Milan Kundera and The Narrative Self

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Abstract

In my thesis, I looked at several of Milan Kundera's novels to explore the relationship between the self and narratives. Specifically, I was interested in how narrative shapes the perception of our selves, both from internal and external perspectives. Using particular characters and historical contexts from Kundera's novels, I also argue from a non-traditional notion of truth that neither an inner or inhabited self nor a perceived external self can authoritatively claim to be more real or fundamental than the other. I argue that because the two are so intimately connected, even self-perception is impossible independent of a narrative.

Given the similarities between the literary process and the formation of personal identity, literary theory is particularly adept at revealing the tenuous relationship between the self that is inhabited by individuals and the self that is projected outward as representative of an identity. At an intuitive level, we are all aware of a discontinuity between the self that we identify with intimately and the self that exists to the external world, as a character based on our original likeness. Even to our perceiving and thinking selves, moreover, distorted judgments of our own self-image may present an internal identity that is shaped primarily by fictions.

Due to the resemblance of our selves as fictional characters, this paper applies theories of literature and authorship to problems of identity, continuity, and the process of self-creation. Specifically, it focuses on the relationship between narrative and the authenticity of the self. If we define the author in more general terms as a producer of coherent images, we find comparisons between the author as a literary figure and the creator of self-images. By narrative, all that is meant is the unity of a compilation of actions, declarations, convictions, significant events, and a myriad other forms of expression that contribute to the image of your identity – and identity that is constructed in fragmented, inter-related ways, and out of which emerge unstable and impermanent characters. As the bearer of these gestures, words, and actions, the individual has taken on the role both of the work and of the author. This self-authorship produces at once a unity and a divorce between the self that is inhabited and the self that is projected as a representation.

To address these complex relationships, this paper will relies primarily on novels written by Milan Kundera, whose unique approach to literature allows for an effective

excavation of these ideas. The novels referenced will include *Life is Elsewhere* (1974), *Immortality* (1990), and *Identity* (1997). This paper examines these novels in conjunction with ideas and essays in literary theory, such as Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" and others. By its conclusion, this paper will have explored the divorce between the self and the one who authors that self, and argued against the authority of the inhabited self as the real one in a traditional model.

The idea of an inner, authentic self is central to a traditional understanding of identity. This is not, however, a universal characterization of self. In his writing, Kundera indicates that the relationship between the self and its representation is not uniform across cultural and historical boundaries, and certain characters in his novels locate their authentic self outside of uniqueness. This applies specifically to characters whose historical context breeds a particular conception of selfhood that is antithetical to singular identity. Jaromil from *Life is Elsewhere*, for example, is the product of the communist revolution, which advocates the destruction of personal identity in favor of collective ideology.

In literature, narrative or authorship does not play a universal role in its historical contexts either. The amount of significance and power that is granted to particular features of a narrative change along with the conditions of the social environment to which it belongs. The author, for example, has not always been a necessary legitimizing feature of a text. In times when folklore, mythology, and oral tradition constituted the primary mode of collecting and transmitting narratives, an author was neither required nor recognized. By contrast, contemporary scientific texts rely primarily on a reputable and relevant author to situate the work within a particular tradition and to legitimize the

text (Foucault, "What is an Author?" 117). In short, narratives may thrive in some venues without the necessity of an explicit producer, whereas in others this creator is the primary determinant of the narrative's validity.

This idea resonates beyond the boundaries of traditional literature and authorship. The relationship between the author and the work that is produced has crossovers into our understanding of identity and the self, as we are conceiving of author more generally as a producer of coherent images. In the same way that historically diverse contexts place varying degrees of import on the author, so too do they place varying degrees of import on the individual as the author of his own self. This is clearly evident in the comparison of progressive, individuality-centric societies and the censorship of uniformity-based ones.

Of this connection, Jaromil is a prime example. One of his first assertions of himself as a dominant, authoritative adult is simultaneously one of his first instances of political rebellion, and it comes during the eruption of the communist revolution in central Europe. When he and his family learn that revolution has broken out, Jaromil and his uncle fight viciously over their opposing viewpoints. A supporter of the revolution, Jaromil exclaims in its defense a phrase that is often repeated in communist literature: "I always knew that the working class would sweep capitalist parasites like you into the dust bin of history!" (Kundera, *Life is Elsewhere* 127). He is conscious of the words he has used for two reasons. First, because the phrases invoked are traditional communist rhetoric, which he typically tries to avoid in favor of his own creative voice. Secondly, because he has spoken those borrowed slogans "in the midst of excitement – and thus at a moment of spontaneity when the true self is speaking" (128). Absent the calculation of

careful thought and creative word choice, Jaromil has supplanted his own identity in order to assume the shared identity of his like-minded contemporaries. He is intoxicated to perceive his true self located within the uniformity of the masses, and he feels himself "to be part of a thousand-headed multitude, one organ of a hydra-headed dragon" (128); in short, he has become a true communist entity.

Jaromil's endorsement of this collectivity-based definition of self reiterates the importance of historical context as a determinant for the relationship between the self as author and as image. To his and others' understanding, the fundamental character of his identity is not expressed as an individual or internally-running narrative that differentiates him as a singular being, but rather as a shade of the externally provided narrative of the revolution itself. His personal narrative is inexorably tied up with the historical movement, and his own choices and ideas no longer define his identity. By this account, Kundera is suggesting a plurality of criteria for characterizing the self, and suggesting that it is a matter of environmental conditioning which self-representation will be given precedence. For Jaromil, the self that places him at the apex of a broader homogenous group, i.e., the voice of the communist revolution, is the truest representation of his identity, even if it is an identity provided to him by the historical move, and thus not authored explicitly by him. This endorsement further shows a complete and total embracement of the necessary link between narrative and death. In its most basic interpretation, Jaromil's death is located in the "sacrifice" or "voluntary effacement" of his own unique identity, in order to promote the image produced (Foucault, "What is an Author?" 117).

This "kinship between writing and death" is largely a modern evolution in narrative, contrary to its role in classic Greek literature, which was primarily to foster immortality of the self through glorification in narrative (Foucault, "What is an Author?" 116). Modern analysis contends instead that the divorce between the author and his work obligates writing and narrative to instead act as a "voluntary obliteration of the self" (117). The work, in this case the narrative image of one's identity, has within its nature an obligation to destroy or negate the self that has authored it. This poses a challenge to the process of immortalization that narrative has previously pursued. While the project of the Greek epic was to "perpetuate the immortality of the hero," the tenuous relationship between author and work precludes this possibility, particularly where the "hero" is serving as both referent and signifier (117).

Kundera opposes the notion that immortality was ever a viable option for narrative representation, and he confronts this issue directly in *Immortality*. This notion, which Kundera synonymizes with "literary legend," is necessarily reductive (Kundera, *Immortality* 80). He considers the term first in relation to Beethoven, whose fame and ubiquity is based "not on his music, which is obviously imperfect, but on the literary legend built around his life" (80). Kundera attributes the fame and repute of the composer more to the constellation of mythologies surrounding the idea of Beethoven, what this name is and what it represents. Essentially, Kundera is opposing the notion that fame is engendered to the individual as a result of merit, and suggesting that merit is divorced from the character that has been immortalized.

This is amply evident in Kundera's fictionalized versions of Goethe and Hemingway, whose interactions expound upon this idea. In the novel, the characters

liken Immortality to an "eternal trial" whose interest is in establishing a complete, authentic image of the living Goethe and Hemingway. The debate revolves around which details of the authors' personal lives to include in these lasting portraits of the men, and the validity of conclusions that can be drawn from them. In the process of constructing the narrative of their lives, however, the original individual on whom the image is based has been eclipsed by the more relevant and inclusive version. In a contrived conversation between the two, Hemingway tells Goethe that his prosecutors continually accost his image with accusations and speculations, subjecting him posthumously to an interrogation of his fundamental identity. The trial itself, however, is conducted in the absence of the living figure, whose words are silenced by the opinions of experts and researchers who have constructed their own image based on the fragmentary pieces left behind after his death. He tells Goethe, "instead of reading my books, they're writing books about me" (81), indicating that the imprint of himself that he intentionally produced, i.e., his books and works, are of less importance to the content of his preserving image than the process itself of immortalizing him.

This is one encapsulation of the death of the author as it is linked to immortality. The process of transforming the living Hemingway who authored his works into the Hemingway of legend necessarily destroys the real Hemingway, reducing him to a scripted caricature of himself. As he himself laments in the novel, "a man can take his own life. But he cannot take his own immortality" (82), because immortality is granted not to the man but to a separate character bearing the man's name and proffering his story. Kundera captures Hemingway's sentiments here in a dream-image produced by Goethe. The latter had dreamt of himself performing a puppet show of *Faust*, yet during

the performance he looked up to see that his audience had gone. Puzzled, he first believes the audience to have left the theater, uninterested in the performance. He writes:

> Bewildered, I turned around and was aghast: I expected them out front, and instead they were at the back of the stage, gazing at me with wide-open, inquisitive eyes. As soon as my glance met theirs, they began to applaud. And I realized that my *Faust* didn't interest them at all and that the show they wished to see was not the puppets I was leading around the stage, but me myself! Not *Faust*, but Goethe! 83

In this episode, Goethe is sickened by the realization that the immortality his work catalyzed has been obscured by his image. He has become the spectacle, and his work is read as a secondary text to support the greater work, which is the caricature of Goethe. People do not research Hemingway to broaden their understanding of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, nor do they research Goethe to inform their reading of *Faust*; rather, people read the authors' work to experience the spectacle of the man who produced them.

A cursory glance of this dream and its implications appears to suggest that it is possible to immortalize an individual, if their works have become part of a broader constellation of defining materials; the issue could almost be reframed as death of the work and glorification of the author. However, it is important to remember that the Hemingway and the Goethe who have acquired this fame are not authentic beings. It is not the man who is being immortalized in the eternal trial, but rather the process has transformed the man himself into a work. Hemingway has become as much a character as any of his protagonists. When Hemingway mistakenly conflates the image that is posthumously rewritten and reformed with the self he identifies as authentically his, Goethe reminds him that he is dead, and "he who does not exist cannot be present" (214). Of the books he wrote, and his own authorship of them, Goethe claims that in death he

has “vanished” from them, and “no one will ever find [him] in them… because you cannot find someone who does not exist” (214). On one hand, this speaks again to the silence with which the eternal trial prosecutors inevitably encounter. Goethe and Hemingway are unable to respond to their own constructed images, either to confirm or disconfirm their accuracy and validity.

These reflections also require us to look more deeply at the connection between narrative and the death of the author as it applies individually to self-authorship and self-obliteration. This relationship resonates most closely in his historical account of communistic tendencies produced in *Life is Elsewhere*, which he has dubbed “the lyric age” (*v*). Again, Kundera is using the movements of the broader historical period to uncover a particular feature of human nature, and so in this novel Jaromil has been used as a case study to exemplify an attitude produced by a social environment that speaks generally to tendencies within human persons. Specifically, Jaromil is used as the embodiment of a tendency that Kundera refers to as “the lyric attitude” (*v*), which is for him synonymous with the fundamental characteristics of youth and immaturity.

It is the lyric attitude that expresses the reliance individuals place on narrative and story, and for Kundera it is born out of fear and immaturity. Essentially, the lyrical attitude refers to the project of poetry, fiction, and writing in general as an attempt to reconstruct the world in a cohesive, linear, and comprehensible image. One of the “basic categories of human existence” (v), the lyrical approach is at first realized as a confrontation with the world beyond “the safe enclosure of childhood” experience (219). As a person progresses into adulthood, the individual “longs to go out into the world, but because he is afraid of it he constructs an artificial, substitute world of verse” (219). The

world of verse, or that world contained within the poetry and narrative that define it both structurally and content-wise, is presented as an absolute and unchanging portrait of history. The historical narrative itself can change, but each time it is presented as eternal truth, as whole and complete. In short, the narratives themselves are self-enclosed and are not subject to external influence or modification. The facts of history or reality as such are barred from the narrative, which takes on its own form of self-referential reality. Sheltered within the boundaries of the narrative, the story becomes its own real world unaffected by the events taking place outside of its confines.

Beyond Kundera, this idea was also presented by the French theorist Maurice Halbwachs in his discussions on history and collective memory. According to Halbwachs, history as a discipline is flawed by its attempts to construct a cohesive and objective unity of disparate events which may or may not resonate within the reality of the affected groups. It is collective memory which ought to hold supremacy over the authority of history, because collective memory by definition is confined to "only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive" (Halbwachs 143). It is history that most closely resembles Kundera's notion of a lyric attitude, because like the tendency expressed by Jaromil's character, history schematizes the timeline of events into separate demarcations and labels them historical periods, each of which is "considered a whole, independent for the most part of those preceding and following" (143). These arbitrarily chosen demarcations highlight certain events or features of the age as representative of the time and of the attitudes belonging to citizens within these categories. All citizens "young and old, regardless of age, are

encompassed within the same perspective" and forced into a homogenous unity reflective of that time period's image (143).

This is precisely the attitude that is produced in Jaromil by the communist revolution. He judges authenticity to be located in objectivity and cohesion, as perfect reflection of the historical movement. His poetry is tailored to reflect the ideology of the time even when it violates his own personal sentiments, and as a young college student he embraces the totality of revolutionary doctrine, rejecting wholly any degree of integration between past, present, or future. In regards to education, he holds firmly that "the future must be totally new or it won't be a future at all," and that "it must be totally pure or it will be totally shameful" (171). He is expressing here the fear of his political ideology, which is grounded in the immaturity of the young revolutionaries to confront the transient nature of life. In their zeal to carve out a world that is new and radically different from the past, Jaromil and his fellow students simply reject anything that is anchored in the past, as if any crossover would signify contamination and corruption. A person who is rooted in this revolutionary age, then, must present himself wholly as its image.

For this reason, Jaromil frequently discovers his truest self to be located in the reproduction of favorable narratives. This was seen in his employment of traditional communist rhetoric during his earlier argument, and it is seen again in his attempts to appear memorable and authoritative amongst his peers. For example, as a budding young adult, Jaromil once joined into an intellectual debate with his student colleagues. During the discussion, he found that the ideas he drew upon belonged not to himself, but to his mentor and tutor The Artist, as did the voice he spoke with and the gesticulations that accompanied his speech. He notes that at first "he found it unpleasant to hear the artist's

words and intonation issuing from his mouth but after a while he felt that this alter ego was a source of safety and reassurance; it concealed him like a shield" (115). It isn't enough to say simply that Jaromil was nervous and wanted to hide behind the artist's practiced words, or to say that Jaromil appealed to an authority higher than himself in order to impress his friends. It also isn't enough to say that Jaromil wanted to become the artist. Rather, Jaromil wanted the artist to become him. He wanted to appropriate the artist's words, ideas, and persona through his own repetition of them, so that the identity associated with those words and that countenance indicated "Jaromil." In other words, he adopted as his own identity a pre-scripted character whose ideas and mannerisms are desirable to him as a mode of being in the world.

Whereas *Life is Elsewhere* incarnates Halbwach's account of history, Kundera's 1997 novel *Identity* is a reflection of collective memory. Examined through the lens of collective memory, personal identity is constructed not out of an overarching objectively-defined ideology, but through a limited series of reflections among carefully bordered groups. These groups are bounded by location and time period, and through certain shared elements that form a common foundation. As facets of a common narrative, individuals define themselves by the reflected image that emerges within that space, because "the events of our life most immediate to our self are also engraved in the memory of those groups closest to us" (Halbwachs 141). The features that shape individuality do not exist on a mere singular level, but rather within a collective whole. Inside of that group, these features are projected back onto the individual by the group that has incorporated these qualities into their conception of the person, who then defines himself in this image. This is why Jean-Marc concludes in *Identity* that "the real and the

only reason for friendship" is to "provide a mirror so the other person can contemplate his image from the past," because without the sharing of common memories this past self "would long ago have disappeared" (Kundera, *Identity* 10). In the same way that Jaromil discovers "a person can be his own self only when he is fully among others" (117), so too does Jean-Marc realize the importance of an audience in order to solidify and make visible a particular narrative inside of which the self is defined.

History and collective memory present two formulations of self-definition that differ in important ways, but they are both united by the similar and provocative idea that the self can be defined by materials external to the inner consciousness of the individual. In a historical context, self-definition is provided by an external ideology. Or, alternatively, the self can be defined by a common perception that imposes borders around personal identity collectively. Either way, what is of note here is the reliance of individuals on external, common materials as indicative of personal or singular identity.

The idea that self-definition can be provided by external sources is compelling, because we tend to regard our authentic self as existing beneath the various self-images we produce. By this model, various images of the self are produced by the inner self, and so authenticity is granted in degrees of proximity to the internal unity. For example, it is uncontroversial to claim that persons display different personalities in varying circumstances, and these circumstances themselves dictate which features of the self ought to be included in the image. A work environment will necessitate a much less inclusive compilation of traits and ideas than the role of an intimate romantic partner, for instance. The person displayed in an intimate relationship is generally considered to be more real than the person presented at work, because intimate relationships express a

wider array of traits and the conditions for their arrangement are more closely linked to the individual. Yet even here, the structure and content of the image is being organized according to forces external to the individual.

However, Kundera's work suggests an even greater degree of external contrivance where the self is concerned. The previous formulation indicates that content is generated individually by the self, and organized into limiting images by external boundaries. Kundera's writing suggests, though, that even the content of these images is constructed externally, and that the self as an underlying inner being does not produce any original content. Kundera begins by indicating that the materials we use to construct these narratives are limited, and provided by a larger matrix of symbols we collectively author. In speaking of language and its communicative limitations, Michel Foucault notes that "representations are not rooted in a world that gives them meaning; they open themselves on to a space that is their own, whose internal network gives rise to meaning" (Foucault, *The Order of Things* 78). In this schema, language – verbal or nonverbal – exists only within a region of representation that is internally defined by an agreement of pre-established symbols, and words or gestures become bearers of these already-conceived-of ideas. This threatens the possibility of original identity, if we accept that the materials out of which we construct our self-image are only meaningful within the arena of existing symbols and the limited range of ideas that they represent. Kundera addresses this implication in *Immortality*, with a focus on the physical gestures of individuals as identifying features of those persons.

Specifically, Kundera begins his reflections on this topic by considering gestures and their performative role. Gestures are a fundamental form of non-verbal

communication between social beings, and the gestures we use when interacting with others provide its own characterization of our selves, specifically by commenting on our affect and dispositions towards the subject to which the gesture is in reference. In this way, gestures are a key element of our projected narrative, precisely because they tend to be thoughtless and casual, which indicates that they and the sentiments they express are bounded to our self-image intimately.

However, gestures themselves are neither original nor defined by the bearer of these signs. Instead of being produced by individuals, gestures have social origins that determine collectively what message or sentiment a particular configuration of bodily movements will signify and express. As Foucault has indicated, gestures are not meaningful outside of a bounded context that assigns them to a predetermined constellation of ideas. Moreover, the sheer volume of human beings precludes even the possibility of an individual repertoire of gestures, indicating that an original narrative cannot even be constructed by a unique collection of these symbols, which would set an individual apart purely by the singularity of the combination:

> If our planet has seen some eighty billion people, it is difficult to suppose that every individual has had his or her own repertory of gestures. Arithmetically, it is simply impossible. Without the slightest doubt, there are far fewer gestures in the world that there are individuals. 7

The rarity of gestures combined with the overabundance of their bearers leads to the "shocking conclusion" that "a gesture is more individual than an individual" (Kundera, *Immortality* 7). This is made all the more surprising by the subsequent move that Kundera makes.

If these reflections on gestures are expanded to include not merely gestures, but to encompass linguistic communications, opinions and convictions, creative productions, and virtually the entire domain of self-formation, then both the authority and reality of the inhabited self necessarily falls away. Narrative becomes instead a process of collecting and assimilating disparate fragments of thought, action, and circumstance to construct a cohesive image of an individual identity; yet none of this material is original or unique. Regardless of the cleverness of our witticisms, the whole of our expressive capabilities is limited to the words provided by a language; and, the potential significations of those words are likewise constrained within the context of that language. The same is true for our interests, passions, and other staples of our personality. Though we perceive our inhabited self to be original in its thoughts and choices, we are actually constructing an identity out of a limited pool of available artifacts.

The narrative, then, that defines our self as a unified collection of events and actions in time, has solidified its divorce from the author of that identity. If the narrative were built out of special elements unique only to the referent, then the narrative would be unable to sever its ties to the self. However, since the features of an intimate personality belong to the public sphere, and cannot be drawn on by any other inhabitants of this space, the narrative self has taken on a degree of independence from the positing self. This is reflected again, for example, in the divorce between certain individuals and the caricatures into which their identity is reduced, as with Hemingway and Goethe in *Immortality*.

So far, however, the discussion has been restricted to the *expression* of the self as limited within narrative. It appears that there are features of ourselves produced by an

authentic, inner consciousness, and our external environment dictates through social and historical forces how these features will be arranged to produce a particular image. The self is reliant, by this account, on the external environment only as a structural force. However, these reflections suggest a much more serious consequence which threatens the possibility of an authentic inner self altogether. If we consider that, as Kundera and Foucault have indicated, that gestures, language, and social convictions are provided by an external framework that assigns them meaning within a particular field of expression, we are also forced to acknowledge that this precludes the possibility of any original thought or ideas. Even if an individual believes himself to have produced an entirely original idea, his thought itself is nevertheless confined to a mode of formation that is provided to him. In other words, the individual is only able to form ideas within the boundaries of language, and language itself is a construction that assigns a limited set of pre-conceived ideas to general symbols. This precludes the possibility of original thought, because ideas are incapable of expressing anything outside of the boundaries provided within that field. The consequence is that we often "deem ourselves the originators of thoughts and ideas, feelings and passions," that are "actually inspired by some group" (Halbwachs 139). Moreover, every person within the group reaches the same general conclusions and produces the same ideas "in unison," yet "ignorant of the real source" of these ideas. Within the field of pre-defined meanings and ideas, we perceive our thoughts to be produced originally, and are not conscious of the restrictions placed upon us that guide out limited formations.

This account destroys the notion of an authentic, original self that produces ideas and arranges identities into narratives. It further suggests, in fact, that the inner

consciousness is itself nothing more than a narrative that unites disparate features provided by the external environment and molds them into an image of uniqueness. In the same way that Fichte's orchestra does not exist externally to the subject that unifies the individual sound of the various instruments involved, the self as a unified being exists only in the subject that unifies the myriad traits and images into a cohesive, singular narrative. The self, then, is nothing more than a narrative. When Chantal's sister, for example, suggests to her that she have a second child to cope with the death of her first, she is horrified by the idea that her deceased son become nothing more than "an existence without a biography" (Kundera 31). She needs to keep her son's memory alive in her own grief, because otherwise she is left with nothing that can be included into her son's narrative, which effectively negates the possibility of his identity.

The idea that identity is not unique to the individual bearer opposes the traditional notion of self. Kundera's novels, however, have indicated that the central "I" behind individuals is as contrived and externally defined as its projected representations. Moreover, the process of uniting disparate characteristics and features into a coherent identity eclipses the unifying force entirely, reducing the self to a narrative. For this reason, the commentary of theorists such as Michel Foucault and Maurice Halbwachs have resonated beyond the confines of literary theory and offered additional insights on the conception of identity.

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