

Poetry and revolution in the Western European novel: Milan Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*

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Abstract. There is a novel which presents a general scheme for the development of a poet but this paper presents a problem for it. The problem is: can a believer in the scheme both account for the universality of some poets and the association it makes between poetry and revolutions?

A review from the early twentieth century modernist literary journal *The Egoist* contrasts the English method of novel writing with a more continental method:

Miss Sinclair treats her subject from within; I believe this is an ancient allegation, but it is quite true. There is nothing artistically wrong about it; if your mind is emotional and not scientific it is absurd to try and write scientifically. And that is what bothers me in the Combined Maze. I feel all the time that Miss Sinclair is striving conscientiously and earnestly to do something which is against her nature—to write a novel from the outside, scientifically, à la Madame Bovary... There is no need to abolish the emotional manner of novel-writing; it is the English method, and Miss Sinclair is English... one has to be marvellously cynical and marvellously calm to write successfully in the other way. (Aldington 1914: 49)

On the next page, the author of these words, Richard Aldington, continues his reviews, but he only has one column. On the other column of the page begins a novel, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But one might conjecture that in an ideal world there is something that goes in-between Aldington's column and the first chapter of this novel. It has some

connection to both. For example, it is scientific or else faux scientific, connecting it to Aldington's review, and also it is about the development of an artist. It is a level above the review but below the level of the modernist novel's poetic opening chapter. One senses a space in-between but what could go in this space? I am not sure. There is a more recent novel which one might hold up and say, "Something like this!" and I briefly wish to examine it.

The novel is called *Life is Elsewhere*. It is by the widely read European novelist Milan Kundera. He presents an account of the development of a poet from his home country. But it does not seem as if it is intended to function as a source of information about that country – a literary ethnography – or at least that is not the novelist's chief intention. If one must associate it with a discipline, it seems closer to what continental Europeans call "philosophical anthropology": the novelist seeks to reveal something about the nature of the human. More specifically, he is interested in a type of human, the poet: the stages of a poet's life and the psychological nature of a poet. He presents his main character as an instance of a general phenomenon. For example:

In every poet's life there comes a time when he tears away from his mother and starts running... (Part 4, section 1, 1986: 161)

There are other poets who apparently went through the stages that this fictional poet goes through, and we are presented with parallels between what Kundera's main character does and what a series of notable actual poets did.

They are all or almost all famous male European poets (Shelley, Byron, Rimbaud and others), which leads to questions of whether his developmental scheme applies to poetesses and to non-European poets and even to less famous poets.¹ I imagine a Polish novel which counters

¹ "His mother put her lips on his cheek; her lips were soft and they wetted his cheek; and they made a tiny little noise: kiss. Why did people do that with their two faces?" (1914: 52)

Kundera's depiction with a depiction of how the stages of a poet's life are different in some faraway society, where the social structure is different, following in the footsteps of Bronislaw Malinowski.

Probably Kundera is very much aware of this issue of to what extent his developmental scheme applies beyond his limited sample. There is another question I have about his novel and the purpose of my paper is actually to raise that question. One might call it a problem, a scientific problem even – a scientific problem for a scientific novel! The novelist draws a connection between poets and revolutions, or at least lyric poets and revolutions. Kundera's young lyric poet is enthusiastic about revolutions. Out with the old and in with the new. That includes getting rid of old poetry in favour of new poetry, which expresses new values, associated with the revolution.

“Revolution is violence,” retorted Jaromil, “that’s a well-known fact. Surrealism above all other movements realized that old clowns have to be brutally kicked off the stage, but it didn’t have the sense to know that it had turned old and useless itself.” (Part 3, section 25, 1986: 149)

“Getting rid” of old poetry can mean more or less extreme measures. It can mean that new poems by an old poet that do not fit with the current trend are not included in anthologies of contemporary poetry, or it can involve more severe acts, such as censorship of the old poet. That brings us to the question, or problem, I wish to raise.

Some poets seem to be universal. People across societies enjoy their poetry and people of different ages too. The problem then is how can we reconcile the following two qualities?

- (A) Poetry (or lyric poetry) is to be associated with revolutions, in which there is a spirit of out with the old and in with the new, including out with old poetry.

- (B) Some poets have a universality, or something close to it, in the sense that people across societies enjoy their poetry and people of a variety of ages.

If the poet, or the lyric poet, is revolutionary by nature, how can there be this universal poetry?

By the way, Kundera seems to be in a good position to address the problem I have raised because it is easy enough to find articles saying that it is time to forget Kundera and yet he continues to be read!

Appendix

Here is an attempt to capture the development of a universal poet, in something not that distant from the style of *Life is Elsewhere*. One day, when he was a boy, Orpheus wrote a poem which pleased his friend but his friend said, "It pleases me but my friend won't understand it." So he wrote a poem which pleases the friend of the friend. Then the friend of the friend brought out his dog and challenged Orpheus to write a poem which pleases the dog. Orpheus looked into the dog's eyes. "It's a dog," said Orpheus, but he could not resist a challenge. Then he somehow managed to please the dog. Then the two friends and the dog brought Orpheus before a tree. "It's an f...ing tree!" he said. "He can't do it!" The friends laughed. Even the dog started laughing.

References

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