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Article in Comparative Literature · June 2016

DOI: 10.1215/00104124-3507972

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# Literature and Learning How to Live: Milan Kundera's Theory of the Novel as a Quest for Maturity

JACQUES DERRIDA'S *SPECTRES DE MARX* opens with a curious exhortation: “*Je voudrais apprendre à vivre enfin*” (13). Derrida wonders what it would mean to know how to live, *finally*: at what point in life does one know how to live, and how much time is then left to live once one actually knows how to do so? What is even more intriguing than the indefinite adverbial is the phrase itself. “Apprendre à vivre” conflates the positions of the learner (learning how to live) and the teacher (teaching how to live), thus making the source of the desired knowledge unclear. On the one hand, because learning how to live strictly by oneself and only from one's own life is impossible—one is irrevocably tied to others and the outside world—this knowledge must come from somewhere else. Derrida suggests that it comes either from death—one's realization and acceptance of finitude—or from someone else. Teaching and learning how to live, he argues, are a matter of “hétérodidactique” (14), because they imply something external that instructs one in the art of living. On the other hand, one never learns how to live simply by adopting some external knowledge or by following someone's advice. It is an individual type of knowledge acquired only by living. Learning how to live takes place neither solely in oneself and the immanence of one's life, nor somewhere else and by implementing someone else's wisdom. Learning how to live happens within one's own life when, with some external assistance, one reflects on one's life, thereby turning it into a practice in which self-fashioning and formation by external forces coincide.

The role of literature in the practice of teaching and learning how to live is not immediately apparent. Although literary fictions have frequently served as a privileged site of heterodidactics, equally often they have been a means of instruction incompatible with self-fashioning. For the politically committed literary critics of the past three decades, the issue of the role of literary fictions in teaching and

learning how to live has been in itself uninteresting. Its relevance was limited to showing that literary knowledge is always ideologically conditioned because it promotes specific sets of values. For the less politically determined scholars this issue has been unattractive as well, because it is simultaneously too elusive and too presumptuous: because one is always learning how to live but never knows definitively how to do so, one is never in a position of being able to teach it to someone else.

In recent years, however, many critics once again have begun to ask why literature matters and what kind of knowledge it imparts. Harold Bloom, for example, reminds us that “the deepest motive for reading has to be the quest for wisdom [on how to live]” because no knowledge is “so hard to acquire as the knowledge of how to live life well” (*Where Shall Wisdom Be Found* 101, 137). Even critics who do not share Bloom’s conservative stance on socially engaged approaches and his antipathy toward conceptions of reading that emphasize a clear social purpose have urged us to revisit the question of literary knowledge. Rita Felski, for instance, points out that this question is important because literary knowledge gives us neither something entirely new and unknown, nor a mere confirmation of our ideas and reiteration of what we already knew. Literary knowledge concerns what Felski calls “the becoming known” (25), a nascent form of knowledge that emerges as a result of the process of accentuating or renewing something we might have intuitively sensed and thought about for some time, but only in a semi-conscious and dispersed fashion. Literary fictions are not only vehicles of propositional knowledge and normative precepts, but, as Joshua Landy argues, also a formative medium that hones our thinking, reasoning, and judgment-formation (*How to Do Things with Fictions* 184). Instead of telling us what to do and which views to uphold, fictions stimulate and refine our cognitive, affective, and imaginative faculties, especially when it comes to complex and uncertain situations. As Bloom observes, when we encounter fictional characters, we “metamorphose into a provisional acceptance that sets aside moral judgment” (*Anatomy of Influence* 20–21). This opening is more than empathy or identification. It concerns an imaginative understanding of literary characters and the freedom of consciousness they display that serves as a seed of desire to achieve the same freedom of consciousness for ourselves. By prompting our mental faculties, literary fictions bolster our freedom and galvanize the process of our self-formation.

This emphasis on self-formation and fostering of faculties among contemporary scholars of very different persuasions does, however, undermine the argument that literary fictions advance moral improvement. Such a view has had a long tradition in literary studies. Mark William Roche, for example, claims that fictions, and novels above all, inspire moral improvement by conveying concrete rules of conduct that readers accept as part of their moral code because they recognize their relevance to higher truth claims (57). Others, such as Wayne Booth, stress the novel’s ability to nurture a reader’s “moral sensitivity” (287–88), which, Martha Nussbaum adds, is an extension of that reader’s personal experiences following characters’ interactions, with the result that readers are able to empathize with what otherwise would be inaccessible (46–47). In a similar fashion, Anthony Cunningham concludes that novels help us “diagnose” and “filter” our moral experiences by “heightening our attention to what should be morally salient” (84–85).

Yet, as Joshua Landy points out, most literary texts are too complex and many-sided to serve as vehicles for delivering value-beliefs. Their sophisticated formal devices (intricate hypotaxis, antithesis, authorial irony, shifting points of view, and so on) offer training in a “figurative state of mind” (*How to Do Things with Fictions* 64)—an abstract type of thinking that involves linking separate events and disparate pieces of information—not an invitation to detect moral models (such as identifying characters as good or evil) (“Formative Fictions” 184). Moreover, not everyone reads novels to become a better person. Arguably, many of us read them to learn how to live a better life. Novels are a vital companion in the process of learning how to live because they bring into our view—more intensely than any other arena of culture, as Frank Farrell notes (11, 24)—the ways in which the world is arranged, what it means to be a human being, and what principal patterns of interacting with others determine human life.

Milan Kundera’s “métaphysique romanesque,” as François Ricard has recently dubbed Kundera’s theory and practice of the novel (“Œuvre” 50), offers an important contribution to understanding the role of novels in the process of learning how to live. Kundera admits that novels must contain relevant insights into human life, but he insists that, as a genre, the novel cannot be limited to straightforward instruction. Novels must also activate a reader’s critical faculty regarding the insights they communicate. This makes the novel a catalyst in a process at the end of which the insights that individual readers attain vary from case to case and often include each reader’s self-knowledge and beliefs. The reason that Kundera’s argument has been largely overlooked is his old-fashioned discourse: he formulates the question of what the novel teaches us and what we can learn from it as a question involving one’s maturity and ability to overcome what he calls the “lyrical” attitude to life. This terminology, which is reminiscent of the Arnoldian understanding of literature as a place of mature wisdom, seems disconnected from contemporary criticism—apart, perhaps, from Bloom. However, a close look at Kundera’s texts reveals that his notions regarding maturity and the novel’s role in promoting it are not pedagogies involving a moral code or instructions in correct values.

In Kundera’s theory and practice of the novel, maturity often appears as an unspoken antithesis to immaturity, which in turn manifests itself via the proxy of a “lyrical age,” a period of inexperience and a perspective on life that is lacking in critical insight: “l’âge où l’individu, concentré presque exclusivement sur lui-même, est incapable de voir, de comprendre, de juger lucidement le monde autour de lui” (*Le Rideau* 106; “the age when the individual, focused almost exclusively on himself, is unable to see, to comprehend, to judge clearly the world around him,” *The Curtain* 88).<sup>1</sup> The lyrical age is the time when individuals exhaust themselves in endless self-contemplations because they are a mystery to themselves (Kundera, “Interview” 142), and the predicament of this period is encapsulated in the formula “life is elsewhere,” itself the title of a Kundera novel, *Život je jinde*, in which the protagonist, Jaromil, finds that the exuberance, fullness, and vitality of life is always missing. Moreover, in the lyrical age, disappointments are inevitable and

<sup>1</sup> Citations from Milan Kundera’s essays will be given parenthetically in the text and abbreviated as follows: AR (*L’Art du roman*), AN (*The Art of the Novel*), TT (*Les Testaments trahis*), TB (*Testaments Betrayed*), RD (*Le Rideau*), CR (*The Curtain*), RC (*Une Rencontre*), EN (*Encounter*).

The roots of these claims run very deep. The ideas that we need to learn how to live, that we must accept everything life brings (death included), that reading and writing are helpful, and that we require both external assistance and our own reflection in this process of learning can be found in Montaigne, and most, if not all, of Montaigne's ancient sources. What this long tradition suggests is that the formation of someone who is learning how to live with the help of texts is simultaneously heterodidactic and autodidactic: at the same time a shaping by external forces and self-fashioning. If, as with Derrida, this auto-heterodidactic formation does not always lead to an acceptance of mortality, it nevertheless entails an openness to otherness, reflection, and change that, in Kundera's view, is the first step in the mature practice of learning how to live.

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