

MILAN KUNDERA'S MOTORCYCLES

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The writer Milan Kundera is the Randy Mamola of the literary world, given that although both have won no titles, neither Nobel nor Grand Prix, they are crowd favorites. Kundera's main theme is a great one: the existentialist individual caught inside a cultural or political authoritarian regime. Initially, motorcycles do not appear important in his universe. Or are they? The image of a motorcycle overtaking a chariot is on the cover of the Spanish edition of *Slowness* (1995), but only a chariot on the Brazilian edition and no vehicles at all in the English and French editions. Traveling beyond the covers to the books' interiors in the quest of finding motorcycles and bicycles reveals them in four of his books: *The Farewell Waltz* (1972), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) and *Slowness* (1995). The vehicles' meanings are multifaceted, but tied to key elements of Kundera's works: time, memory, and authoritarianism.

Milan Kundera was born in 1929 in Czechoslovakia and in 1975 he moved to France. One of his main subjects is Czechoslovakia, created in 1918 from the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, invaded by the Nazis in 1939, and then involuntarily under Soviet rule until the Velvet Revolution of 1989. In 1968, Czechoslovakia experienced eight months of freedom after the election of a reformist first secretary. This event, the Prague Spring, was terminated by the invasion of the Soviet army in August 1968, returning Czechoslovakia to authoritarianism.

Kundera's recurrent sociopolitical theme is the authoritarianism arising both from a powerful government, as well from the ordinary people who support it. Of course, the government intimidates its people by silencing, exiling and jailing them. But no one can maintain an authoritarian government alone without the support of the people. In Kundera's novels, the supporters are moved by resentment, envy and sadness. Instead of trying to become better themselves, they prefer to destroy what is good in free and creative people. Kundera's works question the origins of authoritarianism.

He is also fascinated by the experience of the individual under authoritarian rule. Exile is a favorite subject: physical exile for those expelled from their countries, cultural exile for those not allowed to speak. Personal relationships, particularly erotic and romantic entanglements, mirror the political relationships among individuals, alternating between joy and of sadness, memory and forgetting.

Kundera is, however, perhaps more a philosopher than a novelist. His themes are more important than his characters. Sometimes he simply forgets a character, changes his/her personality, or creates a new one out of nowhere, all in service of developing the theme. The motorcycles that

appear in his novels are the same. They have several personalities, each one in service of a specific literary intention.

For instance, if characters are secondary to Kundera's sociopolitical themes, the motorcycle is tertiary in his earlier novels. *The Farewell Waltz* (1972) features a beautiful nurse who is romantically divided between a famous trumpeter who drives a white limousine and a humble machinist who rides a motorcycle. The motorcycle is used only to represent the different social positions of both rivals.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), a two-wheeled vehicle—a bicycle, not a motorcycle—also serves a representative function. In the novel, Kundera shows a society trying to forget its past, full of authoritarianism and mediocrity. In a rare scene of optimism, a bicycle appears associated with subversion, hope, and physical pleasure. In this scene, a group of friends is watching a famous writer being interviewed on television. At a certain point, the writer is talking about the transition from an authoritarian world to a better world:

"Don't forget," said the writer, his face more and more agitated, "it was in Rourou that I first rode a bike. Yes, I tell about it in detail in my book. And you all know what the bicycle signifies in my work. It's a symbol. For me, the bicycle is the first step taken by humanity out of the patriarchal world and into the world of civilization. The first flirtation with civilization. The flirtation of a virgin before her first kiss. Still virginity, and already sin." (p. 136)

Yes, the virgin is still trapped, but she already anticipates love. This is how society begins to be transformed: with joy, passion, pleasure, and freedom. The scene continues, but now one of the friends, Joujou, relates the writer's metaphor to their reality.

"That's true", said Joujou. "Tanaka, a girl I worked with, had her first orgasm riding a bicycle when she was still a virgin." (p. 137)

Tanaka, still a virgin, still stuck in the bonds of an authoritarian order that deprives her of feeling pleasure within her own body, enjoys it nonetheless. The bicycle becomes a vehicle for personal freedom, as she subverts the order by having an orgasm as she rides.

The motorcycle appears four times in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), a novel that features four

characters. The two men, Tomas and Franz, one a womanizer doctor and the other an idealistic professor, are unimportant from two-wheeled point of view. The only appearance of a motorcycle related to Tomas occurs after he dies and his son uses a motorcycle to go to the funeral. There is no great meaning in this.

Instead, the meaningful scenes involving motorcycles concern the two female characters. Tereza, Tomas's wife, is attached to their relationship, which causes her a lot of pain because of his womanizing. She finds a certain freedom in becoming a documentary photographer, especially during the Soviet invasion after the Prague Spring. She achieves fame by taking pictures of the tanks coming in. In the first scene of the book in which the motorcycle appears, Tereza is photographing the arrival of the Soviet tanks. At that moment, the Soviet soldiers still do not know if they can fire on the Prague citizens, so the Czech youths begin to irritate the soldiers.

She shot roll after roll and gave about half of them, undeveloped, to foreign journalists (the borders were still open, and reporters passing through were grateful for any kind of document). Many of her photographs turned up in the Western press. They were pictures of tanks, of threatening fists, of houses destroyed, of corpses covered with bloodstained red-white-and-blue Czech flags, of young men on motorcycles racing full speed around the tanks and waving Czech flags on long staffs, of young girls in unbelievably short skirts provoking the miserable sexually famished Russian soldiers by kissing random passersby before their eyes. As I have said, the Russian invasion was not only a tragedy; it was a carnival of hate filled with a curious (and no longer explainable) euphoria. (p. 67)

The speeding motorcycles encircling the Soviet tanks with Czech flags is a potent symbol of resistance and political provocation.

In the next scene, associated with the other female character, Sabina, the motorcycle provokes, but on an individual level. An artist, Sabina uses her creativity to break free from family ties, and then from the chains of authoritarianism. But she begins to question the legitimacy and authenticity of others who fight against the authoritarian regime, suspecting they are motivated by pride and vanity. She fears that music is being used to create artificial happiness.

At the time, she had thought that only in the Communist world such musical barbarism reign supreme. Abroad, she discovered that the transformation of music into noise was a planetary process by which mankind was entering the historical phase of total ugliness. The total ugliness to come had made itself felt first as omnipresent acoustical ugliness: cars, motorcycles, electric guitars, drills, loudspeakers, sirens. The omnipresence of visual ugliness would soon follow. (p. 93)

In this scene, motorcycles are seen as noisy, as a part of the world's ugliness.

Sabina, a visual artist, takes the urban noise as an affront. Consider, by contrast, how a musician might respond. Two Brazilian songs take this reflection a little further. The lyrics of a blues song called "Música Urbana 2" ("Urban Music 2"), by Legião Urbana ("Urban Legion," a venerated existentialist pop-rock band from the 80s), talk about the urban scenery: TV aerials, beggars, junkies, the wind, shanty towns, penthouses, children in schools, police and so on. All of them make urban music. In the song, Renato Russo (the composer, vocalist and leader of the rock band) sings:

"Motocicletas querendo atenção às três da manhã - é só música urbana" (Port.)

"Motorcycles craving for attention at three in the morning - it's just urban music" (Eng.)

Here, as in Kundera's novel, the motorcycles are disturbing. But Renato Russo further reflects on the cause of that ugliness: the motorcycles want attention! This is more or less what Kundera tries to develop when he says the cause of those people supporting the communist regime is lack of affection. No one loves them, no one admires them, no one thinks them intelligent. This is why they try to disturb the lives of the creative people persecuting them, and that is why the motorcycles disturb the sleep of the city at three in the morning—for attention, affect.

"A Tua Presença Morena" ("Your Black Presence") by Caetano Veloso, emphasizes the power of individuals to quiet the urban noise. In the lyrics, Caetano tell us how the presence of a woman commands, overpowers, spreads and paralyzes reality. In a verse, he sings:

"A tua presença silencia os automóveis e as motocicletas" (Port.)

"Your presence silences the automobiles and the motorcycles" (Eng.)

The presence of the strong woman makes us no longer aware of the ugliness of the motorcycles' noise, thus the song inspires a hope for change. Love, joy, intelligence, beauty, and strength can rid us of the noise.

Ironically, in *The Unbearable Lightness of the Being*, Sabina, who wants to escape from that noise, does so on a motorcycle. To flee from the simplistic military music used by the communists, she takes a ride:

When Sabina was working in the student brigade, her soul poisoned by the cheerful marches issuing incessantly from the loudspeakers, she borrowed a motorcycle one Sunday and headed for the hills. She stopped at a tiny remote village she had never seen before, leaned the motorcycle against the church, and went in. (p. 110)

In this case, the motorcycle becomes an escape companion. It is not yet a vehicle for the transformation of authoritarian society as the bicycle was in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* but it provides at least a momentary relief.

The contradictory meanings of the motorcycle—as noise and escape, as political provocation and personal freedom—reach their apex in *Slowness*, the first book Kundera wrote originally in French. On the first page, a man is driving a car while thinking about speeding motorcycles:

What could I say? Maybe this: the man hunched over his motorcycle can focus only on the present instant of his flight: he is caught in a fragment of time cut off from both the past and the future; he is wrenched from the continuity of time; he is outside time; in other words, he is in a state of ecstasy; in that state he is unaware of his age, his wife, his children, his worries, and so he has no fear, because the source of fear is in the future, and a person freed of future has nothing to fear.

Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man. As opposed to a motorcyclist, the runner is always present in his body, forever required to think about his blisters, his exhaustion; when he runs he feels his weight, his age, more conscious than ever of himself and of his time of life. This all changes when man delegates the faculty of speed to a machine: from then on, his own body is outside the process, and he gives over to a speed that is non-corporeal, nonmaterial, pure speed, speed itself, ecstasy speed. (p. 1)

The book critiques this need for speed, this need for ecstasy, this need to forget.

The novel is partly based on “No Tomorrow” (1812) by Dominique Vivant Denon. In this erotic story, a married woman invites a young man to spend the night with her, in the castle where she lives with her husband. The next morning, the young man is full of life and satisfaction. He doesn't want to forget the night; he wants to remember, in other words, the opposite of using the ecstasy of speed to forget.

Slowness occurs in the same castle as in “No Tomorrow,” but in the present day. At the end of the novel, Vincent, an intellectual motorcyclist, wants to provoke, to shock, the people in that castle: scholars, politicians, and thinkers. To do so he seduces a beautiful girl and convinces her to perform savage anal sex in front of the castle's inhabitants. They get naked in the swimming pool, but, when he tries to penetrate her, he fails to get an erection. Instead, they simulate sex, pretending to engage in anal sex. Later the experience causes him great suffering, so he tries to forget.

The contempt he spat upon him has plunged Vincent right back into his turmoil. Suddenly he feels weak. He knows he will not tell anyone the orgy story. He will not have the strength to lie. He is too sad to lie. He has only one desire: to forget this night speedily, this entire disastrous night, erase it, wipe it out, nullify it - and in this moment he feels an unquenchable thirst for speed. His step firm, he hastens toward his motorcycle, he desires

his motorcycle, he is swept with love for his motorcycle, for his motorcycle on which he will forget everything, on which he will forget himself. (p.154)

Simultaneously, the young man of the nineteenth-century story “No Tomorrow” reappears. He had just had sex with the married lady all night. He was satisfied and felt no need to show himself to anyone. An observer, Kundera himself, soon after seeing Vincent riding the motorcycle to forget the failed penetration, watches the young gentleman going to a chariot:

“Wait a second.”

I want to go on contemplating my Chevalier as he walks slowly toward the chaise. I want to relish the rhythm of his steps: the farther he goes, the slower they are. In that slowness, I seem to recognize a sign of happiness.

The coachman greets him; he stops, he brings his fingers to his nose, then he climbs up, takes his seat, huddles into a corner, his legs stretched comfortably before him: the chaise starts, soon he will drowse off, then he will wake, and all that time he will be trying to stay as close as he can to the night as it melts inexorably in the light.

No tomorrow.

No audience. (p.155)

Here it is clear that the Chevalier was not having sex only for the moment of ecstasy. He remembers the whole night. He does not want to forget. He wants the scent of the woman to stay on his fingers forever. He wants to remember the night forever, always in his memory. With his interjection, “wait a second,” Kundera appears to elevate slowness, memory, and the past—the chariot—over speed, forgetting, and the present—the motorcycle.

However, Milan Kundera's motorcycles, like his characters, are multifaceted. They are humble, because they are vehicles of the working class. They are liberating. They can bring us pleasure and joy, and those are what in the end will subvert the authoritarianism of the government and the mediocrity of people. They are provocative when they tantalize the Soviet soldiers. They are noisy when they represent the world where no one wants to dialogue anymore. They are companions in moments when we lose the strength to fight and want a temporary escape. They are ecstatic, although this ecstasy may be limited, an escape from reality that is equally temporary.

In short, Milan Kundera lies. He uses motorcycles to develop his characters, and then he uses characters to develop his themes. He is willing to distort motorcycles and characters to benefit his fiction. He creates fantasies to talk about what really matters to him.

Can he be forgiven for his lies? I think yes, because he represents the fantasies everyone inhabits, including scholars using motorcycles as a subject to pay tribute to their favorite writer, citizens remembering past authoritarian regimes to

denounce present clowns dressed as presidents, and even an individual talking about fictional passions only to thrill a beautiful woman-tigress with fleshy inviting lips.

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