
Placing Thebes and Ithaca in Eastern Europe: Kundera, the Greeks, and I

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Rarely do books compel me to literary criticism as well as to a reconsideration of personal experience. What follows is an expression of such dual fascination—as classicist and immigrant—with the novels of Milan Kundera. This essay examines the literary use and political significance of the tales of Oedipus and Odysseus in two recent novels by Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Ignorance*, to suggest that the political experience of ex-Soviet Eastern Europe has led to some unique interpretations of classical Greek myth.

east, eastern europe(an): an excursion

the terms “Eastern Europe” and “Eastern European” often make me cringe—likewise “Africa” and “African.” Certain uses of these words show disregard for the diversity of vast geographical regions; in the same manner, the “West”—created as a geopolitical term to counterbalance the “East”—encompasses such distinct territories as Western Europe, the United States, and Australia. Once, the “West” was opposed to the East of Europe, but now, after the fall of the Soviet Block, “West” is rather used in opposition to the Middle and Far East. To make things even more complicated, “Western civilization” includes Eastern Europe whenever it opposes “Eastern civilization.” In truth, West, East, and their derivations have never been in perfect balance.

“Eastern European” replaces the uniqueness of the individual with an amorphous denomination. Should everyone

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be put in the same category—Romanian, Czech, Hungarian, and Russian? By contrast, no one says or has ever said “Western European” in the same way. Why not? Are not the French and the English related through Norman blood ties? Are not we all (or in Europe almost all) related, as Indo–Europeans? Leaving aside the joke and despite my aversion for the expression “Eastern European,” I have to concede that living during and after Communism has created a similar cultural sensibility in the ex–Soviet East. My reading of Kundera’s novels emphasizes that Greek myth has become invested with a new kind of symbolism when seen through the eyes of “Easterners.” And the “West” should take note of that.

thebes, prague, and bucharest:

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

and sophocles’ *OEDIPUS THE KING*;

the problem of “knowledge” in communism

have you ever felt that your community is plagued and that you will die unless a miraculous cure and absolution can be found? You probably have not—unless you come from a certain part of Europe, the East, and unless you have lived during the decades of imposed Soviet socialism.¹ In Kundera’s *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), the protagonist, Tomas, writes an unusual article which he sends to the editors of the main socialist newspaper. The article puts an interesting spin on the story of Oedipus. It starts from the question of why those who sincerely believed in the ideals of Communism have failed to admit the failure of the Communist regime and now consider themselves innocent. Tomas’ conclusion: *it ultimately did not matter*. Oedipus, the unfortunate king of Thebes, took responsibility for his deeds, even though he had acted in ignorance and therefore did not commit any crime voluntarily.² Even if those early idealists did not consciously predict or realize the horrific consequences of installing the socialist regime in (back then) Czechoslovakia, they were nevertheless responsible. Tomas reasons thus:

Anyone who thinks that the Communist regimes of Central Europe are exclusively the work of criminals is overlooking a basic truth: the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise. They defended that road so valiantly that they were forced to execute people. Later it became clear that there was no paradise, that the enthusiasts were therefore murderers.

Then everyone took to shouting at the Communists: You're the ones responsible for our country's misfortunes . . .

And the accused responded: We didn't know! We were deceived! We were true believers! Deep in our hearts we are innocent! . . .

It was in this connection that Tomas recalled the tale of Oedipus: Oedipus did not know he was sleeping with his own mother, yet when he realized what had happened, he did not feel innocent. Unable to stand the sight of the misfortunes he had wrought by "not knowing," he put out his eyes and wandered blind away from Thebes.

When Tomas heard Communists shouting in defense of their inner purity, he said to himself, As a result of your "not knowing," this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and you shout that you feel no guilt? How can you stand the sight of what you've done? How is it you aren't horrified? Have you no eyes to see? If you had eyes, you would have to put them out and wander away from Thebes!

The analogy so pleased him that he often used it in conversation with friends, and his formulation grew increasingly precise and elegant. (176-77)³

While I was reading this, I had an epiphany. A similar problem used to consume me, although I spent my childhood in the socialist Romania of the eighties, a setting that differed significantly from Kundera's (Prague of spring 1968 and the subsequent ussr invasion). Could it have been possible that Ceaușescu, the dictator of my country, did not know what was going on around him? If he had known the reality he would have done something. Right? Why, like Kundera's character, did I used to obsess over this problem of political ignorance versus culpability? I called a Romanian friend, about my age, now an architect in Chicago.

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“Were you asking yourself the same question?” I asked. “Oh my gosh, yes,” she said. “I was planning to throw myself in front of the dictator’s car to tell him what was happening, because I was convinced that he had no idea.” Now, however, she is convinced that Ceaușescu knew everything. Why were we wondering back then whether he knew the truth? Because we kept hearing from the media about the glorious accomplishments of the country. We heard directly from Ceaușescu discourses about the steady progress toward the “highest golden peaks of Communism.” But the economy was in ruins and the only thing increasing steadily was the people’s hatred for the government! My puzzlement differed superficially from that of Kundera’s character, I suppose—for I was not wondering whether not knowing might exculpate the Romanian tyrant, but rather the following: *how could he not know?* Could it have been possible for Oedipus not to realize that the Thebans were ill and dying from plague? How could anyone have failed to realize the lack of civic freedom, the gloomy state of economy, and the boiling anger of the population in mid-eighties Romania? I have long answered that our tyrant *decided* not to know, and willingly missed all the clues about the surrounding reality. He missed even the moment of final revelation before his execution in December 1989. Unlike Oedipus, he never realized what he had done, or at least never openly acknowledged it; he went down mumbling the same inept phrases that he had uttered over decades. I felt no satisfaction when Ceaușescu was executed—not because of my sudden forgiveness for him or out of compassion but because the problem of guilt and responsibility remained unresolved. It was an execution of a madman who refused to understand what he had done wrong. No revenge or redemption can take place without some awareness by a criminal that he might deserve his punishment.

The similarities between Kundera’s Czech Republic and the Romania of my childhood have set my thoughts and remembrances in motion, from the modern novel to my own expe-

rience to Sophocles' play. So much has been made of Oedipus' desire to know and of the limitations of tragic knowledge. And, indeed, this is an important theme in Sophocles. Ultimately, Oedipus proves himself to be noble and brave because he longs for truth despite the terrible consequences that he anticipates (e.g., *OT* 1076, 1170). As one scholar observes, Oedipus represents human greatness by undertaking "self-discovery as heroic action."⁴ However, there is another aspect of *Oedipus the King* that has always fascinated me: how much the characters *do* know but decide to ignore. Oedipus knows that the Corinthian royal couple that raised him might not be his parents, for this was the reason for his consultation with the oracle in the first place (*OT* 779–88).⁵ The oracle told Oedipus something that should not have changed his initial suspicion: he will kill his father and marry his mother. He realized that this horrific prophecy did *not* provide the answer to his question (*OT* 789), however, he seemed willing to forget what bothered him initially—that he might have been adopted. Shouldn't he have first pursued his real parents, instead of running away from his possibly adoptive family? Shouldn't he have thought twice about killing a man, or at least inquired more before marrying a much older widow? What about Jocasta? Even if she thought that Oedipus died as an exposed baby, did she not even entertain the possibility that he might have been saved? Why didn't she find it strange from the beginning that the young man whom she was about to marry looked so much like Laius, since she clearly noticed the resemblance (*OT* 743)? And why didn't she wonder about his scarred feet?⁶ Last but not least, what about the shepherd who exposed baby Oedipus? He knew so much, didn't he? But said nothing. I was among the crowd of "shepherds" during Communism. We knew the truth but said nothing because we were afraid to speak. For we had learned that those who dared to speak out vanished quickly. It was not easy to deliver the truth in Communist Thebes. For there was no Oedipus willing to listen to the shepherd—only a tyrant putting plugs in his ears.

In psychoanalysis, the story of Oedipus has been used as a paradigm for the unconscious, especially for the hidden, forbidden desires. In Eastern European thinking, the myth symbolizes the problem of culpability, in spite of (or perhaps because of) political ignorance. Kundera's Tomas suggests that ignorance should not excuse one's actions in politics. Certainly this problem is entrenched in the "ill-fated" Eastern societies. Those societies, until a couple of decades ago, must have looked to spectators from the West as sad as Thebes appeared to the Athenians. Yet such a situation is not confined to Communist-era Eastern Europe, but rather has a much broader scope. How much do we now know and yet resolve to ignore in the West? Truly and luckily we do not have the power of an Oedipus and, consequently, the responsibility to redeem an ailing Thebes. Neither do we have, however, the excuse of the shepherd who fears for his life if he utters the truth. And if we choose not to acknowledge injustices, we cannot claim blamelessness on account of blissful ignorance.

had ithaca been in eastern europe:
IGNORANCE and homer's *ODYSSEY*;
 "return" after the war's end
 (whether the trojan or the "cold")

kundera weaves a bitter meditation on Homer's *Odyssey* into the narrative of his novel *Ignorance* (2000). The myth of the wanderer from Ithaca wishing to return home has led us to believe in a fairy tale: the Great Return. But there is no magic return.⁷ Irena, a Czech émigré, goes back to the Czech Republic from France after twenty years, only to have a premonition confirmed: she would be a misfit in her former fatherland. Joseph returns from Denmark to experience similar disappointments. Many passages show touches of brilliance, in particular, those that describe the bittersweet taste of home and the contradictory feelings of belonging and yet not belonging to one's natal place. In her dreams, Irena rejoices when she sees the street corners of Prague, but

she is also terrified when the native crowds chase her to lock her up somewhere in an asylum. Anyone—immigrant or not—who has lived away from home for a while knows the mixture of the familiar and the strange that defines the homecoming. I knew that I was going to take the story personally when early on I read:

Without waking him, the Phaeacian seamen laid Odysseus, still wrapped in his bedding, near an olive tree on Ithaca's shore, and then departed. Such was his journey's end. He slept on, exhausted. When he awoke, he could not tell where he was. Then Athena wiped the mist from his eyes and it was rapture; the rapture of the Great Return; the ecstasy of the known; the music that sets the air vibrating between earth and heaven: he saw the harbor he had known since childhood . . . (8–9)⁸

No exact quotation is offered, but I recognized at once the passage from the *Odyssey* (13.187–96). Not that I am one of those classicists who can place any passage in a poem and give quotations with line numbers by heart. No—it was this passage and the subsequent lines up to the end of book 13 over which I obsessed when I moved from Romania to the United States. Although I had previously shown no interest in writing about the *Odyssey*, all of a sudden I started frantically writing a long paper on how Odysseus seems to be re-born back home. The encounter between Odysseus and the goddess is much simplified in *Ignorance*. In fact, after the Phaeacians leave Odysseus on the shore of his homeland, Athena first throws a mist over his eyes (13.189–93) so that he can neither recognize the place nor be recognized by others and so that they can plot revenge against the suitors. Later she reintroduces him to his birthplace (here is the harbor, there is the cave, etc.) and finally takes the mist away from his eyes (13.344–52), allowing him to recognize Ithaca. Thinking about the passage now, I realize the deep wisdom hidden in Athena's actions. The wanderer cannot experience a successful return unless he realizes that he no longer knows his homeland and needs to rediscover it. Back then, in

my unsolicited paper, I argued that Odysseus' sleep resembles a kind of death on the shore of Ithaca and that the hero appears not only to be reborn, but also to live a whole life rapidly and to go through various stages of initiation. A seemingly infantile stage follows his awakening; in a mature stage he attempts to test Athena, until the goddess reveals herself; finally, through a magic process the goddess makes her protégée resemble an old beggar: thus Odysseus passes through all of life's phases. That was in my pre-graduate, pre-civilized understanding of the scholarship on the topic. Later I discovered, of course, that other scholars had already noticed the mystical aspect of Odysseus' awakening, but I remained sentimental about the passage. For a long time a few of my friends, who had arrived in the United States about the same time as I had and under similar circumstances, were wondering along with me where home was. We felt that it could no longer be the birthplace that we sometimes visited in the summer, but it was not the new, adoptive country either—not quite yet.

Kundera takes Odysseus' awakening in Ithaca as the key Homeric passage in the creation of the illusion of the Great Return in Western civilization. I interpret it now as a marvelous insight into the mysterious process of reintegration. Home can no longer be home without rebirth because, in so many ways, one's homeland becomes "foreign" after a long absence. Likewise, a new place may become familiar after a long presence—and, of course, with the help of some benevolent divinity.

staying with calypso?

the narrator of *Ignorance* entices us from the beginning with a song for Calypso: "Calypso, ah, Calypso! I often think about her. She loved Odysseus. They lived together for seven years. We do not know how long Odysseus shared Penelope's bed, but certainly not so long as that. And yet we extol Penelope's pain and sneer at Calypso's tears" (9).

Why don't we, as common readers, care about Calypso as much as we care about Penelope? Because she is immortal, I say to Kundera, and because she will have found many an Odysseus to love by now (and Hermes might not have "re-called" all those lovers, as he does Odysseus); we surely hope so for her sake. Furthermore, we think that Odysseus should not stay with Calypso because he does not love her, because they have no child, and so on.

Yet, aside from my defending the structure of the *Odyssey*, how masterfully Kundera captures in this novel the experience of the émigré! While causes may vary (political persecution, economic hardship), there is one general feature of the exile: the impossibility—or at least extreme difficulty—of returning. For those who left the Eastern Block during the rule of the Communist regimes, as much as for Odysseus, external forces prevented a return. While the Homeric hero has to face the storms of Poseidon and Calypso's confining love, the emigrant trying to repatriate would have had to face accusations of treason, imprisonment, and even death—or, if very lucky, "only" social demotion. But now nothing prevents our homecoming. Even less can anyone explain leaving, as I did, long after 1989, when the Communist regimes fell.

Why do we not return? Why have we Eastern Europeans decided to stay with Calypso? There is no simple excuse. The inability to return has become perhaps the peculiar problem of the Eastern European exile. Thus, in Kundera's novel, Irena receives little understanding from her French friend once the Czech Republic renounces Communism. Why don't you go home, now that your country has become free? Why do you waste your time here in France, when you could be helping to rebuild your country? The French never fully understand Irena. Yet there can be no "Great Return," the wanderer intuits, no true home in bygone Ithaca either. Irena's former Czech colleagues and friends understand her even less than the French. Outside Kundera's fiction, even if a French friend has not urged us to go back, some inexplicable feeling of guilt prods us that perhaps we should. Why

don't we? Why isn't returning desirable? Perhaps, above all, our sense of belonging has become more complicated than ever. If, for Odysseus, the family reunion can only take place on Ithaca, for many Eastern European families this is no longer the case. After family members have migrated and become integrated into other societies, reunion requires further migration rather than homecoming. So, for instance, my parents left Romania long before I did, and my search (in a kind of Telemachus role) for them led to a reunion in the United States. A somewhat similar—and probably more common—example is the situation described in *Ignorance*. In that case, an immigrant (Irena) has children while in France; those children are brought up in the new, adoptive culture, so they became more French than Czech. Thus deciding to go “home” means for Kundera's character—as for many others—leaving behind her children, who now belong to the adoptive country.

Secondly, the process of alienation started early in our childhood. For us Easterners, Calypso displays even more “veils” of symbolism than the Homeric one. I think of growing up feeling trapped in my own country: “You cannot go to the see the ‘corrupt West,’” was the slogan of the regime. “You shouldn't go, there is nothing to see there anyway, except for capitalist decadence.” Didn't then our own homeland appear to us as the island of Calypso, from which we had to escape? Whether the “West” wanted us to roam freely is a question for another essay. Poor Irena. Her nightmares revive the schizophrenic view of the fatherland: half-Ithaca and half-Ogygia. Indeed, had he come from Eastern Europe, Odysseus might have left to fight in the Trojan War gladly. Upon arrival at Troy, he would probably have asked for political asylum there—and joined Helen.

When the wanderer travels to foreign places, the narrator of *Ignorance* thunders, strangers will be curious to hear his stories. The Phaeacians urge Odysseus to tell them his story. At home, people think that they know the person who has returned and do not bother to find out how he may have

changed. People from Ithaca do not seem curious enough to ask about Odysseus' adventures. Both Joseph and Irena are startled to observe the indifference of their audiences back in the Czech Republic, whenever they feel compelled to talk about life in exile. Again, I feel obliged to defend the structure of the *Odyssey*. We would not have liked Homer's (to use the conventional name) describing the hero's same adventures twice, first to the Phaeacians and then again to the people of Ithaca, would we? Surely Odysseus must have recounted his feats to Telemachus and to Penelope (at least selectively), but that is not of interest to us, the audience of Homer's poem. In our modern world, isn't it likewise true, I wonder, that the exile does not make a good listener upon his return? He assumes that those who have stayed home could not have changed that much, so he does not ask them much either. Perhaps this type of indifference ought not always to feel poignant. From the liminal position of the émigré, one can look critically at both the natal and the adoptive societies, judging the shortcomings as well as realizing the advantages of each. No attachment; but then detachment can be good, too. At times, juggling identities can certainly be both convenient and amusing; the comedy of exile replaces the tragedy. I have surprised myself when switching pronouns: "we Romanians" or "they, the Romanians"; "they, the Americans" or "we Americans." Self-inclusion or -exclusion depend on the type of conversation: does the topic concern the educational system or the orphanages? Accordingly, I may or may not declare myself Romanian. Conversely, does it refer to comfortable standards of living or to disapproved wars? And, while Odysseus' sense of belonging to Ithaca remains both undeniable and enviable, let's not forget that he often proclaims himself a Cretan. Besides, if Odysseus could have gone back and forth between Ogygia and Ithaca, he might not have deserted Calypso so entirely. I have the feeling that he might have sent her postcards.

the recognition scene

a false assumption of familiarity often leads to tension and tragic misunderstanding between the returning traveler and those who have remained home. Indeed, the “homecoming” has been one of the favorite themes of drama, from Aeschylus to Harold Pinter. Only a complicated process of adjustment and redefinition of identity on both sides can ensure a successful return. Thus the moment of recognition, at which Penelope rediscovers her husband after testing him, stands out as one of the most amazing scenes in the *Odyssey*. Husband and wife must have loved each other, because they are so much alike (“circumspect,” the epithet given to the wife, well matches the husband’s attribute, “cunning,” throughout the poem). Furthermore, the final reunion succeeds, we realize, because the two share a deep, unique experience that time and separation cannot destroy. “For we have signs that we know of only between the two of us, but they are secret from others,” declares Penelope (23.109–10).⁹ If homecoming is analogous, to an extent, to “re-birth,” the reunion in marriage comes after the “re-cognition” of a sacred token: the nuptial bed. When Penelope cleverly tells Euryclea to set the bed made by Odysseus outside the well-fashioned chamber, Odysseus exclaims: “What man has put my bed in another place?” (23.184–85), for no man could have moved it anywhere, since it was built on the trunk of an olive-tree, which grew at the base of the chamber (a description of the building process follows, 23.190–204). Only then does Penelope accept her husband’s identity, while “her knees and the heart within her went slack / as she recognized the clear proofs that Odysseus had given” (23.205–6). This moment has to be counted as the second chance for a truly “happily ever after” married life. The remembrance of the secret token proves not only Odysseus’ identity but also his love for his wife.

Through a captivating and yet deviant narrative, Kundera distorts the moment of recognition from the *Odyssey* in his novel. The parallel is not absolute, of course, but it offers spe-

cial delights and torments to the admirer of Homer. Joseph and Irena have never been married, but they had met once at a bar in Prague prior to going into exile. He noticed her and gave her an ashtray as a token of appreciation. Now the reader may note the triviality of the token, but it is in fact appropriate. In the pro-smoking Communist East, ashtrays were as relevant as olive trees in archaic Greece. Irena was married at the time, so she did not respond to the attentions of the fascinating, unknown man who, sipping his beer, could not turn his gaze from her. But she never forgot him. She interpreted the meeting as a symbol: a possible future of happiness in love. Thus, Irena finds it all the more miraculous when she meets the same man as she is about to embark upon a plane from Paris to Prague. Both she and Joseph are returning home for the first time after long years of exile; both are now free from other relationships (widow and widower). Joseph gives her the impression that he has recognized her, although he has not. On the plane they converse and decide to see their relatives and then to meet after several days in Prague. They do so and have a passionate night. Then Irena decides to test him, a tragicomic rendition of the scene from the *Odyssey*:

She pulls out a small ashtray and shows it to him. "Do you recognize this?"

He takes the ashtray and looks at it.

"Do you recognize it?" she repeats, harsh.

He does not know what to say.

"Look at the inscription!" It is the name of a Prague bar. But that tells him nothing and he does not speak. She observes his discomfort with attentive, increasingly hostile mistrust.

He feels uneasy beneath her gaze, and just then, very briefly, there flickers the image of a window ledge with a bowl of flowers beside a lighted lamp. But the image vanishes, and again he sees the hostile eyes.

Now she understands everything: not only has he forgotten their meeting in the bar, but the truth is worse: he doesn't know who she is! he doesn't know her! . . . And suddenly she realizes: he has never addressed her by name! (*Ignorance*, 186)

Reading this, I smolder with indignation. How could an author do something like this and deny his characters a little happiness! How could Kundera ruin the scene of the final reunion so mercilessly! At the same time, while I am upset from a sentimental standpoint, the comparison with the scene of recognition from the *Odyssey* gives me a kind of perverse intellectual pleasure—for which I hate myself. Unlike Penelope, Irena is not “circumspect,” and so she throws herself into the arms of the strange man before verifying that he recognizes her. She wants to believe that he remembers her, that she was as important to him as he was to her. Thus, she misses the right time for her test. Most painfully, he *almost* remembers, and yet . . . he does not. The greatest irony is that this is a tragic loss for Joseph as well: this woman could have given him happiness. She ought to have meant more to him than a casual encounter—we know that as readers. Truly, Joseph and Irena share a deep common experience, just as Odysseus and Penelope do: they both lived abroad; they can laugh together at the myth of the Great Return. Joseph intuits this, and almost recognizes the significance of the reunion, even after failing to recognize the token. If there is no Great Return, can there be at least a “Great Reunion” for Kundera’s characters? But no, the narrator denies them even domestic happiness. Then, taking the shape of a vengeful deity, he (merciless narrator!) lets Joseph abandon Irena while she is still asleep, which makes me think of another Greek myth. I feel too sad to imagine Irene’s awakening and I am grateful that the novel ends without giving me any further details about this.

Kundera’s novels have led me to a realization of the new symbolical significance that Greek myth has achieved in the East. Particularly the myth of Odysseus—more than any other, I believe—has become crucial to Eastern European experience and thought, a cultural archetype. If grand comparisons may be permitted—and why not, since we are dealing with epic—the Homeric wanderer has recently rekindled our

imagination and hope, as other mythological stories used to fuel Western thought. To Freud, the myth of Oedipus embodied the hidden desires and taboos of the unconscious, the basis of his psychoanalysis. From the existentialist perspective of Camus, the myth of Sisyphus stands for the heroic, albeit futile, efforts of mankind to obtain anything in the universe. In Eastern European thought, the myth of Odysseus provides the paradigm for social integration after painful wanderings. Everyone back “home,” wherever the Eastern Ithaca is located, knows an Odysseus—a relative, friend, or acquaintance. The desire to return to Ithaca may not materialize for many an Eastern Odysseus, just as returning proves not to be a viable solution for the characters of *Ignorance*. Yet, the Homeric model, even when it is brilliantly deconstructed, continues to preoccupy us obsessively. We treasure the *Odyssey* as a hidden token of optimism, by which we measure the hope of discovering a cunning way home . . . or at least to a home.

notes

I am grateful to my father, Laurentiu Munteanu, for introducing me to Kundera's novels. Special thanks go to my friends, Todd Reinhard and Iulia Ionescu, who have read earlier versions of this essay and given me valuable suggestions.

1. I use “Socialism” and “Communism” interchangeably in this essay. The two were not seen as quite the same in the official terminology of the Soviet empire. Socialism was often presented as an earlier, imperfect phase of Communism, through which countries had to pass before attaining perfect equality. In the political jargon of those discontent with the Soviet regimes, the two words were often used disparagingly as synonyms. Furthermore, I have noticed that the English translations of Kundera's novels use either term in the same context, a practice that I have adopted. I do not know whether the author has a preference, since I have not consulted the original Czech or French.

2. It is not my intention here to discuss the complex problem of the degree of voluntariness involved in the tragic *hamartia*, “error” or “missing the mark” (a term with an inexact translation), in the *Poetics* and other Aristotelian works. See, for example, S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago 1998), 215–26, for an excellent analysis of this topic and a thorough review of the scholarship. Suffice it to say that Aristotle (*Poetics* 13.1453a9–10) clearly distinguishes between ruin caused by a deed done

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through “depravity” (*mochtheria*) and ruin caused by some kind of blunder (*hamartia*), such as the situation of Oedipus in the *OT*. Obviously, the latter scenario carries less responsibility on the part of the agent.

3. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, M. H. Heim, trans. (New York 1999). No doubt, Kundera’s character thinks of *Oedipus the King* exclusively. In fact, in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus justifies himself in front of Creon in a manner very similar to Tomas’ Communists. In the latter play, Oedipus says that he cannot find any reproach with himself (966–68), for he knew absolutely nothing (976), and all he had done, he did unwillingly.

4. B. Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time* (New York 1975), 51–52. Numerous other scholars have emphasized Oedipus’ quest for knowledge, which gives him an active role in the discovery of his identity. See M. McDonald, *Sing Sorrow: Classics, History, and Heroines in Opera* (Westport 2001), 133–55, with notes, for a useful review of the scholarship on this topic and a discussion of the later interpretations of Oedipus as a victim of fate, including a comparison between Sophocles’ play and Stravinsky’s opera.

5. Of course, throughout the ages other readers and scholars have wondered why Oedipus fails to realize the truth about his birth earlier. So, for example, Voltaire was puzzled that the process of discovery takes so long and wanted to correct Sophocles in his own version of the play. For more details on this, see M. Muller, *Children of Oedipus and Other Essays on the Imitation of Greek Tragedy, 1550–1800* (Toronto 1980), 105–52. My puzzlement was of a rather different sort. I have wondered how things can go that far in the tragedy and on the political stage when people have the knowledge to stop the disaster at some point. But I have always thought that Sophocles deeply understands the nature of such paradoxical inactive knowledge that we all possess.

6. Although I have never seen Cocteau’s *The Infernal Machine*, I read (C. Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, ed. R. Lecker [New York 1993], 28) that in this movie many issues that have puzzled readers about Sophocles’ tragedy find expression. So, for example, on the wedding night, Jocasta tells the story of her lost child to Oedipus and he responds with the story about his scarred feet.

7. M. Alexopolou, “Nostos and the Impossibility of ‘A Return to the Same’: From Homer to Seferis,” *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 1 (2006), 1–9, offers an excellent survey of the influence of the Homeric epic on contemporary literature.

8. *Ignorance*, L. Asher, trans. (New York 2002). All quotations from *Ignorance* follow this translation.

9. Translations from R. Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York 1991) are on occasion slightly adapted.