Can I Be My Body?

In January, I wake up needing to make my body better. More whole. Less body fat, more strength. Less wine, more green food. This will eventually slip away during February until I wake up one morning in March and wonder why my breakfast begins with a smoothie with lettuce in it but is followed by a bagel an hour later.

I know what the body is. I know my body is 5 foot 4 inches tall and 157 pounds (which means it is softer than I’d like it to be). It has eyes and arms and ten fingers that I used to help second graders finish addition problems. I know I have all my organs inside of me, working.

I do not know who I am, but I know that my entire self must come out of my physical form if it comes out at all. In Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being, “the duality between body and soul” is discussed in the moment that Tereza appears on Tomas’s doorstep, followed by a study on the labeling and categorizing of body parts as a way of understanding our physical forms (40). This explanation of the body does not lead to clarity of the soul. I wonder: how do I fit into my own body? And then: will understanding how my body and self function together help me accept my body as it is? Through Tereza’s experience and the narrator’s focus on man’s historical relationship to his body, I decide that my self lives alongside my body, separate, but that I need to remember to care for both – and that connecting with another person will help me to accept this duality. Even if it will not help me understand myself, it will ease the tension between body and soul.

Kundera emphasizes that the body must be remembered through the voice of the narrator, who brings attention to the physical needs of Tereza when she first visits Tomas’s flat, focusing on the concrete care given to the body to keep it working while simultaneously personifying Tereza’s organs. She “was born of the rumbling of a stomach” and remains tied to her stomach.
and body throughout the novel, stuck in the physical sound, “rumbling” like thunder (Kundera 39). “Stomach” conjures up for the reader the image of an organ with purpose, not the softness of a belly. Tereza comes from a part of the body with a purpose, not an aesthetic. That purpose is to hold and digest food, or that which sustains us, but “rumbling” means that goal is not being reached, the stomach is empty. The stomach needs something – the sounds it makes call to the owner of the body to fill it. As Tereza goes to Tomas’s flat, the narrator steps to the side of the story and focuses on her concrete physical needs. He tells us,

And no wonder: she had had nothing to eat since breakfast but a quick sandwich on the platform before boarding the train. She had concentrated on the daring journey ahead of her and forgotten about food. But when we ignore the body, we are more easily victimized by it. (39)

The body is often ignored in novels. There, the body operates on its own, almost magically. Unless the food that characters are eating is particularly important, or their physical health key to the storyline, we as readers do not get to hear about what they ate for lunch, or if they weighed the pros and cons of adding an extra helping of vegetables, or how often they needed to urinate. Everyone in real life has to pee at some point, but characters in books? They never seem to. Tereza has “forgotten” about her body here, specifically the food it needs. By noting, though, that she did have a “quick sandwich […] before boarding the train,” however, the narrator reveals that Tereza understands that her body needs. Not eating at all is more active than passively making an effort that happens to not be enough. Eating is a habit. People eat. Tereza did not fully forget that she needs to eat, she only forgot to consider her body’s specific needs when she did.
Tereza’s “belly speak[s] out” as she stands in front of Tomas after she reaches his flat, calling out with the energy of a conscious life form, personified through its voice (39). The belly, a less scientific-sounding organ than the stomach (if an organ at all), here turns into a separate figure, something inside Tereza calling for attention, for its needs to be fulfilled. Speaking is not the same as “rumbling.” You do not have to be human to rumble. Thunder, a herd of animals, an avalanche, all of these can rumble, can create the deep, low noise that pushes out of an empty belly. Speaking, though, is unique to humans. It is not animalistic. When we speak, we say specific things with the intention of being understood. When we are unsure, we begin to mumble, to blur words together, create more of an extended noise than specific words strung together. Speaking, though, is clear, evident, with the purpose of communicating a need or desire. When Tereza’s belly “speak[s] out” it needs her to understand what it wants. It requires a connection between self and body – listen to me and give me what I need, it tells her.

When I first moved abroad to spend a semester studying, I spent the first few weeks having to force myself to remember to eat enough. I regularly felt bursts of intense worry occasionally including tears, and whenever I called home to say that I was stressed and lonely my mother asked if I had eaten, and I remembered that yes, I had, bread and jam with my coffee in the morning and a sandwich and that apple I’d picked up at the grocery store. My mother told me that I needed to eat something else and I forced myself to remember protein and regularity and dinner.

Although my reaction was different than Tereza’s, worry instead of sound, there is a universality to physical reactions to ignoring the body. When we do, “we are […] victimized by it” (39). It hurts us, telling us to listen to it, focus on it, put it’s needs first, always. Here, the body comes into conflict with the self. To “victimize” requires two participants, one to be the victim
and one the victimizer. If the body and self are one there can be no separate victim. The body and soul may not naturally be unified – or that somehow, after man began to label body parts and organs and discover individual functions, body and soul separate further than before, leading to the place that Tereza (and myself) ended up in, at odds with our physical forms.

This disconnect is resolved at this particular moment through connection with another body. After a few seconds of Tereza’s hurting on his doorstep, “Tomas put his arms around her and made her forget her ventral voices” (39). She feels “terrible standing there,” but he is able to comfort her through physical contact, nothing else (39). Her stomach may be speaking out, but Tomas does not respond to her “ventral voices” with a voice of his own. He does not talk to her, does not tell her to quiet or to calm down or ask if she is hungry. Instead, he holds her. While it might be possible to skip out of an embrace without much physical contact, that Tomas “put his arms around” Tereza “after the first ten seconds” implies that his touch lasted much longer than that amount of time. There is no way to fake a hug - the other person must feel your body align with theirs. For a period of time longer than ten seconds, Tomas must commit to holding Teresa. He “[makes] her forget her ventral voices” adding a further element of the possible inevitability of reaching a form of peace between body and self when someone else holds them together, or at least moving beyond them. As soon as he touches her the “voices” are forgotten. At this moment, when considering another body, as she must be when touching Tomas’s so fully, Tereza cannot be in conflict with her own.

Touching another person feels good to me. When in contact with someone else’s body in an intimate way I focus on the way the other body feels next to my own. As soon as I begin to worry about what my own body may be doing, how it may be fighting against what my self wants, the connection is lost. However, when with another person, arriving at that state of worry
is far less natural. It takes more conscious effort. It isn’t what I want. I do want to be with their body – but I do not need to understand their body’s parts the way I need to understand my own.

The narrator describes the “duality between body and soul” as a “fundamental human experience,” suggesting that even though we have now tried to avoid it, our natural state of being is one in which our physical forms actively conflict with whatever it is that makes up who we are – that is, the soul (40). In describing what past humans thought of the body, past with the vagueness of “a long time ago,” the narrator’s commentary presents both it and the soul as foreign to a person, as if we could step away from both and look at them, frightened and curious. Past man was “unable to identify himself with so alien and unfamiliar an object as the body. The body was a cage” (41). The body is an “object,” a thing, physical. It takes up space. Here, to man who doesn’t yet understand it, the body is also “alien.” It comes from somewhere else, it is not us. It does have a purpose, though. The body is “a cage.” Cages hold things, keep them in. Whatever is inside this confusing foreign object, contained by it, must be even more incomprehensible. The body must be actively separate from it in order to hold it. The soul is described as “something which looked, listened, feared, thought, and marveled” (40). This description of the soul doubles as an explanation of everything that we do as humans (except, perhaps, to touch others). Our senses and emotions are wrapped up in this description, with the verbs chosen ones that imply a search as we “look” and “listen.” However, the placement of whatever this is, these extra bits, as separately inside the body, not connected to it, forces body and soul to be two different things not even occupying the same space – the soul is in a hollowness in the body, a “cage,” and crashes against the boundaries of the physical as it seeks to express itself through our bodies.
This is not what humans want now. The narrator points out that we have turned to the categorization of each of our body parts to provide a way to avoid the conflict between body and self. The focus on the scientific aspects of this, as well as on the benefits provided by labeling the body, reflect a desire to avoid having to consider the soul. The narrator, fully embracing his role in the novel as one who explains, tells us,

[…] the body is no longer unfamiliar: We know that the beating in our chest is the heart and that the nose is the nozzle of a hose sticking out of the body to take oxygen to the lungs. The face is nothing but an instrument panel registering all the body mechanisms: digestion, sight, hearing, respiration, thought.

Ever since man has learned to give each part of the body a name, the body has given him less trouble. (40)

Despite how primal some of these aspects of being are – think of “the beating in our chest,” now aligned with an animalistic urge, they have been labeled into submission. It cannot be a fervent “beating” of lust or rage if it is simply a machine operating. The description of the nose takes this a step further. The “nozzle of a hose sticking out of the body” draws up images of robots, or at least mechanized humans, perhaps someone in a hospital with a plastic tube sticking out. Breathing, though, is often considered a way to relax the body and mind, to center the self. I have been told that deep breathing, connected to meditation, is a way to find my place of zen (wherever that is). Deep breathing through the “nozzle of a hose” designed to “take oxygen to the lungs” will not bring me calm and understanding. It will put oxygen in my lungs so that I do not die. This labeling of parts to understand them “give[s] [us] less trouble.” Even “thought” has here been relegated a mechanism of the body, not connected to self and soul. Man doesn't want
the soul. He, the man the narrator describes, a representative of Western culture, has decided that “the soul is nothing more than the gray matter of the brain in action” (40). If this statement is true, then the soul is itself the body and I can say that I am my body and I can end my search as having culminated in me finding myself in my brain cells. This is what I want, what humans want, to have searched for and found ourselves, and when we find them inside us then even better.

I want to be able to say that I am myself, that I know myself, that my body is myself and that I love it and am happy. When we, though, return to connecting to others, the body and soul again separate. Tereza listening to her stomach on Tomas’s door must feel the conflict between self and body. As the narrator points out, “just make someone who has fallen in love listen to his stomach rumble, and the unity of body and soul, that lyrical illusion of the age of science, instantly fades away” (40). I want this – to fall in love, to be with another person, deeply, and this means that I also want my body and soul to be separate and conflicting. This means my body cannot be my self. It can hold me, but we are still separate. I’ll have to listen to my body, to remember not to ignore it. I will have to eat and sleep and be good to my physical “cage.” And then I’ll have to look for connections with others so that the tension of the duality of soul and body does not become too much.