

Graphomania again: a taxi driver puzzle from Milan Kundera and a solution

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Abstract. This paper presents a puzzle that occurred to me while reading Milan Kundera defining graphomania: a mania for writing books for an unknown public. I also present a solution.

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“To my first fan:

I drove all over Paris with Milan.”

The puzzle. Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* does not just contain fiction. It also contains autobiography. One of the autobiographical pieces concerns a sailor-turned-taxi driver:

Some time ago, I went across Paris with a garrulous driver. He couldn’t sleep at nights. He had chronic insomnia. Had it ever since the war. He was a sailor. His ship sank. He swam three days and three nights. Then he was rescued. He spent several months between life and death. He recovered, but he had lost his ability to sleep. (1996: 126)

“Maybe Kundera made this up and so it is also fiction,” you might propose. No, surely Kundera would not dare make up a sailor’s story. I imagine a committee of sailors evaluating it, the ones from that popular music video even.

Anyway, through a process of questioning, the former sailor goes on to tell Kundera that he writes in the time when he is unable to sleep, and not for his children. Then Kundera introduces his famous definition of graphomania:

Graphomania is not a desire to write letters, personal diaries, or family chronicles (to write for oneself or one's close relations) but a desire to write books (to have a public of unknown readers). In that sense, the taxi driver and Goethe have the same passion. What distinguishes Goethe from the taxi driver is not a difference in passions but one passion's different results. (1996: 127)

It is difficult not to get the impression that Kundera intends to convey that the taxi driver's book is not going to be any good, if he manages to produce one. The impression is further justified by his later claim that graphomania increases to epidemic proportions in countries such as France, where practically nothing happens (1996: 127). Kundera sounds dismissive of the country's many writers.

But Kundera includes the taxi driver's story in his book. We are left with these commitments then:

- (1) The taxi driver and Goethe have the same book-writing desires, but the result of the taxi driver's attempt to satisfy them is not of value for readers in general.
- (2) The taxi driver's story is included in Kundera's book.
- (3) It would only be included if it were of value for readers in general.

How can one accept all three propositions? Or which must go?

A solution. This is a solution which I devised. The taxi driver must have told Kundera a lot of other things on their journey; it was evident that he was trying out book material but Kundera omitted all of this from his own book because he judged it to be not worth it. (In the language of mathematics, he did not show his working out.)

Given this solution, proposition (1) should be qualified slightly:

(1*) the taxi driver and Goethe have the same book-writing desires, but the result of the taxi driver's attempt to satisfy them is *largely* not of value for readers in general, assuming it is a book.

Kundera can still maintain that the results of the same passion are of very different value in the case of the taxi driver and Goethe. (But if one took a page from each of France's book writers for an unknown public and turned these into a book, that might be a different matter.)

Reference

Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber.