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An Essay: From Nowhere with Love

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When the famous 1985 *New York Times Book Review* polemic between Milan Kundera and Joseph Brodsky (the latter, a poet; the former, a novelist—but I like them both more as essayists) came again into my hands after several years, I let myself be seduced by the text out of habit, enchanted by the beauty of the authors' sentences—until I eventually found myself seduced again. [1] Deceived. As great writers—veritable magicians, *wizards of the first order*—they deceived me just as they ultimately deceived themselves. The very brilliance of their sentences obscured the true woefulness of the problem at hand: the fundamental problem, the place from which it all started, the very reason for the polemic lurking beneath the surface. Both writers' prophetic eloquence, mastery of style, endless digressions, associative meanderings and metaphors had the ability to delight readers and to shed light upon particular topics, but—in the end—neither author addressed the underlying origin of the polemic itself.

So, Kundera realized that even if he were starving, he could not have written a stage adaptation of *The Idiot*. [2] And "all at once" he started feeling "an inexplicable pang of nostalgia for *Jacques le Fataliste* . . . .Why the sudden aversion to Dostoyevsky? . . . Was it doubts about the esthetic value of the work? No, because my aversion had taken me by surprise and made no claims to objectivity." What irritated Kundera about Dostoyevsky "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." But what bothers Kundera in Dostoyevsky's novels, in the world of literature/fiction, does not vex him when applied to his own writing. Despite the fact that Kundera glorifies "Western rationality" throughout his essay, his objections or arguments do not seem rational to me: "an inexplicable pang of nostalgia," "the sudden aversion," "an instinctive need," "made no claims to objectivity," etc. Such statements are nothing else but "feelings … promoted to the rank of value and of truth." Even though he claims that his thoughts are not "the anti-Russian reflex of a Czech traumatized by the occupation of his country," they end up leaving such an impression, with far too facile and hurried formulations and with over-generalized conclusions. He trivially interprets Saint Augustine; naively formulates Western sensibility as determined by the complementarity of wisdom and doubt; and, traumatized, he discovers the famous dichotomous mystery of the Russian soul: "its profundity as well as its brutality." I do not object to Kundera because of his traumas.

I suppose Russian tanks in Prague would traumatize any healthy person, and it would probably be insane and obscene if one stayed sanguine and unruffled, as if nothing had happened. I repeat: such frustrations attest to Kundera's health, not his illness. But I do object to his bad taste as a writer. There are understandable reasons behind all of his missteps, but these do not justify them. Terrified by the events of '68 and the overnight changes to his way of living, Kundera reaches out for the life jacket of Western rationalism in order not to sink in despair or to drown—hoping to keep a clear head and his objectivity—and he accuses the East of irrationalism because, for God's sake, it is not logical that such evils are possible. (By the way, 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.)

Kundera writes: "[t]he elevation of sentiment to the rank of a value dates back quite far, perhaps even to the moment when Christianity broke off from Judaism. 'Love God and do as you will,' said Saint Augustine. The famous saying is revealing: it shifts the criterion for truth from the outside inward, into the arbitrary sphere of the subjective. A vague feeling of love ('Love God!'—the Christian imperative) supplants the clarity of the Law (the imperative of Judaism) to become the rather hazy criterion of morality."

It is true that St. Augustine's famous saying is revelational—revelational precisely because it moves the criterion of truth from the outside inward. Shedding the internal criterion of truth and replacing it with "external" criteria leads to depersonalization, demagoguery, totalitarianism—to exactly the same sort of repressive system which banned Kundera's books and deprived him of any LEGAL means ("the clarity of the Law") to earn a living. Kundera continues: "Jesus on the cross taught us to cherish suffering. . . .[sic!]" The descent of the Son of God—or rather God Himself—among people is one of the essential moments of Christian teaching, marking a revolutionary shift from a passive to a proactive principle of morality. And this directional shift was exactly from the outside inward. It is not "the arbitrary sphere of the subjective"—it is the freedom of choice thus granted which bans us from seeking justification for our own weaknesses and transgressions beyond ourselves, in the absolute, "in the external criterion of truth." With the very act of baptism, God's Likeness is set free from Original Sin while being gifted with the burden of freedom of choice, the burden of "arbitrariness"—with responsibility for one's own actions. The example of a crucified Jesus does not teach us to cherish suffering (as we were taught for centuries by various interpreters with their own dubious motives). Suffering is not an end in itself. It is not suffering just for suffering's sake. The example of Jesus on the cross teaches us not to venerate suffering but shows how painful and difficult freedom of choice may sometimes be. Master Jan Hus could have renounced his teaching, but he did not. Jan Palach did not have to burn himself, but he did. They did not perform these actions for the sake of suffering, but rather out of love for God, for humanity, and for truth. They confronted their own inner moral compasses against "the clarity of the Law" as represented by the Holy Inquisition (Hus) or by the brutal political power of the Soviet Empire (Palach). Freedom of choice gives us the ability to choose between good and evil. The example of Jesus on the cross teaches us that selecting good sometimes can result in sacrifice and suffering. And it instructs us, not to venerate pain and suffering, but to become accustomed to them as the natural order of things which we are compelled to stand up against with consistency and the persistence of our love.

BRODSKY, who was replying to Kundera's essay and thus had the advantage of taking it as a springboard for his critique, began masterfully—catching enough momentum to jump up and perform literary gymnastics with perfect technique. [3] But instead of landing on his feet, he ultimately falls on his ass. Even though Brodsky once, on another occasion, remarked that he is "no good Russian, nor American, nor Jew," [4] he himself—in addition to giving us an account of the flip sides of Kundera's essay (which is a quantitative, not a qualitative advance)—remains on Kundera's level ("a traumatized Czech" vs. "a big-souled Russian" who, despite everything, seeks an alibi for himself). In several places, Brodsky begins to address the underlying issue properly, but he then suddenly—as if frightened by the foreseen conclusion—hastily returns to Kundera and the safety of the dichotomy he himself wanted to condemn (!?): "Yet tragic as the notion of a world apportioned in this fashion may be, it is not without mental coziness. It offers the handy dichotomies of feeling-reason, Dostoyevsky-Diderot, them-us and so forth. It forces the individual to make a choice. The process of making it is invariably dramatic and dangerous; having chosen, one has every reason to regard oneself as a hero. The only catch is that the choice itself is very limited. True to the nature of its place, it is a matter of either/or."

But Brodsky is not successful in digging out of this dichotomy and is unable to overcome it. He writes: "[t]he atrocities that were and are committed in that realm, and are committed were not in the name of love but of necessity—and a historical one at that. The concept of historical necessity is the product of rational thought and arrived in Russia by the Western route." And thus he returns us to the safety of the dichotomy, dividing us into two opposing camps and therefore making us gaze once again at each other through the battlements of rationalism and irrationalism, or—if you object to this military terminology—he brings the discussion back down to the level of a bad ping-pong match, where the only important thing is to lob the ball to the opponent's half of the table. Kundera (ping): "So I reread *The Idiot* and realized that even if I were starving. . . ." Brodsky (pong): "But one should not forget that *Das Kapital* was translated from German into Russian." Kundera (ping): "in this other balance (or imbalance) we find the famous mystery of the Russian soul (its profundity as well as its brutality)." Brodsky (pong): "What's more, those feelings are reactions to expressed thoughts, and most of those thoughts are highly rational thoughts picked up, in fact, in the West. The majority of Dostoyevsky's novels are Russian denouements to events that took place outside of Russia, in the West. Prince Myshkin returns mad from the West, and Ivan Karamazov got his atheistic ideas there as well, the West is the source of Verkhovensky Jr. 's political radicalism and the seat of his conspiracy." Ping, the irrationalism of the East; Pong, the rationality of the West. *Ping-Pong!* (In this context, these two words do not sound to me like the name of the beautiful sports game, but rather like the names of some of those infamous East Asian dictators: *Mao Tse-Ping* versus *Kim Il-Pong*.) As if Evil originated in the East or in the West! Evil comes from the world's *fifth* cardinal direction: Evil is born in my heart, in my human heart.

"The atrocities that were and are committed. . . were and are committed not in the name of love but of necessity—and a historical one at that. The concept of historical necessity is the product of rational thought and arrived in Russia by the Western route," Brodsky writes. I am not interested in the Russian export-import trade and I

could not care less whether or not “the concept of historical necessity” is a domestic or an imported product, since NO concept (including the one Brodsky is discussing) can justify crime. So, if we cannot point at individual responsibility, we can always find so-called “higher purpose.” Thus, it is not Us who is guilty (I abhor that plural, so let me rephrase it: it’s not ME who is guilty)—it’s the concept of historical necessity that is guilty (no, not Me, but an unfavorable alignment in the Zodiac, a full moon). And here we end up: our ethics are set by astrology, higher motives, stars in the sky. Brodsky writes: “First, that betrayal, erosion, lowering of the standards and so forth are the organic features of civilization, that civilization is an organism that excretes, secretes, degenerates, regenerates, and that the dying and rotting of its parts is the price this organism pays for evolution.” True, Darwin’s theory is amoral and non-hierarchical. According to it, the winner on the evolutionary scale is the one with superior reproductive ability and the best adaptation to the local environment. But it is also true that all attempts at implementing social Darwinism have failed—all those sick and blind pseudo-historical interpretations and glorifications of the indisputable right of the *stronger* over the *weaker* have been proven to be miserably wrong. Darwin’s theory, to reiterate, applies to nature and cannot and *should not* be applied to human civilization because there is a distinctive difference between nature and civilization—that is, between dying and being murdered, between FATAL ACCIDENT and VIOLENCE. Darwin’s theory cannot and should not be used for interpreting ethics, even less for establishing law and justice. Nevertheless, Brodsky continues that: “the purity of the victim is a forced, i.e., artificial purity that we would not trade the smallest of our liberties to have. . ..”

The fact that a Russian, writing about the events of ‘68 and Russian tanks in the streets of Prague (not Czech ones in Moscow), refers to the “artificial purity of the victim” and seems to me no longer a matter of ethics, but of aesthetics—of the lack of good taste. Actually, I consider it a matter of bad manners. (Zbigniew Herbert also wrote a poem on the topic, *The Power of Taste*, which Brodsky was familiar with in writing his contradictory essay, stating that it is an individual’s Esthetics “that give rise to his ethics and his sense of history–not the other way around.”) “Artificial purity”—what is that supposed to mean? Does it mean: you are better and purer than me just because you’re a victim, and you’re the victim just because you’re weaker than me, and had you been stronger than me, no doubt I would have been your victim and you would have been my hangman, and then I would have been purer than you? What nonsense, what a miserable narrative ping-pong! How stupid, distasteful and dangerous! If we were to attempt to go farther down this path, would we soon have to face the ultimate connotations of Brodsky’s revelation? If the Nazis weren’t exterminating Jews in gas chambers, Jews would have, for sure, killed the German folk! Or, “after a rape, neither the victim nor the rapist are VIRGINS anymore, anyway!” (As the cynical and bitter Sarajevo witticism goes.)

I am not very convinced that all of this above was just a matter of *unfortunate* formulations, taken out of context; just the contrary—I claim that these were flagrant methodological errors, inadmissible for writers of Kundera’s and Brodsky’s stature (or for the way they would like others to see them). Brodsky dares, with no pardon, to write “moralizing treatises,” while at the same time using formulations which sound as if they were borrowed from the infamous book originally entitled *Mein Kampf*. I was desperate for some time; not wanting to trust in the authenticity of the sentences

spoken by Brodsky in the interview from November 28th, 1989, in Iowa City [5], I was hoping that they were a hoax, a matter of poor translation, an unfortunate formulation or some such thing. [6]

In fact, Brodsky said in that interview: "The foreseeable future, that is, foreseeable by me, which again can be terribly erroneous, is precisely the conflict of the spirit of tolerance with the spirit of intolerance, and there are all sorts of attempts to resolve that conflict now. The pragmatists try to suggest that there is some equivalence between these principles. I do not believe that for a minute. I think that the Moslem notion of universal order should be squashed and put out of existence. We are, after all, six centuries older than the Moslems spiritually. So, I think we have a right to say what's right and what's wrong." I used to think that Brodsky was only twenty-six years older than I, not six centuries. Anyway, I assume that those twenty-six—or even the whole six hundred years of his historical and civilizational "seniority"—do not make him eligible to prescribe and define for me (or for anybody else) what is good and what is evil (such an eligibility one, maybe, can earn by something entirely different). I've never thought that someone's age measures the quality of one's experience—that an older person is necessarily and automatically wiser and better than a younger one. My life experience may be unusual, but it tells me that most of the evil I have faced was inflicted upon me by older people. Furthermore, I think that spiritual experience doesn't necessarily encompass only religious experience, just as it seems to me that some of the great Eastern civilizations are older than Christianity. Even though I consider myself to be an atheist, my spiritual experience also encompasses Christianity as well as Judaism and Buddhism and Taoism and Islam . . . I believe that members of different cultural and religious traditions should seek out ways to live together, not *squash and put each other out of existence*.

But who knows? Maybe seniority means much more than I'm aware of; maybe Brodsky, after all, knows more than I? He wrote: "The foreseeable future. . ." BOSNIA? "[T]here are all sorts of attempts to resolve that conflict now. . ." CHECHNYA?

(Prague, 1995)

Additional Resources

Kundera, Milan. "An introduction to a variation." *New York Times Book Review*, 6 January 1985, Sunday (Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 1, Column 1; Book Review Desk) Online

Brodsky, Joseph. "Why Milan Kundera Is Wrong About Dostoyevsky." *New York Times Book Review*, 17 February 1985. Online

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Images, published in 2005 in Czech, 2010 in Bosnian.

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Notes

1. "From Nowhere With Love" is the opening line of Joseph Brodsky's poem "Ниоткуда с любовью" (in the Russian original). (Ed.) Online. Ljuca wrote this essay as a term paper at Charles University in Prague without ambitions for publication in 1995. Upon the personal insistence of the distinguished Czech philosopher and politician Professor Jan Sokol, it was published in Czech translation (1996) as "Odnikud s láskou" in the journal *Nová přítomnost – měsičník pro diskusi a politiku*, #3, March 1996. ISSN: 1211-3883 (Ed.) Online The essay was written in 1995, before Joseph Brodsky's death on January 28, 1996. This is the first English translation of the original essay written in Bosnian. (Ed.) ↩
2. Kundera, Milan. "An introduction to a variation" in T*he New York Times Book Review*, 6 January 1985, Sunday (Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 1, Column 1; Book Review Desk) Online All Kundera quotes originate from this essay. (Ed.) ↩
3. Brodsky, Joseph. "Why Milan Kundera is wrong about Dostoyevsky" in *The New York Times Book Review*, 17 February 1985 Online
   All Brodsky quotes referring to Kundera's piece originate from this essay. (Ed.) ↩
4. Brodski, J. A., Jovanović, M., & Bertolino, N. (1990). *Izabrane pesme* (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga. 1990) Introduction, p 11 ↩
5. From an interview with Joseph Brodsky which took place in 1989. All Brodsky quotes not referring to Kundera's piece are from this interview. (Ed.) Musial, Grzegorz and Longinović, Tomislav. "Esthetics is the mother of ethics" in *Periplus: Poetry in Translation*, edited by Daniel Weissbort and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (Oxford University Press, 1993, 37-5). Reprinted in *Joseph Brodsky: Conversations*, edited by Cynthia L. Haven. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002, 131-140. Online ↩
6. "Pre ukusom nego moralom," a conversation by Grzegorz Musial with Joseph Brodsky in *Književne novine* (Beograd, 25 February 1999, 814). Translated by Petar Vujičić. Online ↩

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