*“Die Weltliteratur” (2005)*

*Milan Kundera*

* Key Notes
  + Czech-born (1929), living in France since 1975
  + Regrets “western misconceptions” of Czech literature
* Key Terms:
  + *Small Context:* refers to the “history of a nation”
  + *Large Context:* refers to the “supranational history of its art.”
  + *Median Context:* An imagined middle step between the *small context* and *large context*. An example is Latin America for Colombia or Scandinavia for Sweden.
  + *Provincialism:* refers to the inability (or the refusal) to see one’s own culture in the large context.
  + *Provincialism (Small Nations):* refers to “hold[ing] world culture in high esteem but feel[ing] it to be something alien, a sky above their heads, distant, inaccessible, an ideal reality with little connection to their national literature.”
  + *Provincialism (Large Nations):* refers to the way large nations resist the Goethean idea of “world literature” because their own literature seems to them sufficiently rich that they need take no interest in what people write elsewhere.”
  + *Small-Context Terrorism:* refers to “a nation’s possessiveness towards its artistic work […] reducing the whole meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland.”
* **Maximum Diversity in Minimum Space (290)**

SUMMARY: This section contemplates geographic realities behind Europe that mark its limited size (it has boundaries, even though these boundaries are subject to change) while also being largely diverse (separate nation states individually and uniquely make up the whole).

🡪 “Cultural diversity is the great European value.”

🡪 “All the nations of Europe are living in a common destiny, but each is living it differently, based on its own separate experience.”

🡪 “The dynamism and long life of the history of the European arts are unconceivable without the existence of all these nations whose diverse experiences constitute an inexhaustible reservoir of inspiration.”

* **Irreparable Inequality (290-291)**

SUMMARY: Political and language inequalities. Not all of the diverse “pieces” within Europe have had equal voices. There are large countries who have 1.) more security in the survival of their nation as well as national characteristics and 2.) control the fate of smaller nations. The primary example is how Germany, Italy, France, and Great Britain determined the fate of Czech in autumn of 1938

🡪 Chamberlain: [Czech is] “a faraway country of which we know little”

🡪 “In Europe there are the large countries on one side and the small on the other”

🡪 “For [small nations] their existence is not a self-evident certainty but always a question, a wager, a risk; they are on the defense against History.”

🡪 “There are as many Poles as there are Spaniards. But Spain is an old power whose existence has never been under threat.”

🡪 QUESTION: Is Kundera right that we would not know about Kafka if he wrote in Czech?

- I think this is slightly unfair. If it stayed in Czech without translation, its possible. But Kundera also acknowledges the importance of translation and that one can judge a novel “without knowledge of its original language.” Kafka’s work easily could have been picked up and translated immediately.

* **Die Weltliteratur (291-292)**

SUMMARY: What is key to this section is the separation between *Small Context* and *Large Context*. The former refers to the “history of a nation” while the latter refers to the “supranational history of its art.” For example, Music is studied according to its *Large Context*; we look at the development of music without often knowing much about the national language it came out of; Bach and Chopin can be studied together according to the supranational history of its art, without knowing its development specifically in the nations of Germany and Poland. For Kundera, *Weltliteratur* refers to looking at literature in accordance with the *Large Context* (A practice that is not as established as seen in music). \*\*\*This can be seen as a solution to provincialism according to Kundera.\*\*\*

🡪 “Europe has not managed to view its literature as a historical unit” [that is, in accordance with the *Large Context* or as *Weltliteratur).*

🡪 “World literature is always presented as a juxtaposition of national literatures … as a history of literatures! Of literatures in the plural!” [Or, in other words, in accordance with the small contexts that the Large contexts].

QUESTION: What are some benefits of the large context?

- “geographic distance sets the observer back from the local context and allows him to embrace the *large context* of world literature, the only approach that can bring out a novel’s *aesthetic value* – that is to say: the previously unseen aspects of existence that this particular novel has managed to make clear, the novelty of for it has found.” [In other words, Kundera believes that looking at literature outside of its local context allows us 1.) see the *large context* more easily which can invite us to 2.) see the novel according to its form more clearly, as a historical unit (like with music)].

QUESTION: What about translation?

- Translation is a good thing; we can do without knowledge of the original language and still correctly judge a novel. Leads him to critique professors of foreign literature who strictly identify with the *small context* to mark their place as experts. In doing so, they adopt the tastes, opinions, and prejudices of the nation.

* **The Provincialism of Small Nations (292-293)**

SUMMARY: “Provincialism” refers to the inability (or the refusal) to see one’s own culture in the large context.” The provincialism of the small nations refers to “hold[ing] world culture in high esteem but feel[ing] it to be something alien, a sky above their heads, distant, inaccessible, an ideal reality with little connection to their national literature.” In other words, it is the feeling that one belongs to their nation alone and must remain there in order to help it survive (especially since their survival is under threat more than large nations).

🡪 “A small nation […] has great respect for its writers because they provide it with pride”

🡪 *Small-Context Terrorism:* refers to “a nation’s possessiveness towards its artistic work […] reducing the whole meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland.”

QUESTION: What is an example of *Small-Context Terrorism*?

- Kundera discusses how French composer Vincent D’Indy only taught Smetana and Dvorak as “folk-style” music that was inspired by “national songs and dances.” Of course, there is much more to their music than this, but they have only been passed along by their mother country in accordance with ways that represent national pride

* **The Provincialism of Large Nations (293-294)**

SUMMARY: Still refers to the inability (or the refusal) to see one’s own culture in the large context.” But more specifically, large nations resist the Goethean idea of “world literature” because their own literature seems to them sufficiently rich that they need take no interest in what people write elsewhere.” In speaking about how a list that discusses the most important books in the country’s literature, Kundera chastises the ways in which the list show a novel’s “great social resonance in France” (the small context) without giving thought to the way each book’s “importance in the history of the novel.”

🡪 “These values are hard to perceive from the viewpoint of the *small context*, even if it be the prideful small context of a large nation.”

* **The Man from the East (294-295)**

SUMMARY: Kundera contemplates the difficulty of being perceived as “An East European exile” who – along with figures like Czech theologian Jan Hus – “now […] must suffer through a dreadful eternity in the company of Ivan the Terrible.” Being associated with Eastern Europeans, whom he doesn’t identify with, feels like a “displacement into a context that was not mine felt like a deportation.”

🡪 “Indeed, to the French, my country was part of the European Orient.”

🡪 “They saw us as “communized,” not “taken over.”

QUESTION: What do we think of this?

- I think Kundera is also being a bit Orientalist in his description as a “Man from the East.” He emphatically does not want to be associated with the East.

* **Central Europe (295-296)**

SUMMARY: In this section, Kundera contemplates the development of median contexts and whether Central Europe can serve as an adequate middle ground between countries like Hungary and Poland. He concludes that no, none of these countries have shown any wish to be associated with a common grouping. Simultaneously, these nations have had their borders adjusted according to large nations; “their unity was unintentional” – “They were kin to one another not through will, not through fellow-feeling or through linguistic proximity, but by reason of similar experiences, by reason of common historical situations that brought them together, at different times, in different configurations, and within shifting, never definitive, borders.”

🡪 “One of Europe’s fundamental problems, the problem of small nations, is nowhere else manifested in so revelatory, so focused, and so exemplary a way [as Central Europe].”

* **The Contracting Paths of the Modernist Revolt**

SUMMARY: Discusses how conceptions of “novel,” “modern art,” and “modern novel” develop differently in different areas, such as France and Central Europe.

🡪 “I don’t believe universities will ever teach the history of Central Europe as a separate discipline; in the dormitory of the hereafter, Jan Hus will always ben breathing the same Slavic exaltations as Ivan the Terrible.”

🡪 “In a brief historical panorama, our two cultures rose up before me as nearly symmetrical antitheses. In France, classicism, rationalism, the libertine spirit, and then in the nineteenth century, the era of the great novel. In Central Europe, the reign of an especially ecstatic strain of baroque art and then in the nineteenth century, the moralizing idyllicism of Biedermeier, the great Romantic poetry, and very few great novels.”

🡪 “What was “modern art,” that intriguing storm of the first third of the twentieth century? A radical revolt again the aesthetic of the past; that is obvious of course, except that the pasts were not alike.”

* **My Great Pleiades**

SUMMARY: Looking at some inspirations who did not form a “movement” but were solitaries. Includes Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz.

🡪 “They all of them conceived the novel to be a great *antilyrical poetry*.”

* **Kitsch and Vulgarity**

SUMMARY: Looking at the differences between what “Kitsch” means in Central Europe versus what “Vulgarity” means in France.

🡪 “Kitsch was the dominant style of the nineteenth century (in Germany and in Central Europe), with a few great Romantic works separating out from it as phenomena of exception.”

🡪 “Kitsch long ago became a very precise concept in Central Europe, where it stand as the *supreme aesthetic evil.* […] Only in 1960, thus a hundred years after it appeared in Germany, was the word first used in France.”

🡪 “‘Vulgar’ comes from *vulgus*; ‘vulgar’ is what pleases the people; a democrat, a man on the left, a battler for human rights, is obliged to love the people; but he is free to disdain it haughtily for what he finds vulgar.”

* **Antimodern Modernism**

🡪 “In *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz got at the fundamental shift that occurred during the twentieth century: until then mankind was divided into two – those who defended the status quo and those who sought to change it. Then the acceleration of History took effect: whereas in the past man had lived continuously in the same setting, in a society that changed only very slowly, now the movement arrived when he suddenly began to feel History moving beneath his feet. […] All at once, being comfortable with the *status quo* was the same thing has being comfortable with History on the move.”

**Questions – Milan Kundera, “Die Weltliteratur”**

1. Kundera defines Europe as “maximum diversity in minimum space” (290) What does this mean? How does this relate to his complaint about “irreparable inequality” (290)?

*- This refers to the contemplation of geographic realities behind Europe that mark its limited size (it has boundaries, even though these boundaries are subject to change) while also being largely diverse (separate nation states individually and uniquely make up the whole). This relates to notion of irreparable inequality because these diverse nations within the limited space of Europe are not all the same size. Larger nations thus have more security than smaller nations in both political and linguistic survival.*

1. Explain the difference between “the provincialism of small nations” and “the provincialism of large nations.”

*- “Provincialism” refers to the inability (or the refusal) to see one’s own culture in the large context.” The provincialism of the small nations refers to “hold[ing] world culture in high esteem but feel[ing] it to be something alien, a sky above their heads, distant, inaccessible, an ideal reality with little connection to their national literature.” In other words, it is the feeling that one belongs to their nation alone and must remain there in order to help it survive (especially since their survival is under threat more than large nations). The provincialism of large nations refers to the ways they resist the Goethean idea of “world literature” because their own literature seems to them sufficiently rich that they need take no interest in what people write elsewhere.” In speaking about how a list that discusses the most important books in the country’s literature, Kundera chastises the ways in which the list show a novel’s “great social resonance in France” (the small context) without giving thought to the way each book’s “importance in the history of the novel.”*

1. Is Kundera right to argue that “a nation’s possessiveness toward its artists works as a *small-context terrorism*, reducing the whole meaning of a work to the role it played in its homeland” (293)? Are you persuaded by Kundera’s claim that “nobody would know Kafka today – nobody – if he had been a Czech” (291)?

*- I don’t think this is very fair; it’s awfully extreme to chastise a nation for wanting to protect part of its local history. Also to assume that using some level of possessiveness entails that the artists cannot have a global contribution seems wrong.*

*- I think this is slightly unfair. If it stayed in Czech without translation, its possible. But Kundera also acknowledges the importance of translation and that one can judge a novel “without knowledge of its original language.” Kafka’s work easily could have been picked up and translated immediately.*

1. Kundera distinguishes Slavic languages from “Slavic culture” (294). What’s the difference, and why does it matter? Is Kundera right to relativize the importance of linguistic factors as opposed to cultural, religious, intellectual ones? Do you agree that “to judge a novel one can do without a knowledge of its original language” (292), and that we should go beyond way of teaching foreign literature which “mire [it] in its home province” (292)?

*- Kundera says there may be similarities between Slavic languages, but the history of “Czechs, like that of the Poles, the Slovaks (and of course, of the Hungarians, who are not at all Slavic) is entirely Western.” The Slavic World or Slavic culture does not exist according to Kundera because many “Slavic” countries follow Western history (Such as the struggle of Catholicism against the Reformation). He sees Russia as another world.*

*- I think his comments about not understanding an original language is beneficial because it means we can read other perspectives without having to learn their language. Of course, this does not help small nations form a sense of security since people can always just read small nations literature according to translations. I think teachers of foreign literature are important because they help preserve other cultures, even if not many people study them.*

1. “In the nineteen-sixties I left my country for France, and there I was astonished to discover that I was ‘an East European exile.’ Indeed, to the French, my country was part of the European Orient” (294). Why is this problematic to Kundera? Does it mean he clearly identifies as a ‘Western ‘writer?

*- Kundera is concerned with being associated with the “East” because he so clearly sees himself as a Western European writer. Obviously this reveals a bit of Orientalism on his side as he feels shame in being so close to even Eastern Europe. He in no way wants to be remembered in the same sentence as “Ivan the Terrible.” Of course this has greater political meaning. Kundera does not want to be associated with the U.S.S.R in any way (coming from a country previously dominated by the Soviet Union).*