

The Ambiguous Expression of the Idyll Theme in Milan Kundera's Novels

Yuhan Sun

Weihai School of Culture and Communication
Shandong University
Weihai, China

Abstract—Milan Kundera, a French writer of Czech origin, occupies a place in the literary world of the 20th century with his poetic words and philosophical thoughts. Throughout Kundera's works, the interlaced variations of many themes constitute the tone of the novel. The same theme appears in different backgrounds, practiced by different characters, and then conveys the value connotation, forming a complex and ambiguous interpretation space. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the special concept of "idyll", and to interpret the two different images of "innocence" and "experience" through intensive textual reading, showing the important revelation of politics, life and philosophy under the two prospects.

Keywords—Milan Kundera; idyll; innocence and experience; indicating significance

I. INTRODUCTION

Milan Kundera is a world-renowned literary writer. As early as the 1960s, western academic circles began to study Kundera's works. The 1980s ushered in the upsurge of Kundera research. The study of Kundera's works covers various aspects such as philosophical themes, characters, polyphonic structures, and humorous styles. The study of the theme of the novel is one of the most important parts. Published in 1993, *"Said by Milan Kundera"*, Kundera's novels are drawn from several themes, such as "meditation of inquiry", "love and affection", "history and politics", which had a great influence on the research on the theme of Kundera's novels in the future. Then, the publication of the foreign researcher François Ricard's *"Anesi's Last Afternoon"* has further developed the research on the theme of Kundera's novels. In this book, he proposes that Kundera's novels present a "mountains map", each of which can be accessed with a radius of freedom, and presents the unique idea of themes, characters and artistic forms of Kundera's novels, more accurately restoring the artistic style of Kundera's novels. In China, Zhou Guoping's *"The Mystery of Exploring Being"* and Li Fengliang's *"Poetry, Thoughts and History: Conflict and Integration: The Historical Connotation and Existence of Milan Kundera's Novels"* also take existentialism as the radius to explore the contemporary enlightenment of Kundera's novels. It is precisely because of Kundera's unique narrative technique, complex and ambiguous language expression, the discussion of the novel once presented a situation of dialogue and contention. And "idyll" as one of the "sixty to seventy words" in Milan

Kundera's *"The Art of Fiction"* provides the possibility for the exploration of the theme of the pastoral in Kundera's novels.

II. THE DESIRE FOR IDYLL AWARENESS

In *"The Art of Fiction"*, Kundera described "idyll" as follows: "The word IDYLLE is rarely used in France, but it is an important concept for Hegel, Goethe and Schiller, referring to the state of the world before the first conflict occurs; or the state of the world outside the conflict; or the conflict is only a misunderstanding, that is, a false conflict."¹ The idyll was first used to refer to the songs sung by the shepherd, and is later often used in literary works, and most of them involve the theme of love, such as the French playwright Octave Feuillet, symbolizes "pure and gentle love" with "idyll". After the influence of Rousseau, idyll represents the yearning for returning to nature. In a certain sense, the idyll has become a literary archetype, which exists in the literary creation traditions of all nations of the world and has quite universal significance and value. In the context of European culture, the idyll points to the Christian spirit and taking the Garden of Eden in the Bible as the target of conversion. Depraved human beings were driven out of the Garden of Eden, unable to free themselves from soul reflection, good and evil tearing, and the struggle of fate, and longing to return to the world before the conflict. In this sense, the "idyll" covers the question of the nature of mankind, the situation of mankind and the fate of mankind, and integrates into the ultimate concern and ultimate pursuit of mankind.

Milan Kundera subverts the traditional definition of the word "idyll". Kundera confronts the idyll with "conflict". "The state of the world before the first conflict" means that human beings have lived in the Garden of Eden without the original sin. The second "state of the world outside the conflict" is to acknowledge the existence of the conflict but deliberately flee to create a beautiful world. The last "the conflict is only a misunderstanding" represents the state of acknowledging and experiencing conflict, but finally returning to the realm of freedom and beauty. The rural world in Kundera's works no longer simply means pure

¹ Milan Kundera, *"The Art of Fiction"*, Translated by Dong Qiang, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2014, p.180.

nature and no competition. What he is concerned about is not some kind of quietness and long-distance existence as an "artistic conception". On the contrary, when people are faced with a lost world of "idyll" and the beliefs that sustain the human spirit no longer exist, people have to pursue a new ideal world as a spiritual sanctuary. At this level, the "idyll" symbolizes the powerful motivation for the survival of characters in the basic situation of eagerness for harmony.

III. THE "NAIVE IDYLL"

Canadian scholar François Ricard divides the idyllic ideology in Kundera's novels into two parts, namely: the idyll of innocence and the idyll of experience. The naive idyll points to the annihilation of the individual and has reached the pursuit of collective idealism. "Everyone is a note in Bach's magnificent fugue. Anyone who doesn't want to be one of those notes is a useless, meaningless black dot that you can just hold in your hand and crush with your fingernails like a flea"²

The realization of the naive idyll depends to a certain extent on the tyranny of the masses, and through the destruction of the individual spirit or the flesh, to achieve the harmony of the idyll. In the works of Milan Kundera, many of them are expressed through the scenes of revolutionary ideals and collective celebrations. For example, Franz in *"The Unbearable Lightness of Being"* participates in the "cross-century" team with the passion of "dreamers", integrates life into the collective, and actively pursues the meaning of co-existence; the hat on the top of Gothwald in *"Laughing and Forgetting"*, when Clementis runs counter to the revolutionary ideal of the ruler, Clementis disappears with his hat in the historical vision; in *"The Boundary"*, the last chapter of *"Laughing and Forgetting"*, Jan and Edovic walked on a beach where everyone was naked. She saw a scene of paradise, a scene of humanity that was finally liberated, and so on. They are all placed in a typical idyll environment. The most striking commonality of them lies in the destruction of individuality and the lack of boundaries. In addition, Milan Kundera's also reveals another possibility of individual existence by shaping the "Circle Dance". "Circle Dance" symbolizes the collective unconsciousness in Milan Kundera's works, and this collective unconscious brings a huge, personal attraction from the sense of belonging, revealing a deeper level of worry about the existence of human beings by insinuating political thoughts and parties - the existence of human beings is being constantly dispelled and even annihilated in this so-called "Circle". Personality disappears, the difference among people's thoughts no longer exists in the "Circle", and people's rejection and harm to those who are not outside this closed circle. Human beings are annihilating the existence itself while seeking false proof of existence. In the novel, Mrs. Raphael is searching for "Circle" throughout her life; Milan Kundera and R are typical of those who have been disintegrated by "Circle" (still with "timid nostalgia"); the experience of Tamina's

refusal to enter the children's "Circle" on "Children's Island" reveals the irony and denial of the innocent idyll.

Another important aspect of the "capital idyll" is the portrayal of the special group of "refugees". The image of the refugees reappears in Milan Kundera's novels, each with its own characteristics and representative meaning. In Milan Kundera's novels, refugees are in a foreign country, and most of them will have rejection reaction to heterogeneous cultures. As a stranger, their situation has not been improved because of the escape of the original social conditions, and the special treatment of the surrounding people forces them to change the mother tongue environment and cultural differences, as a result, they are completely lonely in the state of losing their superiority. Tamina, in *"Laughing and Forgetting"*, lost her husband and fell into the memories of the old days, selling his flesh in exchange for an opportunity to be close to the letters left in the past. In *"Ignorance"*, when Weierwei learned that the Czech Republic had once again set off an uprising, she encouraged her friend Elena to return to her home country. It is a very powerful proof of the state of suspension of the refugees in a foreign country. In the heterogeneous cultural field, it is difficult to reconstruct the complete personality and achieve identity through complete integration, while what presents more to readers is the destruction of self-identification and self-status. Kundera uses the unintegrated individuals themselves to disintegrate the ideals of "collectivism", so as to criticize the fragility and ridiculousness of the innocent idylls.

IV. "THE IDYLL OF EXPERIENCE"

After thoroughly criticizing the hypocritical collective ideals and totalitarianism, Milan Kundera gave another possibility of existence — the "experience" idyll after recognizing his own state of existence. Milan Kundera created a typical idyll environment for the appearance of the idyll experience. By writing the different fates of the protagonists, it shows the different living conditions after the individual consciousness awakens. Thomas and Theresa in *"The Unbearable Lightness of Being"* exist as "a lonely person away from the hustle and bustle", fleeing the country to seek peace of mind; in the *"Jokes"*, the "ordinary", "plain" and "unimpressive" Lucy is incompatible with modern society, and she is more like "fairy" and "angel", pure as the shepherdess in the idylls; in *"Laughing and Forgetting"*, Yang came to the beach with Aiqiu. There were few villages on the island and the sheep are grazing inadvertently... If the "capital idyll" is a rebellion and deviation from the traditional idyll environment, then the "lowercase idyll" represents Kundera's inheritance and conversion to the Eden of humanity mind. "We are all raised in the mythology of *The Old Testament*. It can be said that the idyll is a scene printed in our hearts, just like the memories of the Garden of Eden. The life of the Garden of Eden is different from the straight race that leads us to the unknown, nor is it an adventure. It is a circular movement in the middle of known things. Its monotony is not boredom, but happiness."³

² Milan Kundera, *"Laughing and Forgetting"*, translated by Wang Dongliang, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011, p.13.

³ Milan Kundera, *"The Unbearable Lightness of Being"*, translated by Xu Jun, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2003, p.356.

Arneis in *"The Immortal"*, as one of the most extreme experiences of idyll seekers, tried to put aside all the sociological and physiological significance of human beings and tossed all external factors to get close to the truest "inner self". In this novel, the author dilutes political factors and turns to more universal thinking about the existence of life. For Arneis, "I am a common, uncatchable, undescrivable, ambiguous image, and the only truth that is almost no longer catch-able and describable is how we look to others, and worst of all, you are not the master of your image."⁴ The idyll environment she hoped for was to feel the existence of the self in absolute loneliness after being completely isolated from the world, and it also fits the author's idyll ideals of "outside the conflict". However, do absolute loneliness and the absolute abandonment of the world exist? Arneis "is lying in the grass, the monotonous snoring of the stream passes through her body, taking away her self and the filth of her self. She has this basic existence attribute, which exists in the sound of passage of time and permeates in the blue sky."⁵ The way she obtained this extreme peace was "only through self-abandonment, by getting rid of all of her own image". The relationship between peace and death is so close, and therefore, Arneis "must die".

V. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TWO SCENARIOS

Kundera excels at using the word "forgetting" to ridicule the absurdity of the innocent idyll and further touches on the nature of human existence. Milan Kundera uses specific objects, such as Mirek's love letter in *"Laughing and Forgetting"*, Tamina's diary, etc., to explore the relationship between existence and memory. Love letters and diaries are the basis of individual memory. Mirek desperately wants to find a love letter of his youthful days to cover up his embarrassment and inferiority. Tamina insanely wants to find her diary to make sure the past between she and her husband really exists. The existence of Tamina is a metaphor for the embarrassing problem faced by a nation — forgetting. The memory and existence in her body are marked as equals, and Tamina loses her diary, as if a nation had systematically forgotten the memory, books, and history of the nation. Kundera solemnly pointed out that history is not real, but it is by no means nothing. In forgetting, "things lose their names and are confused into a unique existence that is indistinguishable."⁶

The Franz revolutionary ideal was finally shattered with three unsuccessful shouts, and the consciousness of "naive idyll" was also gradually dispelling during this period. The Thomas couple eventually chose to return to the field, reaching a "fake conflict" to some extent, that is, the couple returned to peace after recognizing "conflict," but the author deliberately arranged their death. Behind these extremely

⁴ Milan Kundera, *"The Immortal"*, translated by Wang Zhensun and Zheng Kelu, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2003, p.56.

⁵ Milan Kundera, *"The Immortal"*, translated by Wang Zhensun and Zheng Kelu, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2003, p.78

⁶ Milan Kundera, *"Laughing and Forgetting"*, translated by Wang Dongliang, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011, p.246.

tragic characters, the novel has already surpassed the theme of the idyll and rose to deep thinking about the problems of self, existence and death.

What is shown in the experience idyll scene contains some impossibility of pursuing itself. Theresa in *"The Unbearable Lightness of Being"* pursues the unity of spirit and flesh throughout her life. Theresa's situation undoubtedly reveals the social status quo of the collapse of the traditional value system in modern society. She is constantly injured in the process of seeking, and finally has to change her external request to inner hope. Theresa sought emotional comfort in the puppy Karenin, and imagines Thomas as a rabbit. After entering the typical idyll environment, she fell into a greater illusion. Arneis, who is also "being-towards-death," tired of the place of self and desire, acknowledging and welcoming her own death, but in its essence, it is only from a confrontation against nothingness to the emptiness of another life. They eventually went to the end of existence — death. Kundera uses his philosophical brushstrokes to "explore the basic lies upon which our lives and minds are based". The experience idyll is "the idyll of the anti-idyll", and the followers under its command, on the premise of "recognizing the conflict", seem to have unconsciously gone to death, during which they all show a unified consciousness: the paradox of human subjectivity and the non-freedom of existence.

VI. CONCLUSION

Whether it is returning to the collective embrace like the "naive idyll", living in the state of "one person is all the world", taking away the characteristics of the individual, or returning to the world before the "conflict" under the premise of acknowledging "conflict" like "experience idyll", Milan Kundera revealed some possible living conditions in the novel. All dangerous pursuits may eventually lead people to the complexity and emptiness of society. Undoubtedly, Milan Kundera's thinking on the word "idyll" has already transcended the meaning of the idyll itself, containing the ultimate thinking of the true meaning of life.

REFERENCES

- [1] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* [M], translated by Xu Jun, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2014. (in Chinese)
- [2] Milan Kundera. *Living Elsewhere* [M], translated by Yuan Xiaoyi, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2014. (in Chinese)
- [3] Milan Kundera. *Laughing and Forgetting* [M], translated by Wang Dongliang, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2011. (in Chinese)
- [4] Milan Kundera. *Jokes* [M], translated by Cai Ruoming, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2014. (in Chinese)
- [5] Milan Kundera. *The Art of Novels* [M], translated by Dong Qiang, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2014. (in Chinese)
- [6] François. *The Last Afternoon of Ricard Arneis: The Works of Milan Kundera* [M], translated by Yuan Xiaoyi, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2005. (in Chinese)
- [7] Edited by Wu Congju. *Inquiry of Existence: Milan Kundera's World* [C], Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2005. (in Chinese)

- [8] Ju Miao. Preliminary Study of Milan Kundera's Idyllic Theme [D], Shandong University, 2009. (in Chinese)
- [9] Wu Congju. The Four Words About Kundera [J], Contemporary Foreign Literature, 1999.05.15. (in Chinese)
- [10] Han Shuixian. Milan Kundera: Escape from Immortality [J]. Book House, 2007, (Phase 1). (in Chinese)
- [11] Wu Weihua. Chen Yanli. Towards the True Life — On Kundera's Discussion on the Way of Human Survival from "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" [J]. Journal of Mianyang Normal University, No.3, 2006. (in Chinese)
- [12] Li Fengliang. Humorous Novel: Character and History — Revelation of Milan Kundera [J]. Journal of Jinan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences), No.3, 2002. (in Chinese)