Love and Return
in The Unbearable Lightness of Being

The Unbearable Lightness of Being by Milan Kundera has been called a novel of ideas. Indeed, Kundera makes a slight admittance of this fact when he refers to the way a novelist produces his characters: "As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about" (221). As Kundera proceeds through his narrative, we begin to see how he uses his characters and their relations as representations of the central ideas of the book – return and love.

The novel starts with a discussion of return. Kundera writes, "in the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make" (5). The lives of Kundera's characters then represent this eternal return. Tomas returns to Sabina, then to Tereza and Sabina, and then finally just to Tereza. Tereza returns constantly to her dreams and to her own private world. Sabina returns to freedom and desire. In short, Kundera's characters incessantly return to some person or need in order to feel present within themselves, and this cycle creates the unbearable responsibility that Kundera mentions. The return his characters constantly enact burdens them with the sense of reality and fulfillment.

In opposition to this cycle of return, the characters posit the hope that love will offer them liberation. Love, however, remains an extremely complex notion to Kundera and his characters. The ability of love to lift us beyond return does not seem totally apparent in the novel. Tereza mentions this when she says that she knows "what happens during the moment love is born: the woman cannot resist the voice calling forth her terrified soul; the man cannot resist the woman whose soul responds to his voice" (160). Love, therefore, as an escape from return, seems to fail

by its very essence. Love becomes an inability to resist, and it pulls the characters more and more into the eternal return.

The question could be asked, therefore, if love and return are the same? Obviously, if one loves a person, one longs to return to that person. This dilemma between love and return plagues the consciences of Kundera's characters. By loving to return and returning to love are we doomed to lives of mindless repetition? No, says Kundera. Love, unlike return, allows for uncertainties to enter in: "If love is to be unforgettable, fortuities must immediately start fluttering down to it" (49). Fortuities flutter down, and the lovers sense the presence of something only chance can provide.

Fortuity, or chance, is thus the crucial difference between love and return. Though love is not unique, lovers are. As Kundera shows so well in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the patterns of that which we discuss and do will always eternally return, but the light, personal, unbelievable process of love occurs but once.

The Great Kanto Quake of 1923

When most Americans think of Japan, they picture efficient corporations, Samurai warriors, and petite women in kimonos. It is unlikely, however, that they will think of earthquakes. Nevertheless, Japan is one of the most seismically active areas of the world. In fact, Japan outstrips Italy, her nearest competitor, in number and violence of earthquakes. An earthquake on December 31, 1703, struck Mushashi, leaving 5,233 people dead. Another earthquake took place in Echigo on May 8, 1844, and killed 12,000 people. The most devastating earthquake prior to 1923 took place in Hizen on February 10, 1792, and took the lives of 15,000 people. However, none of these compares to the Great Kanto Quake of 1923.

The earthquake that struck the area in and around Tokyo, Japan on September 1, 1923, is often considered as one of the worst natural disasters in history. The Great Kanto Quake devastated almost the entire Southeast section of the country, destroying buildings and killing or injuring hundreds of thousands of people. The main event of the quake was registered as 7.9 on the Richter scale. On the following day, September 2, there were over 300 after-shocks felt. Throughout the following three days, over 300 additional after-shocks were reported, which left people scared and anxious as they attempted to recover.

While the earthquake itself was incredibly destructive to lives and property, the fires that followed the tremors were even more destructive. Most of the stoves in Tokyo and Yokohama during that time in history were coal or charcoal cooking stoves. Given that the quake came right prior to lunch, most of these stoves were on in preparation for the lunch-time meal. Therefore, moments after the quake, fires broke out everywhere.

Storage of chemicals and fuel led to many other conflagrations. In Yokohama, for instance, 88 fires broke out simultaneously and the city was soon engulfed in flames that burned

for over two straight days. Further, while the winds in Yokohama were relatively low, the fires caused cyclones that incited the flames. In Tokyo, the winds themselves were a problem, as they reached speeds of almost 18 miles an hour, spreading the flames and making it difficult for fire fighters to stop the blaze.

Those who died from fires were either trapped in buildings that had collapsed on them or in supposedly safe buildings. The greatest loss of life occurred at the Military Clothing Depot in Honjo Ward. In flames fueled by the bedding and clothes of refugees, an estimated 40,000 people died by fire or smoke inhalation.

Those who sought refuge in the harbor were not completely safe either. The oil in the water caught fire and burned many ships. Further, those who were stranded at the ends of piers were forced to either burn or drown to death. In one report it was said that thousands of Japanese, caught by the flames that swept through the city almost immediately, leaped into the canals and bays and drowned.

It is estimated that the Great Kanto Quake killed over 150,000 Japanese people and left millions homeless and hungry. In lives lost and property damaged, it ranks among one of the most deadly and destructive natural disasters ever. The Japanese continue to live with the possibility of earthquakes as they look back in fear upon the Great Kanto Quake of 1923.

The Challenge of Limited Growth

As the twenty-first century begins, much of the world seems transfixed upon one predominant goal: economic growth. With the triumph of capitalism over communism, more and more nations are joining the march toward higher profits, greater output, and larger consumer spending. Indeed, this very spirit of growth is seen as the essence of survival itself within the capitalist structure, since those who do not grow, perish. However, along with this incredible urge toward growth, there now exists the real threat that human beings are heading toward a giant disaster of planetary proportions as the resources of earth become ever more extended and depleted. Therefore, it would seem that in this time of global economies, information highways, environmental degradation, and weapons of mass destruction that the time has come to ask the simple question: can we limit growth?

Whether or not growth can be limited would seem, within the realm of capitalism, to be a nonsensical question. Growth is the essence of capitalism, as capital is designed to produce more of itself. However, it does make sense to ask whether or not the drive to growth can be regulated and inhibited in certain instances in order to begin organizing society in a manner more in tune with the necessities of natural and cultural longevity, as opposed to the current system of brutal and unflagging competition in the drive toward greater exploitation of human and planetary resources.

In order to chip away at the religion of necessary growth, efforts need to be made to show that life can be rewarding without constant accumulation. The stigma assigned to a non-accumulating lifestyle needs to be re-evaluated. The ideas of Ghandi or St. Francis of Assisi need to be discussed not only in relation to peaceful resistance or spirituality, but to the beauty of living free of the drive to accumulation. Only when a lifestyle of non-accumulation is able to be

held up as desirable (and not lazy or anti-capitalist) will the impetus toward growth have a chance at being minimized.

This change requires alterations in the way in which the individual and society co-exist and interact. Society needs to begin rewarding its individuals for efforts that do not simply aim at growth, but which aim at such goals as quality, self-satisfaction, and applied solutions. Further, we need to begin looking at our society not only as something valuable in its expansion, but as something valuable in itself; i.e., valuable in the way it treats its people, provides for its people's desires and aspirations, and takes care of the natural environment on which it depends.

Can the same creature that spawned capitalism's incredible industrial and information machine at the same time turn around and dismantle that machine? Is the human personality equipped to make changes to the economic order necessary for survival? Can the compelling drive toward growth be managed and, if need be, ceased? In short, is it possible to limit growth? If humanity comes to conceive of this limitation as necessary to its survival, then perhaps it is and humanity will survive. If humanity does not achieve this critical enlightenment, then it will probably grow itself into extinction.