

Sezione monografica *Tradurre il trauma*

Moments of beauty in the prose of Danilo Kiš

SIMONA ŠKRABEC

Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB)

simona.skrabec@uab.cat

Abstract. Danilo Kiš is one of the few Balkan authors that have acquired sufficient prestige not only to circulate but also to be studied beyond their own borders. He was forced to abandon Yugoslavia as a result of the affair orchestrated by the authorities in connection with the publication of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976). The book was censored as the result of an infamous campaign in which the author was accused of plagiarism (1976-1981). Kiš decided to leave the country and lived in Paris during the decisive decade of the thawing of East-West relations. He became one of the most insightful voices in the analysis of totalitarian societies as a «combative author» (Casanova 1999). The very structure of his literary works functions as an artefact that expose the possibility of manipulation of any discourse. Behind his prose, there is a deep analytical work capable of documenting the personal and collective traumas.

Keywords: Danilo Kiš, Balkan, World Literature, traumatic childhood, collective trauma, resilience, nation building.

Riassunto. Danilo Kiš è uno dei pochi autori balcanici ad aver acquistato abbastanza prestigio non solo per circolare ma anche per essere studiati al di fuori dei propri confini. È stato costretto ad abbandonare la Jugoslavia per lo scandalo orchestrato dalle autorità in relazione alla pubblicazione di *Una tomba per Boris Davidovich* (1976). Il libro è stato censurato dopo una campagna diffamatoria in cui l'autore è stato accusato di plagio (1976-1981). Kiš ha deciso di lasciare il paese e vivere a Parigi durante il decennio decisivo del disgelo delle relazioni Est-Ovest. È diventato una delle più acute voci nell'analisi delle società totalitarie come «combative author» (Casanova 1999). La struttura stessa delle sue opere letterarie funziona come un artefatto che espone la possibilità di manipolazione di ogni discorso. Dietro la sua prosa, c'è un profondo lavoro analitico capace di documentare traumi personali e collettivi.

Parole chiave: Danilo Kiš, Balcani, letteratura mondiale, infanzia traumatica, trauma collettivo, resilienza, costruzione nazionale.

Moments of beauty in the prose of Danilo Kiš

Bien entendu l'énonciation historique des événements est indépendante de leur vérité 'objective'. Seul compte le dessein 'historique' de l'écrivain.
Émile Benveniste, 1966

In his *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1966), Émile Benveniste reflected on «the man within the language». He did so with the attention to detail of a born linguist who identified the fact that we use language to speak in two clearly differentiated ways. On the one hand, we use language in order to give an account of History, while on the other, we speak with the aim of communicating, with a wish to give rise to a discourse that can be shared between a “me” and a “you”. Communicative discourses are born from a desire to influence someone else in some way, while History is always written in the «Aorist». Benveniste uses this term, which is borrowed from classical Greek, to refer to a verb tense that has neither first nor second person and that also excludes any possibility of being used to depict the present. In order to be perceived as an «objective reality», history must be recounted in the third person, from a distance and without any kind of involvement. In this way, events are positioned in a causal chain once they come into view over the horizon of history. The historian's pen documents the past in a highly selective way, and always from the perspective of those who have the power to speak in the third person, to assume the position of an uninvolved observer.¹

«If, as indicated by the primitive nature of its stem, the aorist is the oldest Greek tense, it is understandable that it is also the simplest. It simply points to the action without describing it. To stress such matters as duration or state of completion, other tenses were developed», observed Frank Stagg in an article in which he analysed the interpretative abuse that the Greek aorist tense has endured in many biblical translations. Translators of the Holy Scriptures have often been unable to resist the temptation to translate the archaic simplicity of that «most ancient verb tense», directly attributing biblical passages in aorist with the capacity to transform the world through prophecy.²

Danilo Kiš is an author who likes to speak in aorist, a tense that is difficult to identify in the original, because in Serbian the third person singular form in the present and aorist tenses are easily confused; they are homographs, written in the same way, though when spoken they di-

¹ E. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966.

² F. Stagg, *The Abused Aorist*, in «Journal of Biblical Literature», 91, 2, 1972, pp. 222-231.

splay subtle differences in stress. What is more, philologists assure us that the aorist tense is a form that has become extinct. However, Kiš shows us that this tool, which is useful for “weaving” historical narratives, is available to any writer with the necessary skills.³ Danilo Kiš “decorates” his texts with a verb tense that sounds like an old translation of the Bible, infusing his prose with a sound so ancient that it seems to come from the beginning of time. Verb endings are used with the clear intention of providing literary texts with a special solemnity and importance, an unquestionable historical weight.

The question raised by the use of such a conscious and profound structure in a literary text is whether Kiš is seeking to reproduce the epic force of those ancient narratives, or whether, by contrast, the author wants to deconstruct the narrative and show its separate component parts in order to reveal the workings of the mechanism of rhetorical persuasion. This is not an easy question to answer, though I should like to try and offer some reflections resulting from my experience of having translated two of his books into Catalan. I will talk first about *A Tomb for Boris Davidovič* (1976), and then about *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1983). These are two unusual books, though they have also been widely translated and discussed in the theatres of the «world republic of letters».⁴

I. Translating an author accused of plagiarism

In my first translation of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovič*, published in 2003, the deadly tool used by the disemboweller Mikša had a handle «made of rosewood». I have to make the uncomfortable confession that I succumbed to the opportunity of translating this syntagma in a literal way. I own up to my mistake because it provides a good example of the density of the web of poetical images created by Danilo Kiš. I remember that I thought at the time that it must have been very difficult to find rosewood, and that maybe there were varieties that were especially cultivated for this purpose, and that the wood must be very strong, as is the case with boxwood, which is only used for small tools because the size of the tree's branches does not allow for anything bigger. I was completely mistaken.

The “rosewood” that lends its name to the title of the first story is a metaphorical description, one that is common in many languages, of an exotic tree: *palisander* is given the name ‘rosewood’ because it gives off such a pleasant smell. Some species are cultivated for their resin,

³ P.-L. Thomas, *L'aoriste, temps de l'Histoire chez Danilo Kiš*, in *Temps de l'Histoire. Études sur Danilo Kiš*, éd. A. Prstojević, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003, pp. 55-83.

⁴ P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, eng. trans. by M. DeBevoise, Boston, Harvard University Press, 2004.

which is used as incense, while others are cultivated for their highly attractive reddish grained wood. If it had ended there, then this would just have been a simple error in translation. But having been tripped up in this way, I then realised that Mikša had used a knife with fine hardwood inlays, a tool far too valuable for a simple peasant, in order to kill a polecat. The polecat is an animal that is found in the forests of central Europe and that emits such a foul smell that this characteristic is even included in its scientific name, *Mustela putorius*. The aroma of the most delicate resins and the repugnant stench of the animal, brought together in a game of contrasts that is as rich as it is unnecessary. As part of the story, this detail did not seem to be of any importance for the development of the plot.

But the assassin's unusual tool also in itself represents the noble value that the bringer of justice ends up stamping on his own actions. His killings were ritual acts, he was not troubled by his conscience. Because the apprentice tailor associated the stench of the woodland animal with those *despicable* humans: «“Look for the thief among the Jews”, said Mikša. And Reb Mendel understood the strength of the insult».⁵ In the eyes of their neighbours, the Jews stank, and they therefore *deserved* the kind of treatment dished out to a polecat that was sneaking into a henhouse. In the end, the cruel apprentice revolutionary finally demonstrates that the word becomes flesh, and that what is first a thought ends up becoming a deed.

This is precisely the challenge faced when reading *A Tomb for Boris Davidovič* (1976). The most unpleasant detail can become like a silkworm's cocoon, providing metre upon metre of thread that an attentive reading can continually unravel and reconstruct. Kiš constructs his stories in a way that is clearly contrary to one of realistic detail. He has no wish to be a narrator who can fill the canvas with all kinds of minutiae in order to make it more real. He is not at all interested in whether the reader can recognise his world, reconstruct it as it is. The author himself said that what he took from the works of Jorge Luis Borges was his technique for organising reading, forcing the onlooker to become involved in the action. Kiš attributes Borges with the invention of *deduction* as a literary mechanism: the elements of the literary universe are a collection of words that are scrupulously chosen and placed in a precise position in order to elicit connections, such as the one between a polecat from the forests of Europe and a tree from a tropical jungle, twinned in a mortal embrace. In this way, thanks to this Borgesian technique, the world becomes *fantastic*, illuminated from within.

⁵ D. Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, eng. trans. by D. Miklić-Mitchell, New York, Penguin, 1980, p. 7.

A literary work built on the principle of deduction, like an enigma, cannot simply be observed, following the solid brushstrokes painted by the artist. Every gesture must instead be interpreted, the parallelisms noted, the exotic wood inlays on an everyday object recognised, if we take the example of this first image from the book.

To be precise, the knife with the rosewood handle is not the first image, because we first have the book's title and subtitle. The title is easy to decipher, though this does not make it any less frightening. This book of short stories is an offering, a cenotaph, an empty tomb erected in the memory of all those who never found peace because the place in which they died is unknown. Where is the tomb for Boris Davidovič, who chose to emulate the death of the prophet Elijah, throwing himself into the fire to be reduced to a column of smoke that swirled upwards into the heavens? The protagonist's tomb is a «tomb in the air», a permanent reminder of the victims whose bodies were supposed to be erased in the crematoria. Even though he documents the Stalinist terror, Kiš never forgets the price that was paid for the utopia of Nazi purity.

In this regard we should bear in mind the author's previous work, in which Kiš recounted his family history and described Nazi oppression in the Balkans. Kiš experienced this persecution at very close quarters. Nazism was the culmination of the "neurosis of fear", constant anxiety, trapped within the family circle, because for him, like many other Central European authors in the first half of the 20th century, Judaism was seen as a *Familienunglück* (a family curse), in the words of Heinrich Heine. When documenting this traumatic experience, the author creates his own way of confronting it:

The ideal of a witness account shared by a number of survivors from the nineteen-forties and fifties is founded on the provision of a restrained, dignified and thoughtful account that is chronologically ordered and rich in factual detail. In the writings of Kiš this is transformed into a fragmented novel built around a central figure who is no longer with us and whose words must therefore be reconstructed.⁶

Eduard Mendel (1889-1944), Danilo Kiš's father, was born Eduard Mendel Kohn in 1889 in a village called Kerkabarbás, in the South-West of what is now Hungary. His was the only Jewish family in the village. In 1903, Eduard Kohn was enrolled at the trade school in the city of Zalaegerszeg with the name Eduard Kiss. His obviously Jewish surname was changed for one that was very common in Hungary. 'Kiss' means 'little'

⁶ A. Prstojević, *Le sens de la forme. La Shoah, le roman et le "partage du sensible"*, in «Revue de Littérature Comparée», 1, 2009, pp. 85-100: p. 92.

in Hungarian. In 1920, Eduard moved to Subotica, then called Szabadka, whose inhabitants were mostly Hungarian. In 1918, following the fall of the Hapsburg Empire, the city fell within the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (SHS), just a few kilometres from the border. The Serbian spelling of the author's surname, Kiš, simply results from the phonetic transcription of his Hungarian surname, a standard procedure in Serbian orthography. His father worked for the Austro-Hungarian railway company from 1907 through to the collapse of the Empire in 1918, rising to the rank of chief supervisor. In 1920 he was taken on as an employee of the SHS State's national railway, and he continued to work there until 1928, when he was given early retirement in circumstances that are not entirely clear. The following year, 1929, following the reforms made by Alexander, the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs changed its name to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and would soon take a turn towards dictatorship.

In 1930, Eduard met Milica Dragičević (1903-1951), whom he married the following year. Danilo was born on 22 February 1935. His mother was a native of Montenegro and had come to the city to visit her sister, as her husband also worked on the railways. In 1937, the family moved to Novi Sad. In 1938, Eduard Kiš published *Konduktar*, a handbook for travellers which contained bus, ship, train and plane timetables for the whole of Yugoslavia.⁷ This publication was very important to Danilo Kiš, and it is often mentioned in his *Family Cycle* trilogy and other autobiographical texts.

Danilo Kiš's father was arrested in Novi Sad during the anti-Semitic operation known as the "Cold Days" in January 1942, but he later came home because the holes in the ice in the river Danube had become blocked with corpses and there was no room for any more. Following this traumatic event, the family returned to the small Hungarian village where Kiš's father had been born. Two years later, in 1944, his father was deported to the improvised ghetto in Zalaegerseg, and from there he was taken to Auschwitz. In 1947, with help from the Red Cross, his mother, Milica, was able to set up home with her two children in Cetinje, Montenegro, the town that she was originally from. Milica died in 1951 when the author was 16 years old.

Kiš grew up thinking that his father's illness had been caused by alcohol. He only discovered much later that his drinking was merely a symptom of a much more serious illness. At the beginning of the nineteen-seventies, Danilo learned that in 1934 Eduard had not been diagnosed with *delirium tremens* but had instead been found to be suffering from anxiety neurosis. From that moment on, the author was able to re-

⁷ B. Krstić, O. Tolnai, *Putovati znači živeti*, Subotica, [s.d.], 2013.

solve one of the great concerns of his childhood: «I learned that anxiety has for a long time been regarded as an endemic condition among the Jewish intelligentsia in Central Europe, and that patients began to drink in order to drown their deepest fears». Kiš also mentions that he himself had experienced this «terrible suffering» in his youth, which he describes as «a kind of metaphysical fear, fear and trembling. All of a sudden, with no visible exterior cause, the defence mechanism that lets you live with the knowledge of human mortality goes to pieces, and a menacing lucidity comes over you; an absolute lucidity, you could call it».⁸

Boris Davidovič is therefore an account that provides a mirror image, a counterpoint to the childhood memories that had so marked Danilo Kiš. The author constructed this set of short stories with minute precision, without being a direct witness of the Stalinist terror, in order to raise awareness of these crimes among all those people who insisted on ignoring the price that was ultimately paid for this utopian idea of a better world. The subtitle, *Seven Chapters of the Same Story*, clearly indicates that one is not expected to read this book as a *portrait* of the years of the Great Terror in the Soviet Union. The author's intention is not really to paint a picture, but rather to analyse, something that is very different. Kiš wants to get within, to penetrate the unfolding events, he wants to examine the subcutaneous tissue, to look at what is moving the entire system, to understand why the machinery has been set in motion and what energies are feeding all this cruelty, this fundamental lack of empathy.

Kiš reproached Borges for dedicating his *Universal History of Infamy* (1935) to the petty criminals of popular legend, ignoring the moral misery that surrounded them. It was for this reason that Kiš wanted to make use of the Argentinian's narrative technique to talk about the crimes that were the real infamy of twentieth century Europe. Danilo Kiš was an established author when in 1976 he published a work that was even more ground-breaking than its predecessors, a collection of related short stories entitled *A Tomb for Boris Davidovič*. Its publication caused the biggest literary scandal ever seen in Socialist Yugoslavia. Above all, it was Dragan Jeremić, Professor of Philosophy at Belgrade University, who tried to show in a number of articles and in his book *Narcissus without a Face* (1981) that Kiš had transfigured and altered testimony about the Stalinist terror from well-documented texts, also accusing him of using quotes and fragments from other works without citing his sources. Based on this latter claim he accused him directly of plagiarism. Dragoljub Golubović, the author of the first article attacking the book,

⁸ M. Thompson, *Birth certificate. The Story of Danilo Kiš*, Itaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2013, p. 9.

which was published in «Oko» magazine in Zagreb in June 1976 under the elegant title *A Necklace of Stolen Pearls*, went so far as to demand an examination of the accused's mental faculties in the resulting court action, and he tried to claim that Kiš's literary activities were serving the purposes of the Cold War. Fortunately, the writer was acquitted, but the fight continued and was not brought to an end until the publication of *The Anatomy Lesson* in 1978, and the volume edited by Boro Krivokapić with the eloquent title *Do we need to throw Danilo Kiš on the bonfire?* (1980), which ran to more than four hundred pages and brought together the various contributions to this controversy. Following this, his detractors fell silent under the weight of the arguments.⁹

II. The footnote to history

Danilo Kiš is capable of showing us the points of no return and all those tragic, irreparable, absolutely definitive mistakes. And he is therefore able to write a "footnote to history", like the one noted by *the translator* under one of the passages from *Dogs and Books*:

In the diocese of Pamiers, the Jews had, according to the provisions of Arnaud Dejean's decree, the right to live freely. This decree, which forbade the inhabitants and civil authorities from behaving in an excessively severe or cruel way towards the Jews, shows that, in difficult times, personal attitudes and the bravery of individual citizens can change an outcome that the timid believe to be unavoidable, convinced as they are that this is fate and something that is historically ordained.¹⁰

This "footnote" by a fictitious translator is not commenting on a passage from the book but instead on the entire history of the twentieth century. Whether or not cruelty is imposed as the only recourse depends on each one of us. In Tito's Yugoslavia during the nineteen-seventies, Stalin seemed little more than a remote memory, as forgettable as he was for the French left that emerged from May 1968. The Soviets never occupied this territory militarily, and in 1948 Tito wanted to cut all ties with them. However, in 1976 Danilo Kiš's book acted as an explosive force, because it exposed the lie in the assumption that Yugoslavia was an almost democratic country, a country in which freedom of thought was respected, the country that enjoyed «Socialism with a human face». The reactions that the book provoked in the circles of power demonstrated the uncomfortable nature of this allegorical reading. It wasn't that people in Yugoslavia didn't know what the Soviet Union was,

⁹ B. Krivokapić, *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, Zagreb, Globus, 1980.

¹⁰ D. Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* cit., p. 160.

or that they were unaware of its repressive Stalinist methods, it was that no-one was able to make the people imagine that they, perhaps, were also living in circumstances in which this hidden terror was also happening.

In 1956 there was a meeting between Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971) and Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980) which, as well as seeking to bring the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia closer together, served to resolve some of the grievances that the Yugoslav state still felt towards the former Soviet leader, Stalin. Tito knew that more than a hundred Yugoslav activists had vanished without a trace somewhere within that vast country, and he asked for a search to be carried out for potential survivors. A search was started on the orders of the highest authorities. From places in Siberia, where the living were sent to die, of the hundred or so that were missing only thirteen came back alive. One of them was Karlo Štajner, who recounted his moving experiences in the book *7,000 days in Siberia*, which was published in Zagreb in 1971 and proclaimed «book of the year».¹¹ This detailed chronicle of the Stalinist terror raised no suspicions about Tito's regime, though by contrast, Kiš's short stories did, despite the fact that the content of both books is more or less the same. This once again confirmed that Communist orthodoxy «could only be criticised when the regime required it and in the way that the regime required it».¹² Štajner makes a brief reference, for example, to a certain butcher called Miška. In Kiš's hands, this brief passage from a history book becomes a canvas on which the unforgettable character from the first story, the throat-slitting Mikša, is brought to life. The events recounted by the original author in a couple of paragraphs are expanded in Kiš's short story to fill some twenty pages. Kiš's book is not, therefore, a work that was created from scratch, but rather an ingenious rearrangement of documents that already existed.

In Yugoslavia it took many years, indeed, right through to the nineteen-eighties, before people began to become aware of the existence of the «social re-education camps» that this country with a “human face” had run in the most absolute secrecy for decades. Danilo Kiš's final work was the documentary *Goli život* (1989, “Bare Life”) about the island Goli otok, (Bare Island), a rock in the middle of the Adriatic without any vegetation which housed the largest of the prison camps. The film recounts the conditions in which two young Jewish women are deported to the island, from which one could see the coast, even though mentioning its very existence was forbidden. In these two interviews recorded in Israel shortly before his death, Kiš was able to show where the

¹¹ K. Štajner, *7000 dana u Sibiru*, Zagreb, Globus, 1971.

¹² B. Shehu, «*Quién teme a Danilo Kiš?*», in «República de las Letras», 80, 2003, pp. 17-22: p. 20.

greatest cruelty of the Tito regime lay. It was repression on an entirely arbitrary basis; there were no rules by which one could predict who might end up in this penal colony in the middle of the sea. Deportations were selective, limited and entirely secret. People just simply “disappeared”. The deported also included victims of the “Dachau processes” which were held in Ljubljana between 1947 and 1949 against survivors of Dachau concentration camp. Those who returned were suspected of having survived because they had collaborated with the Nazis. One of those who left Yugoslavia a few days after returning from Dachau was Zoran Mušič (1909-2005), a painter who ended up living in Venice and is known for his disturbing cycle *We Are Not the Last*, a series of gigantic canvases painted in vivid colours depicting bodies piled up in front of the cremation ovens. We should bear all of this in mind if we want to understand the spark that resulted in the huge literary controversy against Danilo Kiš's book in Yugoslavia.

The glory of Tito's Yugoslavia was based, along with its unity, on the idea of an epic world founded ultimately on the wars of the twentieth century. One could talk about the suffering, about the horror, but one could never question whether there was any point to these wars, or whether they were truly inevitable. Kiš, with his 1976 revision of the Russian revolution found himself indirectly up against the revolutionary myth on which the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was founded, the belief that one day, through bloodshed and fire, a new people and a new world would emerge.

Kiš managed to explain to his people that they were also living in a world in which they were deprived of the most basic freedoms, even though Yugoslavia presented a smiling and tolerant face with regard to the *folkloric* differences between the nations from which it was made up. Josip Broz Tito, leader of the revolution, Head of State and Marshall of the armed forces, died in 1980, and with his death the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1943-1991) went into a visible decline. In its happiest and most prosperous times, Tito's Yugoslavia was a cultural space in which it was possible for Danilo Kiš's books to be published equally in both Zagreb and Belgrade. Sales of successive editions of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovič*, issued by the emblematic Belgrade BIGZ publishing house and published, as was the custom of the time, in Latin script with the aim of reaching the maximum possible number of readers, reached 100,000 in just a few years, itself demonstrating that Kiš was not short of readers.

The controversy faced by Kiš showed that, still in the 1970s, there was a dogmatic and intransigent elite hard core in Yugoslavia that was willing to defend the established model at all costs. In a prophetic way,

Kiš described a parallel to the political, social and cultural panorama towards which Serbia ended up moving in the nineties. The Occitania of the fourteenth century, the expansion of Nazi fascism across the continent of Europe, the immensity of the Soviet territories subject to Stalin's terror and Slobodan Milošević's Serbia during the period of Yugoslavia's disintegration, all of these show the same signs of a severe pathology of the social fabric; all opposition was to be silenced, annihilated or converted, whichever was more convenient. «Safely dead», wrote Susan Sontag in her obituary, «he could be eulogized by the mediocrities who had always envied him and had engineered his literary excommunication, and who would then proceed – as Yugoslavia fell apart – to become official writers of the new post-Communist, national chauvinist order».¹³

III. The banality of an ordinary life

The aim of *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* seems from the outset to stem from «post-memory», as this is defined by Marianne Hirsch: «It promised to propose forms of justice outside of the hegemonic structures of the strictly juridical, and to engage in advocacy and activism on behalf of individuals and groups whose lives and whose stories have not yet been thought».¹⁴ But Kiš goes far beyond just telling a story that has not yet been told. Reality and text are frequently and intentionally confused.¹⁵

In the story from which this collection of short stories gets its title, we enter a secret underground library that contains details of the lives of ordinary people, all those who have not left any lasting memory. We understand that the rooms in this enormous space are organised alphabetically. However, we have to remember that 'alphabet' in Serbian is 'azbuca', and this work comes from the first two letters of Old Church Slavonic, 'az' and 'buki'. The order of the letters in this mysterious library is therefore not the same as that of the Latin alphabet. This classification serves to introduce one of the themes of the story, which is how can one bring order to the immense diversity in the world? Is alphabetical order as obvious as it seems? Serbian, which is Danilo Kiš's language, is a separate case, because as well as being written in Cyrillic it can also be written in Latin script. Both writing systems co-exist and remain in use. In Cyrillic, organising the letters "alphabetically" has nothing to do with the idea of organising an encyclopaedia from *a* to *z*.

¹³ S. Sontag, *Danilo Kiš*, in «Partisan Review», 62, 3, 1995, pp. 372-375: p. 375.

¹⁴ M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 16.

¹⁵ S. Boym, *Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and the Protocols of Zion*, in «Comparative Literature», 51, 2, 1999, pp. 97-122.

The Encyclopaedia of the Dead (1983) offers a highly perceptive analysis of the process of mystifying an experience. Any accidental event can be converted into part of a collective consciousness and subsequently evoked as if it had always been present. The eponymous short story creates a space that is literally mythical, a space with an absolute, ineradicable, eternal presence. Not only with his use of the aorist tense, which I have already mentioned, but also with his misuse of the present in a narrative about the past, Danilo Kiš bends the possibilities of the tenses of the verb.¹⁶ The more internal structure of this short story is a true provocation and a challenge to the mythical perception of time. Kiš wants to examine the nature of traditional stories, but also the nature of the creative prose of the Balkans of that time. He takes the reader to a point where they are separated from the fictional universe, as if to force them to see the actual form, the innate structure of the story.

The protagonist is not only “remembered” in this story, he is made literally present. The power of *The Encyclopaedia* is just this, it can rescue lives from death, it can make something that once was continue to be, unchanged, eternally present. In this way Danilo Kiš creates a short circuit between the simple human desire to preserve everything one loves and the manipulation that is inevitable when the compiling of records is institutionalised. What is remarkable about this work is that the author doesn’t just reflect on this problem, he actually makes these contradictions form part of the very structure of the story. Kiš creates instant flashes of memory and freezes moments in which past and present become confused.

The plot was a gift from Mirjana [Miočinović], the story’s dedicatee; for the dream of an encyclopaedia was hers, and the father figure, “Đ.M.,” was based on her father, Đura Miočinović (1910-1979). He and Kiš were very close and shared certain convictions; according to Mirjana, her father never had a good word to say about any nation, beginning with his own, the Serbs.¹⁷

This literary character really seems to be very good natured, a little absent-minded and eccentric, but completely harmless politically and historically irrelevant, unconnected with all the important events. If we make a superficial reading of the story, if we tie together the anecdotes of a life as if they were biographical details compiled in some fortuitous way, we could see Đ.M. as an anonymous hero, and he could be any one

¹⁶ V. Pilipović, *The Serbian Present Tense and its English Equivalents in a Narrative Text*, in «Linguistics and Literature», 11, 1, 2013, pp. 13-21.

¹⁷ M. Thompson, *Birth certificate* cit., p. 285, n. 111.

of us who have not made a place for ourselves in history. But I suppose that it is now clear that we cannot read Kiš in such an offhand way. Đ.M., retired railway worker, stamp collector and father is merely a construct, a deliberate construct that shows us a particular *banality of evil*.

A more attentive reading of this story reveals that Danilo Kiš was conscious of the dangers of Serbian hegemony and of all the ghosts that could rise from the ashes. Kiš did not mourn the state that had emerged from the Titoist revolution but instead dreamed of something completely different. «Quietly Kiš adds a simple statement that is actually worthy of headlines in the context of this debate: the Europe to which Central Europe compares itself includes not just Judeo-Christian traditions, but also the Byzantine and the Ottoman ones».¹⁸ The debates of the 1980s, when developments in Central Europe affected discussions on the whole of Europe in its entirety, and attempts were made to define the future of a continent without ideological divisions, went against «fatalistic subjugation to the determining power of a fractured zone».¹⁹ We must understand that the Balkans are not a powder keg that are always on the point of exploding, and that the guardianship of a hegemonic nation is never going to be the solution. A city such as Sarajevo was besieged and destroyed by Serbian forces precisely because it was an example of the peaceful co-existence of religions and cultures that rejected the need for homogenisation.

No less interesting than the use of certain verb tenses is the origin of some words. The frequency of borrowed terms that come from a wide variety of languages is notable. The message here is that any literary language is a multi-hued jigsaw of complex influences. No language can be reduced to one single and pure source, something that is of especial significance in the Balkans. Serbian is a language that has allowed itself to be strongly influenced by French, in the hope of mirroring that cosmopolitan culture. Thus, *cauchemar* in this sense becomes *košmar*, a word used in everyday language without seeming at all odd. I have preserved this borrowed language in my translation, in order to create small hurdles that the reader will encounter and thus be forced to reflect on the cultural background that we share in Europe, where the most diverse ideas have been passed from one language to another, mutually enriching us all.

Also interesting in this regard is the use of a word of Arabic origin, *haramia*, in the context of religious arguments between Jews and Christians in the story based on the legend of Simon Magus. *Haram* in clas-

¹⁸ J.K. Cox, *The Adriatic-Baltic Transversal: Danilo Kiš Through the Prism of Baltic Writing on Essentialism and Diversity*, in «Interliteraria», 20, 2, 2015, pp. 79-87: pp. 84-85.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 86.

sical Arabic means anything that is impure, as opposed to *halal*, which refers to practices that are permitted under Islamic law. Without explicitly saying so, by choosing to use words made available to him by a language marked by long periods of Ottoman occupation, a language in which Islamic concepts are therefore integrated into one's everyday vocabulary, Kiš expands the contextual space in which to make his reflection. By choosing these words he is able to include the third monotheistic religion, Islam, and its presence and influence in these same debates, without actually mentioning it specifically. At the same time, with the use of these words the author is denying the purity of the Serbian language, exposing it to the Islamic tradition and legacy that also forms part of this territory.

As with the use of these "intrusive" words, particularly in the eponymous story in *The Encyclopaedia*, there is a very specific use of place names. Kraljevčani, for example, is a small village in the frontier region between Croatia and Bosnia, on the secular border with the Ottoman Empire. The historical region of Banija (Kiš purposefully uses its old name) became one of the hot spots in the war of the 1990s, and it is one of the territories in which open hostilities first broke out between Serbs and Croats, initially in the form of small, isolated and seemingly unconnected actions. It should never be forgotten that the aggressor was Serbia, in a well-organised joint action between the regular army of the Yugoslav Federation (JNA) and Serbian paramilitary units. The main problem was that the federal government became complicit in the ideology of a Greater Serbia right from the beginning of the conflict, and it used its regular armed forces to this end, in addition to arming or helping to arm members of the Serbian civilian population who were living outside the borders of the Federal Republic of Serbia.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Danilo Kiš was already aware of the potential magnitude of the tragedy if the mythologisation of history continued on this course. There are therefore details in this story that create a window through which we are shown issues that are extremely difficult to face. Kiš forces his readers, if indeed they wish make a serious reading of the story, to adopt a highly critical attitude. The author does not allow us any kind of respite in the empty slogans of politically correct language. His challenge is basically addressed to virulent Serbian nationalism. The author takes a critical position towards the nation and the culture to which he himself felt he belonged. What he examines in this story is how the legendary touchstones of a powerful nation have been constructed. In Serbia, the people who lived their nice simple lives were never actually aware of the poison contained in these touchstones and the beliefs that they cultivated.

For the majority of his Western admirers, Danilo Kiš denounces the dangers of nationalism. But what this assessment overlooks is that Kiš is denouncing Serbian nationalism, the nationalism of Yugoslavia's hegemonic nation, the supposed bedrock of that federal state. Tito's Yugoslavia did not disintegrate as the result of the disobedience of peripheral nationalisms, but because Josip Broz's Communist regime never succeeded in creating a truly plural and democratic society. Communism acted as an enforced binding agent, which became a dogma that did not permit any deviation. Indeed, it was during the Tito regime that this transformation of the past into a mythical narrative was encouraged, based on the heroic origins of the Yugoslav "nation", a narrative that was completely ahistorical, non-critical and easy to manipulate. With the coming to power of a politician as skilled as Slobodan Milošević, this Communist dogma was transformed into the golden legend of the nation of Serbia.

However, the people of Yugoslavia had been trained not to examine the past and not to think critically, not to have the capacity to evaluate anything other than the arguments about purity and unconditional belonging. This is the evil that Danilo Kiš denounces, aware of the fact that any nation that denies its plural past will destroy its future, as his own biographer also observed:

The ideology of Yugoslav unitarism had expired, unmourned, in the 1960s. Communism in Europe was weakening, but Yugoslavia had generated very little liberal or democratic energy to exploit or accelerate this trend. Instead, the initiative lay with nationalist intellectuals – such as Dobrica Ćosić and Gojko Ćogo – who saw neighbouring nations as the enemy. The 1980s saw the creation or resurrection of nationalist myths, drawing on the traditionalism and authoritarianism that were deeply rooted in Yugoslav society. This process went fastest and farthest in Serbia.²⁰

Kiš died in 1989, when open hostilities, though generally expected, had still not broken out. However, the author knew that stories persisted regarding the incorruptible national (and religious!) origins of the Serbs, and that all of this mythology was capable of creating a state of war. The Serbian population, historically established in Croatia in enclaves located along the entire border with Bosnia, was heavily armed, and it was isolated incidents involving these people during 1991 which lit the fuse for a war that then spread rapidly, like a wildfire.²¹ Croatia was simultaneously attacked by the Yugoslav army while at the same time

²⁰ M. Thompson, *Birth certificate* cit., p. 291.

²¹ D. Matanić, *Zvizdan [The High Sun]*, Croatia, 2015, 123 min.

being sabotaged from within in hostile actions perpetrated by Serbian civilians who had lived within Croatian territory for centuries. However, Croatia quickly organised its defences and succeeded in holding on to its land. Croatian history books now speak about this period as the “domovinski rat” (Homeland War). Operation “Storm” (Oluja) lasted from 3 to 5 August 1995, and its actual purpose was ethnic cleansing: expelling the Serbs who were still living in their homes within the territory of Croatia. This operation is celebrated as a great victory in Croatia, to the extent that 5 August is celebrated as a national holiday. Some of its architects, such as General Ante Gotovina, were accused by the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague of crimes against humanity (2011), though this in no way changed the widespread view in Croatia that still persists and that maintains that it was essential to eliminate or physically expel from the country anyone who might become hostile agents.

Many of the cities in *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* share the common feature that they are important railway hubs. We should remember that Danilo Kiš's own father worked for the railway company. As with cartographers who draw maps, railway workers are responsible for constructing a territory's physical links so that a country ends up materialising into an imagined community. The plot of this story originates from a reflection on who these men are who make it possible to construct the symbolic infrastructure required in order to create a nation state.

As a result of the events of his own life, and particularly that of his father, Kiš was not short of arguments to show how the State takes advantage of individuals but will equally abandon them in the event of the slightest problem in order to replace them with others who can perform the same tasks more faithfully, depending on the current moment in history. That which we perceive as almost eternal, a map with its defined borders or a railway network, are here spaces in a state of continual construction and reconstruction. States collapse and are reconstructed in a different way, making use of the existing physical infrastructure as well as the mechanisms of symbolic cohesion. The people who suffer from this abusive construction and reconstruction are clearly the individuals who have to adapt to new patterns and new requirements for belonging.

In telling the story of his protagonist, Kiš is describing the progress of a new State, the Yugoslavia that emerged in 1918 as the result of the First World War, a State that did not know any internal boundaries and that supposedly allowed its population to move freely, particularly within the space in which Serbo-Croat was spoken. The language spoken in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and also in Montenegro is

mutually understood and, as a result of this ability to communicate, this large area was theoretically accessible to all without requiring any additional effort. The protagonist is born in a small village close to Sisak, in central Croatia, he completes his baccalaureate in the medium-sized city of Vojvodina (now in Serbia) and then first sets up home in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, before going to live for fifty years in Belgrade, the Serbian capital. Similarly to the way he had done with Joseph Roth, the chestnut seller who travelled across the vast expanse of the Hapsburg Empire, Kiš describes the complexity of Balkan co-existence through the use of the *burek*, a culinary institution that extends throughout all the regions that have formed part of the Federation, from Slovenia to Macedonia. This is a savoury pastry made with a very fine flaky and crispy dough and filled with cheese or minced meat. It is usually made and sold in small patisseries or street stalls run by Kosovar or Bosnian families. The cohesion created by Empires or multinational States allows for the creation of these spontaneous networks, through which the influence of cultures that are not always visible or even accepted can be extended. With these seemingly unimportant details, Danilo Kiš repeatedly reminds his readers that the nation of Serbia is a conglomerate, formed from many layers, with many different influences.

For Yugoslavia to be able to function, the Serbs would have had to be able to accept their own diversity; this could be one of the author's messages. Here is where the Yugoslav experiment failed. From 1990 onwards, Serbia devoted itself to justifying its own purity and uniqueness. The possibility of belonging was based on characteristics of exclusion. Kiš criticises this gestation of nationalist symbolism using references to books like *Hajduk Stanko* (1896) by Janko Veselinović, which talks about the Serbs' heroic resistance against Turkish domination. This portrays the figure of the Hajduk, the Serbian combatants who hid in the forests and made incursions against Ottoman power with the support of the civilian population. Svetolik Ranković's *Gorski car* ("The King of the Mountains", 1897) is also mentioned. This is a critical account of those men from the forests who have taken justice into their own hands. Basing his depiction on an attack suffered by his own family, in which his father was killed and other members of his family were tortured, he denounces the brutality of which these people were capable. In addition to these two classic Serbian works, *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* also quotes the most well-known Croatian author from the end of the 19th century, August Šenoa, and his novel *Seljačka buna* ("The Peasants' Revolt", 1887), which describes the great revolt against serfdom led by Matija Gubec in 1573 that affected land in southern Slovenia, central Croatia and Dalmatia.

This combination of literary references is quite strange, and could also be regarded as a denunciation of ideological intoxication. The common thread that unites these books is the idea of a necessary struggle against unfair domination. The theme of a kind of heroism that is inherent in every town throughout Yugoslavia was one that was clearly highly promoted during the Presidency of Marshall Tito, and it rests on the fact that the partisans succeeded in liberating the territory of Yugoslavia without any external military help. Stories about a rebel peasant and an irrepressible Hajduk were thus joined by epic accounts of the actions of the partisans. For generations, therefore, these stories about combatants who had fought for an ideal that was more important than their own individual lives were the ones that fed the imaginations of young people, filling them with a sense of lost grandeur and unfair exploitation.

The central theme in the story that we are analysing here is that the protagonist starts to draw strange flowers on the wall, which in the end are revealed to be a likeness of the carcinoma that is killing him from the inside. At this point it is worth recalling that, «Aristotle called the climatic discovery of identity *anagnorisis*, its *locus classicus* being when the foundling Oedipus ('swollen foot') realizes his relationship to the father who named him by marking his feet with a wound».²² What kind of *anagnorisis* is represented, then, by those mysterious flowers on the wall that indicate that an incurable disease has begun to consume one's body?

We know that Kiš died prematurely in 1989 from a virulent lung cancer (he was an inveterate smoker), and we cannot completely discount the fact that he was intuitively aware of this some years before his illness was confirmed. Cancer is also frequently used as a metaphor to describe social pathologies. It is an unpleasant comparison, but this story requires us to make a very serious examination of this rhetorical device. Is a pensioner who is bored and who collects stamps offered here as a representation of that banality, that inertia, that lack of awareness that allows destructive ideas to spread as if they were of no importance?

Behind the moments of beauty in his prose, there is a deep analytical work that has the capacity to document both personal and collective traumas. Kiš uses these moments of beauty to show us the head of Medusa, reflected in the mirror.

²² J. Emery, *Danilo Kiš's Metafictional Genealogies*, in «The Slavic and East European Journal», 59, 3, 2015, pp. 391-412; p. 396.