

On Milan Kundera's definition of graphomania

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Abstract. This paper presents two objections to Milan Kundera's definition of graphomania.

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"For every person met and every shaken hand

Something in return: the book they all demand!"

In his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera recalls being driven across Paris with a taxi driver who was a talkative man. The taxi driver was writing a book about his life, which he thought would help a lot of people. It was not for his children, who would not be interested. It was for a wider public. Kundera writes:

You might say that the taxi driver is not a writer but a graphomaniac. So we need to be precise about our concepts. A woman who writes her lover four letters a day is not a graphomaniac. She is a lover. But my friend who makes photocopies of his love letters to publish them some day is a graphomaniac. (1996: 126-127)

He then offers a definition:

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). (1996: 127)

He claims that both the taxi driver and a renowned German writer share these desires. It is merely the results which are different. But is his definition acceptable?

It will be useful to state Kundera's definition:

Someone has graphomania if and only if:

- (i) They have a desire to write books.
- (ii) They have a desire for these books to be read by an unknown public.

There are various objections to this formulation. One objection is: what if these desires are quite weak and overridden by other desires of theirs? Do they count as a graphomaniac then? Presumably not. We do not call a person an alcoholic because they occasionally have a mild desire for some cold white wine which they never act on.

A second objection is: what if you are the president of a country and you meet a lot of people? Can you not nevertheless be a graphomaniac by desiring that this known public read your book? "Surely this person also counts."

Perhaps Kundera will try to clarify the sense of "know" in the definition to cope with this objection. That handshake public still counts as unknown. Here one encounters a difficulty:

- (a) If he makes the conditions for knowing easy to meet, then the president in our example avoids graphomania, because their desire is to write for a known public;
- (b) If he makes the conditions for knowing difficult to meet, then even the lover counts as writing for an unknown public, or at least an unknown person.

How can one avoid these two problems? (And were the letters even posted? Insects or other bugs came and read them!)

Reference

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