

## **“Graphomania” in *Told by an Idiot*, and crowds**

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*Abstract.* This paper examines what is said about a craze for essay writing in Rose Macaulay’s 1923 essayistic novel *Told by an Idiot*, comparing the material with Milan Kundera on graphomania. In the appendix, I note a passage on crowds which is reminiscent of the widely read European author.

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*She dresses plainly, she wears no socks*

*But her brain is the devil’s letter box*

*Told by an Idiot* is an essayistic novel of 1923, divided into a number of short sections. It is about a family with the surname Garden and is of value for understanding liberalism in England. The family are intellectual. Of the father, who regularly loses and then recovers his faith we are told:

Nor were papa’s interests bound by religion; he had friends, distinguished and indistinguished, among politicians, journalists, poets, professors, and social reformers, besides his relatives and mamma’s. (1983 [1923]: 23)

In this family, going to Oxford or Cambridge and returning with a distinguished first is normal, it seems, though there is at least one family member who is not an intellectual (1983 [1923]: 46).

In 1879, they move to Bloomsbury no less. The family seem part of the very affluent

middle-class, more connected with “culture,” in the prestigious sense, than business. (Where do they get their money from?<sup>1</sup>)

Rome Garden is one member. She is interested in definitions and probably skilled in producing them, in a qualified manner close to English analytic philosophy (1983 [1923]: 43). She is presented as (academically) cleverer than her siblings who go to university, but she is also described by the narrator as a do-nothing (1983 [1923]: 40, 68), though her definitional skill would be useful in various fields. We are told:

The very sharp clarity of her mind, that chafed against muddled thinking, stupidity, humbug and sentimentality, made intercourse difficult for her in the country, where heaven has ordained that even fewer persons shall reside who are free from these things than is the case in large towns. (1983 [1923]: 21)

In the 1890s, young people involved with literature wanted her to join them in writing. She wonders why she should:

Miss Rome Garden, the author of those clever critical essays. ... Or perhaps those dull critical essays. ... Either way, what did one gain? Why write? Why this craze for transmitting ideas by means of marks on paper? Why not, if one must transmit ideas, use the tongue, that unruly member given us for the purpose? Better still, why not retain the ideas for one’s own private edification, untransmitted? Writing. There was this about writing—it showed that some one had thought it worth while to pay for having one’s ideas printed. For printers were paid, and binders, even if not oneself. Most literary persons sorely needed such cachet, for you would never

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<sup>1</sup> I said the book is of value for understanding liberalism but I have doubts about how reliable it is, with its title and the sentence: “It was an epoch of fortune-making. Mr. Cecil Rhodes loomed in the south, an encouraging and stimulating figure to those who had enterprise and a little capital.” (1983 [1923]: 138) There is probably some family connection to business, despite Maurice’s socialism. (“ “All you can say of Liberals,” said Maurice, who was not, “Is that they’re possibly (not certainly) one better than Conservatives.” ” 1983 [1923]: 226. He then says much more.)

guess from meeting them that anyone would pay them for their ideas. (1983 [1923]: 67)

The reference to a writing craze cannot but remind us of a widely read author today, representative of continental Europe, who introduces the concept of graphomania (1996: 126-127). But there are, or is, a number of differences. I cannot claim that the list below is exhaustive.

- (a) *Essays versus books*. Rome Garden analyzes a craze for writing essays, whereas the European author analyzes a mania for writing books. Presumably, most of these essays are much shorter than books.
- (b) *Publisher versus unknown public*. Rome Garden displays the desire for acceptance by a publisher willing to pay various others for an essay to be published, whereas the European author, Milan Kundera, magnifies the desire for an unknown public of readers.
- (c) *The desires of the few versus the many*. Rome Garden depicts literary people as (mostly) ones who would like this desire for acceptance satisfied – I presume the thought is that they are separated off from the vast majority of others by this desire or the satisfaction they gain from its fulfilment (the amount of satisfaction, the nature of it) – whereas Kundera diagnoses how widespread the desires he associates with graphomania are, in some societies. It is merely the results which are different with authors who belong to literature in a prestigious sense of the word. The older contrast is between the desires of the few versus the many, whereas “now” we are presented with a lack of contrast.
- (d) *The unwisdom of writing or not*. This is not in the quotation but in the further reasoning Rome gives for not writing and trying to publish: she regards it as unwise because there is a risk one will appear a fool and a wise person will not take that risk, rather enjoy the

writings of others. She regards it as irrational to write-and-try-to-publish. (Is her maximin thinking so unmuddled? And does this explain why she does not bother with university? And even why some political philosophers write so little?) I do not think Kundera regards his favourite writers as irrational, or unwise, in writing, despite the name he gives to the general phenomenon they partake in. (Note: regarding names for things, journalists are described, by Rome's sister Vicky, as "a strange, instinct-driven, non-analytical race, who can seldom give reasons for their terminology." 1983 [1923]: 48.)

(e) *Do-nothing: bad or good?* Macaulay describes Rome Garden as a do-nothing in contrast with the literary young men and women around her, whereas Kundera sounds critical enough of most people's aspirations to write for unknown publics that there is a question of whether he would praise Rome Garden.<sup>2</sup>

(f) *An anomaly.* Kundera offers a theory of when graphomania takes on epidemic proportions in a society, with lots of people desiring to write a book for an unknown public, and there is a question of whether Rome Garden or people like her are an anomaly for his theory. Note: she is presented as an instance of a type that always exists, against the view that she is modern (1983 [1923]: 66).

Of Rome's type we are told: "It is not a type which, so to speak, makes the world go round; it does not assist movements nor join in crusades; it coolly distrusts enthusiasm and eschews the heat and ardour of the day." (1983 [1923]: 66) I think various people would say that the desire to partake in a collective identity is human nature – "Only people with disorders do not." Anyway,

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<sup>2</sup> I was struck by this description of Rome Garden, in contrast to the opening description of her sister Stanley: "She was what is called a useful and public-spirited woman. Rome, on the other hand, grew with the years more and more the dilettante idler. At forty-six she found very few things worth bothering about. She strolled, drove, or motored around town, erect, slim, and debonair, increasingly distinguished as gray streaked her fair hair and time chiselled delicate lines in her fine clear skin. Rome cared neither for the happy Liberals nor for the unhappy Tories; she regarded both parties as equally undistinguished." (1983 [1923]: 218) Such idle motoring must be annoying in real life!

Rome (surprisingly) falls in love and then the novel briefly – a little too briefly for my tastes – becomes rather Russian, with familiar-sounding sentences, such as “Nicolai Nicolaivitch—they have arrested him for revolutionary propaganda and sent him to Siberia, with my brother, Feodor.” (1983 [1923]: 87)

### **Appendix: a predecessor?**

Other Kunderan themes bubble up and disappear in Macaulay’s novel. The idea of a problem novel about sex is also introduced in this book. Mamma regards such novels as modern but Rome regards them as ever-present (1983 [1923]: 69). I think more important for our comparisons is the theme of crowds, depicted in a negative light:

A crowd is queer. A number of individuals gather together for one purpose, and you get not a number of individuals, but a crowd. It is like a new, strange animal, sub-human. It may do anything. Go crazy with panic, or rage, or excitement, or delight. Now it was enthusiasm that gripped and swayed it, and caused it to shout and sing. Songs rippled over it, starting somewhere, caught from mouth to mouth.  
(1983 [1923]: 169)

Unfavourable impressions of crowds, mixed with music! Sentence one of this quotation is of its time, I suppose. I think sentences two to five could be uttered by a Kunderan character observing a crowd and then the last two by a Kunderan narrator (see 1996: 88; Kuhlman 2001; Edward 2022).

From Kundera’s list of references to actual authors, one is left with the impression that outside of his native country his influences are almost entirely world-famous male authors: Thomas Mann, Kafka, Hemingway, etc. There is a question of to what extent female authors

exert an influence on his writing and also less known authors. My intuition is that three less famous female authors are a large influence, each outweighing the influence of any male author. Kundera is apt to seem a figure alien to the English tradition, but in the case of *Told by an Idiot* there are these convergences: (i) the blend of essay and novel; (ii) the short sections, sometimes with essayistic titles; (iii) the focus on intellectuals; (iv) the struggles over definition; (v) the theme of a craze for writing; (vi) the negative depiction of crowds, mixed with their being moved by music; (vii) the mixture of Western Europe and, from an English perspective, “east.” He also reminds me of some less known male authors: minority authors from a century or so ago. Of course some convergences may be accidental, but was the enduring success a long time in evolving, with many near misses?

## References

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