
Lyric Poetry, the Novel, and Revolution: Milan Kundera's Life is Elsewhere

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Do novels or poems of high literary merit provide any particular guidance about the idea of revolution, or can we say only that different novels and poems express different points of view? Part of the issue, certainly, depends on how and where one draws the line in regard to the works worth considering. There are those who would argue that even if one can agree on a common list of literary classics, moral chaos reigns among the great works themselves, whether they are novels, poems or plays. Richard Posner, arguing that literature has no wisdom to offer about the nature of justice, declares that "the world of literature is a moral anarchy; immersion in it teaches moral relativism."¹ Declaring that "the classics are full of moral atrocities . . . that the author apparently approved of," he cites the apparent approval of "rape, pillage, murder, human and animal sacrifice, concubinage, and slavery in the *Iliad*," "anti-Semitism in more works of literature than one can count, including works by Shakespeare and Dickens." He points to novels of high literary merit that "disparage the modern project of liberty and equality" and others that "presuppose an organization of society in which a leisured, titled, or educated upper crust lives off the sweat of the brow of a mass of toilers at whose existence the novelist barely hints" (312). Claiming that moral wisdom is unrelated to

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¹ Richard Posner, *Law and Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 311. Subsequent quotations from this work are identified by page number in the text.

aesthetic quality, Posner argues that “the moral content of a work of literature . . . is merely the writer’s raw material—something he works up into a form to which morality is no more relevant than the value of sculptor’s clay as a building material is relevant to the artistic value of the completed sculpture” (313). If Posner is correct, then it would surely be a waste of time to consult even the best novels or poems about revolution, because they would not have any wisdom to offer, about revolutions or anything else.

Posner’s thesis that aesthetic merit has nothing to do with moral insight is, paradoxically, affirmed with the kind of persuasive power that only imaginative literature possesses in one of the great contemporary novels about the idea of revolution, Milan Kundera’s *Life is Elsewhere*.² (“Idea of revolution,” rather than revolution itself, since the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948 was more like a coup than a revolution, though its partisans thought of it as a true revolution.) It should be emphasized at the outset that although Posner’s thesis is certainly affirmed in *Life is Elsewhere*, it is also significantly narrowed. Lyric poetry, according to *Life is Elsewhere*, may have great aesthetic merit despite lacking truth and insight, but novels do not have such leeway. In any case, Milan Kundera’s *Life is Elsewhere* provides an excellent test case both for Posner’s thesis and as a starting point for inquiry into the relation between the idea of revolution on the one hand and novels and poems on the other. Jaromil, the protagonist of *Life is Elsewhere*, is a passionate supporter of the 1948 Communist revolution in Czechoslovakia and, not incidentally, a lyric poet. It is central to the novel that the reader believe Jaromil is indeed a gifted poet, a poet in the tradition of Shelley, Keats, and Rimbaud, to each of whom—and many other famous poets—Jaromil is repeatedly compared throughout the novel. The novel demonstrates how the same impulses and attitudes that lead Jaromil to become a poet also shape his enthusiasm for what he sees as a true revolution—even though his uncle calls it a “putsch,” adding sarcastically: “It’s easy to make a revolution when you’ve got the army and the police and a certain big country behind you” (170). The uncle, who is so uncultured that he believes “Voltaire had invented volts” (172), understands what is going on very well: “The Communists had

Aesthetic merit in art does not guarantee truth and insight.

² *Life is Elsewhere*, trans. Aaron Asher (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000). This edition supersedes the earlier translation by Peter Kussi (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986). Quotations from *Life is Elsewhere* are identified by page number in the text.

most of the power already, and they made this putsch so they could have all of it" (171). Jaromil, on the other hand, gives his mother an explanation that is more hopeful but less accurate: "He explained to Mama that what was happening was a revolution, and that a revolution is a brief period when recourse to violence is necessary in order to hasten the arrival of a society in which violence is forbidden" (173).

Jaromil's enthusiasm for revolution is in part the result of the lessons he has learned from the avant-garde poets and painters of the interwar generation. He learned, for example, "that the word 'bourgeois' was an insult; bourgeois are people who want paintings to be lifelike, to imitate nature," but, his tutor told him, "we can laugh at the bourgeois because (and Jaromil was delighted by this idea!) they were long since dead and did not know it" (43-44). For the young Jaromil "the future consisted of unknown distances in which a vague image of revolution (the painter often spoke of its inevitability) merged with a vague image of the bohemian freedom of poets" (133). But Jaromil also has his own, intensely personal reasons for looking forward to a revolution. When his mother humiliates him by combing his "carefully disheveled hair" while she carries on a conversation with her friends, "the great poet, who had a diabolical imagination and looked like Rilke, sat quietly, crimson with fury, letting himself be combed; all he could do was wear his cruel grin (the one he had been practicing for years) and let it harden on his face." When his mother is not only not intimidated by his "cruel grin" but even jokes about it to her friends, "Jaromil swore that he would always be on the side of those who want radically to change the world" (152).

Throughout the novel the notion that a real revolution rightly demands absolute, unquestioning commitment is presented as the political and social equivalent of the notion in personal life that love, if it is real, requires an absolute commitment against which other concerns become meaningless. The first time this conception of love is voiced occurs when the avant-garde painter, seducing Jaromil's mother, responds to her qualms by telling her: "Yes, it's crazy. Love is either crazy or it's nothing at all" (52). Jaromil's first lover, identified only as the "girl with glasses," declares to Jaromil that "I believe that when it comes to love there's no such thing as compromise. When you're in love you must give everything" (165). One might think that this belief in the absoluteness of love

might come into conflict with an absolute commitment to revolution, but Jaromil has no trouble uniting the two. Angry because his girlfriend arrives late for an assignation, he becomes even angrier when she tells him that she was delayed by her brother, who plans to leave Czechoslovakia for the West. Jaromil surprises the girlfriend, identified only as “the redhead,” by insisting that she must inform on her brother to the police; if she does not do so, he will. It is not that politics conflicts with and overrides love; instead he thinks to himself that he “had exposed the redhead to danger not because love didn’t matter to him”; what he “wanted was precisely a world in which man and woman would love each other more than ever. Yes, that’s how it was.” He “had exposed his girl to danger precisely because he loved her more than other men loved their women; precisely because he knew what love and the future world of love were” (356).

It is clear that Jaromil knows little more about the revolution he embraces than he does about the lovers whom he thinks of only as “the girl with glasses” and “the redhead.” Jaromil does not know, for example, “that people had been arrested by the thousands, Communists among them, that they were tortured, and that their crimes were mostly imaginary” (293). This ignorance does not, however, prevent Jaromil from writing powerful lyric poems praising the revolution. There is a natural affinity, it seems, between revolution and lyric poetry: “Lyricism is intoxication, and man drinks in order to merge more easily with the world. Revolution has no desire to be examined or analyzed, it only desires that the people merge with it; in this sense it is lyrical and in need of lyricism” (261-62). The narrator explains that it is possible to write beautiful poetry on behalf of tyranny because in poetry intensity of feeling, not truth, is the essential criterion: “in the magical territory of verse all assertions become true as long as they are backed by the power of experienced emotion” (363). The narrator sums up the role of poetry in the era of Stalinist rule in Czechoslovakia in an eloquent indictment: “Nowadays everyone regards it as an era of political trials, persecution, forbidden books, and judicial murder. But we who remember must bear witness: that was not only a time of horror but also a time of lyricism! The poet reigned along with the hangman” (363).

Kundera’s novel demonstrates convincingly what happens when the celebration of extremity and intensity of feeling in po-

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etry is transposed into politics, where extremity and intensity are associated with revolution and emotional moderation with conservatism. What the novel cannot demonstrate but asks the reader to believe is that its protagonist, Jaromil, was indeed a fine poet, despite his political folly. The narrator claims that poets who praised the revolution and the regime it installed “often left behind beautiful verse” (363), even though there is now no doubt that the regime they hailed was an ugly tyranny. Is Richard Posner then justified in claiming that aesthetic merit has nothing to do with moral insight, at least in regard to lyric poetry?

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Before answering that question, we might consider the work of one of the poets to whom Jaromil is compared most often, Percy Bysshe Shelley. George Santayana argued that Shelley's poetic greatness remains even when one recognizes the folly of his political enthusiasms.³ Santayana points out that Shelley's humanitarian idealism would be dangerous if there were any possibility that it could be implemented: “Shelley, with a sort of tyranny of which he does not suspect the possible cruelty, would impose his ideal of love and equality upon all creatures” (171), adding that Shelley's “sympathies are narrow as his politics are visionary, so that there is a certain moral incompetence in his moral intensity” (172). Warning that Shelley's poetry misleads about politics, society and human nature, Santayana argues that it may nevertheless reveal certain aspects of human experience all the more powerfully because it focuses on them alone: “Being a singer inwardly inspired, Shelley could picture the ideal goals of life, the ultimate joys of experience, better than a discursive critic or observer could have done” (183). One of the tasks of criticism, Matthew Arnold suggests in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” is to appreciate and evaluate “elements that for the fullness of spiritual perfection are wanted, even though they belong to a power which in the practical sphere may be maleficent.”⁴ Poems like Shelley's “Ode to the West Wind” illustrate Arnold's point. Would-be revo-

³ “Shelley: Or the Poetic Value of Revolutionary Principles,” *Winds of Doctrine* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 155-85. Quotations from this essay are identified by page number in the text. Although this essay appears in the original 1913 edition of *Winds of Doctrine*, it is omitted from the version of *Winds of Doctrine* published in 1937 as part of Volume VII of the Triton edition of Santayana's collected works.

⁴ *Matthew Arnold: Selected Prose*, ed. P. J. Keating (London: Penguin, 1970), 130-57, 153.

lutionaries looking for literary inspiration might take Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" as a call for violence that would cause as much destruction as the "Black rain, and fire, and hail" that the west wind will cause to "burst" on the world. In Shelley's poem the west wind is both "Destroyer and preserver"; the wind is the herald first of winter but ultimately of spring, as the rhetorical question that ends the poem promises: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" There is no assurance, of course, that any revolutionary violence that might be inspired or justified by the poem will similarly lead to the creation of a new and better society. The greatness of Shelley's poem, then, depends on the ability of the reader to divorce the poem from its merely political implications and read it as a dramatic presentation of a movement from fear and despair to hope and possibility. Santayana compares Shelley's poetry to music that possesses emotional resonance without specific reference to actual events: "Music is surely no description of the circumstance of life; yet it is relevant to life unmistakably, for it stimulates by means of a torrent of abstract movements and images the formal and emotional possibilities of living in the spirit" (182). "Ode to the West Wind" may be a great poem, even if Shelley's politics are entirely mistaken. Though it is clear enough that "Ode to the West Wind" is about more than the weather, the poem makes no direct reference to politics, leaving the reader free to appreciate the poem on other grounds—for example, its union of formal control with a celebration of wildness. In contrast, Shelley's "Sonnet: England in 1819" is much more specific, much more directly political—and a much weaker poem. Just like "Ode to the West Wind," it closes with a vision of hope, but it is a long way aesthetically if not politically from "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" to ". . . a glorious Phantom may/Burst to illumine our tempestuous day."

But if lyric poetry, however great, cannot be trusted for political guidance, why should we turn to the novel? Why was it that the novels in praise of Stalinism were bad novels, while at least some of the poems praising the same regime were successful works of art? The narrator draws a distinction between poetry and novels: "Novelists, who wrote about that time with the blind eyes of conformism, created mendacious, stillborn works. But lyrical poets, who exalted the time in an equally blind manner, often left behind beautiful verse" (363). While the narrator of *Life is Elsewhere* of-

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fers a series of interesting comments about lyric poetry, he says very little about novels. The work itself, however, demonstrates the difference between the world of poetry, in which intensity is the criterion of truth, and the world of the novel, in which intense emotion is repeatedly shown to be a source of illusion. In episode after episode the narration allows readers to see the disjunction between the self-dramatizing conceptions of the characters, especially but not only Jaromil, and the undramatic actuality. Jaromil first gets the notion that he is a real artist when an avant-garde painter praises his youthful drawings of human beings with dogs' faces. The painter enthuses to Jaromil's mother that her son's drawings reveal deep intuitions about the era of World War II: "Don't you feel there's some kind of link between your son's vision and the war that shakes us every hour of our lives? Hasn't the war deprived man of his face and head? Aren't we living in a world where headless men only desire decapitated women? Isn't a realistic vision of the world the emptiest of illusions? Aren't your son's childish drawings much more truthful?" (48). This is indeed eloquent, and one might be convinced of Jaromil's rare powers of intuition if the narrator had not revealed the truth: "Jaromil of course knew very well that he had made this admired discovery of dog-headed humans by chance, purely because he couldn't draw a human face" (38). The first woman to whom Jaromil makes love, the one known as the redhead, tells him after they go to bed that she had been aware for a long time that he had desired her; she has seen him waiting outside the store where she worked as a salesgirl: "I noticed it when you came to the store. I know that you waited for me outside. . . . You didn't dare talk to me, because I was never alone. But I knew that someday you'd be here with me. Because I wanted you too" (246). The narrator, however, has told a different story. Jaromil has indeed waited outside the store, but he has not been waiting for the red-headed salesgirl:

The store closes at six, and he positions himself at the opposite corner. He knows that the cashier always quits work a little after six, but he also knows that she is always accompanied by one of the salesgirls.

This friend is much less pretty, seeming almost ugly to Jaromil; the two are exact opposites: the cashier is dark-haired, the other is a redhead; the cashier is buxom, the other skinny; the cashier is quiet, the other noisy; he feels mysteriously close to the cashier, repelled by the other. (222)

Even Jaromil's denunciation of his girlfriend and the brother escaping to the West, an act that seemed to him both tragic and beautiful, "the only tragedy of our time that was worthy of beautiful verse, worthy of a great poem!" (356), turns out to be based on a misunderstanding. His girlfriend, the reader eventually learns, had not been late because she was attempting to dissuade her brother from escaping but because she had taken too long explaining to a lover that she was leaving him for Jaromil, who "had promised her a life" (379). She had made up the story about her brother because she did not want to tell Jaromil about his rival.

Kundera argues in "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes" that not only *Life is Elsewhere* but the European novel as a genre should be thought of as the "legacy of Cervantes."⁵ It is the "depreciated legacy of Cervantes," because "the spirit of complexity" (18) characteristic of the novel is overwhelmed by the contemporary reduction of complexities into banalities. Though Kundera believes that "the novel is incompatible with the totalitarian universe" (13-14), he sees the forces of reduction as ultimately cultural rather than political. The reductivism seemingly inherent in the mass media is equally trivializing, whatever the politics:

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the novel is more and more in the hands of the mass media; as agents of the unification of the planet's history, the media amplify and channel the reduction process; they distribute throughout the world the same simplifications and stereotypes easily acceptable by the greatest number, by everyone, by all mankind. And it doesn't much matter that different political interests appear in the various organs of the media. Behind these surface differences reigns a common spirit. . . . This common spirit of the mass media, camouflaged by political diversity, is the spirit of our time. And this spirit seems to me contrary to the spirit of the novel" (17-18).

In "The Novel and Europe" Kundera identifies this spirit as "kitsch":

The word "kitsch" describes the attitude of those who want to please the greatest number, at any cost. To please, one must confirm what everyone wants to hear, put oneself at the service of received ideas. Kitsch is the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling. It moves us to tears of compassion for ourselves Given the imperative necessity to please and thereby to gain the attention of the greatest number, the aesthetic of

⁵ "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes," *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 1-20. Quotations from this essay are identified by page number in the text.

the mass media is inevitably that of kitsch; and as the mass media come to embrace and to infiltrate more and more of our life, kitsch becomes our everyday aesthetic and moral code.⁶

The right not to be judged would entail life without meaning.

It is all too easy to interpret Kundera's ideas about the spirit of the novel in ways that lend themselves to the sort of doctrinaire simplifications that embody the spirit of kitsch. In "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes" Kundera asserts that the world of the novel is "the world as ambiguity," in which there is "not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths," in which the "only certainty" is "the *wisdom of uncertainty* (6-7). It is only a small step, one in accord with the spirit of the age, to claim that the novel presents a world with no truths at all, a world in which moral relativism is the only intelligent philosophy. In "The Novel and Europe" Kundera points out that the Anna Karenina of Tolstoy's published novel is a different and more attractive figure than the Anna of the first draft, who was a "most unsympathetic woman" whose "tragic end was entirely deserved and destroyed," observing that in the novel "no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin," but "everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin" (159). It would be only a small step to move from "the right to be understood" to the right not to be judged at all. The border crossed when such small steps are taken is well described in a passage from Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*:

It takes so little, so infinitely little, for someone to find himself on the other side of the border, where everything—love, convictions, faith, history—no longer has meaning. The whole mystery of human life resides in the fact that it is spent in the immediate proximity of, and even in direct contact with, that border, that it is separated from it not by kilometers but by barely a millimeter.⁷

A careful reading of Kundera's observations about the novel suggests that they do not quite cross the border to unmeaning, but in any case it is the novels themselves that embody the deeper insight, as the author himself would no doubt cheerfully concede. He observes in "The Novel and Europe" that "great novels are always a little more intelligent than their authors," adding that "Novelists

⁶ "Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe," *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 155-65, 163-64. Subsequent quotations from this essay are identified by page number in the text.

⁷ *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Aaron Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 281. This translation supersedes the earlier translation by Michael Henry Heim (New York: Knopf, 1980).

who are more intelligent than their books should go into another line of work" (158). If Kundera's fiction, including *Life is Elsewhere* with its emphasis on the gap between self-dramatizing illusions and reality, is indeed representative of the tradition of the novel since Cervantes, then the relation between the novel as a genre and the idea of revolution is clear. Despite the emphasis in Kundera's essays on the "language of relativity and ambiguity" as characteristic of the novel as a genre, *Life is Elsewhere* has a number of implications that are quite straightforward. The danger of accepting even the most beautiful lyric poetry as a source of political wisdom is made unambiguously clear. Likewise, the novel is not ambiguous about the failure of the Communist regime that took power in 1948 in Czechoslovakia to live up to its promises or even to fulfill the basic requirements of a decent society. Above all, the folly of being swept away by the seductive allure of revolutionary absolutism is driven home repeatedly, convincingly and without ambiguity.

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