Light Through the Crack

The Meaning of Life in the Face of Adversity

Avi Sagi
Translated by
Batya Stein

palgrave
macmillan

Light Through the Crack

Avi Sagi

Light Through the Crack

The Meaning of Life in the Face of Adversity

Translated by Batya Stein

palgrave
macmillan

Avi Sagi
Shalom Hartman Institute
Jerusalem, Israel

Translated by
Batya Stein
Jerusalem, Israel

ISBN 978-3-031-27390-2 ISBN 978-3-031-27391-9 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27391-9

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgments

This book, like my previous ones, would not have been written without the special community at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem that I have been part of for decades. My deep gratitude to my colleagues at the Institute and to its president, Donniel Hartman, for his friendship, his support, his encouragement in hard times, and for this warm home, which has enabled me to go on thinking, developing, and writing. In the hard early days of COVID, the Hartman Institute under Donniel's leadership was for me a source of light and inspiration shining through the crack created by the epidemic. My words here are only a small token of what I hold in my heart.

Thanks to my students, my colleagues at Bar-Ilan University, who have for many years participated in a course on the philosophical study of literary works. Parts of this book were a focus of fruitful discussions we engaged in during the epidemic, which enriched us all.

I am grateful to Carmel Publishing House for publishing the Hebrew version of this book, *Light through the Crack* (2020). I deeply appreciate my long and fruitful partnership with its founder and editor in chief, Israel Carmel.

Special thanks to Batya Stein, who, as usual for all my work, translated this book into English. Her contribution, marked by her wisdom and her professional expertise, make her a partner to the book's final shape.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

An epidemic such as COVID-19 is unlike the familiar illnesses we often face in our lives. In its sudden eruption, its extent, and its terrifying consequences, it challenges life's very order and meaning, takes control of it, interferes in our relations with others, and breaks apart our routine. It also raises many questions in the realms of ethics, politics, theology, psychology, and more, and reawakens an ancient one—what is the human creature in an existence confronting illness and death? All these circumstances tarnish our self-image as sovereign rulers, testing the modernist ethos of humans replacing God when what we experience is solitude, detachment, pain, and bereavement. The world is no longer a safe place—we have been exiled from home and gone back to being strangers subject to an arbitrary power.

We now appear to be beyond the epidemic. Aided by scientific, social, and cultural efforts, humans have retaken control of the world and returned to the old order. The modern Promethean hero has won the war. This picture, however, covers up the cracks, the traumas, and the experience of unhomeness that the epidemic brought back to the world. We have no modernist guarantee proclaiming human victory. Unlike human evil, which can be fought, the epidemic surges as an impervious force that hurts people and corrodes their self-confidence. Its decline notwithstanding, then, we now bear its scars and fear its recurrence.

My focus in this book is on existential questions rekindled by the epidemic. Thrown into the terror of disease, people bring to it the traditions,

A. Sagi, *Light Through the Crack*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27391-9_1

values, ideals, hopes, failures, and habits that constitute their lives, all shaping the way they grapple with questions seemingly resolved. We do not stand naked when facing the harsh reality. Questions arise from this substrate, reflecting the confrontation between the reality of the illness and our universe of meanings.

But the question is not only about reality. When we ask a question, we are both the asking subject and the addressee. Reality challenges our world and compels us to take account of our lives. Is our world of values justified or is it no more than a theory that should be rejected because it does not fit reality? The present becomes an axis of confrontation with the past—our values so far—and the future—should we change our world, reject it, and reshape our lives and beliefs? Or is perhaps the painful present an opportunity for a meaningful existence that does not necessarily reject who we are and what we believed in?

I take a stand in this reality and think about it, not as a distant and uninvolved individual. Although the voice in this book at times speaks in the third person, it is my voice. The use of the third person conveys the hope that my voice, even if personal, is not isolated.

Like many of my books, this one too is the story of my voyage, but this "I" is not a closed monad. I assume that many share my language and the various legacies I bear within me. We do not live in closed enclaves and are all part of one big human web, as evident in what I bring to the existential reflection about the unique reality surrounding us. We live and we also think life. The thought about life—more precisely, the elaboration of life within a conscious frame—is not a necessary product of reality as such. Our consciousness enables us a distance from reality, conveying the fundamental freedom that allows us to constitute ourselves in the present vis-à-vis values and ideas. We are not only what we were but also what we can be. The crack that opened in our lives enables us to think and be different from what we had thought and had been. Even if we were to return to our previous consciousness, we will be different since we have reevaluated reality and are now compelled to take a different stand vis-à-vis what it offers us.

The chapters of the book grapple with a specific kind of existential question, centering on one's attitude to oneself and to the other—any other, human or divine.

Chapter 2 examines the existential challenge posed by the epidemic as a paradigm of an existential crisis. The leitmotif of this chapter is the concept of "the crack," conveying a break, a rift. The chapter traces these

cracks through literature and poetry, which provide insights that at times elude theoretical analyses. The focus of Chap. 3 is on the ethic fitting a reality such as the one resulting from the COVID outburst, which dislocates the world as we know it. This ethic centers on the concept of taking a stand, which I develop through a detailed analysis of Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague*. Chapter 4 deals with the shift in Camus' stance in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to that in *The Plague* and *The Rebel*, conveying the change that takes place in the self. While in *The Myth of Sisyphus* the self is focused inward and strives for conscious choices, in the later works the self undergoes a transformation and is now constituted through its shared existence with the other. Chapter 5 addresses various forms of contending with an existential crisis such as the epidemic along a spectrum stretching between faith and its rejection. At times of existential crises, questions of faith are marginalized. Solidarity then takes center stage, requiring a new religious approach that endorses a theology of suffering and accepts that faith, rather than granting ontological security, compels us to take a stand at the heart of darkness.

Chapter 6 deals with a widespread expression of existential crisis in human history—the search for the guilty. Mythical and religious history assumed that order is disturbed due to human sins. These mythical elements have not disappeared, however, and the belief that identifying those who bear the blame for the pain and the suffering will bring order back is still evident. In this chapter, I examine the guilt discourse of Karl Jaspers and various ways of approaching it. In Chap. 7, I examine the potential existential meaning of loss and bereavement as moments of moral growth, centering on one biblical figure—Jacob. Chapter 8 focuses on Aharon Appelfeld's attempt to contend with the horrors of the Holocaust. Dealing with this experience, Appelfeld tells us, can generate moments of compassion that are true sources of consolation. COVID was a source of suffering far beyond physical pain, justifying attention to a writer who displaces his personal experience to the literary domain and opens up new ways of contending with it.

Chapter 9 reformulates the question of interpersonal connections, an issue that emerged in the harsh lockdowns of the pandemic and fully revealed the fallacy of perceiving the individual as a self-contained entity. Focusing on a critical analysis of Martin Buber's dialogical conception, I argue that Buber overlooked the genuine nature of dialogue as a constant movement toward interpersonal connection occurring at the heart of real existence. Dialogue is an actual event in the world rather than a wondrous

moment of revelation that detaches the person from real life. The book, then, which is an invitation to a dialogue, culminates in a dialogue about dialogue. Chapter 10 offers a brief epilogue.

Each chapter represents an independent unit of meaning and all join into one endeavor: tracing a real and potential picture of life when confronting a threatening reality and suggesting that we can contend with the threat, not necessarily through theological or metaphysical understanding but by taking a stand in our shared existence.

CHAPTER 2

An Essay on the Crack

If a person only remembered how everything around him steadily and imperceptibly dwindles and wanes, breaks, shrinks, and fritters away, how puny and ineffectual are the measures he can and does take in his struggle against it, he would willingly accept every hardship and privation only to ward off this evil.[1]

Each with its own pain,
Each with its own dying.[2]

On Philosophy and Literature, or the Author's Apology

I will begin by addressing a question fundamental to this book and particularly to this chapter. Readers will quickly realize the central role that literature—both poetry and prose—plays in my discussions, raising the question of its relevance to philosophy. Dealing with all aspects of this issue is beyond the scope of the present endeavor, and I will confine myself here to a conceptual analysis meant to substantiate the claim that literature is a crack through which we can understand the ontological-existential crack that enfolds our lives. Literature, then, affords entry to the literary

[1] Ivo Andrić, *The Woman from Sarajevo*, trans. Joseph Hiltrec (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1965), 14.

[2] Czesław Miłosz, "A Poem for the End of the Century," https://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/poems/milosz/a_poem_for_the_end_of_the_century.php.

A. Sagi, *Light Through the Crack*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-27391-9_2

linguistic crack through which we can expose what is hidden—the ontological crack. The epistemological/linguistic layer creates a world without cracks, but literature is a linguistic space that enables the ontological crack to surface; it serves as a "voice" to what was concealed. In this book, and in this chapter in particular, literature sheds light on the existential crack because it is itself a crack.

Milan Kundera warns against the attempt to bring philosophy and literature (and particularly the novel) closer together:

> The novel's wisdom is different from that of philosophy … The art inspired by God's laughter does not by nature serve ideological certitudes, it contradicts them. Like Penelope, it undoes each night the tapestry that the theologians, philosophers, and learned men have woven the day before.[3]

Good for philosophy and theology are transparency and daylight, due to philosophy's open argumentative character. Appropriate for art in general and the novel in particular, claims Kundera, is the concealment of night, which does not expose everything and leaves a space of darkness and ambiguity. In Kundera's view, the foundation of all ideological thought, including philosophical thought, is a passion to shape an ordered world where truth and falsity, good and evil, are clearly distinct from one another. This "passion" is at the foundation of various ideologies that

> can cope with the novel only by translating its language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse…. This "either-or" encapsulates an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human…. This inability makes the novel's wisdom (the wisdom of uncertainty) hard to accept and understand.[4]

Kundera, then, points to a deep contrast between philosophy and literature and presents them as two unbridgeable spaces. Specifically relating to the novel, Kundera determines: "The novel's sole *raison d'etre* is to say what only the novel can say."[5]

Underlying this attitude is a meta-philosophical approach involving certain assumptions about the nature of philosophy. According to Kundera,

[3] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 160.

[4] Ibid., 7.

[5] Ibid., 36.

philosophy is synonymous with a rationalist worldview whereby the world is an ordered system that is also evident in knowledge and morality. This ordered system is prescribed by the luminous and transparent structure of reality, which is also reflected in philosophy. Philosophy is perceived as a set of ideas and "develops its thought in an abstract realm, without characters, without situations."[6] By shedding light on life, philosophy saps its marrow: situations and characters are replaced by abstract ideas that are perceived as clear and transparent.

This luminosity returns from oblivion the Cartesian approach. This approach seeks to set a philosophical course built on distinct and clear ideas that lead to knowledge of the objective world, which is perceived as luminous and resting on a rational and systematic set of laws.

The myth of light is among the greatest and most enduring legacies of a philosophical tradition stretching from Plato to Descartes. Philosophy is perceived as releasing humans from the dark cave and leading them to the light embodied in truth, goodness, and, above all—in the intellect common to God, the world, and humans. According to this approach, darkness and irrationality denote what has to be overcome, not reality as such. In the wake of this approach, Kundera locates art as the antithesis of light, as penetrating the dark depths. The clash between philosophy and literature is thus inevitable and these two disciplines cannot be mediated.

But is this model of philosophy indispensable? The history of philosophy suggests a more complex picture. Heraclitus had already acknowledged a ceaseless flow and the lack of an organizing and stable framework for existence. This acknowledgment resurged at times of crisis and disenchantment among modern philosophers such as Pascal, Hume, Schelling, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Wittgenstein, and many others. Not only did these thinkers cease to yearn for metaphysical rationalism but they also saw rationalist thought as irrational since it is not critical and takes unnecessary and even implausible assumptions as obvious. In their view, rationalist thought pollutes thought and consciousness.

Expanding on these thinkers' weighty arguments against rationalism exceeds my scope here, but one fundamental claim common to all of them is that the rationalist worldview is based on nonrational foundations—habits and superstitions or implausible beliefs. This philosophical project, they asserted, was intended to hide from humans their real situation, their

[6] Ibid., 29.

loneliness, and the anxiety that envelops their lives—the crack at the core of their existence. People need rationalist order to find rest from the sense of meaninglessness that threatens them. In sum, classic metaphysics had intended to serve humans as a refuge from the collapse of their existence.

Modern thinkers, by contrast, sought a different opening for philosophy. They yearned for a less pretentious approach and did not aspire to create a philosophical community where God and humans share the same knowledge. This philosophy gradually turned into a long journey of humans toward themselves, which fluctuates between self-knowledge and self-creativity. The old Greek determination "know thyself" was reinterpreted as an existential challenge. In the thought that grew after Kant, we discover traces of a new emerging metaphysic that focused on humans, at times more than on the world. Philosophy became a long journey of self-understanding and self-consciousness marked by immanence.

This type of philosophy did not negate the concern with the world or with God. Its perspective changed, however: its concern with God or the world rests on the epistemic, ethical, and hermeneutical primacy of humans. The world is our world as we interpret it, and God is our God as we acknowledge, affirm, or negate.[7]

This shift of gaze from the world to humans requires an entirely different philosophical effort from the one that Kundera had assumed since it is based on the data of human existence. A philosophy founded on the attempt to grapple with the full complexity of human life, including its typical contradictions, tensions, and dialectic, refutes the literature/philosophy antithesis set up by Kundera because this philosophy, like literature, contends with human existence as a whole.

Albert Camus' thought conveyed this displacement. In the brief essay that appears in *The Myth of Sysiphus*, he points to the relocation of the novel within the thought of his choice—the absurd. The absurd does not seek to explain existence through the old metaphysics: "For the absurd man it is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing."[8] In this context, a key role is reserved for the literary work, which Camus describes as follows:

[7] On this issue, see Avi Sagi, *Living with the Other: The Ethic of Inner Retreat*, trans. Batya Stein (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018).

[8] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 87.

> It [the literary work] marks both the death of an experience and its multiplication. It is a sort of monotonous and passionate repetition of the themes already orchestrated by the world: the body … forms or colours, number or grief.… It does not offer an escape for the intellectual ailment. Rather, it is one of the symptoms of that ailment which reflects it throughout a man's whole thought. But for the first time it makes the mind get outside of itself and places it in opposition to others, not for it to get lost but to show it clearly the blind path that all have entered upon.[9]

According to Camus, literature functions as a kind of consciousness that repeats the primary experience. In this process, it kills the experience because it turns into a textual object. But this process is necessary since only through it can the spirit reach the conscious transparency wherein it discovers the borders of existence—"the blind path that all have entered upon."

One need not endorse all of Camus' views about the literary work to admit that his view of the relationship between literature and philosophy differs from Kundera's. The literary work functions as a kind of self-consciousness: it replicates the experience and enables us to observe it. Rather than a replication of the abstract, general, formless human subject, however, this is a replication of concrete human life that reflects the human experience. This replication is vital for the understanding of human existence in all its meanings. Against this background, Camus unhesitatingly determines:

> It would be impossible to insist too much on the arbitrary nature of the former opposition between art and philosophy. If you insist on taking it in too limited a sense, it is certainly false. If you mean merely that these two disciplines each have their peculiar climate, that is probably true but remains vague.[10]

After this general determination, Camus returns to examine some of the claims that were raised to justify the antithesis and rejects them all. In a distinctly Hegelian tone, he writes:

> to anyone who is convinced of the mind's singleness of purpose, nothing is more futile than these distinctions based on methods and objects. There are

[9] Ibid., 87–88.
[10] Ibid., 88–89.

> no frontiers between the disciplines that man sets himself for understanding and loving. They interlock and the same anxiety merges them.[11]

Camus sees the wealth of human creativity and culture as an expression of the human spirit. Despite the diversity of its expressions, one single spirit constitutes human life. The universal unity of human existence neither ignores nor removes the unique and the particular. The classic "either-or" assumption, then, is thereby doomed. According to this approach, notwithstanding the differences between the disciplines, they are not distinct from one another but reflect the same distress and the same process of the spirit that becomes conscious of itself.

But even if both literature and philosophy are expressions of the human spirit, it does not follow that no essential differences prevail between them. Camus' argument does enable philosophers, if they so wish, to use literary texts to decode the human spirit, but it does not successfully decode the special relationship between philosophy and literature. Like many creative artists, Camus did indeed "cross the borders," but the crossing per se does not clarify the relationship between the two disciplines. For that purpose, a reformulation is needed of the meaning of philosophy and philosophical practice that will enable all philosophies to be placed under one overarching rubric, while also answering the question about the relationship between literature and philosophy.

Philosophers who turn to literature may see it as an additional voice that will enrich their philosophical voyage. It may enable them to engage in new reflections on the fundamental philosophical questions that concern them. They are interested in the philosophical questions troubling them and in the relevant conceptual system, and the voice of literature challenges them. They find in literature a broad and deep expression of the human voice or, in Camus' formulation, of the human spirit.

The human spirit is not necessarily realized in pure philosophical reflection, which could lead to an increasing detachment from life. Descartes, the philosopher who thinks his existence to himself, can cast doubt on all that exists outside him and still constitute a meaningful world where the solipsistic subject creates the whole of existence and its meaning. Philosophers may constitute their thought as a kind of monad without any windows.

[11] Ibid.

Philosophers who turn to literature transcend this solipsistic framework. They admit their need for what is beyond them, first and foremost the literary text, seeing it as a voice rather than an object of hermeneutical-literary manipulation. Such philosophers explicitly or implicitly endorse the Hegelian assumption that the human spirit is embodied in the various means of expression in use by human creatures. In this context, art in general and literature in particular have a special status.

A full description of human reality, whose importance Camus acknowledged, is found in literature. Literature can direct philosophy to new horizons of thought not only in ethical realms but also in other domains of philosophical concern. Hidden in literature is often a significant critique of philosophy from which it can rethink its perceptions. This critique rescues philosophy from the closed circle of assumptions and conclusions that functions in a kind of Munchausen movement toward the reality where we are all planted. One brilliant instance of this issue is Voltaire's critique of Leibniz's argument that this is the best of all possible worlds and, therefore, evil is justified. When Voltaire challenged this approach in *Candide*, he showed its harsh implications for real life. In this sense, he anticipated Camus who, in *The Plague*—a text that will be at the center of the discussion in the next two chapters—ascribes to Rieux the claim that such an approach weakens the struggle against evil.

In the wake of the literary text, philosophical thought can often embark on a new course. Literature should therefore be viewed as a kind of mechanism compensating for philosophical deprivation. Literary criticism releases philosophers from their assumptions and enables them to renounce the pretense that these are clear, unconditional insights to endorse the view that philosophy, like literature, is always partial and human. Philosophy is not only thought by humans but also reflects them, and its claim to hold a monopoly on truth could lead it to the brink of the abyss. The philosopher can now begin to rethink, adopt the literary datum, and suggest a philosophy.

Literature enables what philosophy cannot because it challenges the philosophical system itself. These insights resonate in the works of reflective writers that convey profound philosophical awareness. One special instance is the book of Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*. In this work, Semprún wrestles with the memories of his Buchenwald imprisonment—how to bring across the testimony from "there" to someone who has not experienced it? In what sense is it still possible to attest to it so that the event will emerge and the truth of human experience will appear? Semprún

is aware that a flat description of the events will not do. He grapples with the question of understanding that, although ostensibly simple epistemically, is one neither epistemology nor cognition can handle:

> I imagine there'II be a flood of accounts … Everything will be said, put in record…. Everything in these books will be true … except that they won`t contain the essential truth, which no historical reconstruction will ever be able to grasp, no matter how thorough and all-inclusive it may be…. The other kind of understanding, the essential truth of the experience cannot be imparted…. Or should I say, it can be imparted only through literary writing? [12]

> What`s at stake here is the exploration of the human soul in horror of Evil … We`ll need a Dostoyevsky![13]

As a reflective writer, Semprún is aware of the tension between possible linguistic statements about the Holocaust experience and the absence that these statements cannot cross:

> Yet I start to doubt the possibility of telling the story. Not that what we lived through is indescribable. It was unbearable, which is something else (that won`t be hard to understand), something that doesn't concern the form of a possible account, but its substance. Not its articulation, but its density. The only ones who will manage to reach this substance, this transparent density, will be those able to shape their evidence into an artistic object, a space of creation. Or of re-creation. Only the artifice of masterly narrative will prove capable of conveying some of the truth of such testimony.[14]

The power of literature is so vast because it can capture the full range of human existence, not only the light in it but also the darkness at its source. Not in vain does Semprún quote Schelling, who writes, "Without that initial uncertainty … the creature would have no reality: darkness is his inevitable lot."[15] Literature bears within it the possibility of conveying the full range of our experience as realized in feeling, intellect, faith, hope, daily life, the necessary, and the imagined. Literature enables anxiety and

[12] Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Viking, 1997), 123–125.
[13] Ibid., 127.
[14] Ibid., 13.
[15] Ibid., 64.

pressing transience to be rescued from abstract conceptual discussion and to resurface intertwined in the web of life. It is the crack that accompanies the all-inclusive human experience. It need not set borders on existence—judge, evaluate, and rank its modes according to a rational or conceptual criterion. Its big metaphors enable us to sense anew experiences of existence that cannot be formulated in abstract words. It creates, as noted, a linguistic crack that enables the existential-ontological crack to emerge.

Contrary to Kundera's stance, literature does not deal only with night or darkness. It deals with it *as well* but misses nothing in human existence. Indeed, the textual-literary manifestation enables the reader, and at times also the writer, to confront the many possibilities of human existence as they are illuminated by the literary creation itself. Literature moves people away from day-to-day banality to the fictional space of the text, returning them to life with new insights and reflections that had at times been hidden from them, not only on psychological grounds but also for philosophical reasons that had sought to set up a particular world picture.

According to the former option, literature and philosophy can ultimately complement one another and establish harmony between units that are not identical. The latter option reverses this equation: in the river of human existence, literature and philosophy confront one another from opposite shores. Emily Dickinson uniquely conveyed this tension:

> The thought behind I strove to join
> Unto the thought before—
> But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
> Like Balls upon a Floor.[16]

What is the "thought behind" and what is the "thought before"? The "thought behind" is one we repress and ignore due to the "thought before"—the rational understanding that generates order, meaning, and coherence. This order, however, is often unraveled due to the hidden, dark elements. And Dickinson ponders: Is it possible for us to express something even though we are so often disturbed by the hidden elements that challenge our existence? Literature poses a challenge: Can philosophy lead us to the light or is it doomed to be split by the crack, by chaos and meaninglessness? This poem concretely realizes the tension confronting

[16] Emily Dickinson, "I Felt a Cleaving in My Mind," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston/Toronto: Little Brown, 1960), 440.

the philosopher of literature, who records the complex web shaping our lives.

Literature's gift to philosophy is now more clearly discernible. Literature expands the horizons of the philosophical pursuit, enabling it to extricate itself from its characteristic paradigms. Not by chance, philosophers whose main concern was actual existence leaned toward literature. Some, such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, preferred literary to systematic philosophical writing. Others, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, combined philosophy and literature. This mutual shift between literature and philosophy reaches a peak in works where philosophical reflection is a significant element. Prominent examples are John Milton, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Max Frisch, André Malraux, and Italo Calvino. These philosophers and writers attempted to break the barriers between the two realms. They indeed expressed Camus' idea of the great unity of the human spirit, carving its path through various means.

Literature is thus an expression of expansion because it opens up the imagination and outlines new options. We are not only what we are but also what we could have been or what we might become. The rejected options or the new possibilities are a constant ontological element in human existence. Kundera conveyed this view when reflecting on his work as a writer:

> 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…. The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities…. The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.[17]

Kundera distinguished "reality" from "existence"—whereas "reality" denotes the factuality that envelops our lives as a kind of trap, "existence" is the open possibility. Literature, even when it relates to the world and to factuality, bears the open possibility within it:

> A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man

[17] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985), 221.