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BRANKO GORJUP

Danilo Kiš: From “Enchantment” to “Documentation”

The expression that literature feeds upon itself points to the self-generating character of literature which aspires to remain enclosed within the fictive world of all writing. For centuries, writers of fiction and poetry have transposed existing literary and non-literary material into their own works. This practice of “borrowing” from the universal library of accumulated texts, particularly on the level of plot, or of extracting fragments from the works of others, with or without acknowledgement, to be used as structural units for the creation of a new fictional composition, has crystalized into an accepted and studied literary convention in the post-Borghes period. With the publication of *Grobnica za Borisa Davidovića* (*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*) Danilo Kiš has emerged as one of the foremost practitioners of and a learned apologist for his type of poetics.

Throughout his writing career, Kiš has questioned the role of the muse as the source of inspiration. He has rejected the concept that invention determines the level of originality, and his fiction has inclined towards the documentary method of writing. Rooted in cool intelligence and drawn towards objectivity, the writer of documentary fiction delights in arranging all of the “borrowed” fragments—regardless of whether they are documents, *quasi* documents, or imaginative literature treated as documents—into an integrated and uniquely personal mode of expression. Kiš’s work, especially *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (*The Encyclopedia of the Dead*), has been described as “documentary” fiction, or “faction,” a term that Kiš has himself used when referring to the prose he has produced in the past decade.¹

The development of Kiš’s fiction is strongly marked by a fluidity of continuous change. The most dramatic shift occurred when he departed from those literary principles that he formulated in his early works, such as *Mansarda* (*Mansard*), *Psalm 44*, and in the first two books of “Porodični ciklus” (“The Family Cycle”): *Bašta pepeo* (*Garden, Ashes*) and *Rani jadi* (*Early Sorrows*). In that initial phase, Kiš located himself within the tradi-

1. Velimir Isković, “Nasljedovanje ili plagiranje,” in Boro Krivokapić (Ed.), *Treba li spaliti Kiša?* (Zagreb, 1980), p. 84.

tion of realism, and, like other realists, sought to project his literary version of reality through the creation of a believable central consciousness and the recreation of a faithful physical and cultural setting for its placement. Nevertheless, Kiš's perception of reality, as he has suggested on several occasions in his critical essays, differs significantly from that of those realists whose narrative technique hinges exclusively upon the use of mimesis.

In his early work, Kiš employed a number of features of realism. His stories were dominated by either a central consciousness or the subject's psyche whose role was to mediate between the author and the reader. Whether the story assumed the third-person point of view of an outside narrator or that of the first person, told by one of the characters from within the story, the function of either source of narrative was ultimately identified with that of a screen upon which the author projected both his vision of the world and his perception of reality.

Central to this type of narrative technique are the created psychological portraits of the characters involved in the internal cosmology of the work but who, in effect, reflect the external world of the writer's memories, dreams, and nightmares, or his experiences of the time and space in which he lives.² In such a relationship between author and reader, it is expected that the reader should rely almost entirely on the narrator's system of values, or on his ego, as a sufficient guarantor of truth. When, for example, one reads *Garden, Ashes*, it appears as if the narrator is asking the reader: "Have you experienced this? If not, I will tell you all about it." The reader is then presented with the story of a man who revisits the place of his childhood and early adolescence in search of his father, a protean figure who escapes definition.

In the quest for the father, Kiš investigated the narrator's inner life, the destinies of Eduard Scham, the protagonist of "The Family Cycle," and of his family on the eve of the Second World War. Through the narrator's memory, Kiš reconstructed Scham's bizarre life and his mysterious disappearance, both facilitated by his formidable learning, his challenging non-conformism, and his Jewishness. *Garden, Ashes* was Kiš's reconstruction of the world he knows best, a world of his childhood and adolescence which he wished the reader to perceive as believable.

In a published interview, Kiš pointed out that in his early work he left it "up to the reader to believe" his words. His intention was to "try to de-

2. Tvrtko Kulenović, "Kiš i Borghes: sličnosti i razlika," in Krivokapić (Ed.), *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, p. 87.

ceive the reader” through the manipulation of the language so as to convey “doubts” and “trepidations” associated with a child’s growing pains and early sorrows. The success of this “deception” depended upon the effect of “recognition” on the part of the reader. The magic use of words, the reliance on “Valery’s *charmes*,” according to Kiš, were the only literary means “to win over” the reader in order to convince him that what he is reading is not “a mere invention of an idle person, but rather a specific truth and experience.”³

The notion of “deception” through the use of language to enchant the reader into accepting the illusion of a created reality as reality places Kiš outside the mainstream realists who sought to reproduce reality as closely as possible. In order to render the subject’s world real, they, unlike Kiš, relied on an accurate and detailed transcription of that world. With *Peščanik (The Hourglass)*, however, the last novel from “The Family Cycle,” Kiš’s method of convincing or “deceiving” the reader about the “truthfulness” of the written text began a process of transformation. The illusion of reality previously conjured up by the magic power of words was replaced in *The Hourglass* by a reality created on the basis of “documents,” letters, diaries, and citations from official registers. Although most of these “documents” were apocryphal, they were intended to instill a sense of authority and authenticity into the text. In addition, a more detached and objective third-person voice replaced the intimate, confessional, first-person one, thus further minimizing the subjective quality of the novel.

With the publication of *The Hourglass*, Kiš exploded conventional narrative technique, such as the chronological unfolding of plot through time, and left in its place a loose structure composed of fragments. Dispersed through the novel but held together by four headings—“Scenes from a Journey,” “Notes of a Madman,” “The Method of Inquiry,” and “Questioning of a Witness”—these fragments presented four different stories “derived” from diverse sources. With such a multiple viewing, Kiš reduced the function of the narrator to the bare minimum and, in turn, reinforced an “objectified” presentation of Eduard Scham’s character. While the participation of the narrator was reduced, that of the reader was increased because he was expected to fill in the empty spaces and make the necessary corrections.

The vast amount of “documentary” material that Kiš used to prop up Scham’s character might appear incidental to Scham’s existence, but, as

3. Danilo Kiš, “Banalnost je neuništiva kao plastična boca,” interview in Kri-vokapić (Ed.), *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, p. 69.

one critic has suggested, this material was necessary because it revealed Scham's essence.⁴ The importance that Kiš attributes to "insignificant" material, such as the biographical fragments that ordinary people usually leave to the oblivion of time, is best illustrated in a passage from "Scenes from a Journey":

. . . perhaps this small fragment from the family history, this short chronicle, carries as much weight as those biographies which, when they appear after many years, or even millennia, become testimonies of their time—and here it is not important who their authors were—just as with the fragments from the manuscripts found in the Dead Sea or in numerous temples or on the walls of prisons.⁵

This scene describes Scham's realization of the importance of his personal notes which contain a brief history of his family. Scham becomes aware of the importance of all written material, particularly of all the anonymous fragments of texts scattered around the world, out of which, for the most part, human history has been woven.

The use of fragments as a structural principle was also reflected on the level of metaphor. Scham's immensely complex personality, bursting out of four separate textual segments, suggested the protagonist's psychological disintegration. As the segments revealed, there were at least four different Schams with four separate personalities. Formed on the basis of apocryphal documentation, each unique Scham was determined by the author's technique of spotlighting one predominant feature in the protagonist's psychological make-up. This was accomplished through the selection and manipulation of the appropriate "documentation." The ultimate effect of putting together all the segments was not the creation of a fully developed character but rather of an unfinished portrait, suggesting the impossibility of completion as well as the many-sided nature of reality.

Although in *The Hourglass* Kiš entirely abandoned realism, his use of the documentary method was only tentative. The documentary material in this transitional work, for example, the letter at the end of the novel, the journal, the transcription of the police interrogation, and the various citations of fines, court summonses, and newspaper articles, was false. Kiš invented these "documents" for the purpose of objectifying the text by creating an "authentic" cold and neutral tone, devoid of dramatic in-

4. Vuk Krnjević, "Kišev porodični ciklus," *Književnost*, 73, no. 1-2 (January-February 1982), p. 10.

5. Danilo Kiš, *Peščanik* (Belgrade, 1972), p. 17.

tensity and psychological intent. With the publication of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Kiš expanded the scope of the documentary to include the actual literary and para-literary sources in the structure of the novel.

In *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, which consists of seven chapters united by the theme of "one common history," Kiš's fiction makes use of documentary material in two distinct ways. First, most of the plots in the work are derived or borrowed from already-existing sources of varied literary significance, some easily recognizable—for example, those extracted from Roy Medvedev and Karl Steiner—while others are more obscure. Second, Kiš employs the technique of textual transposition, whereby entire sections or series of fragments, often in their unaltered state, are taken from other texts and freely integrated into the fabric of his work.⁶

In terms of poetic sensibility, Kiš, who once stated that the history of fiction can be divided into the pre- and post-Borghes periods, belongs to the latter, at least since the publication of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*.⁷ With Borghes, Kiš shares an attitude to fiction according to which the source of the material used for the new composition is not important in itself. Instead, what is essential is the manner in which the borrowed material is shaped. In this type of writing the structural fragments are not selected for their aesthetic or moral values, but rather for their power to evoke the works from which they were extracted. The ultimate success of the textual transposition is the ability of the new text to emanate fresh meaning that is independent of the sources from which the fragments have been taken.⁸

Kiš's departure from Borghes is significant especially in view of his original application of the documentary method in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. Unlike Borghes, Kiš formulates his plots from historically and poli-

6. Because of an extensive textual transposition of existing literature into *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Kiš was viciously attacked by a group of Yugoslav writers, critics, and journalists. They went as far as to accuse him of plagiarism, thus setting the stage for one of the most infamous polemics carried in the pages of Yugoslav magazines and literary journals. In the book *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, Krivokapić produced an invaluable collection of letters, interviews, and scholarly investigations, which can serve as an illuminating document of an attempt on the part of a literary establishment to commit both Kiš and his work to the consuming fire of provincial narrowness of vision and self-interest.

7. Danilo Kiš, *Čas anatomije* (Belgrade, 1981), p. 52.

8. Velimir Visković, "Rekonstrukcija 'poetičke podloge,'" in Krivokapić (Ed.), *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, p. 326.

tically relevant material. While Borghes's fiction heavily extends its references to life's extraordinary manifestations, involving metaphysical elements, that of Kiš gravitates towards more ordinary phenomena, defined by temporal references. As shown in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Kiš takes over from fiction those historical elements which, like Stalinism, are still remembered by contemporaries.

By treating the literature of others as documents and by consulting history for specific temporal references, Kiš's fiction, exemplified by *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, assumes the quality of truthfulness, credibility, and, above all, authenticity. The illusion of an accurate reality, convincing to the reader, is achieved through the author's intimate knowledge of the period in which his work is set. This knowledge, according to Kiš, this accurate understanding of the period's cultural sensibility, psychological and philosophical perceptions, and precise topography, may be gained from numerous literary and non-literary sources. By presenting a collective response to one of the period's unique features—for example, to Stalinism, at the time of Stalin—Kiš's use of "documents" imparted to *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* the necessary tone of authoritative objectivity.

Derived from different sources, the stories presented by the seven chapters in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* are thematically in agreement; they reveal the irony of the tragic lives of those who fell victim to the very political system they had helped to create. As a counterpoint to the time of Stalin, Kiš moves one story into fourteenth-century southern France, at the time of intense Jewish pogroms, in order to indicate temporal and spatial analogies and emphasize the cyclical nature of history.

The tendency of the documentary method to present the subject objectively checks the author's temptation to diagnose the subject's character arbitrarily; it prevents him from turning the subject into his own projection. In his cool anatomizing of the diabolic nature of Stalinism in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Kiš refrained from pointing an accusing finger at a particular nation or race. Nor did he question the meaning or the validity of the ideal in which "sacrificed" revolutionaries fervently believed until the very end. Instead, as in the title story, based on the life of Boris Davidovich Lenski, Kiš portrayed the moral integrity and psychological endurance of an individual who, despite torture, refused to confess to the accusations fabricated against him by his former co-revolutionaries.

In *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, the latest collection of short stories, Kiš pursued the application of the documentary method; however, he reinforced its prosaic character to such an extent as to reveal the "crazy" patchwork of bizarre facts operating on the level of ordinary experience.

The illusion of reality which in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* the documentary method so successfully objectified is in *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* inverted, echoing Kiš's dictum that "nothing is more fantastic than reality."⁹ The effect of the documentary in *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, as one critic has noted, was to give ordinary reality the appearance of the fantastic.¹⁰ Another source of the fantastic within the framework of ordinary experience is created through Kiš's choice of characters. Since *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, his fiction has explored the crooked alleys and dark corners of reality experienced by individuals who belong, in most cases, to the margins of general history and have been lost in the anonymous grave of the vast multitudes of common people.

The title story "The Encyclopedia of the Dead" illustrates the process by which Kiš inverts a given reality. The prosaic, the outer framework of the story, reveals the fantastic, which it contains, when the narrator informs the reader that more than half the story already told is simply a dream of the main character. In the dream, part of the story of a female protagonist is described during a visit to unusual archives in which the lives of all dead people, except the famous, whose lives have been documented elsewhere, are preserved in every single detail.¹¹ In an excerpt from the vast encyclopedia of the dead which, in fact, constitutes the core of the story, the life of the protagonist's father is disclosed. The tone of the passage is encyclopedic, detached, monotonous, yet meticulous. The narrative approach also follows the technique used by the encyclopedists, that of summarizing long sections from the life of a person and of reducing all events from that subject's life to the same level of significance. The documentary method, in this case, based on the apocryphal encyclopedia, imparts to the biography of the father the illusion of existential seriousness.

9. Kiš, *Čas anatomije*, p. 62.

10. Goran Bojić, "Enciklopedija i leksikografija—Najnovije proze Milorada Pavića i Danila Kiša," *Savremenik*, Nos. 1-2 (January-February 1986), p. 98.

11. In his notes to *Enciklopedija mrtvih* Kiš relates that following the publication of the title story from the collection in *Književnosti* (May-June 1981) and in *The New Yorker* (12 July 1982), he discovered to his great astonishment that similar archives in fact exist near Salt Lake City. Stored in underground caverns are the genealogies of more than "180 million people, living or dead, carefully registered in one million and 250 thousand microfilms." Danilo Kiš, *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (Zagreb, 1983), pp. 217-19.

As one critic has pointed out, Kiš's concept here is "that every human being has the right to a place in the eternity of the document."¹²

Although the illusion of the documentary is shattered for a moment when the father's story is revealed as the dream of the protagonist, it is restored when the reader discovers that the description of the cause of the father's death, disclosed in the dream, coincides with the actual cause of death.

The distortion of ordinary reality through the injection of fantastic elements, such as mysticism, magic, and the occult, is explored further in other stories from *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*. Whether these elements derive from the Bible or from folk tales and legends, when incorporated into Kiš's writings, they reflect the "dignity of the document." Kiš's urge to explore all types of "reality" is fundamental to his notion of fiction. As indicated in this study, Kiš's fiction has evolved from a manner of writing in which the illusion of a created reality is achieved by more conventional means—the reliance on the magic power of words to instil credibility in a work of fiction—to a method that aspires to assure fictive authenticity through the application of documents—real, apocryphal, or fantastic.

12. Bojić, "Enciklopedija i leksikografija," p. 106.