BRODSKY VS. KUNDERA: PAN-SLAVISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EUROPE'S CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract This study explores the intellectual confrontation between Milan Kundera and Joseph Brodsky, focusing on their divergent interpretations of Dostoevsky and the Russian cultural identity. Framed within the ideological contexts of Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia, the analysis reveals deeper tensions concerning European identity, geopolitical discourse, and the role of literature in post-war ideological conflict. While Kundera critiques Russian sentimentalism and its links to authoritarianism, Brodsky defends Russian literature's complexity and universality. The article underscores literature's power as a symbolic arena for negotiating identity and cultural memory in a divided Europe.
Keywords Pan-Slavism, Slavophilia, cultural identity, East-West dichotomy, Milan Kundera, Joseph Brodsky.

Polemical Framework and Ideological Stakes

At the beginning of 1985, Milan Kundera (1929–2023) and Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996) entered into a notable intellectual confrontation, arising from profoundly divergent views of Dostoevsky's work and, more broadly, of Russian culture, Russia's European identity, and the criteria by which Europe's cultural space may be defined. Their dispute unfolded against the wider backdrop of ideological and identity-driven tensions that marked Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War. It transcends differences in aesthetic preference and reveals the opposition between two major cultural paradigms: one that associates Russian culture with excessive sentimentalism and

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authoritarian tendencies, and another that asserts the autonomy of literature in the face of political instrumentalisation.

Owing to the international stature of Milan Kundera and Joseph Brodsky, together with the topical significance of the issues under debate, their controversy has attracted substantial critical attention. It has been discussed not merely in passing, within monographs and critical essays devoted to each writer's body of work, but also in studies that engage directly with the texts which ignited the confrontation: Kundera's *"An Introduction to a Variation"* and Brodsky's *"Why Milan Kundera is Wrong about Dostoyevsky."*[1] The impact of this debate was strong enough for critics to include it within the tradition of great "intellectual battles", alongside such celebrated controversies as the "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns," the "Battle of the Books", the polemical correspondence of 1847 between Vissarion Belinsky and Nikolai Gogol (which led to Dostoevsky's arrest and death sentence), or the dispute between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus concerning communism and the Soviet Union.[2]

This study sets itself apart from existing scholarship by adopting a rarely employed interpretative framework, one that situates the polemic between Brodsky and Kundera within the ideological horizon of Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia. Such a perspective provides a productive lens through which to examine the interplay between national identity, literature, and the geopolitics of post-war Europe. In this light, the analysis aims to investigate both the cultural implications of Pan-Slavism and the role of literature as a symbolic arena for negotiating belonging and otherness.

Pan-Slavism: Historical and Conceptual Context

The Pan-Slavic movement emerged in the 1830s and 1840s, in the intellectual climate of European Romanticism, and was deeply shaped by the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the German unification movement, and German Romantic philosophy.[3] Like other forms of pan-nationalism, Pan-Slavism resists precise definition, being characterised by conceptual vagueness and "low

[1] See: Peter Petro, "Apropos Dostoevsky: Brodsky, Kundera and the Definition of Europe," Miller and Petersen (eds.), *Literature and Politics in Central Europe*, Camden House, Columbia, SC, (1993), 76-90; Marcos Farias Ferreira, "Apropos Kundera & Brodsky: Uncovering the Role of Literary Querelles about the Meaning of Europe," *Negócios Estrangeiros* 13 (2008), 40-52; Adin Ljuca, "An Essay: From Nowhere with Love," in *Spirit of Bosnia: An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal* 8, No. 2 (2013): April, https://www.spiritofbosnia.org/volume-8-no-2-2013-april/an-essay-from-nowhere-with-love/.

[2] Ferreira, 40; See Petro, 76-77.

[3] Sándor Kostya, *Pan-Slavism*, ed. Anne Fay Atzel (Danubian Press, Inc., 1981), 5; Hans Kohn, "The Impact of Pan-Slavism on Central Europe," *The Review of Politics* 23, No. 3 (Jul., 1961): 325; Hans Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), ix; Susan Baker, "Pan-Slavism in the Balkans: A Historical View," in Suslov, Mikhail, Marek Čejka, Vladimir Đorđević (eds.), *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: Origins, Manifestations and Functions* (Palgrave Macmillan, Palgrave Springer International Publishing, 2023), 60.

practical feasibility."[4] This ambiguity was heightened by the confessional, linguistic, cultural, and socio-political heterogeneity of the Slavic peoples, as well as by their territorial disputes – factors which gave rise to "multiple Pan-Slavic projects, complementary or antagonistic, liberal, democratic, imperialist, or revolutionary."[5] Pan-Slavism thus operates as an "umbrella term" that encompasses a wide spectrum of configurations of 'Slavic identities'[6]. What may initially appear as weaknesses – features that caused the Pan-Slavic narrative to lose ground to more coherent and sharply defined nationalist programmes[7] – nonetheless endowed Pan-Slavic rhetoric with an "unprecedented flexibility."[8] This elasticity allowed it to converge with other narratives and doctrines (such as the *Russkiy mir* [Russian World], Pan-Orthodoxism, Pan-Russianism, Eurasianism, *Sviataia Rus'* [Holy Rus'], and Slavic, Russian, or Polish messianism), while also mobilising additional unifying factors of identity such as religion, nation, and territory.[9]

In one of the field's seminal works, *The Emergence of Russian Panslavism 1856–1870*, Michael Boro Petrovich defines Pan-Slavism as "the historic tendency of the Slavic peoples to manifest in some tangible way, whether cultural or political, their consciousness of ethnic kinship."[10] This indicates that, despite its etymology, the term "Pan-Slavism" (coined in 1826 by Ján Herkeľ) has been used over time not only to denote movements or projects encompassing all Slavic territories, but also to describe any form of solidarity among two or more Slavic peoples. A more recent volume, *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: Origins, Manifestations and Functions* – the most extensive and systematic study of contemporary Pan-Slavism – proposes supplementing (or even replacing) the term "Pan-Slavism" with "Slavophilia", which more accurately reflects the fluid and eclectic character of the phenomenon. This approach involves replacing the suffix *-ism* with *-philia*, thereby allowing Slavic pan-nationalism to be conceptualised not as a unified ideological doctrine but rather as a constellation of ideas, emotions, narratives, symbolic images, and metaphorical representations.[11] This extended and flexible understanding of the term provides the basis for the present analysis.

[4] Đorđević, Vladimir et al., "Revisiting Pan-Slavism in the Contemporary Perspective," *Nationalities Papers* 51, 1 (2023): 5-6; Dejana Vukasovi´c and Miša Stojadinovi´c, "On Pan-Slavism, Brotherhood, and Mythology: The Imagery of Contemporary Geopolitical Discourse in Serbia," Suslov, Mikhail, Marek Čejka, Vladimir Đorđević (eds.), *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: Origins, Manifestations and Functions*, 123.

[5] Constantin Tonu, "Contemporary Panslavism – between Imperialism and Modernity," *Annales Universitatis Apulensis. Series Philologica*, no. 22 (2021): 278.

[6] Mikhail Suslov, "Geographical Metanarratives in Russia and the European East: Contemporary Pan-Slavism," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 53, 5 (2012): 577.

[7] Đorđević et al., "Revisiting Pan-Slavism in the Contemporary Perspective," 6.

[8] Suslov, "Geographical Metanarratives," 577.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Michael Boro Petrovich, *The Emergence of Russian Panslavism 1856-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), ix.

[11] Suslov, Čejka, Đorđević (eds.), *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia*, 15.

Dostoevsky and the Spectre of the Russian Soul in Kundera's Thought

The origin of the dispute between the two writers lies in the publication of Kundera's essay *"An Introduction to a Variation"* in *The New York Times* on 6 January 1985. The Czech author begins by recalling two memories from 1968, shortly after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by armed forces from five Warsaw Pact states, led by the Soviet Union. The first concerns the censorship imposed by the occupiers, as a result of which all of Kundera's books were banned and he was left without any means of subsistence. In spite of these adversities, when a theatre director sought to support him financially by proposing that he prepare a stage adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Kundera reread the novel and realised that he could not take on this task, even if he were starving. "Dostoyevsky's universe of overblown gestures, murky depths and aggressive sentimentality" repelled him, and he suddenly felt "an inexplicable pang of nostalgia" for Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist,*[12] which he placed at the very antipodes of Dostoevsky's writings.

"Why the sudden aversion to Dostoyevsky?" Kundera asks himself. "Was it the anti-Russian reflex of a Czech traumatized by the occupation of his country?"[13] Yet he immediately rejects this explanation, noting, for instance, that he never ceased to love Chekhov. Nor, he insists, was his reaction a matter of doubting the aesthetic value of Dostoevsky's writings, for his aversion was immediate, visceral, and totally unexpected; he had no time to distance himself and filter it through an aesthetic judgement. What disturbed him in Dostoevsky was "was the climate of his novels: a universe where everything turns into feeling; in other words, where feelings are promoted to the rank of value and of truth."[14] Although Kundera maintains (with reference to Chekhov) that his stance is not a wholesale repudiation of Russian culture, the way he constructs his argument nonetheless results in a sweeping generalisation, portraying Russian civilisation in its entirety as marked by the qualities emblematic of Dostoevsky's novels.[15]

This idea is further exemplified and reinforced by the second memory recounted at the beginning of the essay, in which Kundera describes how, on the third day of the Czechoslovak occupation, while travelling from Prague to Budějovice, his car was stopped and searched by three Russian soldiers. At the end of the procedure, the officer who had ordered the search asked him in Russian: "'Kak chuvstvuyetyes?' – that is, 'How do you feel? What are your feelings?' His question was not meant to be malicious or ironic. On the contrary. 'It's all a big misunderstanding,' he continued, 'but it will straighten itself out. You must realize we love the Czechs. We love you!'"[16] The bizarre, almost surreal episode left Kundera stupefied: Czech territory was being devastated by Soviet tanks, the leaders of the Czech government were being arrested and abducted, the future of the country stood compromised, and yet a Russian officer was offering him a declaration of love,

[12] See: Milan Kundera, "An Introduction to a Variation," *New York Times*, January 6 (1985), https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/kundera-variation.html.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] See Ferreira, 41.
[16] See Kundera, "An Introduction to a Variation."

lamenting that tanks were necessary to teach him what love meant. At this point Kundera resorts to a second generalisation, claiming that all the occupiers behaved in the same way: they did not criticise the invasion – in fact, they believed in its necessity – but their attitude did not follow the pattern of "the sadistic pleasure of the ravisher;" rather, it resembled the model of unrequited love.[17]

Kundera's argument is that, although feelings are indispensable, "the moment they are considered values in themselves, criteria of truth, justifications for kinds of behaviour, they become frightening. The noblest of national sentiments stand ready to justify the greatest of horrors, and man, his breast swelling with lyric fervour, commits atrocities in the sacred name of love."[18] In this sense, the relationship between the intense, abyssal emotions associated with the Russian soul and the tanks that invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 is not one of mere simultaneity but rather of causality. The text implies that the disproportionate elevation of emotionality over rationality in Russian cultural life fostered the growth of intolerance and resulted, in Jung's terms, in the transformation of sentiment into a "superstructure of brutality."[19] Kundera interprets this dynamic as emblematic of the classical Pan-Slavic practice through which Russia repeatedly sought to demonstrate its love for the "younger Slavic brothers" by means of their forced "pacification." In other words, in the absence of an ethic of alterity, violence is delivered as altruism – a strategy typical of those who not only profess to will the good of others, but also presume the authority to define and impose what that good should be.

Building on Dostoevsky, Kundera describes the distinct character of Russian culture and civilisation, and its divergence from the West, in terms that structurally echo the Slavophile philosophy underpinning Russian Pan-Slavism. According to the four principal thinkers of Slavophilism – Aleksei Khomiakov (1804–1860), Ivan Kireevsky (1806–1856), Konstantin Aksakov (1817–1860), and Iurii Samarin (1819–1876)[20] –Russian cultural space possesses a unique and irreducible originality (*samobytnost'*, *самобытность*), such that the difference between Russia and Western Europe is not merely "a matter of degree, but of character and principle."[21] In his seminal essay *On the Character of European Education and Its Relation to Education in Russia*, Ivan Kireevsky emphasises the contrasts between the two cultural paradigms. Unlike the West, which privileges the rational and cerebral dimension of knowledge through an analytic process that fragments and separates – thereby producing identity and social fissures (such as body–soul, matter–spirit, individual–society, public–private) – Russian culture is marked by a holistic orientation towards a mystical-religious mode of knowledge. This orientation privileges interiority over exteriority; it does not exalt individualism, but rather fosters the spiritual communion of the

[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Susana Rabow Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 7.
[21] See Petrovich, *The Emergence of Russian Panslavism 1856-1870*, 47; See Tonu, "Contemporary Panslavism – between Imperialism and Modernity," 285.

community, expressed through the concept of *sobornost'* (*соборность*), a profound solidarity grounded in fraternity, love, and freely given cooperation.[22]

Kundera articulates a similar distinction between East and West, between Dostoevsky and Diderot, between emotion and reason, yet he invests the two cultural spheres with different axiological weightings. While the Slavophiles denounced the hypertrophy of rationality in the West – perceived as a source of alienation and exhaustion – and maintained that deliverance from decadence could be secured only in the purity of Russian or Slavic soil, uniquely suited to the creation of a new, organic and joyous civilisation, Kundera affirms the value of European reflexivity and identifies the Russians' heightened emotionality as one of the factors conducive to totalitarianism.[23] He traces the origins of this elevation of sentiment to value status to the historical separation of Christianity from Judaism: Christianity's distinctive cultural contribution – love – stood in stark contrast to the clarity of Jewish law. In Western Europe, this sensibility was subsequently counterbalanced, beginning with the Renaissance, by a complementary spirit – "that of reason and doubt, of play and the relativity of human affairs." In Eastern Europe, however, which Kundera identifies with either the USSR or Russia, it continued to prevail largely untempered by reason. This imbalance, he argues, gave rise to the mysterious "Russian soul," in which profundity is inseparably bound up with brutality.[24]

Kundera had already emphasised these ideas in an earlier manifesto-like article entitled "The Tragedy of Central Europe," published in 1983 in *Le Débat*, where he defines Central Europe as "that of the part of Europe situated geographically in the centre – culturally in the West and politically in the East."[25] What matters for Kundera is cultural identity – namely, the belonging of this region to the Western sphere rather than to the Soviet bloc – an identity endangered both by the threat posed by Russia and by the complacency, lethargy, and indifference of other European states, for which culture no longer constitutes a defining value.[26] At "the eastern border of the West," that is, for the nations of Central Europe (Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary), Russia

[22] See Ivan Vasil'evich Kireevsky, *"On the Character of European Education and Its Relation to Education in Russia"* ["О характере просвещения Европы и о его отношении к просвещению России"], in *Razum na puti k istine. Pravilo very* (Moscow: Pravilo very, 2002), 151-213; Aleksei S. Khomiakov, "*Letter to the Editor of* «*L'Union Chrétienne*» *on the Meaning of the Words* «*Catholic*» *and* «*Sobornyi*» *with Regard to the Speech of Father Gagarin, Jesuit"* ["Письмо к редактору «L'Union Chrétienne» о значении слов «кафолический» и «соборный» по поводу речи отца Гагарина, иезуита"], in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* [Complete Collected Works], vol. 2 (Moscow: Tipo-lit. T-va I. N. Kushnerev & Co., 1907), 305–14; Janko Lavrin, "Khomyakov and the Slavs," *The Russian Review* 23, No. 1 (Jan., 1964): 42.

[23] Liisa Steinby, *Kundera and Modernity* (Purdue University Press, 2013), 1-22.

[24] Kundera, "An Introduction to a Variation."

[25] Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," *New York Review* (April 26, 1984), translated from the French by Edmund White, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/04/26/the-tragedy-of-central-europe/.

[26] Ibid.; See Adriana Babeți, "Kundera după Kundera. Tragedia Europei Centrale?" *Dilema Veche,* no. 943, (5-11 May 2022), https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/kundera-dupa-kundera-tragedia-europei-centrale-634556.html.

is not simply another European power but "a singular civilisation, another civilisation."[27] Kundera refrains from judging whether Russian civilisation is superior or inferior, yet he insists that it represents a world entirely different "from our own," before which one encounters the revelation of a "terrifying foreignness." "Russia knows another (greater) dimension of disaster, another image of space (a space so immense entire nations are swallowed up in it), another sense of time (slow and patient), another way of laughing, living, and dying."[28]

The tragedy of Central Europe also stemmed from the Pan-Slavic legacy of its *small nations* – those "whose very existence may be put in question at any moment."[29] Kundera terms this the "ideology of the Slavic world," which he regarded as a nineteenth-century political mystification through which the Russians pursued their imperial ambitions. The Czechs and Slovaks, and to a lesser degree the Poles, fell into the trap of this imagined solidarity. A particularly telling example is that of the Czech writer Karel Havlíček Borovský (1821–1856), who, after studying the languages and literatures of various Slavic peoples, resolved to travel through those regions in order to gain a closer acquaintance with his "kin."[30] With the assistance of the philologist and poet Pavel Jozef Šafárik, he departed for Moscow in 1842, "warmed by the glow of sincere Slav solidarity,"[31] where he was employed as tutor in the household of the Russian Slavophile S. P. Shevyrev (1806–1864) – though he had initially expected to be hosted by the still more famous Mikhail Pogodin (1800–1875). Yet the Russian frosts soon quenched his Pan-Slavic enthusiasm: the two years he spent in Moscow revealed to him the inequities and despotism concealed behind the alluring façade of Russian good intentions, and he returned to Prague profoundly disillusioned.[32] In the articles he later wrote about this cross-border experience, entitled *Images from Russia* (*Obrazy z Rus*), Havlíček observed that "he did not see in Russia a country which can and must spread its light abroad. On the contrary, he became convinced that Russia needs light from abroad."[33]

To strengthen his argument about the hegemonic foundations of Slavic solidarity and its deleterious effects on Central Europe, Kundera cites another passage from Karel Havlíček: "the Russians like to label everything Russian as Slavic, so that later they can label everything Slavic as Russian."[34] Yet even non-Slavic peoples, such as the Hungarians and Romanians, suffered from Russian imperialism of a Pan-Slavic stamp, having been incorporated into many of the unionist

[27] Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Of all the Czechs who, in the first half of the 19th century, equipped with the most rudimentary ideas about the political and social conditions in the Russian Empire, looked to Russia for models, advice, and the possibility of salvation in the struggle against the Germans, Karel Havlíček is the only one who actually had direct contact with the Russian Empire, traveling there. See: Michael Henry Heim, *The Russian Journey of Karel Havlíček Borovský* (Verlag Otto Sagner, Munich, 1979), 7.
[31] See: S. E. Mann, "Karel Havlíček: A Slav Pragmatist," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 39, No. 93 (Jun., 1961): 415.
[32] Ibid.
[33] See Hans Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 23-24.
[34] Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."

projects advanced by the advocates of Slavic pan-nationalism (Ján Kollár, Mikhail Pogodin, Ľudovít Štúr, Nikolai Danilevsky, among others).[35] Moreover, what had once remained at the level of an unrealised project, Kundera maintains, became reality after the Second World War: "The division of Europe after 1945 – which united this supposed Slavic world […] has therefore seemed almost like a natural solution."[36] With this claim, he aligns himself with those who saw in the USSR the realisation of the Russian Pan-Slavic dream – a view sharply at odds with the situation within, where both the movement and the ideology of Pan-Slavism were prohibited in the Soviet Union.

Closely bound to the tsarist regime, Pan-Slavism failed to "survive" the Russian Revolution. Its decline was exacerbated by the profound incompatibility between Pan-Slavism's emphasis on religion and ethnic solidarity and the militant atheism and proletarian internationalism promoted by the Soviet authorities. Following a period of marginalisation of roughly two decades, Pan-Slavism was briefly revived in 1941, in the context of Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, as part of an attempt to mobilise the support of other Slavic peoples. At Stalin's initiative, committees were established and conferences convened on the subject, culminating in a major Pan-Slavic Congress held in Belgrade in 1946, which brought together not only representatives of European Slavs but also delegates from the Slavic diaspora in the United States, Canada, South America, Australia, and New Zealand.[37] This resurgence, however, proved short-lived, ending with the rupture of relations between Tito and Stalin in the late 1940s, after which Pan-Slavic discourse was once more relegated to the margins for the following four to five decades. As Anna Grigorieva observes, in Soviet historiography during the Cold War, the term 'Pan-Slavism' was either avoided altogether, or mentioned only to be repudiated, or else attention was confined to those aspects of Pan-Slavist theories that could be accommodated within official ideology.[38]

Thus, while the Pan-Slavic imaginary was subject to censorship in the USSR, in the West debates on the Slavic idea gained momentum, with many of the Kremlin's decisions being interpreted through a Slavophile or Pan-Slavic lens. Kundera adopts such a perspective in his essay "An Introduction to a Variation," where he recalls that, in 1968, he felt the weight of the "rational irrationality" of Russian culture and civilisation invading Czechoslovakia alongside the tanks and enemy soldiers. "Faced with the eternity of the Russian night, I had experienced in Prague the violent end of Western culture such as it was conceived at the dawn of the modern age, based on the individual and his reason, on pluralism of thought and on tolerance. In a small Western country I experienced the end of the West. That was the grand farewell."[39]

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[35] For a detailed discussion on the practice of incorporating non-Slavic territories into Pan-Slavic unionist initiatives, and the rationales employed to justify this non-Slavic presence, see Constantin Tonu, "The Pan-Slavic Utopian Imaginary," *Caietele Echinox* 46 (2024): 283–298, DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2024.46.22.

[36] Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."

[37] Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*, 305; See Mikhail Suslov, "Geographical Metanarratives in Russia and the European East: Contemporary Pan-Slavism," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 53, 5 (2012): 580.

[38] See Anna Aleksandrovna Grigorieva, "Problema panslavizma v sovetskoi istoriografii" ["Проблема панславизма в советской историографии"], *Al'manakh sovremennoi nauki i obrazovaniia*, no. 4 (59) (2012): 69–71; See Tonu, "Contemporary Panslavism – between Imperialism and Modernity," 286.

[39] Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."

Brodsky and the Dispute over European Identity

The apocalyptic tone of Kundera's "*An Introduction to a Variation"* and the uncompromising manner in which he delineates the Russia–West relationship did not go unanswered. The sharpest response came from Joseph Brodsky, who on 17 February 1985 published an incisive essay in *The New York Times* entitled "Why Milan Kundera is Wrong about Dostoyevsky." As a preliminary caveat, the Russian writer makes clear from the outset that his polemic with Kundera's ideas extends beyond a mere divergence of literary or aesthetic taste.[40] At stake, rather, is a cultural and geopolitical question: how Russia's identity may be understood in relation to Europe, and, above all, what role literature – and Dostoevsky's work in particular – plays within this fraught configuration.

As indicated above, for Kundera – marked by the experience of the Soviet invasion of 1968 – Russia constitutes a menacing Other, devoid of the Enlightenment spirit that underpins European modernity. In this perspective, Dostoevsky assumes the role of emblematic figure for an irrational, fideistic Russia that exalts suffering, excessive emotionality, and suffocating collectivism. At the core of Kundera's critique stands the polarity between the rationalism, reflexivity, and irony of Central Europe – which he insists belongs integrally to the West – and the sentimental mysticism of Russia, paradigmatically embodied in Dostoevsky.

The Russian writer rejects this characterisation outright, regarding it not only as superficial but also as perilously ideological. In his essay, Brodsky contends that the direct association between Russian literature – particularly that of Dostoevsky – and the Soviet regime or aggressive Pan-Slavism constitutes a serious distortion, stemming from a fundamental error of logic and of cultural perception. He insists that the Soviet soldiers who invaded Prague in 1968 cannot be equated with Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, or Chekhov: "such, it would seem, was Mr. Kundera's feeling in Czechoslovakia in 1968. We may feel for him, but only until he starts to generalize about that soldier and the culture the soldier represents. Fear and disgust are understandable, but soldiers never represent culture, let alone a literature - they carry guns, not books."[41] Classical Russian literature, Brodsky argues, is not responsible for the crimes of the Soviet state, and to extrapolate from Dostoevsky's aesthetic a justification for imperialist ideology is to disregard precisely its critical, problematising, and often anti-authoritarian dimension. In this sense, he does not defend Russia as a political or ideological entity, but as the site of a literary tradition that, far from being monolithic or "barbaric," is capable of articulating the most subtle and complex moral conflicts of human existence.

Moreover, Brodsky emphasises that totalitarianism is not an inherently "Russian" phenomenon, facilitated by the triumph of emotion over reason, but rather a political pathology that may arise anywhere. He deconstructs this interpretation by arguing that the atrocities perpetrated in and by the USSR were "committed not in the name of love but of necessity – and a

[40] Joseph Brodsky, "Why Milan Kundera is wrong about Dostoevsky," *New York Times* (February 17, 1985), https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/17/specials/brodsky-kundera.html.
[41] Ibid.

historical one at that. The concept of historical necessity is the product of rational thought and arrived in Russia by the Western route."[42] After adducing several examples of ideas, theories, and ideologies commonly associated with Russian culture but in fact of European origin, Brodsky concludes his argument in a caustic register, stressing that even Russian communism – the very system that forced Kundera into exile – has Western roots, being "as much a product of Western rationalism as it is of Eastern emotional radicalism. In short, on seeing a Russian tank in the street, there is every reason to think of Diderot"[43] rather than Dostoevsky.

Brodsky accuses Kundera of a "selective Eurocentrism" that constructs an idealised image of Europe grounded in reason, irony, and freedom, while omitting both the contributions and the wounds that Russia has brought to, and received from, the European project. In Brodsky's view, to exclude Russia from Europe is to display a form of "myopia"[44] and to falsify the history of the continent itself. Such falsification, he argues, arises from the fact that the Czech-born writer, together with "many of his East European confrères," has fallen prey to the geopolitical certainties of the East–West division, which lead him to interpret everything in starkly dichotomous terms: either/or, emotion/reason, Dostoevsky/Diderot, they/we.[45] For the polemic between the two, it is also significant that Brodsky labels Kundera an "East European," a designation with which the latter refused to identify: the entire purpose of his 1983 article *The Tragedy of Central Europe* had been to stress the "fundamental" difference between Eastern and Central Europe, to demonstrate Czechoslovakia's belonging to the latter, and consequently to the values of the Western cultural sphere.

Brodsky, however, deliberately refused to use the concept of "Central Europe" – a category that, as Irena Grudzińska Gross observes, did not fit within his mental and political geography[46]. The rationale for this position was articulated only three years later, at the 1988 Lisbon Conference on Literature, which brought together such eminent figures as Salman Rushdie, Susan Sontag, Danilo Kiš, Czesław Miłosz, Sergei Dovlatov, and Tatiana Tolstaia, among others. During the debates – which quickly turned into a controversy over the very notion of "Central Europe," a concept the Russian participants refused to acknowledge, for which they were in turn accused of exhibiting imperial reflexes.[47] In this context, Brodsky issued a categorical statement, dismissing the term as ineffective and devoid of cultural significance: "In the name of literature, there is no such a thing as a 'Central Europe'"; there are only particular states and particular literatures: Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Croatian, and so forth.[48] This assertion – promptly condemned by Czesław Miłosz as a classic colonial strategy of *divide et impera* – only intensified

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Glen Brand, *Kundera. An Annotated Biblhography* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1988), 47.
[45] Brodsky, "Why Milan Kundera is wrong about Dostoevsky."
[46] Irena Grudzinska Gross, *Czeslaw Milosz and Joseph Brodsky: Fellowship of Poets* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 138.
[47] Olga Bertelsen, "Joseph Brodsky's imperial consciousness," *Scripta Historica* 21 (2015): 272.
[48] See "The Lisbon Conference on Literature: A Round Table of Central European and Russian Writers," *Cross Currents* 9 (1990): 73-124; Gross, 132-136; Petro, "Apropos Dostoevsky: Brodsky, Kundera and the Definition of Europe," 85.

the censure directed at Brodsky, all the more so as he added, in a distinctly paternalistic (and imperial) tone, that the sole means of liberating other nations from Soviet domination was for the Russians first to liberate themselves.[49]

These interventions at the 1988 Lisbon Conference retrospectively illuminate aspects of the essay "Why Milan Kundera is Wrong about Dostoyevsky," underscoring that Brodsky himself was not immune to the ideological inflections of which he accused the Czech-born writer. The reverse, however, is equally true: when "An Introduction to a Variation" is read alongside Kundera's other writings, critics have pointed to certain inconsistencies within his own discourse. For example, in *Commiserating with Devastated Things: Milan Kundera and the Entitlements of Thinking*, Jason M. Wirth observes that Kundera's perspective on Dostoevsky is not as one-sided as it might appear from the vehement essay of 1985.[50] In *The Art of the Novel*, the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* is praised as "a great thinker only as a novelist. Which is to say that in his characters he is able to create intellectual universes that are extraordinarily rich and original."[51] In another volume, *The Curtain*, Kundera even values *The Idiot* – the novel that had provoked his strong aversion in 1968 – emphasising Dostoevsky's ability to reveal within the novelistic form "the beauty of a sudden density of life."[52] Peter Petro develops this line of interpretation further, arguing that "a careful reading of Kundera's novels provides enough evidence to suggest that Dostoevsky as a thinker and a master of the polyphonic novel is a major influence on Kundera's work."[53]

In addition, there are contradictions within the internal coherence of "An Introduction to a Variation." Adin Ljuca argues that the Kundera is guilty of precisely the same "shortcomings" that fuel his aversion to Dostoevsky's novels. Although ruthless in his denunciation of sentimentalism – an attack that, as Roger Kimball suggests, may well constitute the central critical motif of Kundera's writings[54] – and although he extols Western rationality, many of his objections and arguments seem to be guided more by emotion than by reason: "an inexplicable sting of nostalgia," "sudden aversion," "an instinctive need," "he claimed nothing about objectivity,"[55] and so forth. Such statements, Ljuca contends, are "nothing other than 'sentiments… elevated to the rank of value and truth'." Even though Kundera insists that his reflections are not "the anti-Russian reflex of a Czech traumatised by the occupation of his country," they nevertheless leave precisely this impression, owing to overly facile and hasty formulations and excessively generalised conclusions[56]. Brodsky himself ironically remarks on this practice that Kundera probably unconsciously resorts to, saying that "to describe the climate of Dostoyevsky's novels as a universe

[49] Gross, 136.
[50] Jason M. Wirth, *Commiserating with Devastated Things: Milan Kundera and the Entitlements of Thinking* (Fordham University Press, 2015), 181.
[51] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 78.
[52] Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 17.
[53] Petro, "Apropos Dostoevsky: Brodsky, Kundera and the Definition of Europe," 82.
[54] Roger Kimball, "The Ambiguities of Milan Kundera," in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Milan Kundera* (Chelsea House Publications, 2023), 40.
[55] See: Kundera, "An Introduction to a Variation."
[56] See: Ljuca, "An Essay: From Nowhere with Love."

where everything turns into feeling, where feelings are promoted to the rank of value and of truth, is in itself a highly sentimental distortion."[57]

The dispute between the two writers also acquires a philosophical dimension, in which literature becomes the arena upon which the struggle over the meaning of cultural identity is played out. Dostoevsky, within this equation, is not merely a novelist of religious ecstasy or of criminal psychology, but a tragic conscience of modernity – an author who, paradoxically, anticipates the existential dilemmas of the twentieth century. Brodsky draws attention to the complexity of Dostoevsky's work, in which no simple solutions or clearly defined ideological programmes are to be found. Even where his characters proclaim absolute truths, the novel undermines them through polyphony, structural irony, and a persistent tension between individual freedom and the soteriological temptation of suffering.

In contrast to Kundera's ideologically charged reading, Brodsky articulates an aesthetic and ethical[58] perspective that values literature for its capacity to raise questions rather than to deliver definitive answers. Within this framework, Dostoevsky is not construed as a prophet of Pan-Slavism – although Pan-Slavist elements can indeed be found in his novels, particularly in *The Devils*, through the figure of Shatov, and even more so in the *Diary of a Writer*[59] – but rather as a writer profoundly engaged with the fragility of the human condition, the experience of guilt, and the impossibility of absolute truth. Far from serving as a precursor of totalitarianism, Dostoevsky, in Brodsky's reading, emerges as an author who lays bare the dangers inherent in the aspiration to totality and in the demiurgic hubris that accompanies it. Crucially, Brodsky does not deny either the historical existence of Pan-Slavism or its political instrumentalisation, including under Stalin. He recognises that messianic ideologies, among them those invoking a supposed mission of the Slavs, were indeed mobilised to legitimate Soviet expansion. Yet he cautions against conflating ideology with culture or propaganda with literature, and above all against the temptation to interpret the Russian cultural tradition exclusively through the lens of recent historical traumas. In his view, Russian culture – and above all its literature – ought not to be reduced to a mere epiphenomenon of politics, but rather understood as a sphere of profound and often conflictual reflection on the enduring questions of good and evil, salvation and freedom.

Equally significant in their polemic is the question of exile and the experience of marginality. Both Kundera and Brodsky write from outside their native countries, yet this marginal position generates markedly different approaches. Kundera tends to conceive of exile as a mode of belonging to Europe, a recovery of a cultural identity lost behind the Iron Curtain. Brodsky, by contrast, adopts a more critical stance towards any form of Western idealisation, refusing to participate in the mythologisation of the East–West divide. For him, exile is not a reconnection

[57] Brodsky, "Why Milan Kundera is wrong about Dostoevsky."

[58] Regarding the ethical dimension, Adin Ljuca emphasizes that "Both Kundera and Brodsky, like the majority of people from the European cultural milieu, use the terms rationality and irrationality as synonyms for good and evil. In academic discourse, this is incorrect; in figurative narrative, both inaccurate and distasteful." See Ljuca, "An Essay: From Nowhere with Love."

[59] Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*, 208-214.

with Europe but a position of lucidity vis-à-vis all forms of power and ideology, including those veiled beneath the mantle of Western humanism – though, as noted above, he himself is not entirely free from certain ideological reflexes.

Conclusions: Beyond Aesthetics and Ideology

The confrontation between Milan Kundera and Joseph Brodsky is not merely a punctual literary dispute but an emblematic reflection on the ways in which literature can function as a space for articulating the major cultural, identitarian, and geopolitical tensions of post-war Europe. Beyond their divergent interpretations of Dostoevsky's work, the two authors embody opposing paradigms of relating to the idea of Europe, to the cultural specificity of Russia, and to the relationship between aesthetics and ideology. For Kundera, Russian literature – and Dostoevsky's in particular – reflects a dangerous propensity towards sentimentalism and authoritarianism; for Brodsky, by contrast, it becomes the expression of an irreducible human profundity that transcends all ideological instrumentalisation. Brodsky challenges the Manichean vision promoted by Kundera, rejecting the supposed equivalence between the Russian soul and political violence, as well as the alleged causal continuity between Dostoevsky's aesthetics and Pan-Slavic ideology. By situating this polemic within the ideological horizon of Pan-Slavism and Slavophilism, the present study reveals not only the symbolic complexity of the dialogue between the two writers but also the potential of literature to serve as a site for the confrontation and negotiation of grand narratives of identity. In a contemporary context marked by the resurgence of geopolitical and cultural divisions, revisiting this dispute offers a fertile framework for critical reflection on collective memory and on the real possibilities of dialogue between traditions that appear irreconcilable.