

The Art of the Novel by Milan Kundera:
~Commentary~

Through our in-class discussions, analysis and interpretations of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina and Cervantes' Don Quixote, we came across two of a novel's intentions: one being to "~~explore the enigma of the self~~" and the other being to organize or to somehow give some kind of structure to what seems like random and chaotic experiences. This didactic passage, from Milan Kundera's The Art of the Novel, presents the reader with Kundera's view of the three things that not only a novel should aim to accomplish, but more significantly, three things that differentiate a novel from other art forms. In this passage, Kundera personifies the novel by presenting its progression or development in the form of a journey, an adventure which helped create and shape it, a journey around the world, across time and through history.

This passage is not in and of itself complicated because the language Kundera uses can be depicted as being of a familiar register, however it is the ideas and notions it explores that are profoundly complex. Because it explores profound concepts and because its aim is of a didactic nature, this passage is philosophical. By using a familiar register and by asking his reader questions, Kundera clearly wants his reader to not only understand and appreciate what he is reading, but to also interact and think about what he is reading. Teaching by asking questions is the basis of all philosophy. Kundera also frequently mentions characters and their situations in various novels to illustrate his points. This shows that he expects his readers to not only have some kind of background literary knowledge, but more importantly, a sensitivity and appreciation of literature. I think that, in a way, this demonstrates that Kundera sees the reader as he sees himself, which is not at all condescending; on the contrary, it unites both learner and teacher as two human beings thirsty for knowledge.

In this passage, Kundera also uses numerous metaphors. For example, he uses the metaphor of the train to symbolize or evoke the passage of time, "~~the train in cold~~
~~is not easy to board, but it is not that person's job, it is not his~~
~~appetite, it promises a return to the passenger, and it is not a journey~~." He also uses the image of a vacuum cleaner sucking up all of mankind's thoughts and feelings to describe the difficulty of mankind's situation, mankind's life. I think Kundera uses metaphors because sometimes words cannot stand on their own; they are simply not powerful enough to communicate the ideas Kundera wants to explore, whereas metaphors hold the magical power of suggestion through imagery and symbolism.

This passage is discursive because Kundera does not merely state his personal views on a particular issue; he supports his position through solid arguments and examples.

According to Kundera, the novel was born along with the Modern era "~~in the~~
~~absence of the Supreme Judge,~~" in a time when "~~the single air the train was~~
~~composed into many individual parcels by men.~~" By "the absence of the Supreme Judge," Kundera probably means the Renaissance, the age of Reason, a time when Christianity, religion, was no longer the most powerful and influential force in Europe (as it had been during the Middle Ages). When Reason took over Religion, doubt and uncertainty conquered the world; the novel therefore permitted the artist to present the world's ambiguity, which makes life's complications more evident. In turn, the novel also allows the reader to discern a central Truth. That central truth, according to Kundera, is that nothing is absolute and that everything is relative; Kundera calls this the ~~Wisdom of the~~

By a "multiple perspective," Kundera is probably addressing the issue of perspective. He believes that ambiguity is created by diverging viewpoints. He underlines this point by using as an example the character of Karenin in Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. Through the eyes of Anna, Karenin is seen as an unappealing and insensitive man, "a narrow-minded egotist," whereas when he is seen from a different perspective, Karenin is revealed to be a kind hearted, well intentioned and magnanimous man, "the victim of an immoral woman." Another way Kundera defends his argument is through his mention of Cervantes' hero Don Quixote, who sets out into a world that he no longer recognizes in which he is "obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a web of contradictory truths." Therefore, in a way, according to Kundera, the novel's intention is also to question human judgment.

Time, history, not only brought changes to the world, it also brought changes to the way human beings were affected by their experiences. Another of Kundera's arguments presented in this passage is that the ambiguity of the world, which became more and more evident with the passage of time, had a great impact on the novel's development. The novel is therefore a reflection of the world, the time period, in which it was written.

According to Kundera, "the early European novels are journeys through an apparently infinite world." He uses as examples the stories of *Don Quixote* and *Jacques le Fataliste*, in which the characters "exist in a time which begins in a space which has no frontiers, in the midst of a Europe whose future is yet to be seen." However, with the passage of time, the advent of the Industrial Revolution, "the vast horizons disappeared behind the modern structures." The "modern structures", the law, the buildings, the industries, the cities, "the walls of modernity" symbolize confinement. As time continued to pass, the horizon started to shrink even more, until it became a barrier, as in Flaubert's *Emma Bovary*, in which the main character is a woman whose life is reduced to dreams and illusions of romance and adventure, that lied beyond that frontier. Finally, as history turned into the twentieth century, with Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the setting is reduced to a single room in which a man is trapped and literally left with his thoughts and feelings as his sole source of humanity. Thus was extinguished man's illusion of an infinitely boundless world and was born the psychological novel of modern times which instead explored the "tiny, tiny, tiny world."

~Or is that another illusion?