

## ***Life is Elsewhere: an English deconstruction?***

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*Abstract.* This paper responds to a European novel presenting the development of a poet. The novelist depicts a stage in which the poet seeks to escape from his mother, but I show that there are textual resources for an alternative interpretation of why.

“What do you make of Milan Kundera?” someone in a library once asked. The French have surely examined the case carefully and, with their rich literary history, are in a good position to come to sound conclusions. It is difficult to add anything that has not occurred to them. He seems an accessible writer; hence his worldwide audiences. But if you ask a certain Englishman, a very clever Englishman, what I guess he will say is, “I don’t think I quite understand his books.”

Let us take *Life is Elsewhere* as an example. The novel is about the life of a fictional poet, but Kundera also draws parallels between the stages of this poet’s life and events in the lives of famous actual poets. Here is a quotation from section 1 of part 3 of the novel:

In every poet’s life there comes a time when he tears himself away from his mother and starts running...

When he was sixteen, he tore himself out of her grasp for the first time. In Paris, the gendarmes caught up with him. He was sheltered for a few weeks by his teacher Izambard and Izambard’s sisters (yes, the same ones who hunted for lice in his hair). Then his mother came to fetch him, slapped his face and her arms enfolded him once more in their cold embrace.

But Arthur Rimbaud keeps running away, again and again, a collar securely fastened around his neck, writing poetry on the run. (1986: 161)

There is an obvious interpretation here: that this is an unhealthily close relationship. There are healthy boundaries between non-poets and their mothers, but the boundaries are weak with poets, and Rimbaud needs *his space*; he is desperately trying to gain it by running away. I presume that is what the novelist is trying to convey. But why the cold embrace? Is it not natural to make the embrace overbearingly warm, in the manner of the rock music band Pink Floyd? Also would she not be heated up after slapping his face?

Here is a way of making sense of the coldness. The mother of the fictional poet tries to understand her son (1986: 185-186). What happens if her understanding gets good enough? Given a “simulative” method of understanding – she does the same things, or sufficiently similar things, or imagines herself doing them – she becomes a poet as well. And poets cannot be in close proximity very easily, or at least that is what we are told elsewhere. Here is what Kundera says in another work, which is meant to illuminate the experience of the literary writer:

Provided their shops are not on the same street, two cobblers can live in perfect harmony. But if they start writing books on the cobbler’s lot, they are soon going to get in each other’s way and ask: “Is a cobbler alive when other cobblers are living?” (1996: 146)

I take it that the point of the reference to cobblers is broadly that two literary writers go well beyond cobblers in their disharmony. Kundera is expressing a commitment to two theses:

**(Cobblers-and-writers thesis)** Two cobblers cannot live in perfect harmony with shops on the same street, and this point metaphorically applies to writers in close spatial proximity.

**(Writers-not-cobblers thesis)** Two cobblers can live in perfect harmony with shops on different streets, but two writers cannot live in harmony while both are alive and aware of each other’s existence, regardless of spatial distance.

Regarding the second thesis, if cobblers are writers, they would ask “Is a cobbler alive when other cobblers are living?” Anyway, the first thesis is enough for us.

“So that is the cobbler analogy, what about the cold embrace metaphor?” Here is a proposal: Rimbaud’s mother wishes to drive Rimbaud away. She is some kind of poet now – maybe not in words, but in her drawing, say: it is poetic drawing, the touch of the poet is there – and he is getting in the way of her poetry. He runs because she makes him run. She makes him run by coldly reducing his space when they are together. And she makes him run to achieve *her space*.

	<b>Obvious interpretation</b>	<b>Alternative interpretation</b>
<b>Who wants space first?</b>	The poet	The poet’s mother
<b>Who does not understand?</b>	The poet’s mother	The poet

I imagine some clever Englishman will not offer you an obvious interpretation, rather another one. Then he will say, “See, I am having trouble understanding the material.” And while it might not be this particular interpretation, it may well involve cobblers.

**References.** (1) Kundera, M. (translated from Czech by P. Kussi) 1986. *Life is Elsewhere*. London: Faber and Faber; (2) Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber.