Narrative Worldmaking of Temporal and Spatial Intersections: "Here" and "Elsewhere" in Life Is Elsewhere

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Abstract: Milan Kundera's novel, *Life Is Elsewhere*, narrates the entire life of the protagonist from pre-birth to death. The author constructs a realistic world of "here" in contrast to a dreamlike world of "elsewhere" in the novel, setting up two homologous narrative worlds that finally drift into an irreconcilable separation and opposition. Cognitive narratology's focus on narrative worldmaking provides the readers with a pathway to analyze the dual narrative worlds in the text, creating double-scope stories represented by the personae of Jaromil and Xavier. The discrepancy between the two worlds runs throughout the narrative, and the relationship between the two independent yet mirroring worlds is evident from the beginning of their worldmaking. The implied distinction between "here" and "elsewhere" in "Life Is Elsewhere" is a metaphor for the unity of opposites in these two story worlds. The storyteller guides the interpreter's reading activity through narration.

Keywords: Milan Kundera, *Life Is Elsewhere*, cognitive narratology, narrative worldmaking

1. Introduction

Milan Kundera's novel *Life is Elsewhere* chronicles the life journey of the poet Jaromil. Through the depiction of the protagonist's family life, romantic experiences, and political pursuits, the novel articulates the author's reflections on the questions of human existence. Sara Mechraou, grounding her research in the philosophical and psychological themes present in Kundera's work, has validated the applicability of the fundamental theories of cognitive poetics to the interpretation of *Life is Elsewhere*. This study, primarily based on theories of cognitive linguistics and psychology, aims to demonstrate the universality of cognitive poetics in narrative research through the analysis of discursive characteristics and aesthetic effects in the novel. [1] *Life is Elsewhere* constructs two narrative worlds initially parallel: the realistic world of "here" and the dreamy world of "elsewhere." As the novel nears its ending, these two narrative realms intertwine and momentarily converge before diverging again. The distinction between "here" and "elsewhere," implied in the title, acts as a metaphor for the dialectical unity of these dual narrative worlds, embodying the novel's dialectical reflections on existential issues. Cognitive narratology, an interdisciplinary research approach, integrates traditional narratological methods with cognitive scientific research, aiming to establish a cognitive foundation for narrative studies. [2] David Herman's cognitive narratology theory, which emphasizes narrative worldmaking [3], provides a pathway for investigating the dual narrative worlds

in *Life is Elsewhere*. Kundera employs a metafictional writing style, vividly unfolding the process of narrative worldmaking before the readers, yielding a unique narrative effect.

2.   Here: The Chaotic Realm of Reality

Storyworlds can be defined as worlds evoked by narratives, and conversely, narratives can be defined as blueprints of specific world-creating modes. [4] *Life is Elsewhere* shapes dual storyworlds through transformative narrative modes, namely, the realistic world where Jaromil lives and the dream world inhabited by Xavier. The storyteller utilizes symbolic cues within the narrative medium to design the world blueprint, facilitating the creation or updating of the storyworlds in the novel. [4] As the plot unfolds, the two storyworlds evolve from being independent to intertwining in time and space, and eventually separating. Storyworlds are psychological models of narrated events, allowing readers to construct the two worlds through narrative discourse cues in the novel, mapping clues from the dimensions of when, what, where, who, how, and why onto the internally constructed storyworlds. [3] *Life is Elsewhere* initially presents readers with the realistic world that nurtures the poet Jaromil, covering story times from the moment of his mother's conception to the accounts of related characters' lives three years after the poet's death. The storyteller's intention to evoke this world is revealed to the readers in the first chapter of the first part of the novel, where the narrative mode permeating the entire world-making process begins to emerge.

The commencement of a narrative serves as a cue for world-making, allowing readers to find their appropriate positions within the storyworld. [4] In *Life is Elsewhere*, the first chapter narrates the story from the poet's conception in his mother's womb to his birth. The initial segment of the novel presents a posed question, serving as an entry point into the narrative world. "When the poet's mother wondered where the poet had been conceived, there were only three possibilities to consider…When the poet's father asked himself the same question…" [5] Under the scrutiny of post-classical narratology with a focus on intertextuality, interpreters understand that one source of literary character formation stems from literary history itself. [6] Consequently, it becomes easier to notice the intertextual relationship between the opening of the text and the progenitor of metafiction, *Tristram Shandy*. The first sentence of the opening in *Tristram Shandy* is written as follows:"I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing…" [7] *Life is Elsewhere* and *Tristram Shandy* both commence their narratives with the conception of the protagonist, illustrating the individual's experiences in the world. However, in terms of narrative inception, an essential narrative characteristic of *Life is Elsewhere* becomes apparent in contrast to the literary classic *Tristram Shandy*: the novel adopts a third-person narration. Unlike Tristram narrating his own birth process, Jaromil's birth is narrated by an external narrator, who introduces the protagonist in a distinctive manner during the narrative process.The narrator does not provide the protagonist's name and identity at the beginning, but instead employs a narrative introduction filled with blanks. Focusing on the description at the start of the narrative, the two most crucial characters, the "poet" and the "poet's mother," have already made their appearances. This approach, in contrast to the self-narration of one's own birth process in *Tristram Shandy*, highlights the unique narrative style adopted in *Life is Elsewhere*, emphasizing the distinctiveness of the introduction of the main character by the external narrator. In the design of the storyteller, interpreters continue reading with questions, wondering who the "poet" is, who the "poet's mother" is, and who the indirectly mentioned father of the poet is. As one continues reading this chapter, questions are partly answered: the poet's mother is "the daughter of a rich merchant," and the poet's father is an "engineer." [5] However, until the end of this chapter, besides learning that the "poet" is named Jaromil, readers do not receive any other names of characters. Numerous characters are being referred to by their identities. This narrative characteristic is evident from the beginning and pervades the

entire creation process of the novel's realistic world. Continuing to map the discourse cues of the storyworld, interpreters will find that most important characters in the storyworld are nameless, symbolized existences represented by characteristics or identities. For instance, in the novel, Jaromil has "engineer" father, "painter" teacher, his first girlfriend is "the girl with glasses," his love interest is "the dark-haired cashier," his official girlfriend is "the redhead," and even "the man in his forties" who indirectly has a decisive impact on his life, are all descriptive symbols existing in the novel's realistic world and significantly influencing Jaromil's life trajectory. Through the choice of referential modes, the storyteller constructs the reality in which the poet Jaromil lives into a symbolized, generalized, and emblematic world. Even Jaromil himself becomes a symbol representing the "poet." He is Jaromil, but his family, his escape, his love, and even his death are no longer individual experiences; they also echo the encounters of Shelley, Lermontov, and Rimbaud. This image amalgamates the characteristics of many poets, meaning that the protagonist of the novel, Jaromil, is not a specific poet but symbolizes the collective identity of "poets."

3.   Elsewhere: The Embodied Dreamworld

Life is Elsewhere is divided into seven parts, each of which can be seen as a stage in the life of the poet, with each part narratively interconnected; however, from a formal perspective, each part also has its independent structural arrangement and narrative mode, and they are not harmoniously unified into a linear whole. Based on the different manufacturing purposes of the two narrative worlds, Kundera set different narrative space and narrative time in the novel, a characteristic evident from the naming of each part of the novel. The seven parts of *Life is Elsewhere* are sequentially titled "The Poet Is Born", "Xavier", "The Poet Masturbates", "The Poet Runs", "The Poet Is Jealous", "The Man in His Forties", and "The Poet Dies". From the titles of each part, it can be seen that, except for Part Two titled "Xavier" and Part Six titled "The Man in His Forties", the remaining five parts are all titled with "The Poet" as the subject. However, whether it is "The Poet" or "The Man in His Forties", this way of designation is a symbolic naming as previously described. Only "Xavier" in the novel chapter titles is a specific and precise name, referring to the individual Xavier.

In this novel, the opening of the second part introduces readers to a new narrative world through the transformation of deictic expressions. The entire first chapter of the second part uses the pronoun "he" to refer to the protagonist, and readers who first read this novel may easily mistake that the storyteller is continuing to narrate the story of Jaromil from the first part. However, when readers read the first line of the second chapter of the second part, they will immediately understand that the "he" in the second part refers not to Jaromil, but to a person named Xavier. At this point, the story interpreter will revise the existing cognition of the previous chapter and regard Xavier as another protagonist in the novel. Cognitive narratology insists on analyzing texts under the guidance of intentionalism, and the CAPA analysis model proposed by Herman emphasizes the contexts of text interpretation, which includes attention to the author's previous works. [8] *Life is Elsewhere* is Milan Kundera's second novel. During the reading process of the first four parts of the novel, interpreters are likely to regard Jaromil and Xavier as two protagonists of the novel's parallel narration, just as Kundera adopted the parallel narration method in his previous and first novel *The Joke*—each part of *The Joke* is named after a character in the book, realizing the conversion of narrative perspectives through this method. [9] However, when readers read to the fifth part of *Life is Elsewhere*, they will find that Xavier is actually a character fictionalized by Jaromil, another self of the poet "elsewhere." The storyteller uses various narrative techniques to play a joke on the readers throughout the novel, first letting the readers mistake Xavier and Jaromil as the same person, then letting the readers regard them as two individuals in unrelated worlds, and finally revealing that the two are actually two sides of the same coin. Readers finally learn about the mirror relationship between Jaromil and Xavier as the novel approaches the end. Jaromil is a poet who truly exists in the real world of the novel, while

Xavier is an image in the dream world in the poet's mind. However, as previously mentioned, the real world of this novel is full of symbolic characters represented by Jaromil, but the storyteller gives specific names with precise referential meanings to images in the dream world like Xavier.

Xavier is a product of Jaromil's dreams; simultaneously, for Xavier, "life is a dream," he "goes from dream to dream as if he were going from one life to another" [5]. Xavier, in the world of dreams, lives amidst layers of dreams. In cognitive narratology research, "dreaming" is considered a quintessential mode of blending incongruent psychological phenomena. Dreams immerse the subject in an imagined world, allowing a temporary disregard of the real world. Subjects, often in a relaxed and comfortable environment when falling asleep, feel a sense of security that mitigates the risks associated with ignoring reality, thus granting the imagined world in dreams a stronger independence relative to reality. [10] In this novel, the world where Xavier resides is constructed through layers of dreams. Xavier is a dream form in Jaromil's mind; concurrently, the life composed of dreams maintains Xavier's subjectivity and autonomy, preserving his image as the ideal form of the "poet." At the conclusion of the novel, it is Xavier, a character from the dream world, who ultimately survives and embarks on a new life.

4.   Life: The Mutual Reflection of Worlds

In *Life is Elsewhere*, the realms of reality and fantasy are often not distinctly separated; the protagonist from the real world ventures into the world of dreams through imagination, with both narrative worlds reflecting each other. This phenomenon is evident in the portrayal of significant female characters by the narrator through the aforementioned narrative styles. In the novel, a concrete depiction, akin to Xavier, is also employed to shape the character of the maid Magda, while a symbolic representation, reminiscent of Jaromil, is applied to the poet's other female companions.

Although Magda nominally exists in the real world of the novel, her significant roles all unfold within realms of fantasy and illusion. Magda is the first woman to evoke Jaromil's desire for female, a role with a strong functional significance and also a concretely named referential existence. The first appearance of the name Magda is accompanied by a sexual fantasy scene related to Jaromil: "Looking out of the window a few days later, she (poet's mother) saw Jaromil down in the garden holding the ladder for the maid, Magda, who was picking chenies while he gazed attentively under her skirt." [5] Magda falls into sorrow due to the arrest and death of her fiancé, and Jaromil gradually becomes infatuated with the melancholic beauty of her weeping eye. However, the intimate interactions between Jaromil and Magda only exist within the poet's own fantasies.

On one occasion, Jaromil covertly observed Magda bathing through the bathroom keyhole, "he suddenly noticed that Magda was gazing right at him." He felt, "her eyes were fixed on the keyhole and she was smiling sweetly (a smile at once embarrassed and friendly)," but the narrator immediately informs the reader that Jaromil "had tested the keyhole many times, and he was sure that a spying eye on his side of the door couldn't be seen from inside the bathroom." [5] Interpreters, by integrating various indications in the narrative, can infer that the scene of Magda smiling at him in the bathroom is actually a figment of Jaromil's imagination. This fantasized scene triggered a series of stream-of-consciousness activities in Jaromil, who uncontrollably fantasized about entering that bathroom, imagining Magda's appearance inside. Jaromil ultimately did not act on this impulse. The final outcome of this event gave birth to the poet's first love poem, inaugurating Jaromil's career as a poet. His love affair with Magda eventually remained in the realm of poetic fantasy. With the completion of this poem about "the aquatic love," the name Magda permanently receded in the novel. In Jaromil's dream world, it has become such that "no one could recognize her behind these words, that she was lost, invisible, buried there." [5]

In contrast to the vivid portrayal of Magda are the female characters who had actual interactions with Jaromil in the subsequent plots. They all had tangible contacts with Jaromil but, unlike Magda

who lives in the poet's fantasy, they do not possess names. The narrator persistently refers to them by their identities or characteristics, seemingly deliberately constructing static, symbolized character models, weakening the realism of the characters while generalizing these images as symbolic representations of meanings. This mode of reference involves the complex and subtle relationship between "who sees" and "who speaks" in the narrative. The symbolized female characters have their own thoughts and personalities in "the real world," but in the world of the story, the genuinely existing "them" are external to the control of the poet, thus being in a position of being observed and depicted, and are flattened and symbolized by the narrator. In contrast are characters represented by Xavier and Magda, whose words and actions are born in the poet's mind, and the control of the subject makes these characters more vivid and concrete. Although the narrator of the novel is not the poet, the narrator uses this narrative method to guide readers to observe the world of the story from the perspective of the poet.

5.   Conclusion: Mirror Worlds and Life

Cognitive narratology posits that modern humans possess the capacity to create, store, reactivate, and blend narratives. People can not only inhabit a dream world through imagination to escape the real world but also connect two originally independent stories to blend into a third story. [2] Humans can blend the current scenario with scenes from imagination or memory, even blending two competing narratives. In *Life is Elsewhere*, Jaromil and Xavier are mirrors of each other, with Jaromil's real world and Xavier's dream world mirroring each other. This setting of a dual world causes a displacement between the surface narrative and the actual reference of the work, realizing the allegorical meaning of the literary work, that is, "to 'speak otherwise,' to 'say other things,' to say other than what is meant." [11] There are many mirrored correspondences in the dual narrative world. For example, Jaromil has always lived under the high control of his mother, but Xavier is without parents. Jaromil always believes that he has created the illusory image of Xavier, and in the seventh and final part of the novel, this balance of one side controlling the other is broken. Jaromil believes that Xavier is his replica, and he had started a different life full of dreams and adventures through Xavier. Now, he hopes to eliminate the gap between dream and reality, wanting Xavier to merge with him. It turns out that such integration is impossible, and Xavier ultimately "betrays" Jaromil. More precisely, Xavier gains independence against Jaromil's wishes, and thus is considered by Jaromil to have committed an act of betrayal. While Jaromil is heading towards death, Xavier runs towards the brightly sunlit outside. The effort to merge the dual narrative worlds in the novel ends in failure; the poet in the real world dies, and the poet in the dream world escapes.

The real world "here" and the dream world "elsewhere" in the novel originally stemmed from the same root, yet they have diverged onto two paths that seem impossible to merge again. Kundera constructs two narrative worlds with different expressions of the same elements such as poetry and love, and inversely uses mixed narratives to create "double-scope stories." [10] The separation of the real world and the dream world is hinted at in the depiction of characters in the novel. From the perspective of naming and referring to characters in the novel, it seems that reality is more abstract compared to dreams, and dreams are more concrete compared to reality. The dream world is not a vassal of the real world from its inception; two parallel narrative worlds have their own operating rules, and the two worlds eventually separate from each other after intertwining. "Real life is elsewhere! Entirely elsewhere !" [5] The conclusion at the end of the novel leaves readers with two seemingly opposing situations, and what the interpreters of the story need to do is try to blend two independent worlds, constructing the world of their own lives through cognitive narrative reorganization.

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