

## Chapter 7

# Is There Such a Thing as Central (Eastern) European Literature? An Attempt to Reconsider 'Central European' Consciousness on the Basis of Contemporary Literature

Mitsuyoshi Numano

### Introduction

In this paper I will use both the terms 'Central European' and 'Eastern European', without giving them a clear-cut definition, since they are actually often interchangeable. What is important to us, for the purpose of this paper in its literary context, is not simply the fact that there can be a certain cultural sphere between Western Europe and Russia; the boundaries of which remain yet to be clearly defined, but that it has shaped its own consciousness and identity through incessant interaction with Western Europe and Russia. It is precisely this cultural sphere, that will be the focus of our discussion. What I call 'Central European' or 'Eastern European' literature is a cultural (rather than 'geopolitical') notion, which has significance in the context of contemporary world literature.

## 1. Kundera vs. Brodsky: A Dispute between a European Man and a Nomad

In his own introduction to *Jacques and His Master* (written originally in French in 1981), Milan Kundera tells us how he was asked to write a stage adaptation of Dostoevsky's *Idiot* by a director who wanted to help him earn his living in very difficult circumstances after 1968. Strange as it may seem, Kundera rejected the offer, despite being deprived of all legal means of earning a living, because 'Dostoevsky's universe of overblown gestures, murky depths, and aggressive sentimentality repelled' (Kundera 1985: 1) him.

If we take into consideration the Czech people's strong antipathy against all that was Soviet and Russian (actually Kundera deliberately ignores the difference in connotation between 'Soviet' and 'Russian') following the tragic event of 1968, Kundera's disgust toward Dostoevsky's Russian world could be interpreted as an emotional reaction in the context of general Russophobia at that time in Czechoslovakia.

However, Kundera himself, as if anticipating such an interpretation from the reader, states that his antipathy transcends temporary emotions and has its roots in the very climate of Russia, which differs so radically from Europe in terms of the value system. He explains:

Why the sudden aversion to Dostoevsky?

Was it the anti-Russian reflex of a Czech traumatized by the occupation of his country? No, because I never stopped loving Chekhov. Was it doubts about the aesthetic value of the work? No, because my aversion had taken me by surprise and made no claims to objectivity.

What irritated me about Dostoevsky 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 (Kundera 1985: 1).

In Kundera's opinion, the elevation of sentiment to the rank of a value first took place in the West and goes back quite far, perhaps even to the moment of the birth of Christianity. 'But from the Renaissance on, such a 'Western sensibility has been balanced by a complementary spirit: that of reason and doubt, of play and the relativity of human affairs' (Kundera 1985: 3). Consequently, Kundera maintains, by implication, that it is precisely the spirit of reason and doubt that is lacking in Russia.

It is not difficult to discern certain stereotypical aspects of anti-Russian prejudice in Kundera's arguments, and it is no surprise that Joseph Brodsky, an émigré poet from the Soviet Union, criticised Kundera vehemently. In his article entitled straightforwardly 'Why Milan Kundera Is Wrong about Dostoevsky', he begins his criticism by accusing Kundera of confusing a sense of history with aesthetic evaluation and explains how Kundera's arguments are based on sweeping generalisations about Russia.

Here, I do not intend to pass judgment as to who is right and wrong in this dispute; but what is of import and interest to us is the striking difference that emerges between Kundera, the European-oriented writer, and Brodsky, the border-crossing poet, in their attitudes toward world literature and their positions in it. One of the most interesting points Brodsky makes in his article about Kundera is the fact that the latter 'has fallen an unwitting victim to the geopolitical certitude of his fate—the concept of the East-West divide'. He goes on to say: '[such a divide] offers the handy dichotomies of feeling-reason, Dostoevsky-Diderot, them-us and so on'. Subsequently, Brodsky labels Kundera a 'European' in a rather negative sense:

Mr. Kundera is a Continental, a European man. These people are seldom capable of seeing themselves from the outside. If they do, it's invariably within the context of Europe, for Europe offers them a scale against which their importance is detectable. The advantage of stratified society lies precisely in the ease with which the individual may appreciate his advancement. The reverse side of the coin, however, is that one senses limits and, beyond them, expanses where this individual's life appears irrelevant. That's why a sedentary people always resent nomads: apart from the physical threat, a nomad compromises the concept of border (Brodsky 1985: 32).

What Brodsky says here about the 'eurocentrism' of Kundera is true to a certain extent. It certainly applies to, for example, Kundera's note on 'Central Europe (and Europe)' in his collection of alphabetically ordered essays 'Sixty-three Words':

In a press release, Broch's publisher places him in a highly Central European context: Hofmannsthal, Svevo. Broch protests: If he must be compared to someone, let it be Gide and Joyce! Was he thereby denying his 'Central Europeanness'? No, he was only saying that national, regional

contexts are useless for apprehending the meaning and the value of work (Kundera 1988: 125).

From the quoted paragraph it is clear that no matter how broad Kundera wants to make the context of his 'Central European' literature, it does not go beyond Europe anyway.

Thus we come to understand that at the core of the dispute between Kundera and Brodsky lies a striking contrast between the insider's view (or rather the view of a would-be insider) and the outsider's view respectively. It is interesting to note that the same pattern can be also discerned in the contrast between Kundera and Solzhenitsyn when they discuss the same thing (the Renaissance) in diametrically opposite ways. It is well known that Solzhenitsyn accused the very Renaissance of introducing a drastic turn in the history of Western civilisation and leading it eventually into moral decline currently faced by the contemporary world. He even says:

The humanistic way of thinking . . . started modern civilization on the dangerous trend of worshipping man and his material needs. Everything beyond physical well-being and the accumulation of material goods, all other human requirements and characteristics of a subtler and higher nature, were left outside the area of attention of state and social systems, as if human life did not have any higher meaning (Solzhenitsyn 1978: 49–50).

The contrast between Solzhenitsyn and Kundera is as striking as that between Brodsky and Kundera. While Solzhenitsyn condemns the Renaissance as the origin of moral decadence in the West from the perspective of the Russian people, who did not experience the Renaissance, Kundera sees it as the origin of essentially positive characteristics of Western civilisation, from the viewpoint of an insider who shares the same history of Western European culture, including the experience of the Renaissance. Interestingly enough, here Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky stand in the same camp in opposing Kundera, although they are quite different writers with different outlooks on the world and Russian national identity.

If there is anything that can be drawn from the discussion of the dispute between Kundera and the Russian authors, it is the assumption that Central European literature (culture) does not exist by itself nor can it

be defined by itself alone. It exists in incessant interactions with Western Europe on the one hand, which it had hoped to join for most of the time throughout history, and with Russia, on the other, to which it was ‘kidnapped’ according to Kundera’s understanding, but which in fact had much in common with it historically. Central (Eastern) European literature of the twentieth century can be delineated only in the context of its complicated relations with both Western Europe and Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Keeping this working hypothesis in mind, I will examine some cases of the most outstanding Central (and Eastern) European writers and try to discuss how we can define the Central (Eastern) Europeanness (if there is such a thing) in the literary practice of these writers.

## **2. The Case of Gombrowicz: Central Europe as a Transition Area In-between**

Although I have no intention at all to discuss the literary Witold Gombrowicz’s literary legacy as a whole (he is large a figure to discuss here fully), it will suffice to quote one striking passage from his interview where he tries to give a definition to Poland. The definition he gives is full of irony, distancing himself from his homeland with ambivalent feelings, but it contains a penetrating insight into the ‘in-between’ nature of Central Europe:

I was Polish. I happened to be in Poland. What is Poland?

It is a country between the East and the West, where Europe starts to draw to an end, a border country where the East and the West soften into each other. A country of weakened forms . . . None of the great movements of European culture has ever penetrated Poland, not the Renaissance, not the wars of religion, not the French revolution, not the industrial revolution . . .

So these plains, open to every wind, had long been the scene of a great compromise between Form and its Degradation . . . This feeling of formlessness tortured the Poles, but at the same time it gave them a strange sense of liberty (Gombrowicz 1973: 53–4).

Thus, Gombrowicz places Poland on the periphery, somewhere between Form (centre) and Chaos (the outside world), and yet the distance

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the dispute between Kundera and Brodsky, see Numano (1991).

from the centre here has an ambiguous (two-fold) function: on the one hand it is bad in the sense that it causes degradation and deviation from Form; on the other hand it can be good because, by distancing oneself from the centre of authority, one can gain unprecedented freedom. This positive evaluation of distancing led him to the peculiar discussion of the positive effects of exile on writers, despite the obvious hardships they have to face and overcome. He writes in his diary in 1953:

*. . . it seems to me that theoretically speaking and bypassing material hardship, the immersing of oneself in the world, that is, emigration, should constitute an incredible stimulus for literature.*

*For lo and behold the country's elite is kicked out over the border. It can think, feel, and write from the outside. It gains distance. It gains an incredible spiritual freedom. All bonds burst. One can be more of oneself. In the general din all the forms that have existed until now loosen up and one can move toward the future in a more ruthless way.*

*An exceptional opportunity!* (Gombrowicz 1988: 40; Gombrowicz's italics)

The great potential of exile experience (distancing from one's homeland) which Gombrowicz hints at, in my view, also applies to the very nature of Central European culture: it has the potential to make use of its distance from the centre to gain freedom in creative efforts. At the same time we have to bear in mind that the notion of distance is by definition 'relative', because distance cannot exist by itself and is always *from* something. Central European culture is thus delineated with the help of relative 'distance' (from, say, the West, Russia, etc).

### **3. Jaan Kross: A Small Nation's Cultural Identity in the Shade of Empire**

Now let us turn to a concrete work of fiction by the contemporary Estonian writer Jaan Kross (born in 1920). One of his most famous historical novels, *Kiesri Hull (The Czar's Madman*, originally written in 1978) provides us with an interesting case of a small nation's cultural identity, shaped not by distance, but rather by the seeming *impossibility* to distance itself from the centre of power and cultural authority. The novel deals with the strange fate of the Estonian nobleman Timotheus von Bock,

a real historical figure who lived during the time of Russia's Czar Alexander I.

The linguistic situation in Estonia of that time was extremely complicated. The vernacular Estonian language was used only by peasants, but the country developed its culture under the influence of German culture. On the other hand, the common language of the educated aristocracy was French, while knowledge of Russian was simultaneously required, because Estonia was under the rule of the Russian czar at that time. The author tries to reflect this complicated situation in his novel, inventing an elaborate way of narrating: the life story of the hero Timotheus von Bock is related by the uneducated ex-serf Jakob Mättik, who becomes a brother-in-law of the hero, and the novel takes the form of his memoirs originally written in a strange, uneducated language—'partly in a patois of Estonia and French, with a significant admixture of German' (Kross 1993: ii). Moreover, the fictitious editor of the book, who appears only under the initials J. K., which correspond to the author's name Jaan Kross, states in the preface that it is he who translated the memoirs of Jakov Mättik written in his strange language 'into modern Estonian, standardizing all those linguistic layers into a form more or less comprehensible to the contemporary reader' (Kross 1993: ii). Thus, through the difficult linguistic situation itself, Estonia is shown here as being under the influence of the major cultures surrounding her and unable to distance itself well enough from them.

The novel us the scandalous deeds of the idealistic hero, a young Baltic nobleman. Firstly, he marries a peasant's daughter officially and scandalises his fellow aristocrats. Then comes an even more grievous infraction. He sends the czar Alexander I (von Bock was his favourite) a letter, frankly criticising his tyrannical rule. Infuriated by this extraordinary deed by his subject, Alexander I promptly banishes him from his estate and imprisons him in the Schlüsselburg fortress for nine years.

Written and published in the Estonian language in Soviet Estonia in the 1970s, the novel seemingly deals on the surface level with the distant historical events that took place in the early nineteenth century, but behind the surface text looms the contemporary reality of Estonia that struggled for independence under the rule of the Soviet Union.

*The Czar's Madman* is a complex novel, which has several cultural borderlines intertwined within itself; of which the author is keenly

conscious, as well as remaining well aware of his own position in this context. Reading such a novel, the reader witnesses the very process of shaping the cultural identity of a small nation under the rule of major foreign powers. This keen awareness of borders and one's position in the context of these borders is doubtless one of the most salient characteristics of what I call Central (or Eastern) European literature of the twentieth century.

#### 4. Ismail Kadare: Torn between Two Camps

Now let us turn to the novel *Doruntine*<sup>2</sup> written by the contemporary Albanian writer Ismail Kadare (born in 1936). It has much in common with Jaan Kross's novel because it also provides us with an interesting case of the cultural identity of a small nation torn between two camps. In my view such a situation is typically Central (Eastern) European.

The novel makes use of a supernatural legend of Albanian folklore and begins with a mysterious event: the young woman Doruntine, who went all the way to Bohemia as a bride, is taken back to her Albanian home; allegedly by her brother, who had died three years before. Thus although the novel initially resembles fantastic fiction, its structure turns out to be more complex and manifold as the reader peruses it further. The narrative also becomes something of a detective story with Captain Stres, who plays the role of a detective. During the investigative process, he remains convinced that the case should be solved rationally without resorting to supernatural explanations.

Then comes the aspect of a psychological love story as well as the level of a political allegory: although the novel is set in the medieval Albanian principality (somewhere around the eleventh or twelfth century) which had been Catholic for almost a thousand years, 'turning Orthodox only half a century before' (Kadare 1988: 78). The Western and Eastern Churches—the two superpowers—are contending with each other for influence over this region that 'lay just on the border of the two religions, and for various reasons, essentially political and economic, the principalities leaned now toward one, now toward the other (Kadare 1988: 78).

---

<sup>2</sup> The Albanian original was first published in Tirana in 1980 as *Kush e solli Doruntinen* (Who Brought Doruntine Back?).



It is not difficult then for the reader to see an allusion to the contemporary world behind such a medieval setting: there looms the contemporary fate of Albania, which was once incorporated into the Soviet bloc, but then began to seek its own way between East and West. On this level of a political allegory, there are many details in the novel that could be read as hints at the contemporary counterparts: the superpower of the Byzantine Church as the Kremlin; the local police of medieval Albania as the secret police of the Socialist regime; and the very fact that the heroine of the novel Doruntine went abroad to get married to a foreigner can be interpreted as a dangerous political provocation in the context of Socialist Albania, where communication with foreigners was under the strict control of the state.

The author is very conscious of the position of his country, torn between East and West, and eventually, toward the end of the novel, seeks for a striking solution that is based on the utopian belief of the Albanian community known as '*bessa*'. Thus we can conclude that the writing of such a novel was only made possible thanks to the special geopolitical situation of Albania on the one hand, and to the small nation's aspiration to find its own way out of such situation on the other. This particular aspiration is explained in the words of Doruntine's brother Constantine as follows:

. . . Albania's location, caught in a vise between the religions of Rome and Byzantium, between two worlds, West and East. Their clash would inevitably bring appalling turmoil, and Albania would have to find new ways to defend itself. . . . In short, Albania had to change its laws, its administration, its prisons, its courts and all the rest, had to fashion them so that they could be severed from the outside world and anchored within men themselves as the tempest drew near. It had to do this or it would be wiped from the face of the earth (Kadare 1988: 162).

It should be stressed, however, that the novel is keenly conscious of 'borders' surrounding itself, on a literary, metafictional level, as well as a political level. On a political level the novel can be read as the account of a small nation in plight which is located on the borderline between two superpowers and which is seeking to free itself from their influence in pursuit of its own shape. On the level which I call 'metafictional', we observe an incessant shift from one level of reading to another: folkloric,

fantastic, detective, psychological, political, and utopian, and it is this process of border-crossing between literary subgenres that makes the novel particularly attractive and modern (although it is based on traditional Albanian folklore).<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Milorad Pavić: Crossing over the Boundaries of Three Religions

To conclude our survey of some outstanding examples of contemporary fiction which I consider particularly ‘Central (Eastern) European’, let us discuss, last but not least, the fantastic novel *Dictionary of the Khazars* (originally published in Serbian in 1984) by the Serbian writer Milorad Pavić (born in 1929).

This is a very strange piece of fiction, full of fantastic Baroque conceits. The most striking device of the narrative is its dictionary form: the book consists of three parts: the Red Book (based on Christian sources), the Green Book (based on Islamic sources), and the Yellow Book (based on Hebrew sources). Each of these Books takes the form of an encyclopaedia and contains various entries (alphabetically ordered) about the legendary medieval Khazar empire. These dictionaries, based on different religions respectively, often pick up the same entry and explain it in different ways: for example, entries on Ateh (the Khazar princess), Kaghan, Khazars, and Khazar polemic are shared by all the three dictionaries, but have totally different contents. Due to such a ‘postmodern’ device, *Dictionary of the Khazars* as a whole assumes the atmosphere of delightful play of literary conceits and relativistic playfulness.

Although at the core of the book lies a rather serious ‘Khazar question’ as to what religion is best (Christianity, Islam, or Judaism), because Pavić’s book is based on the half-legendary historical polemic between missionaries from these three major religions invited by the Khazar Kaghan, it seems that the author freely traverses the borders among them and even makes use of the conflicts between the religions as effective material for playful postmodern fiction. In this sense Pavić’s novel can be said to be a product of truly ‘Central (Eastern) European’ imagination, which enables the writer to embrace different cultures in

---

<sup>3</sup> I have discussed this ‘metafictional’ aspect of the novel (Numano 1994: 299–303).

their relative perspective. It is the multicultural climate of the Balkans that has given birth to such a superb work of fiction imbued with a border-crossing spirit.

On the level of the writer's personal credo, however, a diametrically opposite interpretation is possible. Pavić in his real life is known as a Serbian nationalist, and his novel seems to express his nationalistic sentiment, for it is not difficult to see the tragic fate of the Khazar empire that disappeared without a trace as a metaphor for contemporary Serbia. Although Pavić himself, as far as I know, did not announce his intention explicitly, such an interpretation of his intention is fairly wide-spread among Western readers. We can find one of the typical statements in that direction, for example, in an article written by an American journalist:

But if we are to understand the Yugoslav civil war, we should pay heed to Pavić's message, which is directed to *large* nations allegedly endangered by small ones. In warning Serbs not to follow the fate of the Khazars, who lost their nationhood because they were unwilling to seize the prerogatives of empire, Pavić is in effect calling for Serbs to protect their 'empire' over other peoples here in Yugoslavia (Kalfus 1992: 23).

Such an interpretation was made possible by the following passage from *Dictionary of the Khazars*:

In the war capital, an area with the largest Khazar population and the most densely populated region in the land, awards and decorations are distributed equally among all the inhabitants, with care always taken that an equal number of decorations is given to Greeks, and Goths, and Arabs and Jews living in the Khazar empire. The same applies to the Russians and others, and to the Khazars themselves, who share their own decorations and monetary prizes in equal parts with others, even though they themselves are the most numerous. But in the southern provinces, where there are Greeks, or in the western regions, inhabited by Jews, or in the East, where there are Persians, Saracens, and others, decorations are conferred only upon these peoples' representatives, not upon the Khazars, because these provinces or districts are considered non-Khazar, although there are just as many Khazars as anybody else there. And so *in their own part of the state the Khazars share their bread with everybody, but in the rest of the land nobody gives them even a crumb* (Pavić 1989: 148–9; italics are mine—M.N.).

In my view, however, such a personal credo does not prevent the novel from being great and attractive, and in the case of Pavić, his talent far surpasses his political position. *Dictionary of the Khazars* is one of the most eloquent examples of contemporary world literature that demonstrates how a literary work, tempered with border-conscious/border-crossing imagination, is capable of standing higher than politics. This is why the American scholar David Damrosch decided to discuss *Dictionary of the Khazars* in detail in his book *What is World Literature?* (Damrosch 2003: 260–79) as one of the most outstanding examples of what he considers ‘world literature’.

## Conclusion

Because of the very nature of this paper, I do not believe it necessary to draw any clear-cut conclusions. What I have attempted here is not to give answers, but rather to share some observation gained through my sporadic reading, to raise questions and to provoke thoughts about the ‘geopoetics’<sup>4</sup> of Central (Eastern) European literature in the context of twentieth-century world literature.

Therefore my tentative conclusion can be boiled down very simply to the idea that there is Central (Eastern) European literature, which can be defined only laxly as a cultural entity. Central (Eastern) Europe is, needless to say, diverse and full of various writers with different worldviews, but if there is anything that would unite them into this ‘laxly definable’ cultural sphere, it would comprise, in my view, the following factors:

1. Central (Eastern) European literature is keenly aware of its position between Western Europe and Russia. Although it stresses, in general, its difference from Russia on the one hand, and wishes to assimilate itself to Western Europe on the other, its self-awareness and self-definition are always constructed through its relations to both of them.
2. Remaining aware of its own position can lead to the small-nation complex.

---

<sup>4</sup> Here I have borrowed the term ‘geopoetics’ from the Russian critic Igor’ Sid, who is energetically pursuing the possibilities of local literature of Crimea.

3. The small-nation complex, in its turn, can lead to obstinate patriotism and nationalistic sentiments in some cases. That is why many poets and writers played a central role in the process of the renaissance of national identity and eventually became 'national' figures.
4. In other cases, however, when the small-nation complex maintains a position open to the outside world and other nations, writers can cross over their national borders and enter a sphere of multicultural creative activities. The most outstanding part of Central (Eastern) European literature, even though it comes from 'small' nations, thus acquires a universal value by crossing over to the horizon of world literature. This is exactly what Karel Čapek had in mind when he discussed 'the fourth type of world literature' in his brilliant essay 'How World Literature Is Made' (originally written in 1936):

What made it possible for Dickens, the most English of all English writers, to become a world-class author? What made it possible for Gogol and others, who created what is indisputably considered the most Russian of literature, to attain worldwide fame? The absolutely Nordic Hamsun. Sinclair Lewis, this one hundred percent American, and many others, who willy-nilly expressed the soul and character, depicted the types and life of their own country and nation? I am aware that those writers I mentioned do not belong to one spiritual family or class, but none of them, without exception, set themselves to the task of creating a certain international literature. Instead, they tried to create works that were deeply national and thoroughly indigenous, although this did not prevent them from becoming—with surprising obviousness—creators of global importance (Čapek [Čapek] 1977: 454; my translation from Russian—M.N.).

5. What is stated in Thesis 3 and Thesis 4 apparently contradicts with each other, but I am not saying that they exist in opposition to each other separately. These opposite tendencies rather coexist in incessant interactions with each other, and it is this complex intertwining that makes the whole process of Central (Eastern) European literature unique and attractive.

## References

- Brodsky, Joseph (1985), 'Why Milan Kundera Is Wrong about Dostoevsky', *New York Times Book Review*, 17 February: 31–3.

- Chapek, Karel [Čapek, Karel] (1977), 'Kak delaetsia mirovaia literatura' [How World Literature Is Made], in Karel Chapek [Karel Čapek], *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh* [Collected Works in Seven Volumes], vii (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature).
- Damrosch, David (2003), *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Gombrowicz, Witold (1973), *A Kind of Testament*, ed. Dominique de Roux, trans. Alastair Hamilton (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
- Gombrowicz, Witold (1988), *Diary*, trans. Lillian Vallee, i (London: Quartet Books).
- Kadare, Ismail (1988), *Doruntine*, trans. Jon Rothschild (New York: New Amsterdam).
- Kalfus, Ken (1992), 'Milorad Pavić: To Serbs with Love', *Village Literary Supplement*, March: 22–3.
- Kross, Jaan (1993), *The Czar's Madman*, trans. by Anselm Hollo (New York: Pantheon Books).
- Kundera, Milan (1985), *Jacques and His Master*, trans. from the French by Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper and Row).
- Kundera, Milan (1988), *The Art of the Novel*, trans. by Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber).
- Numano, Mitsuyoshi (1991), 'Kundera wa doshite Dosutoefusukii ga kirai nanoka' [Why Kundera Does Not Like Dostoevsky?], *Yuriika*, 23 (2): 150–7.
- Numano, Mitsuyoshi (1994), 'Nai jikan o butai ni kakareta genso-suii shosetsu' [A Fantastic Detective Novel Whose Action Takes Place on the Stage of Uchronia], *Bungakukai*, 48 (4): 299–303.
- Pavić, Milorad (1989), *Dictionary of the Khazars*, trans. Christina Pribičević-Zorić (New York: Alfred Knopf).
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr (1978), *A World Split Apart: Commencement Address Delivered at Harvard University, June 8, 1975* (New York: Harper and Row).