

Excerpts from a letter dated 8/26/88

A Prospect Summer Institute participant (Q., an urban public school teacher) is writing to Pat, a few weeks after the Institute ended)

Pat—

I got hold of Kundera's The Art of the Novel and I'm glad, because it makes possible a conversation I've been wanting to continue. This is going to be muddled, I'm figuring it out as I'm saying it, but that feels like an honest way of proceeding. (I liked the way Margaret Himley tied it to Prospect, in "Deep Talk," this Prospect fear of having too finished a written product, rough edges too polished to be true to a still-growing truth.)

I'm thinking of the attraction of the novelist as a writer who has solved this problem. By "meditat[ing] on existence through the medium of imaginary characters." (Kundera, p. 83), by "explor[ing] by means of experimental selves (characters) some great themes of existence " (p. 142), the novelist can create an extended piece of prose that doesn't pretend to say the last word about Reality – in ways that a philosopher or other non-fiction writer can't. So the novelist (and poet, too?) can take this work that's obviously partial and polish it, refine it, revise it, rearrange it quite artfully, even publish it, without risking having it come out as some final definitive statement.

Kundera talks about "what the novel alone can discover about man's being." (p. 64). I'd like to propose that it's not the novel alone that can discover "being." We've been using the Reflective Processes to discover "being," in ways that are interesting to compare to the novelist's ways.

You mentioned how the section of Kundera's book called "Dialogue on the Art of Composition" was helpful to you in writing the paper you delivered last October to the Progressive Ed Conference, how it helped you to see Kundera's way of proceeding in disconnected sections of varying lengths. The analogy was between Kundera's work (a novel) and your work (a speech/paper). I'd like to propose a somewhat different analogy. I want to take what Kundera reports he was doing with his characters Tereza and Jaromil in his novels The Unbearable Lightness of Being and Life is Elsewhere (described on pages 30-31 of The Art of the Novel). I want to compare Kundera's experience to what we do at Prospect when we describe a work or do a staff review. I also want to look at something amazing that happened in August 1987 at Summer Institute Two.

*Kundera: "You see, I don't show you what happens inside Jaromil's head; rather, I show you what happens inside my own; I observe Jaromil for a long time and I try, step by step, to get to the heart of his attitude, in order to understand it, name it, grasp it...."*

*...Suddenly, [Tereza] can't go on, and I ask myself: What is happening with her? And this is the answer I find: She is overcome with vertigo. Vertigo is one of the keys to understanding Tereza. It's not the key to understanding you or me. And yet both of us know that sort of*

*vertigo, at least as a possibility for us, as one of the possibilities of existence. I had to invent Tereza, an experimental self, to understand that possibility, to understand vertigo.*

First of all, the distinctions: the child whose work we describe is not someone we have invented. When you described my ways of knowing, August a year ago, I knew I wasn't a character you had invented, though it did feel as if you were exploring for yourself, for all of us, "some great themes of existence" (and here, even Kundera's words seem cheap for getting at the power of what I felt, what all of us felt, in different ways). I want to let you know something of what it did feel like. This is an adventure – what if Tereza could talk to Kundera and tell him what it felt like for her to be seen/heard/known? Visibility/audibility of the person, from the person's point of view. Tereza doesn't exist and I do, so let me try to tell it.

First of all, we had worked together in pairs for a few days, last August, helping each other say, practice saying, what we knew, how we came to know it. I remember E. and B.M. were working together, C. and S., maybe K. and A.M. I was working with J. a little, though she mostly worked by herself. A.S. by herself? You by yourself? So it was already a partially created work, with a history of a partial audience, by the time we ten assembled in the circle to tell our stories.

What Kundera doesn't go into much (as far as I know) is the power of the listening audience in creating the story, the self, that comes out. I suspect that for the solitary creator it isn't the same as for a person in our group speaking, being heard, with the story getting created in the telling, the power of the listening sucking words out that weren't quite there before the telling. It's one of the first things that struck me, sitting in the circle at the first Summer Institute I was part of, and it was scary, how words came through me, out of my mouth, in timbres I didn't know I possessed, when it came my turn to tell my part of a story/recollection.

Now, after five or six years of weekly local teacher group meetings, and successive Summer Institutes, I'm less afraid of the power. I know it doesn't depend solely on any one particular listener in the circle, though the power can vary somewhat with different chairs. For instance, there are some chairs who can't hear so well the voice of, say, men, or of certain tentative newer people, or of certain poetic/elliptical speakers, and then often there's a corresponding lapse of power in the speaker – something, maybe, corresponding to Kundera's discussion of the increasing lightness of an individual's being, proportional to the increasing mass of world population, and to the increasing hold of mass media, mass bureaucracies.

To follow another corollary: that Thursday in August 1987 (I think it was a Thursday) there were only ten of us in the circle around the arrangement of Queen Anne's Lace. Maybe this smaller-than-usual group helped intensify the listening/hearing/seeing, the audibility/visibility of each person present. We each had more weight of being. And there was also the weight resulting from our history together over some years, and our history together over some days of making new life out of Summer Institute Two for the future Institutes (weight being proportional, too, to trust.)

Anyhow, some remarkable things were going on as we were telling our ways of knowing (not that it was totally, altogether remarkable; there were limits to the trust. K. was later embarrassed that she had exposed her “flaky” side so nakedly; A.S. wrote an accurate but totally wrong set of notes on my ways of knowing -- she made my lip experience sound like a Vaseline advertisement; probably many of us heard only partially.)

Let me single out four things that stand out to me after a year’s passing: the soothing, quiet rhythm of K.’s telling; my own unease in telling about trying to know what it’s like to be Black; the extreme grace and high beauty of J.’s telling some difficult things; the almost insupportable discomfort of C.’s telling – for me, felt in her collarbone and the angle of her jaw.

That was the day of telling. Then, what I think happened was this: you stayed up late (got up early?) with your notes of all our tellings, notes enriched by very present images of how each of us looked and sounded when we were telling, along with your layered memories of other stories we’ve told. And you did something akin to what a novelist does when he writes the novel. You did something very much like what Kundera does when he finds the character’s key words. You found some of our key words/images: S. diving; J. with the wave; A.M. with the house and sky; A.S. and the “oldest word.”

Here’s something remarkable about the “summaries” you created to recapitulate our ways of knowing: many of the important indicators/clues didn’t actually come from the previous day’s tellings (even as the “summaries” expressed more than ways of knowing; many of the key words you used dealt with values, with ways of being which I think are larger than ways of knowing.) From the summary of Q. (myself) as I heard it: an image of seaweed next to the skin, which arose from a description of a photo of the 3-year-old me, something we had done at an Institute in 1985; an image of a Shelley poem typed flawlessly on a sheet of white paper (which came from a discussion a week earlier); maybe a reference, a week earlier, to the intimacy of having someone in one’s head all winter.

Anyhow, the effect of hearing that “summary” of myself was powerful. To be seen, to be heard, to be known. Some cheap ways to put it: I felt more real, more valid. I existed in a way I hadn’t existed before hearing those words. And yet I hadn’t become (to use Kundera’s pejorative) “transparent.” My privacy had not been violated. Nor had I become some sentimentalized idealization, “kitsch.” The power didn’t diminish over time, hasn’t, over the past year, so that any new indicator of knowledge made aware to me – either internally presented (as in new lip muscle sensations) or externally, as when I show an aspect to someone else and that person reflects it back to me, in a look or glance or gesture or word or a laugh -- any new indicator just builds on the old key words, modifying or amplifying them, so the power goes on, not to mention the feeling.

So, this is all by way of confirming something you mentioned at Summer Institute a few weeks ago, that knowing one person increases our common store of people. It’s also in the notes from last year, about what we gain when we describe (Iris’s) picture, about how we become

peopled with more people. I'm setting these Prospect ideas next to Kundera's definition of the novel ("exploring by experimental selves [characters] some great themes of existence.")

Kundera has a large view of the novel:

*A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable of. Novelists draw on the map of existence by discovering this or that human possibility. But again: to exist means "being-in-the-world." Thus both the character and his world must be understood as possibilities. (p. 42)*

The novel is a very finite, bounded work, the words between the covers (though less finite if it's seen as the work and then the effect that work begins to have on the reader, on his ways of looking). How about the work we were doing in Summer Institute 1988? What are its boundaries?

What is your work? Not a finite collection of pages to end up between covers. More, an enterprise that examines a range of human possibilities – possible ways of acting and being in the world, possible worlds.

The final session of this year's Institute felt like an expression of a wide range of possibilities – possible selves for each of us to go forth and be, possible arenas for each of us to carry on the adventure in. And who, then, is the author of that "novel" that has discovered these possibilities? The "author" is not just Pat Carini – it was a group working together these past two weeks, but not exactly a group-with-or-without-Pat-Carini....

I'll be excited to see where all this leads, where the thinking is headed. Thanks for listening!

Love, Q.