

1-1-1989

Book Review: *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*

Loretta Wasserman
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

Recommended Citation

Wasserman, Loretta (1989) "Book Review: *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 22.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol5/iss1/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

while pointing an accusatory finger, stripping away foolish and fashionable Holocaust chatter.

It is tempting to end this review with a rhetorical flourish, but doing so would be false to Levi. Better to conclude by quoting his answer to the question, why continually write about the Holocaust? Because, as Levi answers, he was witness to a "trial of planetary and epochal dimensions"; and also because, as the Yiddish proverb reminds us: "Ibergekumene tsores iz gut tsu dertseylin" (Troubles overcome are good to tell).

Gilbert R. Davis

Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*. Translated by Linda Asher. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

As a lifelong reader of novels (and for almost as long, a teacher of them), I have observed with dismay the gradual disappearance (scarcely too strong a word) of novel reading for pleasure. Nor do novels seem to be included in any programs of self-improvement, though not so very long ago being "well read" was an aspect of sophistication. (Jay Gatsby, as he set out to make himself over, resolved to read "one improving book or magazine" every week.) As we all know, turning on TV has replaced picking up a book. A recent article in the *Yale Review* states flatly what this means for literature:

Literature . . . is an institution of print culture, centered on the printed book and on reading and writing. The rapidly developing electronic culture is knocking the props out from under Gutenberg literature in numerous ways, ranging from increasing amounts of illiteracy and TV-watching to the proliferation of pho-

tocopying machines and tape recordings. (Alvin Kernan, "Criticism as Theodicy," Autumn, 1987)

Obviously, as stated, all literature is affected, but the novel is the most endangered species. Poetry may even flourish, especially the short expressive lyric, and poetry readings are popular. The drama, too, can survive, adapting to the new taste for spectacle by moving from talkiness to dazzling stage business. Short stories are gaining in popularity, evidently replacing novels as representing "fiction" in literature courses in both high school and college. In fact, many currently published novels are quite short, as though moving toward the short story. And, another effect of TV and cinema, current fiction tends to be photographic and non discursive in style. A recent novel by Louise Erdrich, for example, is praised for its "brilliantly hallucinatory" scenes. What I am lamenting is the old shaggy, baggy novel that carried the reader into and through a world, explaining as it went: Fielding, the Brontes, Tolstoy, George Eliot, Henry James, Faulkner. Perhaps the last of this panoramic kind to be read by both the common reader and the critic was *The Grapes of Wrath*, now fifty years old.

One might reply that these giants remain for classroom study; although gone from the backgrounds of the average educated person, they at least remain for the devoted professional. But now for the other bad news. While technological change is reducing the ranks of the general reader, the critical onslaught of the last twenty years is teaching the new members of the profession, graduate students, especially those at our most prestigious universities, that to study great literature is to chase a chimaera: not only is "great" suspect (a reflection of the taste of an elite few), but literature as a good in itself cannot be defended. Resolutely deconstructed, it dissolves into a text among others — history,

journalism, social comment, propaganda tracts, laundry lists. What meaning remains may be discerned in traces of ideology (political, economic, gender oriented, and so on) left inadvertently, as it were, by the author.

Amid this disarray, it is comforting to come upon Robert Alter's *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. As a teacher of comparative literature at Berkeley, and the author of many books of literary comment and criticism, Alter writes with authority about recent and current trends, and his love of literature in all its branches is evident: here is someone to trust.

Alter first acknowledges the precarious status of literature as it has been undermined by the new academic critics. Then, more importantly, he attempts to define what it is that makes imaginative literature different from other writing, and to defend the reading of literature as both pleasurable and as meeting a deep human need.

Refuting the academic deconstructionists would take more space than Alter wants to allot to the task, which would have to include tracing the roots of the various branches in Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and Heidegger. He even acknowledges their skepticism has had a salutary effect in forcing teachers of literature to ask themselves what it is they do. He does, however, point out that the jargon in which their arguments are couched — a welter of terms from linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, decorated with arcane prefixes — has further discouraged ordinary readers from expecting helpful leadership from teachers or professionals. Further, he finds indefensible the extremism of some of their positions, for example, that a rigid “canon,” reflecting the current “power structure,” dictates what must be admired and studied. Alter observes that most of the works prominent in any list of “great literature” are in varying degrees critical, if not skeptical, concerning the

society they portray, from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on to *Ulysses*, and that the margins of the “canon” have always been open.

The principal task that Alter sets himself, however, is to assert the particular excellence of literature, and to show how the trained reader — the professional — can elucidate aspects so as to add to our pleasure in reading. He considers first the element of character and its relation to reality, asserting the “illuminating connection we feel as readers between fictional character and real human possibility.” Here the novel is preeminent in attending to “the minute emotional and cognitive fluctuations of inner states.”

Subsequent chapters discuss style, structure, allusion and the question of multiple meaning. What Alter says about allusion is particularly interesting. It is an aspect of reading that at first blush would seem to be a mere affectation on the part of the author. Why drag in references to dead authors? If missed, the allusion baffles the reader; if caught, it provokes an unlovely sense of self-satisfaction. Alter shows that allusion is more than a device: it is a way of “fitting into” the whole context of thought and discovery that is our world. All writers, when they set about to write, have something new to say, but they must say it responsibly, against what has already been put forth (“all writers are forced to enter into a dialogue or debate with their predecessors”). Eliot in *The Waste Land* or Joyce in *Ulysses* did not discover this means of engaging with the past; it appears when Euripides makes fun of Aeschylus, or in medieval glosses. The new wave critics appear to make much of this aspect of literature under the term “intertextuality,” but intertextuality, as they practice it, is *their* discovery of resonances and echoes, not the author's conscious, purposeful response.

Whereas Alter talks about all forms of literature, Milan Kundera looks solely at the novel

— and it is a yearning look, for he has little hope for its future. With the international success of at least two of his novels, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera is frequently interviewed about writing, and *The Art of the Novel* is made up of former articles and interviews. As such, it is not a unified presentation. Despite its pessimism, Kundera's is a bracing argument because he is so certain about what the novel has given to the modern world, and could still give ("If the novel should really disappear, it will do so not because it has exhausted its powers but because it exists in a world grown alien to it"). Perhaps reflecting his status as a political exile from his native Czechoslovakia, Kundera sees the death of the novel as due to the "nonthought of received ideas," the crushing of original and individual thought.

Kundera begins his defense with Cervantes. He sees in the setting forth of Don Quixote into a world he no longer recognizes the birth of the Modern Era as surely as in Descartes' expression of radical doubt. From there, Kundera continues with the great figures of the European novel, from Rabelais to Joyce (he never mentions American writers). Kundera locates the spirit of the novel in complexity ("Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not as simple as you think'"), and links complexity to individualism, what he calls "the right to be understood."

Kundera uses *Anna Karenina* several times to illustrate "the wisdom of the novel," what he calls a "suprapersonal wisdom" more intelligent than the author, that gives every character fair treatment. In Tolstoy's first draft Anna was unsympathetically drawn, her fate deserved, but gradually Tolstoy came to see her in an altered light. Like explorers, or scientists, the European novelists, the great ones, desired to know, "to keep the world of life under a permanent light," and their tenacity

(not psychological or political or moral or historical, but partaking of all and adding something more) yielded a special truth.

Like Alter, Kundera insists that novels speak to the past, to continuous thought: "each work is an answer to preceding ones." And like Kundera, Alter insists on the "mimetic validity of character," — that is, that the fictional people that we take so seriously provide us with a link to reality, to the world of life.

In Anita Brookner's *Misalliance*, a novel about a broken marriage, the deserted wife refuses an invitation to dinner with her estranged husband and his new companion, saying, "I am not sophisticated enough to be able to tolerate such a civilized arrangement. I might make an injudicious remark or start raving on about Henry James." This allusion works in several ways, one of them humorously: no doubt a good many husbands would consider an unbridled enthusiasm for Henry James sufficient grounds for divorce. It also suggests to the reader the fine discriminations the wife makes, and asks us to consider what James thought were "civilized arrangements." But such fine-drawn scenes will not be around much longer, as James's readers disappear from fiction as from life.

Loretta Wasserman