) he was forced to work as a labourer, having been driven from the Entomological Institute for opposing the Communist Regime. However, the occupation having ended, he has returned to his research as the newly appointed minister of the academy of sciences, and is present at the conference addressing members of the scientific community after an exile of twenty years. This may perhaps explain his rather passionate opening remarks as he takes his place at the speaker’s stand:

Excuse me, my dear ladies and gentlemen, for expressing my emotion, which I did not anticipate and which has caught me by surprise [...]. I come from a country where, merely for saying aloud what he thought, a man could be deprived of the very meaning of his life, since, for a man of science the meaning of his life is nothing but his science. As you know, tens of thousands of men, the entire intelligentsia of my country, were driven from their positions after the tragic summer of 1968. Just six months ago, I was still a construction worker (55).

He continues in this manner, and when he has finished he stands there “awkwardly tall” with “tears welling in his eyes” (56). The audience is “moved” (56); they stand and applaud, and some of them weep too. Then, when the applause thins, he thanks his audience, bows and returns to his place. The narrator tells us that, at that moment, Cechoripsky was aware that “he [was] living the greatest moment of his life, the moment of glory [...] he [felt] grand and beautiful, he [felt] famous, and he want[ed] his walk to his seat to be long and never-ending” (57). At this point, Cechoripsky appears as a modern day tragic hero. His suffering is lit up by camera crews and photographers. In the media spotlight, his suffering appears terrible yet sublime; we imagine him, says the narrator, as a tragic figure standing



alone on the stage of history “while gunfire clatters in the background and the Archangel of Death hovers overhead” (54).

In his essay on the function of laughter in Kundera’s work, Gaughan offers the following definition of tragedy: “Tragedy”, he argues, “requires that some value be accorded the individual and his suffering” (1992:8). The fact that those present at the conference are moved by his suffering is enough, according to this definition, to make the Czech scientist a tragic figure. However, we can be assured that he will not be allowed to remain so for long. In *Life is Elsewhere*, Jaromil’s “kick in the pants” arouses the laughter of those around him, and turns his private tragedy into a comedy. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the same thing occurs. After they had been kicked in the behind by their classmate, Gabrielle and Michelle hear “their beloved teacher laughing behind their backs” (73). The laughter of their teacher and fellow students strips their suffering of any tragic value it might otherwise have attained. They feel ridiculous, humiliated. “Teardrops fell from their eyes like water from a faucet”, says the narrator. “The feeling of humiliation was so painful they began writhing as if overcome with stomach cramps” (74). Similarly, the laughter of his colleagues will destroy any sense of pride the Czech scientist had attached to his suffering, and in a few short moments he will move from the tragic to the ridiculous.

After Cechoripsky resumes his seat, there is a moment of silence from the audience. The conference then continues, while he becomes lost in his thoughts. Then, after some time has elapsed, he realises “good Lord, he forgot to give his paper!” His “cheeks are burning”, says the narrator, and he “feels ridiculous” (58). For a brief moment, Cechoripsky experiences humiliation. But the moment is too brief, and soon he returns to pondering the tragic beauty of his situation. “[I]t’s true he is ridiculous”, he thinks to himself, “but there is nothing negative, nothing shameful or disagreeable, in that; the ridiculousness that has befallen him intensifies still more the inherent melancholy of his life, renders him still sadder, and hence still grander and more beautiful” (58). Up until this moment, the audience had shown nothing but respect for their colleague’s suffering, and it seems that as long as they refrain from laughing, it is still possible for him to maintain his tragic illusions. However, the narrator tells us that ever since Cechoripsky forgot to give his paper, “the entomologists [had] all been dying to laugh” and that they had only been held back by “their scruples” (68&69). It is not long, however, before a

situation arises which will provide the opportunity for their laughter to be unleashed. As the assembly gather in the foyer of the hotel, Cechoripsky is approached by a politician named Berck. Berck is a man who craves the moral spotlight, someone who attaches himself to causes simply for the glory of being seen to be in a position morally superior to that of his political opponents. He is thus very eager to associate himself publicly with the suffering of the Czech scientist. As the news cameras surround them, Berck makes the following speech:

And may I take this opportunity to announce my proposal to establish a Franco-Czech Entomological Association [...] I've just discussed this with my colleague from Prague [...] who has declared himself delighted with the idea of ornamenting this association with the name of a great exiled poet of the last century who will forever symbolize the friendship between our two peoples. [...] Adam Mickiewicz. The life of this poet stands as a lesson that will remind us that everything we do, be it poetry or science, is a revolt. [...] You have proved this by your life, by your sacrifices, by your sufferings [...] (67).

Berck continues with his speech, talking about suffering and the courage of oppressed people, and as he does so, he grows more and more pleased with the inspiration and beauty of his remarks. But all the while, the Czech scientist, like a persistent fly, has been trying to interrupt: "But Mickiewicz wasn't ..." he protests, trying to alert Berck to the fact that Mickiewicz was not a Czech, "permit me to tell you that Mickiewicz was not ...". Finally Berck loses his patience and answers derisively: "I know, my dear colleague, I know just as well as you do that Mickiewicz was not an entomologist. In fact, very rarely are poets entomologists. But despite this handicap, they are the pride of the entire human race, of which, if you'll allow me, entomologists, yourself included, are a part" (68). Finally the gathering is given an opportunity to laugh at this man who had been "so moved by himself" that he had "forgotten to read his paper" (68). The laughter of his colleagues comes like an assault on Cechoripsky's pride. "[W]hat has happened to the respect his colleagues were showing him only ten minutes earlier?" he wonders. "How is it possible that they are laughing, that they are permitting themselves to laugh?" (69). Cechoripsky moves away from the crowd and returns to his room. He is "dejected", his "soul [is] bruised" and he asks himself "can people really move so easily from veneration to contempt?" (69). The fragile illusion of his own tragic status could only be maintained whilst he felt himself the object

of his colleague's veneration. His suffering, as Gaughan argued, needed to be acknowledged and valued. The difference between suffering that is tragic and suffering that is ridiculous appears, therefore, to be based not on any inherent quality of the suffering itself, but on the attitude others take in relation to it. While he basked in the admiring applause of his colleagues, Cechoripsky felt himself the most moving of tragic figures, but when he was met with laughter, he felt ridiculous. The laughter of the crowd has a subversive effect on his tragic pretensions. Berck's quip provides the opportunity for this laughter to be released, but the real target of the joke is the tragic tradition, on which Cechoripsky bases his understanding of himself.

In his book *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner examines the rise and fall of the tragic tradition in Western literature.<sup>38</sup> The concept of tragedy first appeared, he argues, with the Ancient Greeks. At the centre of Greek tragedy, according to Steiner, is the individual sufferer, tormented by "a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell, or [his] own animal blood" (1961:9). His suffering is great, and "far in excess of [his] guilt" (Steiner, 1961:9). However, within the tragic tradition, suffering is also the source of the individual's redemption:

[I]n the very excess of his suffering lies man's claim to dignity. Powerless and broken, a blind beggar hounded out of the city, he assumes a new grandeur. Man is ennobled by the vengeful spite or injustice of the gods (1961:9-10).

According to Steiner, this basic sense of the tragic, in which the individual attains greatness through suffering, continued to reemerge at various moments in Western literature. He finds it in the medieval era with Chaucer and Dante, in the Elizabethan period in the works of Shakespeare, in the lyric poetry of the Romantic era, in German literature between 1790-1840, and in Russian drama at the turn of the twentieth century. However, he insists that the appearance of tragedy in literature required a specific set of conditions, and did not occur other than at the times and places he specified. These conditions, he argues, are not present within the modern era. The conditions necessary for the existence of tragedy

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<sup>38</sup> While Steiner was writing over forty years ago, the insights he provides into the construction of suffering in tragic literature are still relevant. As will be discussed in the following pages, the concepts of suffering propagated by the tragic tradition continue to have an impact on the way in which some human beings conceive of their suffering, despite what Steiner sees as the death of the particular art form.

are open to a fair amount of speculation. Steiner claims they have to do with “elements of language, material circumstances, and individual talent” (1961:106-7). Kundera develops his own views on the subject. In *Immortality*, he has one of his characters address the matter directly: “Do you know what is the eternal precondition of tragedy?” he asks. “The existence of ideals that are more important than human life” (134). Rather than focusing on the formal aspects of tragic drama, Kundera defines it in terms of its attitudes and concepts (in much the same way as he defines the lyric tradition). For him, the tragic tradition seems to be predicated on an approach to the world which is inherently metaphysical (in that it values ideas more than human beings). Its conceptual underpinnings are found in notions such as nobility, greatness, and solemnity. Tragedy and banality are thus polar opposites; they cannot exist in the same place. In Kundera’s novels, tragic notions play a central role in the ways in which some of his characters think about their suffering, but these notions are shown to be increasingly difficult to sustain. In Kundera’s novels it is through laughter that tragedy is destroyed and the banal revealed.

In *Immortality* the protagonist argues that “[t]he age of tragedy can only be ended by the revolt of frivolity” (135). Tragedy is based on the idea that human beings may attain greatness through suffering. As such, it requires that we take ourselves seriously. Frivolity works against the grain of tragedy, as it trivialises human life and human endeavours. “Nowadays”, says Paul,

people no longer know Beethoven’s ninth from concerts but from four lines of the *Hymn to Joy* which they hear everyday in the ad for Bella perfume. That doesn’t shock me. Tragedy will be driven from the world like a ludicrous old actress clutching her heart and declaiming in a hoarse voice (134-5).

The decline of tragedy in the modern world is one of the themes of *Slowness*. The suffering Cechoripsky experiences is antithetical to the suffering of the great figures of tragic drama; while they are ennobled by their suffering, he is diminished. The respect his colleagues had initially shown him was an acknowledgment of his tragic status, but this status is revoked by their laughter. Cechoripsky is a ridiculous character; he is made so by his tragic pretensions. There is something funny about human beings seriously contemplating their own greatness. And since tragedy is built on the assumption of human greatness, perhaps there is also something potentially or even inherently funny, or ridiculous, in

tragedy. The tragic and the comic are traditionally thought of as opposites; a conventional tragedy would never allow its protagonist to appear ridiculous. In Shakespeare, for example, minor characters figure in the comic scenes, leaving the King Lear and the Othellos alone with the burden of their great suffering. Within the tragic tradition, the comic side of the individual is denied or displaced in order to maintain the illusion of human greatness in relation to the central characters. Kundera destroys such tragic illusions by introducing an element of humour. The ridiculous side of tragedy asserts itself in his fiction in the same way in which realities antithetical to the ideals of socialist realism assert themselves in Sabina's paintings. Cechoripsky's fears and insecurities are plain to see for those around him, it only takes the laughter of others to force him to acknowledge what he had repressed. For the entire period of the Soviet occupation he had been forced to suffer a banal and ordinary existence; the only way he could deal with this was to imagine himself as a heroic figure in a tragic drama. The laughter of his colleagues destroys his illusions. It may be argued that this is cruel; however, it is cruel only insofar as the destruction of illusions is cruel. The loss of illusions is undoubtedly a cause of anguish for human beings, but it is, as Kundera demonstrates, also a necessary step towards self awareness.

### *Litost*

In the Czech language, the type of pain endured by characters such as Jaromil and Cechoripsky has a special name - *litost*. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera defines this as "a state of torment caused by a sudden insight into one's own miserable self" (122). *Litost* thus describes an emotion opposite to that inspired by tragedy, which demands respect for the greatness of human suffering. *Litost* is bound up with the insecurities human beings have about themselves. The student in Part 5 of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, for example, experiences *litost* because his girlfriend can swim faster than he can. "One day the student went swimming with his girlfriend", says the narrator.

She was a top-notch athlete; he could barely keep afloat. He had trouble holding his breath under water, and was forced to thrash his way forward, jerking his head back and forth above the surface. The girl was crazy about him and tactfully kept to his speed. But as their swim was coming to an end, she felt the need to give her sporting instincts free rein, and sprinted to the other shore. The student tried to pick up his tempo too,

but swallowed many mouthfuls of water. He felt humiliated, exposed for the weakling he was; he felt the resentment, the special sorrow which can only be called *litost*. He recalled his sickly childhood - no physical exercise, no friends, nothing but Mama's ever-watchful eye - and sank into utter, all encompassing despair (121).

Kundera claims that the word *litost* has no equivalent in the English language. Perhaps it can be roughly approximated, however, by the term humiliation. Humiliation involves a loss of dignity and self respect. It is the painful awareness that, in the eyes of others, you are ridiculous. Humiliation is a common sort of suffering, and most of Kundera's characters experience it at one time or another. It is a type of suffering that is, however, most often ignored in literature belonging to the lyric tradition, because it goes against the grain of the grand and sublime notions popularised by such literature.

While humiliation is not often acknowledged by certain types of literature, it is nevertheless a very common sort of suffering, and is in this sense banal. People suffer more often from the trivial and mundane details of ordinary life than from monumental and tragic disasters. Kundera understands this fact, and that is why laughter plays such an important role in his novels. Laughter is a way of acknowledging the ridiculous and mundane nature of human existence, from which we can all potentially suffer. Gaughan argues that an understanding of suffering is reached, in Kundera's novels, precisely through laughter. "[U]nderstanding takes place", he argues, "on the other side of the disorder laughter creates, where the shared suffering of being human momentarily appears" (1992:1-2). By laughing, we destroy the comforting illusion of human greatness, and we see ourselves as poor pathetic creatures who suffer in life with no grandeur and no purpose. To understand Jaromil's suffering is to apprehend this; he suffers because he is ordinary and ridiculous. Similarly, to understand Cechoripky is to understand that he suffers from "the triviality [...] and baseness of his too commonplace life" (*Slowness*, 43). Laughter represents a recognition of this fact. It is therefore not only destructive (in the sense of shattering illusions), it is also productive in that it allows us to recognise a previously repressed source of suffering. Suffering does not only come from great tragedies - we also suffer from the ridiculous and trivial circumstances of our everyday lives. In acknowledging this fact, and in fact emphasising it in his fiction, Kundera creates a crack in the edifice of those lyrical illusions which attempt to disguise the banal realities of modern suffering. Through his focus on the ridiculous and

petty nature of the human predicament, he reveals one important aspect of the banality of suffering in the modern world.

## Chapter 9:

# The Vulgarities of Suffering

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The previous chapter looked at the way in which Kundera creates an impression of the banality of human suffering through his focus on the ridiculous. This chapter turns to an examination of the second aspect of the concept of banality which emerges from his work: vulgarity. Vulgarity is an element of Kundera's fiction which has often been remarked upon. "I showed the manuscript of *The Joke* to a friend", he writes in *The Art of the Novel*. "He berated me sharply for being vulgar, for defiling Helena's human dignity" (Kundera, 1993:152). Kundera's understanding of vulgarity, as has been stated, is complex. This chapter sets out to provide a detailed discussion of his particular understanding of vulgarity and the role it plays in his work, and an examination of the way in which it contributes to his overall depiction of the banality of suffering.

### Body and Soul

"You know I detest vulgarity" (94), says Immaculata, one of the characters in Kundera's novel *Slowness*. In uttering this protest, she seems to be speaking on behalf of all of Kundera's female characters. While it may be tempting to accuse Kundera of clinging to tired feminine stereotypes in the representation of his female characters, his depiction of their aversion to vulgarity is not as simplistic as it first appears. In a number of his novels, Kundera presents a detailed analysis of vulgarity and examines why it is often offensive - to society in general, and to women in particular. In order to understand the repugnance Kundera's female characters feel for the vulgar and obscene, it is useful to refer to his own definition of vulgarity. "The realm of the vulgar", he writes in *The Art of the Novel*, "lies down below, where the body and its needs hold sway" (Kundera, 1993:153). "Vulgarity", as he understands it, is "the humiliating submission of the soul to the rule of the down-below" (Kundera, 1993:153). A vulgar type of suffering, according to this definition, is a suffering in which the sublime notions of the soul give way to intrusions from the body.



The classical western opposition between the body and the soul is an important one in Kundera's work, and it plays a central role in his understanding of vulgarity. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* he devotes two chapters to its exploration. The body / soul distinction has been subjected to much analysis by seminal thinkers including Rene Descartes, Friedrich Nietzsche, Simone de Beauvoir, and Julia Kristeva, but it is de Beauvoir's classic feminist interpretation which is most useful here as a starting point for theorising the attitude of Kundera's female characters to their bodies. Under the influence of patriarchal thinking, claims de Beauvoir, women have been taught to associate themselves with their bodies, while at the same time, the body has been made to appear the inferior term in the opposition. This idea, she argues in *The Second Sex*, has been given credence in Western society through Christian mythology:

The Christian is divided within himself; the separation of body and soul, of life and spirit is complete [...]. Evil is an absolute reality and the flesh is sin. And of course, since woman remains always the Other, it is not held that reciprocally male and female are both flesh: the flesh that is for the Christian the hostile Other is precisely woman. In her the Christian finds incarnated the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. [...] All Christian literature strives to enhance the disgust that man can feel for woman (1988:199-200).

Despite the 30 years or more that separate the publication of *The Second Sex* from the release of Kundera's major works, de Beauvoir's analysis is useful in understanding the dilemmas his female characters encounter in relation to their physical selves. These female characters are more prone than their male counterparts to experience a sense of shame in connection with their bodies. All of Kundera's female characters struggle with their materiality and most experience a sense of shame and humiliation in relation to their bodies.

The negative attitude towards the body in western culture has had an enormous impact on traditional notions of suffering. Suffering is often thought of, especially in the literature of the lyric tradition, as a matter of either the soul or the heart (conceived of in poetic rather than biological terms). For example, when the narrator in *Anna Karenina* describes the "wounds of [the heroine's] tortured, cruelly throbbing heart" (798) he is not referring to a physical injury, but to something ethereal and

ungraspable. In lyrical literature, a soul's suffering is perceived of as lofty and sublime - a metaphysical experience that rarely involves the body. In Kundera's novels, on the other hand, suffering is shown to be at least as much a matter of the body as it is a matter of the soul. I do not mean to suggest, however, that Kundera makes a simplistic distinction between physical and spiritual injury. A physical injury can produce a suffering which is non-corporeal (for example, Jaromil feels his kick in the pants primarily as an injury to his pride), just as an injury which does not consist primarily of an assault on the body can produce corporeal effects (the humiliation experienced by the Czech scientist, for example, produces a burning in his cheeks). In the former case, there is an elevation of one's suffering, in which it is displaced from the body to the soul. In the latter case there is a degradation of one's suffering, involving a displacement from the lofty or sublime reaches of the soul to the realm of the body. A lofty suffering, a suffering of the soul, elevates the individual; it allows him/her to transcend the body, even if the original cause of the suffering was a physical injury. A vulgar suffering, on the other hand, reminds one of the body, even if it has not been injured.

In *Slowness*, Kundera creates a parody of the romantic stereotype of the suffering heroine through the character of Immaculata. "Beneath her white dress", says the narrator, "she bears the wound of an injustice, and she feels she is made greater by that injustice, made more beautiful by it as the characters in tragedies are made more beautiful by their suffering" (92-3). Initially, Immaculata's suffering is a suffering of the soul; it elevates her and makes her feel beautiful. However, whereas Tolstoy's Anna Karenina is surrounded by other characters who, by their words, thoughts and actions, reinforce her tragic self-conception, Kundera's heroine is accompanied by a young companion who has no intention of playing along with her lofty illusions. The young man quickly becomes tired of playing the role of villain in her tragic drama and decides to put a stop to it by doing "something [...] immensely vulgar and aggressive" (93). By uttering a few obscene remarks, he topples Immaculata from the sublime heights she had reached in contemplating her soul's suffering. "What do you mean, I no longer exist?" he asks her. "We fucked just this morning!" (93-4). While it causes her no physical pain, the vulgar reminder is enough to spoil her tragic pretensions.

Similarly, the shame Agnes experiences in *Immortality* when she menstruates one night and bloodies the sheets in the home of her parents' friends involves no physical injury, but is nevertheless bound up with her bodily functions. The suffering she experiences is thus vulgar and degrading. For the sixteen-

year-old Agnes, the stain on the sheets is glaring evidence of the ignominy of her body, something of which she is “mortally ashamed” (276). Shame, suggests Kundera, is intimately connected with an awareness of one’s body. “When someone discovers [their] physical self for the first time” says the narrator in *Immortality*, “the first and most important feeling that comes over [them] is [...] shame” (276). But why does one feel shame at being reminded of the body? Because the body and its needs, implies the narrator, are an affront to the lofty notions humanity holds about itself. As soon as she notices the stain on the sheets, all Agnes can think of is to erase this evidence of her physical nature. She slips “stealthily into the bathroom” (276) for some soap, and begins scrubbing at the stain. The more she scrubs, however, the bigger the stain and mark of her ignominy become. Of course it may be argued that Agnes is simply worried at having ruined her hosts’ sheets. However, the narrator insists that Agnes suffers primarily from the evidence and proof of her material nature, and not from any other cause. “Why was she so ashamed?” he asks,

[d]on’t all women suffer from monthly bleeding? Did she invent women’s genitals? Was she responsible for them? No. But responsibility has nothing to do with shame. If she had spilled some ink, for example, and ruined her hosts’ carpet and tablecloth, it would have been unpleasant and painful, but she wouldn’t have felt shame. The basis of shame is not some personal mistake of ours, but the ignominy, the humiliation we feel that we must be what we are without any choice in the matter, and that this humiliation is seen by everyone (276).

The fact that the evidence of her physical nature is witnessed by others is central here. Cechoripsky’s repressed insecurities about himself could remain hidden until the laughter of his colleagues brought them out into the open. Similarly, the anxiety Agnes holds about her body poses no great threat until it is exposed by the stain she leaves on the sheets. The identity of characters such as Agnes and Cechoripsky is tenuous and based on illusions which cover over what they seek to deny about themselves. These illusions can only be maintained through a sort of unwritten agreement with those around them to take the appearance of these illusions as fact. When this contract is broken through the recognition by others of what the character had sought to repress, identity is threatened.

For most of Kundera's female protagonists, identity is built on a denial of the body. Tereza (in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), Tamina (in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*), Helena (in *The Joke*) and Agnes (in *Immortality*) all suffer from a shame more or less directly connected with their bodies. When Tereza meets Tomas at his flat, she is mortified by the rumbling in her stomach; on the island with the children Tamina is distressed by her nakedness; hiding in the toilet, Helena is humiliated by the uncontrollable movements of her bowels; and at the home of her parents' friends, Agnes is ashamed of bleeding on the sheets. Suffering for these characters is a vulgar and humiliating experience, intimately connected with an awareness of the body.

It is instructive to contrast these characters to those in Dostoevsky's novels. Though suffering is generally shown to be a wretched and degrading experience for the men in his novels, the same is not always the case for the women. In fact, for some of Dostoevsky's female characters, suffering is actually portrayed as an experience that elevates them. This is a point Kundera has recognises in *Immortality*. The narrator argues that for Dostoevsky's women, "suffering [...] is the one feeling most worthy of respect: the value of all values" (226). Though he greatly exaggerates this point by neglecting to mention any of the instances in which Dostoevsky clearly demonstrates the base and degrading nature of suffering in relation to his female characters,<sup>39</sup> there is some validity in the argument. Kundera's narrator mentions, for example, that Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, "admires all women who suffer" (226).

When he saw a photograph of Nastasia Filipovna for the first time, he said: 'That woman must have suffered a great deal.' Those words determined right from the start, even before we saw her on the stage of the novel, that Nastasia Filipovna stood far higher than all the others. 'I am nothing, but you, you have suffered,' said the bewitched Myshkin to Nastasia in the fifteenth chapter of the first part (226).

For characters such as Nastasia Filipovna, suffering is an experience of the soul; to mention her body in relation to her suffering would completely alter its nature. The suffering of Kundera's female

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<sup>39</sup> For example, Elena Smith in *The Insulted and Injured* is ruined by poverty and forced to live a vulgar existence at the mercy of a Petersburg madam; while, as previously mentioned, in one of Ivan's stories of tortured children in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a female child is smeared with faeces and locked in an outhouse.

characters, on the other hand, is vulgar and tied up with their bodies. Nowhere is this more apparent than with Tereza in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. “Tereza was born of a rumbling of the stomach” says the narrator.

The first time she went to Tomas’s flat, her insides began to rumble. And no wonder: she had had nothing to eat since breakfast [...]. She felt terrible standing there in front of Tomas listening to her belly speak out. She felt like crying. [...] Tereza was therefore born of a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience (39-40).

Tereza grew up in a household in which vulgarity was the norm rather than the exception. “At home there was no such thing as shame”, says the narrator. “Her mother marched about the flat in her underwear, sometimes braless and sometimes, on summer days, stark naked” (45). Tereza’s mother was the personification of vulgarity. She “blew her nose loudly, talked to people in public about her sex life, and enjoyed demonstrating her false teeth” (45-6). She never missed a chance to embarrass Tereza in public, and berated her at every opportunity for the shame she felt in relation to her body. “Tereza can’t reconcile herself to the idea that the human body pisses and farts,” her mother said to a gathering of their friends. “Tereza turned bright red, but her mother would not stop. ‘What’s so terrible about that?’ and in answer to her own question she broke wind loudly” (45). For Tereza, the body was inextricably associated with her mother’s world, and as such, it was a reminder of all that was crude and ordinary. Escaping the vulgar world of her mother thus meant escaping from her body. During her childhood she had developed the habit of standing naked in front of a mirror, a habit she had continued into her adult life. On these occasions she would look at herself in the mirror, “staring at her body as if it were alien to her, alien and yet assigned to her and no one else” (139). She felt “disgusted” by this body, and “longed to dismiss [it] as one dismisses a servant” (139).

According to the narrator, Tereza had always “yearned for something higher” (44); she had always longed to escape from her vulgar and ordinary life. Initially she found her escape in the books she borrowed from the municipal library. These books, says the narrator, represented her only “weapon against the world of crudity surrounding her” (47). Lost in the pages of novels such as *Anna Karenina*, she found a temporary retreat away from her mother’s banal and vulgar world. “Whenever she did the

clothes”, says the narrator, “she kept a book next to the tub” (45). Perhaps Tereza was attracted by the romance of such novels, or perhaps she was simply attracted by the cerebral exercise of reading - a pursuit of the mind that allows her to escape her body. When she meets Tomas in the restaurant in which she is a waitress, she is initially attracted to him because he has an open book before him. For Tereza, says the narrator, “books were the emblem of a secret brotherhood” (47). Tereza sees in Tomas her ticket to a more sublime existence. Not only does he read books, he also appears attractive to her because he has no ties with the crude small-town life she is trying to run away from; he “knew neither her mother nor the drunks” she served in the restaurant (47). He differentiates himself from the vulgar locals with their “scabrous remarks” because he calls to her in a “kind voice” (47). He embodies all of the lofty qualities she associates with the soul, rather than the body, and when she approaches him she feels “her soul rushing up to the surface [...] to show itself to him” (48). At the first opportunity, Tereza leaves her small town to start a new life with Tomas in Prague. She arrives at his flat with a heavy suitcase and a copy of *Anna Karenina* tucked under her arm. However, in her new life with Tomas, Tereza does not find the escape from vulgarity she had yearned for. It soon becomes evident to her that Tomas is a serial womaniser. Tereza’s goal in escaping her mother had been to get at “something higher”, but Tomas’ infidelities, and especially the smell of other women’s groins in his hair, drags her back to the vulgar world she thought she had left behind. “She had come to him to escape her mother’s world”, says the narrator. “He had sent her back into the world she tried to escape” (58).

To grasp the character of Tereza, it is necessary to grasp her fear of vulgarity. What she fears most is not suffering, but suffering without beauty. The vulgar degrading suffering her mother had inflicted on her at home is the same type of suffering Tomas subjects her to with his infidelities. It is significant, therefore, that Tereza says to Tomas “I know your infidelities are no great tragedy” (59). In tragedy the individual is raised up and celebrated; suffering in tragedy can be beautiful. Tereza is afraid of the degrading sort of suffering that reduces her to a mere body; she is afraid of “the down below” (60). Tereza longs to suffer beautifully, greatly, tragically. During the first days of the Soviet occupation in 1968 she risks her safety by roaming the streets “photographing Russian soldiers and officers in compromising positions” (67). However, when one of Tomas’s mistresses phones her home she finds herself terribly upset, and “unable to concentrate on anything” (74). The woman who braved Russian tanks “was absolutely incapable of tolerating this absolutely insignificant incident” (75). What makes

the incident intolerable is precisely its insignificance. The Soviet invasion was “a tragedy” says the narrator, “a carnival of hate filled with a curious [...] euphoria” (67). Tomas’ infidelities, on the other hand, are “no great tragedy”; they are humiliating and vulgar, and that is why Tereza finds them unbearable.

Tereza often relives her suffering in her dreams. She imagines being forced to march naked around a pool with a group of other naked women. “Tomas stood over them” says the narrator, “shouting at them, making them sing and do kneebends. The moment one of them did a faulty kneebend, he would shoot her” (57). In another dream, which appears to follow on from the first, she is thrown into a hearse with a lot of other dead women. Dreams are like jokes, in that they present the opportunity for repressed fears and anxieties to be released in an acceptable fashion. However, just as jokes require laughter in order for their subversive potential to be realised, dreams require interpretation. In Kundera’s novels the narrator performs this function. He recognises and acknowledges the repressed fears expressed in Tereza’s dreams, and the way in which these repressed fears threaten the lyrical edifice on which she had constructed her identity. Tomas performs the same psychoanalytic function, not through any formal act of interpretation, but merely by recognising the meaning of her dreams. These “dreams left nothing to be deciphered”, says the narrator. “The accusation they leveled at Tomas was so clear that his only reaction was to hang his head and stroke her hand without a word” (58). On one level, Tereza’s dreams are simply a manifestation of the feelings of humiliation and degradation Tomas’ infidelities arouse in her. “Marching naked in formation with a group of naked women was for Tereza the quintessential image of horror”, says the narrator. “Since childhood, [she] had seen nudity as a sign of concentration camp uniformity, a sign of humiliation” (57). On another level, however, her dreams appear to be an unconscious attempt to beautify her suffering. The dreams were not only “eloquent”, says the narrator, “they were also beautiful. [...] Tomas lived under the hypnotic spell cast by the excruciating beauty of Tereza’s dreams” (59). Her dreams may thus be read as a manifestation of the tension between the vulgar and degrading nature of her suffering on the one hand, and her desire for a more beautiful suffering on the other. The anxiety she experiences in her dreams, an anxiety which on the surface seems to be connected with her fear of being shot by Tomas, is in fact an anxiety connected with her fear of vulgarity, her fear of the ‘down below’. “The naked women marching around the swimming pool”, says the narrator, “the corpses in the hearse rejoicing that she, too, was dead - these were the ‘down below’ she had feared and fled once before” (60).

Like Jaromil, Tereza is an embodiment of the lyrical attitude towards suffering - an attitude based on the denial, among other things, of its vulgarity. Vulgarity, however, is central to her suffering. Since this concept is irreconcilable with her lyrical visions, she must come to terms with it by ridding herself of those illusions, or remain in perpetual crisis. Tereza is shown struggling throughout the novel with the conflict between the vulgar facts of her suffering and her imaginary relationship with those facts. This conflict arises again in her confrontations with death.

### **The Body in Death**

According to the narrator in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, death has “two faces”. On the one hand it appears to us in “the form of nothingness”, and is associated with the “rather vague fear” that one day the intangible elements that make up the subject (the soul, the mind, the personality) will “cease to be” (171). On the other hand, there is the physical side of death, “the terrifying material being that is the corpse” (171). The fear of death is thus also connected with the shame individuals experience in relation to the body. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza becomes obsessed with this material side of death. Her dreams are filled with the idea of becoming a corpse. The fact that she will one day be nothing more than a collection of dead matter, a body without a soul, strikes her as the utmost form of humiliation. In her dreams of death, says the narrator, “humiliation turned into a never-ending state” (58).

Humiliation may seem an odd sentiment to associate with death. Death commonly evokes feelings of horror or grief. However, the fact that it also causes feelings of shame and humiliation is perhaps less understood. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva explores the shameful and scandalous nature of dead bodies. A corpse is considered a symbol of the “utmost abjection”, she argues, because it threatens the identity of the subject (Kristeva, 1982:4). According to the Cartesian model of subjectivity, the body is merely the container for the soul. It is, as Kristeva explains, “something rejected”, in that it is not considered to be constitutive of selfhood, but is nevertheless something inextricably bound to us, something “from which one does not part” (1982:4). This ambiguous status, suggests Kristeva, the fact that the body can be neither recognised as part of the self, nor completely separated as an independent object, causes us to feel a sense of shame and



humiliation in relation to our bodies. Precisely this reaction has been demonstrated by Tereza. Tereza is a subject who wishes to associate her self entirely with her soul. In her mind, argues the narrator, the name Tereza referred not to “her body” but to “something incorporeal, intangible” - that ethereal substance she referred to as her soul (139). The fact that she has a body is utterly humiliating for her. The thought of becoming a body without a soul - a corpse - is the ultimate form of degradation and humiliation. The corpse, as Kristeva explains, is the embodiment of the base materiality the subject excludes from its definition of selfhood. “[R]efuse and corpses”, she writes, “show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (1982:3). The corpse, therefore, is the material remainder of an individual who has lost the defining element of his/her subjectivity - the mind or soul. For Tereza, death meant being reduced to the vulgar materiality she had thrust aside. In her dreams she is simply one naked corpse among many - nothing more than dead matter, the vulgar embodiment of the ‘down below’.

The scandalous nature of the corpse may explain the fact that literature often tends to skirt around the material side of death. In much of Western literature, death appears sublime, ethereal and intangible. The death of Shakespeare’s Ophelia, for example, seems to be hardly a physical matter at all. Her drowning in *Hamlet* is described thus:

There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds  
Clambering to hand, an envious sliver broke;  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook.  
Her clothes spread wide;  
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes;  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
[...] but long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death (1162).

In this passage the experience of drowning seems almost pleasant; the character sings songs until the end. Shakespeare allows his readers to escape completely the vulgar physical nature of his character's death. In Kundera's novels, on the other hand, death is firmly anchored in the material world. Just as he mocks our lyrical notions about love by reducing the act of love to what Maria Banerjee refers to as "a mere sequence of ridiculous motions" (1990:188), he also scoffs at the poetic treatment of death by showing it in its "irreducible physicality" (Banerjee, 1990:182). Compare, for example, Kundera's description of Tamina's drowning in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* to Shakespeare's description of the death of Ophelia:

Again she inhaled water into her lungs and coughed and thrashed her arms about, feeling she could no longer keep herself afloat. Her legs were getting heavier and heavier. They dragged her down like lead weights. Her head ducked under water. By struggling violently she managed to raise it back up several times, and each time she saw the boat and the children's eyes observing her. Then she disappeared beneath the surface (191).

The depiction of Tamina's death is dramatically different from Shakespeare's lyrical portrait of the death Ophelia. Tamina figures in Kundera's work as yet another embodiment of the lyrical attitude. As Banerjee has noted, she was a character surrounded by the "poetry of suffering" (1990: 166). She experienced her life as a tragedy, and had a somewhat hazy idea of death. Death for her, says the narrator, appeared "only in the [...] form of nothingness" and was associated with the "rather vague fear" that "someday she would [...] stop seeing trees or the sky" (171). Unlike some of Kundera's other lyrical characters, however, Tamina gradually outgrows her lyrical phase. "As she grew older", says the narrator, Tamina began to think more and more about the "material side of death" (171), with the result that what had once appeared to her as an intangible threat gradually took on a terrifying reality. The fear of nonbeing was replaced by the fear of becoming a corpse. "She was terrified of becoming a corpse" (171), says the narrator. While the idea of nonbeing was indefinite and vague, the idea of becoming a corpse had a vulgar and degrading reality. "Being a corpse", says the narrator, "struck her as an unbearable disgrace" (171). "One minute you are a human being protected by modesty", she thinks to herself, "and the next you die, and your body is suddenly up for grabs. Anyone can tear your

clothes off, rip you open, inspect your insides, and - holding his nose to keep the stink away - stick you in the deepfreeze or the flames” (172).

Kundera’s focus on the vulgar material nature of death and suffering plays a crucial part in the conceptual shift in modern literature on these subjects. Whereas the suffering of the heroes and heroines of Romantic literature was presented as an ecstatic experience in which the sufferer could transcend the material conditions of existence, suffering in Kundera’s novels is firmly anchored in the physical world. Kundera has been openly critical of what he sees as the erasure of the material vulgar aspects of suffering from literature. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, he refers a number of times to a story by the young Thomas Mann. In the story death appears in the form of “a painfully beautiful naked woman” who steps every night from a wardrobe to tell the dying protagonist “a long bittersweet tale” (172). Kundera criticises the story for producing a naive metaphysical portrait of death. The vulgar physical details are ignored in the interests of maintaining a false and comforting illusion in which death appears “sweet” and “bluish” (172).<sup>40</sup> The death of “Mann’s young hero was beautiful” writes Kundera,

but what happened to his body? [...] Did they slit his belly down the middle? Did they toss him into a hole or into the flames? Mann was twenty-six at the time [...]. I am unfortunately older, and unlike [him] I can’t help thinking of what happens to the body. The trouble is, death is not blue, and Tamina knows it as well as I do (172).

Contemporary film and literature also often rely upon images designed to avoid the material nature of death. A crowd in black gathered at a cemetery, a closed coffin in a stream of sunlight, or an empty hospital bed are all images that present a sanitised view of death. Kundera’s novels contain an implicit critique of these types of images. In his own fictional accounts of death, he reminds the reader of its material aspects. When Tamina’s husband dies in hospital, for example, she arrives to find his bed empty. Kundera is not content to leave us with this mental picture, however, but sets immediately about redressing the elision of the body from the scene. An old man who had shared a room with her

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<sup>40</sup> Some of Thomas Mann’s later work, on the other hand, seems determined to portray the terrible mundanity of death and suffering. *The Magic Mountain*, a novel set in a hospital for tubercular patients, is one such example.

husband prior to his death tells Tamina about the way in which the hospital staff had disposed of her dead husband. “You should file a complaint”, he says. “The way they treat the dead. [...] They took him by the legs and dragged him along the floor. They thought I was asleep. I saw his head bump against the threshold” (171).

Kundera’s novels are in many ways a testament to the vulgar materiality of death. When the narrator reports the deaths of Tomas and Tereza in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for example, he does no more than to inform the reader of what had occurred in material terms: “Tomas and his wife had been crushed to death under a truck” (272). In this brief account, Kundera evokes both the vulgar material nature of death and, by extension, its terrifying banality. The connection between vulgarity and banality is fairly straight forward. The banal exists at the opposite end of the spectrum to the rare and grandiose. At the most extreme end of that spectrum, within the category of the banal, we find the vulgar. Nothing could be less rare or grandiose than vulgarity. Kundera’s focus on the vulgarity of suffering and death destroys very effectively the lyrical illusions perpetuated by other literature and reveals these phenomena in all their banality. It is interesting to contrast the deaths of Tomas and Tereza, for example, to the death of Anna Karenina, a character who has a special place in Kundera’s novel. Tereza is holding this volume under her arm when she first arrives at Tomas’s flat, the couple even name their dog Karenin after one of the primary characters. The novel also functions as a constant source of contrast against which Kundera arranges the lives and deaths of his characters. Although the deaths of all three characters involve a heavy vehicle (a train in Tolstoy’s novel and a truck in Kundera’s) this is where the direct similarity ends and the inversions begin. Anna’s death is the tragic climax of Tolstoy’s novel, while Tomas and Tereza’s deaths are mentioned only in passing. In Tolstoy’s treatment the material details of the incident are extremely understated - the vague reference to the train colliding with Anna’s body is so subtle that it might easily be missed. Rather than dwelling on the gruesome details of mangled flesh on train tracks, Tolstoy offers up a comforting metaphor in which his protagonist’s passing from life is likened to a candle flickering out. Kundera, on the other hand, offers no such distractions. It is significant that Kundera has his protagonists die in a road accident. In *The Art of the Novel*, he argues that this is one of the most banal ways to die: “I also think of those daily slaughters along the highways, of that death that is as horrible as it is banal” (1993:62). The description of the accident in which Tomas and Tereza are killed leaves the reader with the single

image of two dead bodies crushed by metal, and the impression that nothing is more vulgar or more banal than death.

### **Vulgarity in Literature**

Kundera's concern about the elision of the body in literature is something he shares with Camus. Both writers voice their disapproval at the denial of the physical aspects of death. In his essay "Reflections on the Guillotine", Camus condemns the way in which official statements and newspaper reports attempt to cover over the material details of state-sanctioned murder with noble phrases and high-sounding sentiments. When a Government kills one of its citizens, writes Camus, all we may hear from the media is that at such-and-such a time "justice was done" (1961:127). In *The Plague*, Camus has Tarrou deliver a tirade against the euphemistic phrases employed by the law when referring to execution. The reader is told that, as a young man, Tarrou had witnessed his father employ a stream of "long, turgid phrases" in order to demand the death penalty for a man accused of an unnamed crime. He had asked that the man "pay the supreme penalty", Tarrou recalls, which was simply a less disagreeable way of demanding that he "have his head cut off" (203). Literature, as we have seen, has also been guilty of using such euphemisms. This suppression of the physical aspects of death and suffering is something both Camus and Kundera have sought to redress. "[E]veryone strives to refer to [execution] through euphemisms", argues Camus, "but it is my intention to talk about it crudely. Not because I like a scandal, nor, I believe, because of an unhealthy streak in my nature. As a writer I have always loathed avoiding the issue" (1961:128). Tarrou's description of the shooting of a political prisoner in *The Plague* is another attempt to reveal the crude reality of death often suppressed in literature. "Have you ever seen a man shot by a firing squad?" he asks Rieux.

No, of course not; the spectators are hand-picked and it's like a private party, you need an invitation. The result is that you've gleaned your ideas about it from books and pictures. A post, a blindfolded man, some soldiers in the offing. But the real thing isn't a bit like that. Do you know that the firing-squad stands only a yard and a half from the condemned man? Do you know that if the victim took two steps forward his chest would touch the rifles? Do you know that, at this short range, the soldiers concentrate their fire on the region of the heart and their big bullets make a hole into which you

could thrust your fist? No, you didn't know all that; those are things that are never spoken of. [...] Really, it would be in shockingly bad taste to linger on such details, that's common knowledge (205).

The accusation of "bad taste" is interesting here; it is a phrase which recurs with monotonous regularity in relation to vulgar, obscene, violent and pornographic literature. Why is this the case? To say that a book or a film are in bad taste is in fact to acknowledge that they transgress the bounds of social acceptability; they are repressed because they do not conform. According to Theodor Adorno, the vulgar sides of death and suffering are denied by civilised culture, because they cannot "be reconciled with the conception culture has of itself" (1973:366). Civilised culture, he suggests, dislikes vulgarity because it is something it defines as its antithesis; something which is alien to its definition of itself. The same may be said of obscenity, which shares with vulgarity the association with the body and the down below. This perhaps explains the repressive measures taken by cultural watchdogs against vulgarity and obscenity in art and literature. The novels of the Marquis de Sade, for example, were banned for their obscenity well into the twentieth century. The eighteenth-century critic Villetterque regarded them as being "full of the most revolting atrocities" and admitted he had been unable to read them "without a feeling of indignation" (1966:118).

That Sade's novels have now achieved a certain level of respectability within literary departments should not, however, be read as an indication that modern culture has relaxed its standards. The fact that Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 film *Salò* - a modern adaptation of Sade's *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* - has evoked almost as much outrage among modern audiences as Sade's novel did in its own time seems to suggest that our society is equally intolerant in its own way of vulgarity and obscenity in art as the society of eighteenth-century France.<sup>41</sup> Whereas Sade's work may have gained a certain level of acceptability in modern culture (due perhaps in part to the fact that the events he describes take place in a time sufficiently removed from our own as to allow us to feel that we have achieved a safe distance from the savageness of the culture he portrays), Pasolini's film elicits outrage because the

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<sup>41</sup> *Salò* was banned in most countries upon its release. The Australian Censorship Board granted the film a brief reprieve in the mid-1990s but banned it again in 1997. The film has also been the subject of numerous protests, often led by the Catholic Church. Pasolini was assassinated by a Catholic activist shortly after the film's release; the assassin said he objected to the film's obscenity.

events occur in a more modern social and political setting. By drawing parallels between the events of Sade's novel and the events of our own recent history (the cruel libertines are played by four Italian fascists, their child victims remind one of the innocent victims of the Holocaust, and the fortress in which they are held captive is a gruesome metaphor for the Nazi death camps), the film suggests to the viewer that modern society is equally as capable of barbarism and vulgarity as its eighteenth-century counterpart. This is precisely what makes *Salò* so disturbing. Through the images of pain and suffering it contains, the film challenges the claims modern culture makes to enlightenment and progress, forcing its audience to confront the vulgarity of which its own society is capable.

In films like *Salò*, the modern world recognises something of itself which it had denied in order to be able to call itself civilised. The fact that the moral majority persist in villifying writers and artists who depict this repressed other of culture indicates that modern society is unwilling to admit to the evidence of its own vulgarity. In his essay "On Commitment", Adorno laments the fact that the authors of works dealing with cruelty and torture are often treated as though they were "responsible for what they revolt against" (1978:313). He argues that the vulgarity found in art and literature emanates not from the mind of the artist or the writer, but from the social bedrock upon which their work is built; he tells the following anecdote to illustrate the point: "An officer of the Nazi occupation forces visited [Picasso] in his studio and, pointing to *Guernica*, asked: 'Did you do that?' Picasso reputedly answered, 'No, you did'" (1978:313). In *Negative Dialectics*, he puts the same point more colourfully: "Culture", he argues, "abhors stench because it stinks - because, as Brecht put it in a magnificent line, its mansion is built of dogshit" (Adorno, 1973:366).

Culture's denial of shit is one of the dominant thematic concerns of Kundera's work. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, an entire chapter is devoted to it. Modern culture, he argues, is driven by an aesthetic ideal whose aim is to exclude "everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (248). "This aesthetic ideal", he writes, "is called kitsch" (248). Kitsch has been theorised in many different ways. Adorno defines it thus: "kitsch or sugary trash is the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart" (1984:71). His definition seems to prefigure Kundera's to a certain extent. In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera argues that kitsch is more than simply "junk art" (1993:135); he sees it an approach to life that denies all of the vulgar and unpleasant aspects of human existence. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he describes it as "the absolute denial of shit in both the literal and figurative senses

of the word” (248). Its aim, he claims, is to keep humankind “happily ignorant of the invisible Venice of shit underlying [its] bathrooms, bedrooms, dance halls and parliaments” (156). “The [...] need for kitsch”, he says, “is the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection” (1993:135).

Kitsch may be seen as a modern manifestation of the anachronistic notions dominating the art and literature of the lyric tradition. Kitsch, in other words, is inherently lyrical, and like all forms of lyricism (whether literary, religious, or ideological) its primary aim is to convince the individual of the excellence of creation – even and especially its least pleasing aspects – death and innocent suffering. In this it performs the same function as the Christian theodicy. In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera writes that “kitsch is historically bound to the sentimental romanticism of the nineteenth century” (1993:135). Kitsch, like lyric poetry, transforms the crude and vulgar aspects of human experience into something which civilised culture can accept; it transforms a mean and pointless suffering into an object so sublime it supposedly moves one to tears. Above all, kitsch denies the vulgarity of life, and this is the basis of Kundera’s opposition to it. “In Prague”, he writes, “we saw kitsch as art’s prime enemy [...]. Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Horowitz at the piano, the big Hollywood films like *Kramer vs Kramer*, *Doctor Zhivago* (poor Pasternak!) - those I detest, deeply sincerely” (1993:135).

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Sabina recognises a form of kitsch in the rhetoric of Communism. According to the narrator, Sabina did not particularly object to Communism on ethical, political or ideological grounds. For Sabina, the enemy was not Communism itself, but Communist Kitsch. “What repelled her”, says the narrator, “was not so much the ugliness of the Communist world [...] as the mask of beauty it tried to wear - in other words, Communist kitsch” (248-9). According to Sabina, the “model of Communist kitsch [was] the ceremony called May Day” (249). This ceremony, with its marching brass bands, smiling officials and joyful crowds, was the lyric poetry of Communism. May Day, argues John Bayley, was an attempt to hide “the drabness, the shortages, the food queues” behind the “facade of a glittering socialist paradise” (1989:60). Like the lyrical illusions through which the characters in Kundera’s novels hide their fears and insecurities from themselves, Communist kitsch masks the chronic insecurities of an entire social and political system through the invention of a false facade. It then takes this illusionary facade as reality and proceeds to feel gratified at its own image.



Sabina's paintings, as has been discussed, set out to expose the vulgarity hidden behind this facade. Her aesthetics are presented in the novel as a challenge to the aesthetics of kitsch, because they are based not on the denial of shit, but on its liberation. Her paintings aim to reveal the ugly aspects of the Communist world; beautiful landscapes open up to reveal the vulgar spectacle of "ruined castles transformed into cowsheds" (248-9). Kundera's novels, with their dystopic portraits of life under a Communist regime, do the same thing. As François Ricard has noted, Kundera's work is well known for its attempts to "lay bare the lie and the horror implicit within the idyll" (1989:21). Of course, Kundera realises that the aesthetics of kitsch is not limited to any specific political philosophy. Each world view has its own type of kitsch, designed to obliterate the negative or problematic aspects of the particular belief system upon which it is based. "Since opinions vary", he argues, "there are various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national, international" (*Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 257). Every political party, argues Kundera, has an interest in kitsch. In fact, "political movements", he argues, "rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that political kitsch" (257).

Upon emigrating to America, Sabina finds that kitsch, while it takes a different form, is just as prevalent in the West as it was in her homeland. One day, after she had been living in America for ten years, she takes a drive with a senator and his four children. The Senator stops the car in front of a large expanse of grass and the children jump out and start running around. "Sitting behind the wheel and gazing dreamily after the four little bounding figures" the senator gestures towards the scene and says "[n]ow that's what I call happiness" (250). According to Kundera, this is not simply an innocent observation. The sentiments expressed by the senator are heavily influenced by the affirmational rhetoric that forms the kitsch of Western Capitalism. "Behind his words", says the narrator, "there was more than joy at seeing children run and grass grow; there was a deep understanding of the plight of a refugee from a Communist country where, the senator was convinced, no grass grew or children ran" (250). Although poverty and suffering are almost as much a problem in America as in those countries belonging to the former Soviet Union, American kitsch, with its slogans about wealth, happiness and

freedom, denies this fact.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, American kitsch is no different in its intent from the Communist kitsch Sabina had left her country to escape; though their contents may have been different, both denied the ugliest aspects of their culture. Sitting in the car with the senator, Sabina realises that the smile on his face was identical to “the smile Communist statesmen beamed from the height of their reviewing stands” during the May Day parades in Prague (250).

Kundera despises kitsch for its hypocritical pretences and its denial of the ugly realities of the human condition. Kitsch, he argues, stands in the way of the truth about our culture and ourselves. It is like a “folding screen” (*Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 253), that acts as a barrier between the individual and the world; it filters out the negative and painful aspects of experience and leaves us with a sanitised view of life. Almost everyday, he suggests, we are faced with images designed to disavow the horror of the world. “What remains of the dying population of Cambodia?” he asks in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. “One large photograph of an American actress holding an Asian child in her arms” (277-8). In this image, the crude and senseless suffering of a population dying of war, illness and starvation is transformed into a touching portrait. Adorno also comments on the way in which art, music and literature disguise the vulgarity of suffering with sounds and images designed to stir the sentiments. When art makes a vulgar suffering appear sublime, argues Adorno, it “does an injustice to the victims” (1978:313). If suffering is vulgar, he implies, it should be made to appear vulgar.

One of Kundera’s goals in writing, as has been discussed, is to reveal the repulsive side of death and suffering - not because he is sadistic, but because he also believes that what is vulgar should not be made to appear sublime. Again, his method may be described (and has been described by authors such as John O’Brien) as broadly deconstructionist. O’Brien provides a definition of deconstruction well suited to the analysis of Kundera’s work: “[D]econstruction”, he writes, “is loosely intended to refer to a perspective on literary texts that is not so much interested in what a text means as it is in what meanings it may undo or what oppositions it may challenge” (O’Brien, 1995:66-7). O’Brien is primarily interested in the ways in which Kundera’s novels “subvert, dismantle or otherwise disable” traditional

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<sup>42</sup> In his recent film *Dogville*, Lars von Trier set out to expose the lies hidden behind precisely this type of validating rhetoric. The hostile reception the film was subjected to by some American critics is perhaps evidence of the deep repression exercised by this society against those things (poverty, greed, racism, ignorance) which do not sit comfortably with its self-image, or indeed with the self-image of many western cultures.

notions about women (1995:70). O'Brien notes, for example, Boccaccio's speech in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, in which he "mercilessly pillories lyrical masculinity and its kitsch dominated conceptions of women" (1995:107). I would argue that Kundera makes use of the same technique in order to undo the equally "kitsch-dominated" notions of suffering found in art and literature. In his novels, he exposes the binary oppositions on which the lyrical illusions of his characters are based. He examines the way in which these illusions privilege one part of the opposition at the expense of the other; for example, the sublime at the expense of the vulgar. Finally, he goes on to figuratively overturn the original binary to reveal what had formerly been repressed.

In much art and literature, suggests Kundera, there exists an unwritten agreement to overlook the vulgarity of suffering in order to produce images that conform to the aesthetics of kitsch. Physical pain and bodily decay are repressed so that suffering may be allowed to maintain a sublime appearance. In Kundera's novels, however, vulgarity erupts from the very heart of the sublime.

In *The Joke*, Helena attempts to commit suicide by taking an overdose of analgesics. In her suicide note she imagines the scene in which her lover will find her. "Maybe you'll find me lying here under a white sheet", she writes, "and then you'll understand you've killed the most precious thing you've ever had in your life" (287). Helena is denied her tragic fantasies, however, in a typically Kunderan twist in which the pills she swallows turn out to be laxatives. Rather than finding her lifeless body sprawled elegantly on the bed, her lover finds her locked in the outhouse. Helena's suicide attempt, which appears initially to follow a script written in accordance with the rules of the lyrical tradition, thus ends by revealing the vulgarity hidden by that same tradition. When her lover arrives in response to her suicide note, he is confronted by a comically vulgar scene. "Facing me on the wooden seat, in the stench of the outhouse", he says,

sat Helena. She was pale but alive. She looked up at me with terrified eyes and instinctively tugged at her turned-up skirt, which despite her best efforts hardly came halfway down her thighs; she gripped the hem with both hands and pressed her legs tightly together. 'For God's sake, go away!' she cried in anguish (299-300).

Helena is a parody of the tragic heroines of Western literature. Ophelia, Anna Karenina, and Madame Bovary all take their own lives, but to greater or lesser degree, the vulgar physical aspects of their deaths are conveniently ignored.<sup>43</sup> Even the existentialists, as Peter Kussi has remarked, were capable of waxing lyrical about suicide. “To Sartre and Camus”, he writes, “suicide is an act of paramount significance, since they regard it as the ultimate expression of human freedom” (1978:161). Kundera attempts to prove the contrary in his novels, which illustrate that there is nothing sublime or beautiful about suicide. “In Kundera”, argues Kussi, “suicide is often treated in an ironic, mocking, even parodic way. The attempt generally fails, and the results are painful or ridiculous; in several instances suicide is associated with a ludicrous accident” (1978:161). In “Symposium”, the fifth story in *Laughable Loves*, a nurse named Alzhbeta is found unconscious in her room after what appears to have been an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Flaishman, the young intern on duty at the hospital, offers a lyrical interpretation of the incident. According to Porter, Flaishman is “a hopeless Romantic [who] can explain Alzhbeta’s suicide attempt only in terms of frustrated love and abstract nonsense, riding roughshod over the banal facts of the affair” (1981:18). However, the lyrical interpretation he produces is immediately called into question by the opinions of the other three characters. The woman doctor prefers to interpret the event as a stupid accident, Havel sees the incident as a pathetic melodrama staged by the nurse in order to attract attention, while the chief physician sees the whole state of affairs as a moronic blunder. “When a person does something so asinine”, he declares, “I refuse to be moved” (148). What all of these latter accounts have in common is a refusal to romanticise suicide. All three challenge the initial interpretation offered by the young doctor, and in so doing, they challenge the notion that suicide is sublime.

Kundera’s treatment of the attempted suicides of both Alzhbeta and Helena is paradigmatic of the way in which he treats suffering in general. His novels, as has been demonstrated, are an attempt to debunk the romantic notions poetry and literature produce about suffering by revealing the painful and vulgar

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<sup>43</sup> References to the material nature of death are not entirely absent from Flaubert’s description of the death of Madam Bovary. He does mention the physical pain she experiences, but he frequently contrasts these passages with others which focus on her inner thoughts and feelings: “She had done, she thought to herself, with all the treachery, the vileness, and the endless cravings that tormented her. She felt no hatred now, for anyone; shadowy confusion was settling on her mind, and among all the sounds of this world Emma could hear nothing but the faltering lamentations of her poor heart, soft and indistinct, like the final echoing note of a distant symphony” (260).

reality that lies hidden beneath. We cannot come to a true understanding of the banality of suffering without recognition of that vulgarity.

## Chapter 10:

# Suffering and the Everyday

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The previous two chapters examined the way in which Kundera's novels use laughter and vulgarity to reveal the banality of the situations his characters face, and to challenge the lyrical notions about suffering we find in some art and literature. This chapter will examine the final aspect of the concept of banality which arises from Kundera's work - the mundane. Mundanity is, if not the very definition of banality, at least synonymous with it. The type of mundanity we find in Kundera's work, however, is complex and intricately connected to the particular historical and social context in which he was writing. In the following pages I will endeavour to elucidate this particular sense of mundanity and to examine the contribution it makes to Kundera's overall conception of the banality of suffering.

### **Variations on the Common Ordeal**

One of the challenges Kundera faces in his novels, as has been briefly alluded to already, is that of representing a world whose notions about suffering have been altered by the Holocaust and the ensuing failure of liberal projects for a better world. Kundera captures the atmosphere of this period in his novels, which emphasise the mundanity of the human situation and the futility of human endeavour. The mundanity of suffering is something all of his characters must face. In *The Joke*, Ludvik eventually admits to the mundane nature of his suffering. As a young man he had been expelled from the Communist Party and forced to spend a period of time in a labour camp. In the camp he is humiliated and intimidated by a boy commander, and worn out by hard labour in the coal mines. Rather than glorifying the experience, however, he admits that, after a period of time, it had become "habitual and ordinary" (82), which is not to say that he had suffered less as time went by, but that he had simply grown used to suffering. "[I]t was still unpleasant and exhausting", he says, "but I had found a way to live with it" (82). Looking back on the experience, Ludvik is able to come to terms with the mundane nature of his suffering:

True, there was a time, when I [...] glorified my outcast destiny as something heroic, but it was false pride. I've had to keep reminding myself that I wasn't assigned to the black insignia for having been courageous or for having fought, for sending my idea out to do battle with the ideas of others; no, my fall was not preceded by any real drama; I was more the subject than the object of my story, and (unless one considers suffering, sadness, or defeat values) I have nothing whatsoever to boast of (117).

While the suffering Ludvik endured was certainly no trivial matter, his story lacks a sense of tragedy. He looks back on the period he spent in the labour brigade, not as a time of grave adversity, but as a "long period of hopelessness and emptiness" (117). Like the testimony of Zindel Grynspan (mentioned in chapter seven), Ludvik's narrative contains nothing remarkable. Apart from a number of attempts to sneak out of his barracks at night, his sentence passes almost without incident. Nor is Ludvik shown to have triumphed in the face of misfortune; in fact, he is diminished rather than elevated by the experience of his suffering. *The Joke* is not one of those uplifting novels that celebrate the human spirit in an attempt to make the reader feel good about humanity. It is primarily a testimony to the mundanity of human suffering. The same may be said of many of Kundera's novels. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for example, the suffering experienced by Tereza and Tomas during the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia is menial and ordinary. There is nothing heroic in their actions against the occupying regime, and nothing overly terrifying in the punishment that is meted out to them. They are not imprisoned or tortured - the worst thing that happens to them is that they lose their jobs and social status. Prior to the occupation, Tereza had worked at a magazine, but as a result of the provocative pictures she had taken during the invasion, she is fired and forced to seek work as a barmaid. Shortly after Tereza loses her job, Tomas also loses his. Tomas had been a successful surgeon, but after publishing an article criticising the occupation, he is dismissed from his post at the hospital and forced to find work as a window washer. For a time he is treated as a hero and a martyr. "People were still reacting to the mass persecution of Czech intellectuals with the euphoria of solidarity", writes Kundera, "and when his former patients found out that Tomas was washing windows for a living, they would phone in and order him by name. Then they would greet him with a bottle of champagne or slivovitz [...] and chat with him for two hours, drinking his health all the while" (197). Eventually, however, the novelty of his situation wears off and he is forced to submit to the

mundanity of his predicament. “The carnival was over”, says the narrator. “Workaday humiliation had begun” (26).

While authors like George Orwell and Alexander Solzhenitsyn emphasise the great and terrible nature of the suffering experienced by the victims of totalitarian terror, there is nothing overly remarkable or inspiring about the fates of Tereza or Tomas. In Kundera’s novels the suffering of political prisoners is not something which occurs on the grand stage of history, and it is not something which elevates the persons concerned. One of the horrors of the modern totalitarian state, as Kundera sees it, is that it forces its victims to suffer silent humiliation. There is no glory in modern suffering. Whereas the saints and martyrs may have gained some solace from the notion that their deaths were a glowing tribute to their god, and while the men and women dying on the barricades during the French Revolution may have seen their deaths as a grand sacrifice for the future, there is no such hope for Kundera’s characters. They must come to terms with the realisation that there is nothing remarkable in their suffering; it is utterly without purpose, but worse than that, it is commonplace. They suffer like everyone else from the vagaries of modern life.

Kundera’s portraits of human suffering are all variations on a theme. The predicaments of each of his characters may be seen as a version of what Maria Banerjee refers to as “the common ordeal” (1990:229). According to Banerjee, the suffering of Tereza and Tomas is one such version. In the climate of “post-invasion normalisation”, she argues, “Tereza and Tomas both endure their unique form of the common ordeal” (1990: 229). All suffering is capable of taking on the form of the common ordeal; just as an ordinary type of suffering may be made to appear sublime, and extraordinary suffering may be represented as mundane. Even when the events in which they are involved are unusual, the suffering endured by Kundera’s primarily middle class characters has an ordinary everyday quality about it. When Ludvik is sent away to the labour camp in *The Joke*, as has been discussed, he experiences his fate as the most mundane thing in the world. Kundera employs a number of simple techniques in order to create the impression of mundanity when portraying his characters’ suffering. In *Life is Elsewhere*, for example, he confirms the mundane nature of Maman’s suffering by placing it side-by-side in the story with other, more dramatic, narrative events:



Czech parachutists sent from London killed the German overlord of Bohemia, martial law was declared, and on the street corners appeared long lists of executed persons. Maman lay in bed and the doctor came every day to stick a needle into her posterior (52).

At other times Kundera highlights the mundane nature of a character's suffering by associating it with ordinary domestic objects. In *The Farewell Party*, as Peter Kussi has noted, Klima's sorrow is compared to "the aroma of well roasted pork" (1978: 26). In *Life is Elsewhere*, the narrator describes the way in which the maid Magda wept uncontrollably after the execution of her fiancé by the Nazis: "sometimes she would break into tears right during dinner", he says, "her eyes would redden and a tear would roll down her cheek and fall on the plate of dumplings" (52-3). Kundera's aim here is not to mock the pain of his characters, but to forestall any attempt to turn it into tragedy.

Kundera's novels often contain poignant descriptions of very banal types of pain; in fact, his characters often evoke pity precisely because their suffering is so banal. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Karel is touched by the quite ordinary signs of aging he witnesses in his mother. On one occasion, while they are out walking, his mother points into the distance and asks him the name of the "pretty white village" she sees there. "There was no village", says the narrator, "just stone road markers. Karel felt an upsurge of pity when he realized how much his mother's eyesight had deteriorated" (29). In another scene, the old woman narrates a story from her childhood in which she claims to have recited a poem at a special school assembly celebrating Czechoslovakia's independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, her son reveals that the event could not have taken place as his mother remembered it, as she had finished school before this momentous national event. When she recognises her mistake, his mother is embarrassed and ashamed. "Suddenly all her self-confidence was gone", says the narrator, "and she stopped talking. [...] Mother felt abandoned by her reminiscences and betrayed by [...] the tricks her memory was playing on her" (33). Karel's mother's failing eyesight and deteriorating memory, while common in women of her age, are examples of precisely the mundane type of suffering Kundera writes about in his novels. By refusing to dramatise her situation, he captures the essence of her suffering. Mother's suffering is not tragic or sublime; it is simply ordinary, and that is what makes it so unbearably banal.

Kundera's characters are tormented not by any great evil, but by the mundane circumstances of their daily lives. Their pain often manifests itself in trifling incidents. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for example, the narrator claims that Franz had first discovered what it meant to suffer when he noticed his mother wearing odd shoes. When he was twelve, says the narrator, Franz's father abandoned his son and wife:

The boy suspected something serious had happened, but his mother muted the drama with mild, insipid words so as not to upset him. The day his father left, Franz and his mother went into town together, and as they left home Franz noticed that her shoes did not match. He was in a quandary: he wanted to point out her mistake, but was afraid he would hurt her. So during the two hours they spent walking through the city together he kept his eyes fixed on her feet. It was then he had his first inkling of what it means to suffer (91).

It is significant that Franz comes to an understanding of suffering through this mundane incident. Unlike Jaromil in *Life Is Elsewhere*, whose notions about suffering are formed entirely from the images found in nineteenth-century poetry, Franz bases his conception of suffering on an utterly banal observation. Rather than appealing to any one of the stock of tragic or romantic images writers use to express the pain of their female characters (Shakespeare's Ophelia goes mad before drowning herself in a river, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina throws herself before a moving train, and Flaubert's Madame Bovary takes poison), Kundera signifies his character's distress through a plain reference to her odd shoes. Kundera refers not to her tears, but to her shoes, because it is precisely the pitifully mundane quality of her suffering he wants to portray.

### **Lightness and Weight**

I have already discussed, to some extent, the influence on Kundera's work of a Post-Holocaust understanding of suffering. I have suggested that the suffering of some of his characters resonates in a particular way with some of what we know of the experiences of the survivors of the Holocaust through their own testimonies, as recorded by authors such as Hannah Arendt. The last part of this chapter seeks to explore and extend that idea a little further, examining the way in which a certain type

of thinking (a type of thinking just as prevalent in contemporary capitalist society as in Nazi Germany) can make human suffering mundane. The accounts of many Holocaust survivors, as has been discussed, highlight the mundanity of suffering under a modern totalitarian state in which the process of mass extermination was carried out as if it were the most prosaic thing in the world. The Holocaust, by all accounts, was not experienced as a dramatic event by the perpetrators or their victims. To some extent, at least, it even went unnoticed, and in some cases where it was noticed it seemed to have made no great impact, a fact Claude Lanzmann draws attention to in his nine hour film *Shoah*: “Didn’t the screams bother you?” he asks a farmer who lived near Treblinka. “When my neighbour cuts his thumb, I don’t feel hurt” the farmer responds. Far from weighing heavily on him, the monumental events taking place in his country seemed not to have affected him at all.

The trivialization of mass suffering requires a certain type of mindset; one which I would argue has become dangerously prevalent in our own era too. It is not necessarily a matter of evil intent, but more an inability or unwillingness to think critically and to stand back and weigh up one’s actions according to broader principles. Individuals possessed of such a mindset are capable of carrying out complex tasks and calculations, but their moral and critical faculties are sadly lacking. Adolf Eichmann was one such individual. He was not, as has been mentioned, a monster of cruelty. If he had been born in another time, he may have lived out his life as an accountant, or an office manager. He approached the mass murder of the victims of the Holocaust as a logistical problem; for him it was simply a matter of moving large numbers of people from A to B. In one sense he was a mere cog in a vast machine managing and regulating the German population. He didn’t think of his actions in ethical terms because such thinking was alien to him. In his own mind, he was a harmless bureaucrat. Bureaucrats, however, as Michel Foucault recognised, are, far from being harmless, the very means by which the modern state exercises its power.<sup>44</sup> The growth of modern bureaucracies (both public and private)

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<sup>44</sup> It is important to note though, as Herbert Marcuse does, that bureaucracies are not inherently oppressive and need not always be oppressive: “In the age of mass society, the power of public bureaucracy can be the weapon which protects the people from the encroachment of special interests upon the general welfare” (Marcuse, 1978:155). To be able to perform this positive function, however, Marcuse argues that bureaucracies would need to be liberated from the control of technocrats and passed into the hands of the people to serve their real interests. “If everyone has become a potential member of the public bureaucracy [...] society will have passed from the stage of hierarchical bureaucratization to the stage of technical self-administration. Insofar as technocracy implies a deepening of the gap between specialized and common knowledge, between the controlling and coordinating experts and the controlled and coordinated people, the technocratic abolition of the “price system” would stabilize rather than shatter the forces which stand in the way of progress” (1978: 155-6).

coincides, Foucault argues, with “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (1978:140). Adolf Eichmann was not a man who conceived and executed a grand evil plan. His mind was far too mundane for that. He thought of his actions in far less grandiose terms; in his mind he was simply involved in the “administration of bodies” (Foucault, 1978:140)

The type of thinking displayed by people like Eichmann has been the subject of much philosophical inquiry since the end of World War Two by members of the Frankfurt School. Herbert Marcuse referred to it as technological rationality (1978:153), while Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called it instrumental reason, a type of reason in accordance with which “the schema of an activity was [considered] more important than its content” (1979:88) and in which “planning [was] considered solely as planning” (1979:89). This type of small minded thinking, just as evident under Capitalism as under Nazism (as Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and elsewhere), may also be described as mundane thinking; a type of thinking opposed to big picture thinking. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries we have witnessed a gradual shift in public thinking away from the lofty issues that were tackled energetically during the height of the Enlightenment – issues such as justice, truth and morality - to mundane matters of fiscal policy. This collective obsession with the mundane has, to a certain extent, shaped the world we inhabit, making it, as Peter Kussi notes, “small and banal” (1978:23). The more fixated on mundane matters we become, the more banal our world turns out to be. The economic rationalism of the modern era represents a kind of summit of banality; under its influence the grand humanist causes of earlier eras have virtually disappeared from mainstream public consciousness, to be replaced by a pathological concern with budget surpluses and deficits. Increasing efficiency becomes almost an aim in itself, subject only to the profit motive, and superceding all other concerns, including ethical and humanitarian concerns as well as questions of personal fulfillment and meaning. It is no coincidence that the rise in this type of thinking has corresponded in our society with an equal rise in what Irvin Yalom, using Salvador Maddi’s phrase, calls “existential sickness” (1980: 450). In rendering our world “small and banal”, economic rationalism, the new religion of the marketplace, has led to a crisis of meaning. Unlike the old religions, it is strictly limited in the types of questions it can address. An accountant can complete your tax return but he can’t provide you with the answers to the questions that really matter: “What should I do?” “How should I live?” “Why do I suffer?”

All of the authors examined in this thesis have been concerned in various ways with the gradual decline in the modern era of those doctrines that had previously given human life a sense of weight, purpose, and meaning. The first part of this thesis examined the way in which the decline in religious faith in Dostoevsky's era led individuals to question traditional theological answers to the problem of suffering. In an increasingly secular world, suffering comes to appear wretched and meaningless. Kundera continues to develop this thematic. His novels chart the decline of some of the grand metaphysical structures of the twentieth century which still seek to attribute a sense of purpose and meaning to human existence (the chief among these being what he refers to as the lyric tradition). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* he reaches the end point of the quest Dostoevsky embarked upon in *The Brothers Karamazov* with his questioning of the Christian proposition that suffering is meaningful. In Kundera's novels there is no trace left of the metaphysical truth that had assured the faithful of the value and worth of their suffering. The problem his character's face is what stance to adopt in a world in which the loss of any sort of belief has made human life and suffering 'unbearably light'. Like Dostoevsky and Camus, Kundera recognises that there are problems with the proposition that suffering has a purpose and a meaning. However, he also recognises the equally problematic consequences of a total lack of meaning in relation to suffering. In the absence of those beliefs that made sense of our pain, suffering appears pointless and insignificant. As O'Brien notes, "Kundera captures the lure and the danger of both uncontested meaning and meaninglessness in the extreme, revealing the consequences when one or the other is dominant" (1995:98). "If there is too much uncontested meaning on earth", Kundera argues in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "man collapses under the burden; if the world loses all its meaning [...] life is every bit as impossible" (61).

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas wavers between the desire for lightness and the desire for weight. His movement to and fro between these philosophical attitudes is played out in his affairs with the two female protagonists of the novel. "Tereza and Sabina represented the two poles of his life", says the narrator, "separate and irreconcilable, yet equally appealing" (28). In this characterisation, Tereza represents weight. She arrives at Tomas' flat one day with a heavy suitcase containing all of her worldly belongings. The suitcase was "large and enormously heavy", says the narrator, and Tomas "immediately realized that [it] contained her life" (9-10). Tereza also represents the weighty voice of fate; she believes that everything that happens to her happens for a reason. In her relationship with Tomas she sees the hand of destiny. "She knew", says the narrator, "that this stranger was her fate"

(50). This idea gives her some comfort. Tomas, on the other hand, sees their relationship as eventuating from a string of arbitrary coincidences. “Seven years earlier”, says the narrator,

a complex neurological case *happened* to have been discovered at the hospital in Tereza’s town. They called in the chief surgeon of Tomas’s hospital in Prague for consultation, but the chief surgeon *happened* to be suffering from sciatica, and because he could not move he sent Tomas to the provincial hospital in his place. The town had several hotels, but Tomas *happened* to be given a room in the one where Tereza was employed. He *happened* to have enough free time before his train left to stop at the hotel restaurant. Tereza *happened* to be on duty, and *happened* to be serving Tomas’s table. It had taken six chance happenings to push Tomas towards Tereza, as if he had little inclination to go on his own” (35).

At times Tomas is tormented by the seemingly arbitrary nature of the events which had brought him and Tereza together. “[I]t was only a matter of chance” he thinks “that Tereza loved him and not his friend Z” (34). Tomas would not be the first person to experience anxiety at such a thought. “We all reject out of hand”, says the narrator, “the idea that the love of our life may be something light or weightless; we presume our love is what must be” (35). Similarly, the idea of fate is shown to lend our suffering a reassuring sense of purpose and weight. The idea that our suffering must be - that it serves a purpose in some larger scheme, can be immensely comforting. However, Tomas is a man of modern times, and while he may desire the sense of weight a belief in fate may bring, he also knows it is objectively impossible. As Banerjee has noted, Tomas exists

at the tail end of the modern era, long after the organic link between the living moment and the arche of divine creation was severed, but still proximate to the recent collapse of the secular teleology of Communism. Tomas’ turn of mind inclines him to be skeptical of all symbolic systems of order, even while hankering after intelligibility (1990:193-4).

In some ways Tomas is attracted to the lightness a lack of belief implies - a lightness personified in the novel by Sabina. Sabina represents everything Tereza is not - she makes no demands on Tomas, and

she does not believe in fate. As John O'Brien has noted, Sabina "is irresistibly attracted to lightness in all its manifestations" (1995:110). This is why Tomas is irresistibly attracted to Sabina. He finds her lightness liberating in comparison with the weight and responsibility with which Tereza is associated. Nevertheless, the fact that Tomas is unable to choose Sabina over Tereza implies that he is not able to commit completely to the lightness she represents. Living with Tereza, while maintaining his affair with Sabina, represents an attempt to have it both ways. According to O'Brien, Tomas's inability to choose between Sabina and Tereza is indicative of his inability to choose between the opposite attitudes they represent: lightness and weight. The inability to choose between the two, he argues, is a common human dilemma: "[T]he vacillation of Tomas between lightness and weight could simply represent an extension of humanity's attempts to reach an equilibrium between these diametrically opposed but equally unbearable epistemological attitudes" (1992:8).

Franz, on the other hand, is a character firmly committed to weight. Another of Sabina's lovers, he is an ordinary man crushed by the lack of meaning in the modern world. He longs for something that would give his life weight and purpose. Like Tereza, he has a desire to escape from the mundane atmosphere of his everyday life. This is why he carries on his affair with Sabina not in Geneva, where they live, but in the most exotic foreign cities of the world. When Sabina admits that she prefers Geneva, Franz thinks with disappointment that "she had failed to understand his apprehensive attempts to save their love from banality" (83). Just as Franz wants to escape banality in his love affairs, he also wants to escape it in his suffering. He cannot tolerate the idea of suffering for something trivial and mundane. He wishes he had a cause to suffer for, preferably something dramatic. It is due to this longing that he is attracted to Sabina. Whereas she had represented lightness for Tomas, she represents the possibility of weight for Franz.<sup>45</sup> "Whenever she told him about herself and her friends from home" says the narrator, "Franz heard the words 'prison', 'persecution', enemy tanks', 'emigration', 'pamphlets', 'banned books', 'banned exhibitions', and he felt a curious mixture of envy and nostalgia" (102). Franz's nostalgia speaks to us of his desire to return to a world in which human suffering could mean something. It is this nostalgia - the nostalgia of a Western intellectual whose world of relative truths and cynicism denies the possibility of grand causes and heroic deaths - that

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<sup>45</sup> As John O'Brien has noted, Kundera's characters are often ambiguous, and Sabina may contain the possibility of both lightness and weight (1995:112).

leads him to envy Sabina and her world. For Franz, Sabina represents “life on a large scale; a life of risk, daring, and the danger of death. Sabina had renewed his faith in the grandeur of human endeavor”, says the narrator (103).

When thinking of his own life, Franz laments the lack of “conflict, drama, and tragedy” in it (102). Most of all, we are told, he regrets the trivial nature of his suffering. “A philosopher once wrote that everything in my work is unverifiable speculation”, he says to Sabina. “I felt terribly humiliated and made a furious response. And just think, that laughable episode was the greatest conflict I’ve ever experienced! The pinnacle of the dramatic possibilities available to my life!” (102). “It is in this spirit”, argues the narrator, “that we may understand Franz’s weakness for revolution. First he sympathised with Cuba, then with China” (103). Franz’s desire for a cause is motivated by a desire to escape the banality of his life and suffering. It is this desire which leads Franz to join a group of doctors and intellectuals marching from Bangkok to the Cambodian border. “Cambodia had recently been through American bombardment, a civil war [...] and finally occupation by neighbouring Vietnam”, says the narrator. “An international medical committee had repeatedly requested permission to enter the country, but the Vietnamese had turned them down. The idea was for a group of important Western intellectuals to march to the Cambodian border [...] to force the occupied country to allow the doctors in” (258). Kundera presents Franz’s decision to join the march as an attempt to recapture the drama of an era in which people were willing to lay down their lives for a fervent belief in values such as liberty and equality. However, the farcical nature of the project becomes apparent when Franz arrives at a meeting in Bangkok, from whence the march will begin. Upon arriving Franz meets a room full of people like himself: well-off Western intellectuals, journalists, politicians, singers and actors, all of whom were moved more by a sense of their own commitment than by the suffering of the people in whose names they were protesting. “The meeting reached a peak”, says the narrator,

when a famous American actress rose to speak. [...] She spoke about suffering children, about the barbarity of Communist dictatorship, the human right to security, the current threat to the traditional values of civilized society, the inalienable freedom of the human individual, and President Carter, who was deeply sorrowed by the events in Cambodia (260).



While this passage is meant to highlight the sanctimonious displays that often accompany such projects, Kundera does not mean to imply that all of those who commit themselves to a cause are acting from shallow self interest. The French doctor with the red mustache seems to be committed to alleviating suffering: “We’re here to cure dying people”, he shouts in anger at the end of her speech. “Let’s not turn this into an American propaganda circus! We’re not here to protest against Communism! We’re here to save lives!” (260). The majority of Kundera’s characters, however, do seem to be guilty of varying amounts of hypocrisy and self-delusion. Such is the case with Franz. The narrator emphasises how “thrilled” he was by the invitation to join the march (258). There is no mention, however, of any sadness he may have felt for the suffering people of Cambodia; in fact the only sadness he feels is regret at having to leave his mistress. Franz is not an evil character; in fact, he is quite likeable. He is simply subject to the same weaknesses as many human beings. He imagines he will be fighting for a noble cause in Cambodia, and if this gives him pleasure, if it allows him to experience an exhilarating sense of purpose and meaning, then he is guilty of wishing for no more than many individuals - to escape the banality of their everyday lives.

Wishing for a sense of purpose and meaning, however, is of course no guarantee of finding it. Franz, for one, fails in his quest for meaning. When his party reaches Cambodia, their protest is met with a stony silence from the other side of the border. Not only does their protest fail, it fails even to be acknowledged. Franz cannot bear the ignominy of marching all the way to the borders of Cambodia only to have his protest ignored, so he conceives the idea of offering himself as a sacrifice in a heroic act which would rescue the situation from banality. “Here he was”, says the narrator, “standing only a few steps from the bridge joining Thailand to Cambodia, and he felt an overwhelming desire to run out onto it, scream blood-curdling curses to the skies, and die in a great clatter of gunfire” (268). However, at the last moment, Franz seems to realise the futility of such a sacrifice. “Instead of getting himself shot”, says the narrator, “Franz merely hung his head and went back [...] to the buses” (269). Though he desires purpose, weight and meaning more than anything in the world, he realises that achieving these things is impossible. All at once he seems to come to terms with the banality of his age: to suffer, he realises, would *mean* nothing.

### Final Remarks: The Demystification of Suffering

Each of the authors whose work has been the subject of this thesis have been concerned in various ways with the human struggle to come to terms with suffering in a world which is becoming increasingly nihilistic. Their novels have been presented here as forming a conceptual series, in that each presents a concept for theorising suffering at a different moment in this process. Dostoevsky, Camus and Kundera emphasise respectively the wretchedness, absurdity and banality of modern suffering. One of the major factors informing their representations of suffering, as has been discussed, has been their critique of those metaphysical doctrines – religious, political and aesthetic – which construct suffering as meaningful. In a sense, they may all be said to have participated in the demystification of suffering with their sustained attacks on the claims these doctrines make regarding the meaning of suffering. In their novels they bring into being fictional worlds in which the possibilities for understanding suffering in metaphysical terms are diminished and then finally lost. The world of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is the same world Ivan called into existence with his protest against God. “I don’t want to understand”, he cried to heaven. At the end of the path he sets out on is Franz, a man weighed down by his inability to understand. Dostoevsky’s protagonist rebelled against a religion that attributed meaning to suffering – and in so doing hammered a nail into the coffin of those sublime notions Christianity had provided to comfort a suffering humanity. Camus continued this process, stripping suffering of any remnants of meaning, whether religious or secular, and presenting it in all its absurdity. The process is completed with Kundera, for whom suffering is so utterly devoid of meaning that it can only appear banal. The world of his novels is a world “moving through the void without any master” (Kundera, 1993:41).

One cannot but wonder what Dostoevsky would have thought of the final outcome of his protagonist’s rebellion. The attitude of Franz at the end of Kundera’s novel seems to be a testimony to what we have lost in bringing into being a modern world in which meaning is impossible. Nevertheless, we can by no means assume that the consequences of our loss of meaning are entirely negative; we may even find that we prefer life without meaning. “And to think”, wrote Aldous Huxley, “that people complain about modern life having no meaning! Look at what life was like when it did have a meaning. A tale told by an idiot, or a tale told by a Calvinist? Give me the idiot every time” (1962:138). A belief in transcendent meaning, as has been shown in the course of this thesis, has often

been used as a justification for suffering, and at times it has even led to sacrifice and martyrdom. It was on ethical grounds that Ivan rejected the meaning Christianity attributed to suffering, and it is perhaps on ethical grounds also that we should evaluate our modern loss of meaning.

It has been suggested a number of times in the course of this thesis that the depictions of suffering in the work of these authors - depictions based on an awareness of the senselessness of suffering - present a better ethical alternative to the euphemistic treatment of suffering in some other literature. As has been discussed, questions regarding the ethics of representation in relation to suffering have been raised on numerous occasions by each of the authors examined here, both in their fiction and non-fiction, and it is now appropriate that we consider these ethical questions in relation to their own works. The conclusion of this thesis will consider whether the authors examined here meet in their own novels the ethical criteria they apply to other literature. What impact do their particular depictions of suffering produce on the reader? Do the concepts of wretchedness, absurdity and banality which inform their depictions of suffering represent a more ethically sound alternative to the concepts of the meaningful and the sublime? These are some of the broader ethical questions which will be considered in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

## Conclusion:

# Nietzsche's Horse

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In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera relates an anecdote from the life of Friedrich Nietzsche:

Another image comes to mind: Nietzsche leaving his hotel in Turin. Seeing a horse and a coachman beating it with a whip, Nietzsche went up to the horse and, before the coachman's very eyes, put his arms around the horse's neck and burst into tears. That took place in 1889, when [...] his mental illness had just erupted (290).

This incident has been interpreted in various ways. Kundera argues that "Nietzsche was trying to apologise to the horse for Descartes" (287), according to whose theories animals were mere machines.<sup>46</sup> A more straight forward explanation might be that Nietzsche was experiencing compassion. All of the novelists examined in this thesis address to some extent the ability of various scenes to illicit compassion. Suffering does not always inspire compassion; it may breed admiration, or in certain circumstances, contempt. The cruel and senseless spectacle of a horse being beaten by its master, however, inspired compassion in Nietzsche.

Dostoevsky tells of having witnessed a similar incident in his youth. He was travelling with his brother to the Petersburg Academy where they were to train as military engineers. While resting at an inn, Dostoevsky observed the arrival of a government courier in a horse-drawn vehicle. Joseph Frank recounts the incident as follows: "The Courier, a powerful and red faced man, rushed into the station [...], emerged again rapidly, and leaped into a new troika. No sooner was he installed than he rose to his feet and began to beat the driver, a young peasant lad, on the back of his neck with his fist" (1976:70). The young driver then began frantically whipping his horses and the troika took off and vanished from

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<sup>46</sup> "Man is master and proprietor of nature, says Descartes, whereas the beast is merely an automaton, an animated machine, a *machina animata*. When an animal laments, it is not a lament; it is merely the rasp of a poorly functioning mechanism. When a wagon wheel grates, the wagon is not in pain; it simply needs oiling. Thus, we have no reason to grieve for a dog being carved up alive in the laboratory" (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 287).

sight. This incident was to become the basis for Raskolnikov's dream about the "poor gentle mare" being beaten across the eyes in *Crime and Punishment*. It is also referred to by Ivan during the "Mutiny" chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The incident made a deep impression on Dostoevsky, a fact he admits in his memoirs: "this sickening picture remained in my memory all my life" (Dostoevsky, cited in Frank, 1976:71).

Why is it that such scenes affect us? Nietzsche had presumably had many opportunities to come into contact with human suffering - poverty, for example, was a fact of existence for much of the population in nineteenth-century Europe, and it is a well documented fact that human beings were flogged as well as animals.<sup>47</sup> Yet he broke down at the sight of a horse being beaten by its master. Whether or not compassion is forthcoming thus seems to have little or indeed nothing at all to do with any inherent quality of the suffering itself - a minor suffering is equally as capable of eliciting compassion as a great suffering. More importantly, however, the same incident of suffering may illicit different responses from different people. While Nietzsche felt compassion for the suffering of the horse, the coachman (apparently) did not. Compassion thus seems to have more to do with the way in which the observer views suffering. We may be inspired by suffering, or we may feel admiration for the sufferer. If we view an incident of suffering as meaningful in a metaphysical sense we may feel satisfied that everything is as it should be. Nietzsche, however, made it clear that he did not view suffering as inherently meaningful. In fact he repeatedly emphasised its senselessness. He also argued that it was precisely the "senselessness of suffering", and not "suffering as such" (1967[b]:68) that provoked feelings of aversion in human beings.

The senselessness of suffering and our aversion to it are fundamental to our sense of compassion. If suffering is presented as sublime and ennobling, it becomes potentially an object of desire. A senseless and degrading suffering, on the other hand, is clearly undesirable, and is more likely to evoke compassion than a suffering which appears meaningful. Nietzsche argued that all suffering is senseless, but that human beings had successfully blinded themselves to the senselessness of their own suffering

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<sup>47</sup> Dostoevsky documents such incidents on numerous occasions in his work. In a letter to his publisher he notes that all of the incidents in *The Brothers Karamazov* about children being beaten and flogged had come from factual sources: "All the stories about children occurred, were printed in the papers, and I can show you where; nothing was invented by me" (Dostoevsky, cited in Belknap, 1990:128).

through religious or philosophical doctrines which offered the comforting illusion that existence was meaningful and that everything was as it should be. Kundera makes the same observation in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

Behind all the European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good, and that we are therefore entitled to multiply. Let us call this basic faith a *categorical agreement with being*” (248).

The suffering of animals, however, is not accounted for in Christian theology. “Genesis was written by a man”, writes Kundera, “not a horse” (286). Neither is it a subject celebrated by lyric poetry or tragic drama. Where we might be fooled into thinking that the suffering of a human being is meaningful, the suffering of a beast is patently senseless. The novels examined here demonstrate that the suffering of humanity is equally as senseless as the suffering of an animal, and that the death of a human being is no more inherently meaningful than that of a pig or a goat. This is not to say that the suffering of humanity is to be despised no more than that of an animal; it should certainly not be concluded that torturing or killing a human being is the moral equivalent of killing a cow.<sup>48</sup> There are of course important differences between the suffering of a human being and that of an animal (the human being, for example, suffers in addition to the physical pain of a beating the mental torture that comes from his recognition of the injustice of his situation and the senselessness of his suffering). The suffering of both human and animal, however, are equally senseless in metaphysical terms, and the secondary suffering experienced only by humans is based partly on an awareness of this fact.

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<sup>48</sup> Animal liberationist and ethicist Peter Singer points to some of the important ethical differences involved. He argues that killing a fish, for example, is less deplorable than killing a sentient human being; a statement he bases on a distinction between “persons” and “non-persons”. Put simply, the most important difference between the two is that the former is able to value existence while the latter is not. He also recognises that there is a difference between inflicting pain on a mouse and inflicting pain on a human being:

Normal adult human beings have mental capacities that will, in certain circumstances, lead them to suffer more than animals would in the same circumstances. If, for instance, we decided to perform extremely painful and lethal scientific experiments on normal adult humans, kidnapped at random from public parks for this purpose, adults who enjoy strolling in parks would become fearful that they would be kidnapped. The resultant terror would be a form of suffering additional to the pain of the experiment. (1990:15-16)

It has been stated thus far that compassion is based on an awareness of the senselessness of suffering. But what exactly is compassion? In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera defines compassion as “co-feeling”:

[T]o have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion - joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This type of compassion [...] signifies the maximal capacity of the affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy (20).

In order to feel compassion for another we must, according to this definition, be able to feel their suffering with them. Perhaps we cannot literally experience the pain of a relative dying of cancer (though some recent research argues that we can)<sup>49</sup> or feel with the horse the lash on its back. We can, however, imagine the mental pain they experience at the senselessness and injustice of their situation. The compassion we feel for others is based on an awareness of the anguish they experience at the senselessness of their suffering. It means feeling that anguish with them. Each of the authors examined here has an understanding of the senselessness of suffering, and it is this understanding that underlies or informs their representations of suffering as *wretched*, *absurd* or *banal*. Compassion is presented in their novels as the response of a human being confronted with the senselessness of another's suffering. Feeling compassion means feeling with the other the wretchedness, absurdity and banality of the human condition. It is solidarity in the face of our common situation as sufferers in a meaningless universe.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty argues that greater human solidarity is the basis of moral progress: “The view that I am offering says that there is indeed such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity” (1989:192). Human solidarity means seeing others, despite their differences, as “like us” in important ways - especially with respect to “pain and humiliation” (1989:192). In his definition of solidarity, Rorty avoids the humanist

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<sup>49</sup> Speaking in a radio interview, clinical psychologist Petria King cited a number of cases in which people have displayed symptoms of the illnesses from which loved one's had died. If the person died of a brain hemorrhage or heart attack, the remaining relative suffered respectively from headaches or chest pains. She even cites a case in which a person who lost a partner in a fire developed burns. King argues that these symptoms are a physical manifestation of the compassion they feel for their dead partner (King, 2003).

claim that all human beings share a common essence, and argues instead that solidarity is “a matter of imaginative identification with the details of others’ lives, rather than a recognition of something antecedently shared” (1989:190). Rorty’s definition of solidarity as “imaginative identification” sounds very much like compassion as Kundera has defined it, in that it also emphasises the individual’s ability to imagine the suffering of another. Rorty argues that literature has a primary role to play in fostering this imaginative ability. “This is not a task for theory”, he argues, “but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel” (1989: xvi). The novelists examined here contribute to this task by allowing us to form an imaginative relationship with their characters - to see them as “like us” in their aversion to suffering. In reading these novels we are allowed an insight into the sense of wretchedness and abandonment felt by those of Dostoevsky’s characters who question their faith; we feel the anguish of those of Camus’s characters who struggle with the absurdity of human existence; and we experience with Kundera’s characters the terrible banality of suffering in the modern world. The literature examined here is thus very different in its affective intent to the literature of the lyric tradition, which seems designed to evoke awe and admiration for suffering, rather than compassion. Such literature actually stifles compassion by undermining the sense of solidarity we may potentially feel at our common situation as sufferers in an absurd universe. It denies us the opportunity to identify with its characters along the lines of our common aversion to suffering, because it presents that suffering as a positive experience.

Theodor Adorno believed that art had a responsibility when dealing with suffering to treat the experience as fundamentally negative. In his *Philosophy of Modern Music*, for example, he writes the following in praise of the music of composers such as Schoenberg: “What radical music perceives is the untransfigured suffering of man [...] the surviving message of despair from the shipwrecked” (1973[a]:105). In an important sense, what Adorno is arguing for is an art that would allow its audience to feel or experience something of the pain and despair of the victims of suffering; an art that would allow us to appreciate on a basic bodily level the negativity of that experience. This, as has been suggested, is what it means to feel compassion. “Beautiful” art, on the other hand, is something Adorno deplores, because it makes suffering attractive and enjoyable. When he labelled lyric poetry “barbaric” (1978: 312) he was condemning on one hand an art form that celebrated the individual during a time which had made a mockery of the very idea of individuality, but on a more basic level, he was making a statement about the moral bankruptcy of an art that rendered suffering meaningful and



sublime. For Adorno, the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust was a fundamentally negative experience and, as such, it had no justification. He felt that by euphemising suffering, the lyric tradition was in fact justifying it. This thesis has also examined the ways in which both religious and secular doctrines provide justifications of suffering by depicting it euphemistically as a meaningful and necessary part of existence. The justifications of suffering they offer can only be maintained by denying the absolutely senseless nature of suffering. In the face of those doctrines that construe suffering as meaningful, literature therefore has an ethical obligation to draw attention to its senselessness, because it is only by recognising the senselessness of suffering that compassion is aroused.

In the novels examined within this thesis, the recognition of the senselessness of suffering is posited as a prerequisite for compassion. Compassion is only experienced, that is, by characters who come to terms with the senselessness of suffering. In *The Brothers Karamazov* Alyosha and Zosima are among those characters who display compassion. Given their religious faith, and the role religious doctrine has played in disguising the true nature of suffering, this may seem contradictory. In fact it may be argued that there is an inherent contradiction between their ability to feel compassion and their stated religious beliefs.<sup>50</sup> Both men quote passages from the scriptures intended to justify the existence of innocent suffering, however, their actions alleviating suffering belie their words, leading us to suspect that they in fact view suffering as something which serves no purpose. Perhaps this contradiction is a manifestation of Dostoevsky's own uncertainty in regard to his faith. He was, as has been discussed, on the one hand a deeply religious man, but on the other, plagued by doubt, especially when it came to the explanations his faith offered in terms of innocent suffering. The sense of compassion demonstrated by characters such as Zosima and Alyosha involves a recognition that suffering is both senseless and an affront to human dignity. Zosima first experiences compassion in relation to the suffering of his servant Afanasy, which he himself had inflicted. As a young man, we are told, Zosima was enrolled in the cadet corps in St Petersburg. He remembers himself then as "a creature almost savage - cruel and preposterous" (340). Having insulted a man towards whom he harboured jealous feelings, he challenges him to a duel. On the eve of the duel, however, Zosima becomes angry with his

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<sup>50</sup> This same contradiction is deeply imbedded in the Christian faith itself. The *Old Testament* preaches about the value and meaning of suffering, while the figure of Christ in the *New Testament* preaches about the need to cure the sick and feed the hungry - that is, to alleviate suffering.

servant and strikes him in the face with such force that he draws blood. This incident marks a turning point for him; it is through it that he first experiences compassion. On the morning of the duel Zosima awakes early, unable to sleep due to a strange sensation in his soul. "Why does my soul feel as though there were something shameful and base in it", he wonders. And then he realises "it was because the evening before I had mercilessly beaten Afanasy!" (342). Zosima is mortified by the memory of the suffering he has inflicted on another human being:

And suddenly I saw it all again [...] he stood before me, and I struck him with all my might, directly in the face, while he kept his hands at his sides [...] quivering with each blow and not even daring to raise an arm in order to shield himself - and this was what a human being had been reduced to [...]. It was as though a sharp needle had passed right through my soul [...]. I covered my face with the palms of both hands, collapsed on to the bed and broke into violent sobbing (342).

In Dostoevsky's novels, compassion is presented as a rare and sometimes mystical ability to understand another person's suffering. For example, the revelation of the senselessness of suffering descends on Zosima as if in an epiphany: "And suddenly the whole truth presented itself to me in all its enlightenment" (343). Such an understanding is utterly inconceivable to the rationalistic mind of Ivan. "Let us assume", he says, "that I suffer deeply - yet I mean, another person would never be able to perceive the degree to which I suffer, because he is another person and not me" (272). The character of Rakitin is also shown to be incapable of compassion. We are told by the narrator that this man "who possessed a remarkable sensitivity to all that concerned himself, only had a very crude grasp of the feelings and sensations of his fellow human beings" (405). In Dostoevsky's novels, only certain types of characters are shown to have the ability to feel compassion: children such as Ilyusha, holy men such as Alyosha and Zosima, and fools such as Prince Myshkin. Perhaps this is because their ability to feel has not been overwhelmed by their rational capacities. Cerebral characters like Ivan experience compassion only in moments of madness - where they lose hold of their rational capacities. Ivan displays a certain madness in the scene in which he talks about the torture of innocent children. "You talk with a strange look", Alyosha notes during his brother's tirade. "It's as if you were in a kind of madness" (273). Similarly, it is perhaps noteworthy that Nietzsche's act of compassion for a horse

comes at the moment when he is beginning to lose his reason. The aim of human reason when confronted by an absurd phenomenon is to try to make sense of it. The attempt must always fail however, as sense and absurdity are, by definition, mutually exclusive. The novelist perhaps succeeds in providing an understanding of suffering where the philosopher fails, because the latter tries to conquer the phenomenon with reason while the former aims to provoke an appreciation of its senselessness. The same observation may be made in relation to characters such as Alyosha, Zosima, Ilyusha and Myshkin. Rather than devoting their energies to the attempt to make sense of suffering, these characters aim to feel with the sufferer the senselessness of their suffering, and it is in this that they achieve understanding. Prince Myshkin is the only character in the corrupt world of *The Idiot* able to understand the suffering of those around him. The narrator describes the “infinite sense of compassion” (367) the suffering of others aroused in him. One character, addressing the prince, remarks that “a heart such as yours cannot fail to understand one who suffers” (513). Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* is the only character in that novel who can understand the burden of suffering carried by Grushenka. “One cannot ask so much of a human soul” (409), he says. Another character in *The Brothers Karamazov* who is shown to have the ability to feel compassion is Ilyusha, the son of the impoverished second-grade captain Snegiryov. The boy is shown to have an exceptional sensitivity to the suffering of others. He discovers what it means to be weak and humiliated when he watches his father being beaten and ridiculed in the town square. “[A]t that very moment on the square”, says Snegiryov, “the truth [...] entered into him and smote him down for ever” (235). In this moment of profound compassion, the child feels the wretchedness of his father’s suffering to such an extent that he is devastated by it.

Compassion is a far more mundane matter for Camus than it is for Dostoevsky. In *The Plague* it is shown to be a simple matter of engaging with others. Rieux feels compassion towards the end of the plague, when he comes upon Grand in the street, and sees the old man crying:

At noon Rieux stepped out of his car into the frozen air; he had just caught sight of Grand some distance away, his face glued to a shop window, full of crudely carved wooden toys. Tears were steadily flowing down the old fellow’s cheeks, and they wrung the doctor’s heart, for he could understand them, and he felt his own tears welling up in sympathy (213).

The compassion he feels is based on his apprehension of the absurd situation in which all individuals find themselves when forced to deal with the existence of innocent suffering. “At this moment”, says the narrator, “he suffered with Grand’s sorrow, and what filled his breast was the passionate indignation we feel when confronted with the anguish all men share” (214). His compassion, as can be seen, is based on a type of understanding of suffering that does not stand in opposition to the absurd, but arises from it. It was precisely the compassionate solidarity I have been discussing here that Camus was referring to when he argued in his *Lyrical and Critical* essays, that absurdity “can by itself generate a positive ethic” (cited in Lowen, 1994:1). He developed this line of thought again in a review of Sartre’s novel *Nausea*: “The realisation that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself, but only a beginning. It is a truth which nearly all great minds have taken as their starting point. It is not this discovery which is interesting, but the consequences and the rules of action which can be drawn from it” (1967:147). Camus was convinced that the recognition of the senselessness of human existence could have positive consequences. He believed that through it human beings could come to feel a sense of solidarity in the face of their common plight. It was their awareness of the absurdity of things that motivates the characters in *The Plague* to unify against the pestilence that befalls them, and it is this same sense of absurdity that motivates their compassion for their fellow sufferers. In times of suffering and death, as has been discussed, we experience the greatest conflict between the senselessness of existence and our passionate desire for meaning. We feel a sense of anguish that people should suffer without purpose or meaning. As long as it does not seek to find resolution in a metaphysical solution, this sense of anguish can be a source of compassion. The strong sense of compassion that arises from the obituary Sartre composed upon the death of Camus in 1960 was based on exactly this type of unresolved anguish. “The accident which killed Camus is a scandal”, he wrote, “because it demonstrates at the heart of the human world the absurdity of what we demand in the depths of our being” (2000:303). This scandalous absurdity is confronted in one way or another by all of Camus’s primary characters, and is the source of their compassion.

If compassion is a simple matter of engagement with others for characters such as Rieux, it is an even more commonplace matter for the characters in Kundera’s novels. These characters experience compassion not only during times of immense and inexplicable suffering, but also when they come across relatively trivial incidents of pain and distress. It is the very banality of these incidents that is shown to inspire compassion in the characters. Tomas feels compassion for Tereza when she

discovers his infidelities by rummaging through the love letters he keeps in a drawer. Her discovery is made clear to him when she tells him of a dream she had in which he made love to another woman while she stood by jabbing needles under her fingernails. “If Tereza had been any other woman”, says the narrator,

Tomas would never have spoken to her again [...]. But instead of throwing her out, he seized her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, because at that moment he himself felt the pain under her fingernails as surely as if the nerves of her fingers led straight to his own brain (20-1).

More often than not, it is given to the narrators in Kundera’s novels to point to the senseless banality of the suffering experienced by the characters, in an attempt which appears to have no other purpose than to illicit the reader’s compassion. The narrator in *The Joke* says of Helena’s suffering that “it was a humiliation without purpose, a humiliation without meaning” (302-3). In *Life is Elsewhere*, the narrator describes Maman’s suffering as “a mean pain, hunched miserably inside her” (103). While Kundera’s narrators may at times appear to mock these characters, they are really only mocking the tragic pretensions with which they try to escape the terrible banality of their suffering. This banality is shown in itself to be a source of suffering, and the reader is asked to identify with the pain the characters experience in this regard. “[E]ach of us suffers”, says the narrator in *Slowness*, “from the baseness of his too commonplace life and yearns to escape it and rise to a higher level” (43). Kundera’s novels are full of these types of statements; the affective engagement they invite is in fact an invitation to feel compassion.

Of course solidarity and compassion are all very well, but they do not in themselves alleviate human suffering. This requires action. Within the novels examined here, however, the experience of compassion is shown to lead to action. For Alyosha and Zosima, compassion is the experience that sets them on the path of their mission to cure suffering. It is Rieux’s recognition of the painful absurdity of the suffering surrounding him that inspires him to fight the plague. “For the moment I know this”, he says, “there are sick people and they need curing” (107). When Tereza leaves Switzerland to return to her occupied homeland it is compassion that leads Tomas to give up his comfortable life and follow her back there:

Tereza forced her way into his thoughts: he imagined her sitting there writing her farewell letter; he felt her hands trembling; he saw her lugging her heavy suitcase in one hand and leading Karenin on his leash with the other; he pictured her unlocking their Prague flat, and suffered the utter abandonment breathing her in the face as she opened the door (30-1).

The image of her suffering leads him to act. It is an image dominated by a terrible banality: a heavy suitcase, a dog on a leash, and an empty flat. If it had been less mundane, if it had been captivatingly sublime, for example, he may not have decided to follow her back to the country he had just escaped. His compassion, which is based on an awareness of the senseless banality of her suffering, leads him to act, despite the danger to himself, in an attempt to alleviate her suffering. If Zosima and Alyosha had seen suffering as meaningful rather than wretched, they may not have devoted themselves to its alleviation. If Rieux had seen suffering as perfectly comprehensible, rather than as a painfully absurd fact of human existence, he may not have been so willing to risk his own health by treating the sick. In all of these cases, it is the patently senseless nature of suffering (a factor central to the concepts of wretchedness, absurdity and banality) that is shown to lead to compassion, and it is compassion that is shown to inspire ethical behaviour.

Adorno, as has been mentioned, maintains that art has an ethical responsibility when it comes to suffering; above all it must avoid attributing a meaning to what is often felt by the victim to be a senseless and degrading experience. “After Auschwitz”, he writes, “our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence [...] they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate” (1978[b]:361). After such events, argues Adorno, it is insulting to try to sustain the idea that suffering is meaningful; that it happens for a reason. Such a claim denies some of the horror of modern suffering, which lies precisely in its senselessness. The claim is also fatalistic. To insist that suffering is a meaningful part of a divine plan is to justify its existence; it is to say to all of those who suffer innocently: ‘Your suffering is necessary and unavoidable, and it is therefore right that you should suffer’.<sup>51</sup> Art forms such as tragedy and lyric poetry (like those sacred and secular doctrines also

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<sup>51</sup> In an article in *The Big Issue* (a magazine sold on the streets by homeless people in Sydney and Melbourne), Meg Mundell expresses this point so beautifully that I feel compelled to quote her at length:

discussed in the course of this thesis) offer us a vision of suffering as meaningful and sublime. They seek to convince us of the merits of suffering, and thus act as its justification. This is the exact opposite of what literature should seek to do. If literature has a role in relation to suffering, it should be to convince us of its senselessness. Rather than comforting us with the idea that all is right with the world, it should make us shudder at the wretchedness, absurdity and banality of human suffering.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that all important works of art have the ability to make us “shudder” (1997:79). His theory provides an interesting platform upon which to consider the work of authors such as Dostoevsky, Camus and Kundera. A short detour can explain his ideas. According to Adorno, some works of art reproduce the shudder primordial humans experienced when a “truth” in nature appeared to reveal itself to them. The revelation of this truth made itself felt as if it were an “epiphany” (1997:80). The individual in the modern world, he argues, has the same experience, but in confrontation with nature as mediated through art. “Under patient contemplation”, he argues, “artworks begin to move. To this extent they are truly afterimages of the primordial shudder in the age of reification” (1997:79).<sup>52</sup> But what is the substance of this “truth” supposedly revealed through art? What is it in the work of art that makes us shudder? If the “substance” of art is suffering, as both

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If I had a dollar for every time I'd heard the words 'Everything happens for a reason', I'd have enough dosh to purchase a fleet of bulldozers capable of shovelling this tripe back into the mouths of all those who have uttered it. This inane, quasi-mystical mantra is invoked for every situation, from losing the love of one's life to missing the last train home [...]. Psychology refers to this type of thinking as 'belief in a just world'. In a desperate bid to impose order on the mind-bogglingly infinite mysteries of the universe, and the shocking things human beings do to one another, we [...] cling to the simplistic idea that there is always method to the madness. Unable to grapple with the question 'How could this happen?', we opt for the more palatable 'This happened because some vague, cosmic law justified it' [...]. And here's the paradox: the 'everything happens for a reason' theory not only blames the victim, but is also fatalistic - as if we are mere puppets flopping about the stage of life, getting run over by trucks and losing our children to cot-death, while some nimble-fingered string-puller controls our destinies (2002:10).

<sup>52</sup> Adorno's theory reads a little like Heidegger's argument on the work of art revealing the hidden essence of things. In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger argues that the role of art is to disclose the essence of things. For example, he writes about a painting by Van Gogh depicting a pair of peasant shoes, arguing that the painting reveals the essence of the shoes, disclosing what they are in truth: “What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth” (1971:36). However, one difference between Heidegger and Adorno is that the latter admits that the artwork in fact produces what it then presents as being in nature: “Artworks become artworks in the production of this [truth], they produce their own transcendence” (1997:78).

Adorno and Nietzsche suggest,<sup>53</sup> the revelation the work of art engages in must be a revelation of suffering. “We shudder”, as Adorno wrote, “at the brutalization of life” (1974:27). The “shudder” may thus be understood as a physical reaction to a painful truth, and in this it is closely related to compassion. It is a bodily response provoked by contact with another’s suffering. The novels examined here create the sense that they are revealing the truth of suffering to the reader in all its wretchedness, absurdity and banality. Of course the “truth” they claim to present is a manufactured truth, but the reader identifies with it and takes ownership of it just as the primordial human must have done when witnessing what appeared to be the revelation of a truth in nature: “The aesthetic shudder once again cancels the distance held by the subject [...] to him is revealed the truth of the work as if it must be his own” (1997:269). But how exactly is this affective identification produced? In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that certain words and expressions can engender an almost uncanny experience that points us to the existence of something hidden beneath the surface of civilised culture. At such moments, we shudder as we are made aware of a “knowledge” that seems to have been repressed. According to Adorno, western culture has been built on the denial of the wretched and degrading aspects of suffering and death. However, this repressed material can be brought to the surface in various ways (some of which have been discussed in the course of this thesis), and when it does so we experience a shudder as we come to an awareness of a previously concealed “truth”:

An unconscious knowledge whispers to the child what is repressed by civilised education; this is what matters, says the whispering voice. And the wretched physical existence strikes a spark in the supreme interest that is scarcely less repressed; it kindles a ‘What is that?’ and ‘Where is it going?’ (1978[b]:366).

Adorno argued that the repression of the wretched and degrading aspects of human suffering by “civilised culture” had produced real and terrible consequences. It led, he argued, to a loss of our “practical abhorrence” of suffering and a consequent dulling of the moral sense. This meant that human beings were able to stand by and watch as terrible atrocities were committed in their backyards. Art, he argues, is directly implicated in these events because it contributed to the moral blindness that

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<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, as has been discussed, claimed that art was built on a substratum of suffering, which was its content and inspiration (1967[a]:45). Adorno also made reference to suffering as the substance of art: “Surely it would be better for art to vanish altogether than to forget suffering, which is art’s expression and which gives substance to its form” (1983: 369)



allowed them to happen. According to Adorno, the experience of the Holocaust alone should convince us of the need to reflect on our cultural traditions. “That this could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences”, he writes, “says more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them. There is untruth in those fields themselves” (1973:366-7).

If one accepts the proposition that art itself contributed to the Holocaust, what is one to do? We cannot simply do away with art, argues Adorno, as this would further the barbarism of which our culture has already shown itself capable (1973:367). However, in its current form this “radically culpable and shabby culture” is impossible to maintain (1973:367). If art is to be ethical, argues Adorno, it must be governed by a “new categorical imperative” that would seek to address what he saw as the failings of culture:

A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler on unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum - bodily, because it is now in the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives (1973: 365).

Whereas Kant believed that reason could deliver us with a set of principles for acting ethically, Adorno demonstrates that reason itself is corrupt, and capable of leading just as easily to the concentration camp or the gas chamber. The only possibility for ethical behaviour, according to Adorno, lies in our “bodily” response to suffering. The role of art under this new categorical imperative would be to shock us into a “practical abhorrence” of human pain and misery - to make us shudder at its wretchedness, absurdity and banality. The novelists examined here succeed in doing precisely this. What is notable in their work is that they draw attention to those aspects of suffering repressed by the lyrical attitude in all its manifestations - theological, philosophical, political or literary. These authors destroy our illusions

about the meaning of suffering, and present it to us as if in its naked state. The effect of this can be shocking; in fact this literature is designed to shock. Dostoevsky's litany of tortured children, for example, aims to jolt us into an awareness of the senselessness and gratuitousness of human suffering; in fact all of the novels examined in this thesis seek to do the same in one way or another. This has often seen their authors accused of cruelty and immorality. In the earliest reviews of *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky was criticized as a "mighty torturer and a man with a sick conscience" (Gorky, cited in Belknap, 1982:30), who orchestrated the suffering of his characters for his own amusement. Camus has been charged with being "anti-Arab" (Brock, 1993:5) and of treating his murder victim in *The Stranger* as a "non-person" (1993:8), while Kundera has been accused, as Fred Misurella notes, "of not caring for his characters and of being morally irresponsible" (1993:12). Contrary to such criticism, I would argue that the authors examined here are ethical in their treatment of suffering. Their novels do not present us with long winded moral treatises on the iniquity of cruelty (this is more the domain of philosophy, which would seek to deal discursively with suffering and to convince the reader with moral arguments of the necessity of eradicating it). They do instead what literature does best - they provoke through their particular treatment of their theme a "practical abhorrence" of suffering, a compassion for those who suffer, and a vehement conviction that things should be otherwise.

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