

History lessons in contemporary French literature: a brief inquiry

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Abstract. This paper makes a comparison between Milan Kundera and Annie Saumont. I assume there is a message being sent by Saumont in her highly recommended short story “You Should Have Changed at Dol,” regarding history in Kundera, but what is the message? I offer two interpretations.

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Writers of literature sometimes pursue other tasks in their works, such as teaching history and philosophy. Below I compare two writers who belong to the French literary tradition, though it is difficult to shake the impression that the works referred to were written with audiences beyond France in mind.

Kundera. In part one of Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we are told:

Since there is not a single historical event we can count on being commonly known, I must speak of events that took place a few years ago as if they were a thousand years old: In 1939, the German army entered Bohemia, and the Czech state ceased to exist. In 1945, the Russian army entered Bohemia, and the country was once again called an independent republic.

These words are from page ten of the 1996 English translation, but I assume they were written in or just before 1978 in Czech and published first in French; the French translation was subject to deep revisions some years later, we are told in an author’s

note. They are of interest for various reasons, of which I shall mention three. (i) One can expect Kundera to endure but observe how such a writer experiences time. 1939: it was but a few years ago!

(ii) Also is this historical comparison apt – “as if they were a thousand years old”? Perhaps a comparison with anthropology would be more accurate: as if they were events in a faraway former colony studied by anthropologists.

(iii) And this is a fiction, but look at how Kundera approaches the task of introducing historical information into it. Perhaps I should not share this, but I imagine a first draft along these lines:

The French have told me that I have to write for privileged people who feel like some of the pleasures of culture – as one might feel an itch upon a buttock, caused by a malevolent insect – but who know hardly anything. Here is some useful information for my readership...

I think a lot of thought has gone into how to send the information as painlessly as he can into the target audience.

Saumont. Now let us turn to a short story by Annie Saumont, entitled “You Should Have Changed at Dol.” The narrator has a strange dream on a train. Later she tells us:

After the court case I try to make sense of it. In Rennes, where I am studying, I consult the Archives. It takes several days of research before I finally light upon an article which contains some information.

In 1944 there was an attack between Dol and Saint-Malo. (2008: 21)

Perhaps Saumont wrote this without Kundera's history lesson in mind, but I am going to assume she is sending some message to him. What is the message? Below are two hypotheses, which are not inconsistent – I think both are right.

1: who my readers are. “Mr. Kundera, you are read by lots and lots of young people and you cannot assume any background knowledge, but I am not and I can be confident that anyone who reads me does not need to be told that 1944 was war time. A young person who reads my work is probably like the kind of person I am writing about: they have experiences of looking through archives.”

2: writing for the English. “You have so many foreign readers. You are read in colleges almost everywhere. But how many will stand up and say, ‘Mr. Kundera is good,’ against those who deny this? Many move on to more difficult authors and thenceforth pretend you don't exist. If you want to crack the English system, just write a story like this. It will be in anthologies. Schoolteachers will recommend it.” I am not sure they will. It may well be passed over with silent horror, at the kind of person who meets “our criteria.” Nevertheless, I have written my own variation on it, in case that is homework.

References

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

Saumont, A. 2008 (translated from French by H. Constantine) 2008. You Should Have Changed at Dol. In H. Constantine (ed.), *French Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.