THE DIALECTICS BETWEEN SELF, TIME AND HISTORICAL CHANGE ACCORDING TO MILAN KUNDERA

ABSTRACT

Milan Kundera (1929- ) has produced literary works focusing on various themes connected to social and political life, as well as categories of human existence. In this paper, we would like to reflect how Kundera deals with historical change within his novels and short stories. We will see how historical change cannot be explained without understanding the essence of two basic concepts: (1) the Self: the way it is perceived by others; our self-image; (2) Time: the basic link between Time and memory. Finally, we will describe how historical change, according to Kundera, is revealing a quest for meaning of life, a basic struggle for freedom and justice, a way to overcome suffering and to actualize the historicity of human being.

INTRODUCTION

Milan Kundera is a Post-modern novelist who looks at the paradoxical character of human life and the interpretation of historical events as well. For Kundera, we are facing the meaninglessness of our dehumanized world. Kundera seems to adopt Albert Camus’ viewpoint on meaninglessness and existence. But Kundera’s perspective cannot be reduced to Camus’ ideas. Indeed, Kundera is much more concerned with History, and more particularly with the desecration of History. Kundera looks at History as the end of a “dreamy innocence”, a subject of self-mystification.

As said Kvetoslav Chvatik, the aesthetics of Kundera’s novels is not an aesthetics of the mimesis (the exact replication of reality), but rather a semiotic
aesthetics of all possible worlds. Kundera’s novels reveal that life is never a pure repetition. They also manifest to what extent life is ambiguous, so that the only relevant way to talk about human life is to identify all human possibilities, the mysterious set of all possible human worlds.

(...) le romancier insiste fortement sur le fait que ce n’est pas la « réalité » que ses romans examinent, mais bien l’existence, ou pour le dire autrement, le monde de tous les possibles, que ceux-ci soient incarnés ou non par ses personnages.²

In this paper, we will analyze Kundera’s novels out of the themes of self, Time and historical change. We would like to show to what extent Kundera’s novels are revealing a dialectics between those three basic philosophical concepts.³ We believe that we cannot isolate one of the three concepts from the others. We cannot understand the essence of the self without considering the nature of Time and historical change. We cannot grasp the nature of Time without looking at the essence of the self and of historical change. We cannot reflect the essence of historical change without considering the nature of self and of Time. In Kundera’s novels, those three philosophical concepts are interconnected.

1. The Self

In our deeper self, there is a discrepancy between what we are, on one hand, and what must be and want to be, on the other hand (P, 52). We can neglect our self-image because we can never fully be our self-image. We cannot be what we perceived of our self (IM, 465). We should recognize our self as it is. We must identify ourselves to our self. But it is not enough. In order to have a specific individuality, we must passionately identify ourselves to our life and death. In doing so, we will no longer be a single “entity” within the whole “same” humanity. We will be someone who can never be replaced by others (IM, 26–27). The unique character of our self can be cultivated in adding new qualities and traits of our self: we are then identifying ourselves to such new elements of our self, but we could loose the basic, unchanging nature of our self. The problem is that if we want to make people adhering to our personal qualities and traits of our self, we are then denying the “unique” character of such self (IM, 151, 153). Our existential life means that we are bearing a “suffering self”: the most painful experience in life is to be our self (and thus not to be an idealized self that contradicts the way we perceive our self) (IM, 381). Kundera said that there is a very powerful capacity to remould the reality in order to place it in pure and total continuity with our ideals (P, 272). But if we are very honest, said Kundera, and look at our self, we can only find out the image of the self which is looking at our self (VEA, 56). This is almost a Buddhist approach of the self, an approach