

Panel: GLOBAL EFFECTS ON CZECH LITERATURE AND CULTURE

The Borders in Milan Kundera's *Ignorance*: Nostalgia in Odysseus Sense, Socratic Ignorance, or a Case of Mental Amnesia?

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This paper examines Milan Kundera's *Ignorance* to uncover crucial aspects of his novel: emigration versus nostalgic return in relation to memory. Its premise departs from Odysseus's Great Return that Kundera introduces as an essay rather than presenting it in an Odyssean form, such as seen, for instance, in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*. The question remains to what extent the Odyssean device in *Ignorance* is purely functional. The knowledge and memory of Kundera's characters are contrasting Socratic definition of ignorance, which calls for recognition of not knowing and therefore seeking to know. Kundera's attempt to present Josef, a Czech émigré to Denmark, as a positive and even compassionate character fails due, to a large degree, to Josef's selective memory that he exhibits after his Odyssean, albeit brief, return to Prague. His amnesia in recognizing his description of his selfish acts by his own handwriting in his diary--acts that he committed some thirty years ago as a young man--is disturbingly magnified, and further complacent if viewed in Plato's concept in *Euthyphro*: "As for me, I will never give up until I know." Josef imposes a purposeful mental amnesia on himself in order to cope with the present of his artificially amputated past in emigration as a refugee. While Socrates preaches "love of wisdom and learning," Josef preaches love of amnesiac forgetting, and his approach ultimately clashes with a vivid long-term nostalgic memory of Irena, another émigré, who too attempts to undertake Odyssean return home. It is at this intersection of the two fictional characters that the question of borders of memory demand re-examina-

tion, and perhaps re-definition against the drawback of global emigration, one of the significant topics in Kundera's *Ignorance*.