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# THE LEGACY OF DANILO KIŠ IN POST-YUGOSLAV LITERATURE

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Many discussions of postmodernism begin with debates as to whether there was really some thing that could be defined as modernism such that a new type of art could be its successor. The same sort of issue might seem to affect the title of this essay. After all, for there to be a “post-Yugoslav literature” would there not presumably have had to have been a “Yugoslav literature” from which it developed? The question of whether there was ever such a thing as Yugoslav literature was an oft-debated topic in both inter-war and Communist Yugoslavia. To be sure, anthologies, histories, and textbooks of “Yugoslav” literature began to appear as early as the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> The unity they purported to discover, however (even within literature written in what was then called Serbo-Croatian), was more hoped for than actual. During the Communist period, under the formula of “brotherhood and unity,” the tendency was to move away from the concept of Yugoslav literature and to speak, rather, of the “literatures of the peoples of Yugoslavia.”<sup>2</sup> More recently, in the wake of the political demise of Yugoslavia and the creation of new nation-states on its rubble, there have been impressive efforts, often state sponsored, to create individual national literary canons and to deny that a Yugoslav literature ever existed. Universities, even in the United States and Western Europe, no longer teach courses on Yugoslav literature/culture, so, insofar as it ever did exist, it would seem to have been consigned to oblivion.

But whether there was something that deserved to be called Yugoslav liter-

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1. See, for example *Antologija savremene jugoslovenske lirike*, eds. Dr. Mirko Deanović and Ante Petravić (Split, 1922); Pavle Popović, “Jugoslovenska književnost kao celina.” *Glas srpske kraljevske akademije*. Second series, No. 60, 1922; *Istorija jugoslovenske književnosti sa teorijom i primerima za III i IV razred građanskih škola*, eds. Franjo Poljanec and Blagoje Marčić. 2nd ed. (Belgrade, 1934).

2. I discovered an interesting example of this switch while working in the mid-1990s in the National Library of Slovenia (NUK). At some point in the 1950s, librarians had gone through the card catalogue and had crossed out the heading “History of Yugoslav Literature” and replaced it with “History of Yugoslav Literatures” on each of the thousands of index cards with this subject heading.

ature cannot be reduced to the question of whether academic establishments, either in the Yugoslav successor states or outside it, choose or do not choose to recognize its existence. A more satisfactory, empirical way to answer the question might be to examine to what extent writers of a given national background interacted with, found inspiration in, and worked with writers from other national backgrounds within the context of Yugoslavia and to see how this network of relationships evolved over time. Presumably, one would find a continuum of sorts and could make a determination of when and whether a sufficient amount of literary cross-fertilization existed to justify the claim that a Yugoslav literature in fact existed at some point or points. I do not propose to carry out such an analysis here. Instead, I will start from the opposite direction and assert that one way to prove that a Yugoslav literature must have existed is to show that a transnational post-Yugoslav literature actually does exist at present. The existence of such a post-Yugoslav literature should be powerful inductive evidence that in the comparatively palmy days of Yugoslavia a supranational Yugoslav literature must have existed as well.<sup>3</sup>

If there was a Yugoslav literature, then its most powerful representative was undoubtedly the half Montenegrin, half Hungarian Jewish writer Danilo Kiš. In the course of a comparatively short literary career (he published his first significant work in the early 1960s and died in 1989), Kiš succeeded in creating an oeuvre that had enormous resonance both in his native Yugoslavia and in translation.<sup>4</sup> This article will be concerned specifically with Kiš's posthumous influence on the literary production in a number of the post-Yugoslav successor states, an influence that continues to grow in the twenty-first century. Kiš's style and literary concerns evolved in the course of his career, but the works that have held the most importance for recent generations of writers date from the latter part of his life, particularly *Grobnica za Borisa Davidovića* [*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*] and *Enciklopedija mrtvih* [*The Encyclopedia of the Dead*].<sup>5</sup> A sign of the broad recognition of Kiš's importance in the ex-Yugoslav cultural space can be seen in the fact that the former was voted the greatest Yugoslav novel of the twentieth century by the newspaper *Slobodna Bosna*.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Kiš's true importance to ex-Yugoslav

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3. The claim that there was a Yugoslav literature does not necessarily mean that there were not parallel national traditions in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia (not to mention the rest of Yugoslavia) as well.

4. No satisfactory monograph devoted to Kiš has appeared in English. Fortunately, however, Kiš has been well served by English translation, with most of his fictional work and essays available to Anglophone readers.

5. The former was originally published in 1976, the latter in 1983. English editions are *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, trans. Duška Mikić-Mitchell (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2001), and *Encyclopedia of the Dead*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1997). All citations from these books will be made in the main text by page number of these editions.

6. See a discussion of this poll in Stephen Schwartz, "Five Yugoslav Classics," *The New Criterion*, May 2000, 16.

literature is best seen not in popularity polls but rather in the ways he is being used by successive generations of writers. I will consider the Kišian presence in the work of four post-Yugoslav writers: the Slovenian Drago Jančar (born 1948), the Serbian Svetislav Basara (born 1953), the Bosnian-born but U.S.-based and English-language writer Alexander Hemon (born 1964), and the Bosnian Muharem Bazdulj (born 1977).

Before discussing these “Kišian” writers, it is first necessary to define what precisely in his literary oeuvre attracts their attention. I would identify three main lines: the first is stylistic and relates to the tone and position of the narrator vis-à-vis his story and characters; the second has to do with the ways in which individual stories within a given collection are linked one to another; the third, and most complex, is connected with the attitude to history in general and historical truth in particular expressed in the texts. In order to illustrate the first and third points, I will analyze a story from *Encyclopedia of the Dead* entitled “The Book of Kings and Fools,” while the second point will be illustrated by reference to the story entitled “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich.”

Kiš’s narrative voice (which undoubtedly owes a great deal to Borges) is highly self-conscious and pseudo-historical. The narrator speaks as a researcher who has amassed a great deal of data about the people he is describing, and he uses this material as if he were a historian relating the events of actual lives rather than a novelist. The referential illusion is furthered by references in the text and in footnotes to photographs, books, and so forth, most if not all of which, however, turn out to have been invented by the historian narrator. Like a good historian, Kiš’s narrator refrains from telling us what he does not know (in fact, he frequently emphasizes that certain things are not known about his characters) as well as from psychologizing. This latter narrative trick gives his prose a somewhat flat, cinematographic feel, though this is leavened by the narrator’s meta-textual commentary, which also serves to prevent the reader from forgetting that the narrative has been carefully constructed by the historian.

Most of Kiš’s trademark narrative quiddities can be found on the first pages of “The Book of Kings and Fools.” It opens with the line “The crime, not to be perpetrated until some forty years later, was prefigured in a Petersburg newspaper in August 1906” (135). The narrator stands at a distinct distance from the narrated events. He knows, apparently, the entire trajectory of the history he proposes to recount, and he wishes to make sure that the reader is aware from the outset that this brief story (in general brevity is another aspect of Kiš’s prose that most of his successors have inherited) will encompass a fairly long and complex historical period. The story continues: “The articles appeared serially and were signed by the paper’s editor-in-chief, a certain Krushevan, A.P. Krushevan, who, as the instigator of the Kishinev pogroms, had a good fifty murders on his conscience.” The specific details about the editor create the illusion of reference to an actually existing person whose life

story is known to the narrator/historian, who comes across as something of a pedant in his belief that the reader will know the details of relatively obscure events such as the “Kishinev pogroms.”

The articles, we are informed, were entitled “The Conspiracy, or The Roots of the Disintegration of European Society” (a thinly veiled reference to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*). In the rest of the brief first section of the story, we are told about how these articles were incorporated into another text entitled *The Antichrist* written by one Father Sergei. The first section ends with the following narrative aside: “We shall now investigate the origins of the text, attempt to throw some light on the people who created it (endowing their insolent procedure with the prerogatives of divine anonymity), and, finally, trace its dire consequences” (137). Again, the narrator presents himself as a historian whose job is reconstruction rather than as a fictional narrator.

The story’s second section opens with an evocation of Father Sergei: “Sergei Alexandrovich Nilus, author of *The Antichrist*, Father Sergei to initiate, entered the historical arena direct from the dark ages of Russian feudalism.” As opposed to some of the characters who appear in this story, Nilus was indeed a real person and he was a central figure in spreading (and perhaps in creating) the *Protocols*. In the pages that follow, the narrator fills out the portrait of Father Sergei through a series of quotes ostensibly excerpted from the works of writers who met and spoke with him at various points. The elaborate (re)construction of sources (typical for Kiš’s style) reaches its pinnacle in the fourth section of the story in a laudatory description of Nilus taken from a biography supposedly published in Novi Sad by one Prince N. D. Zhevakhov, a White Russian emigrant (later in the story (162) a footnote will give the full bibliographical reference to this biography—a search of WorldCat, however, does not turn up this biography, although it reveals that N. D. Zhevakhov did in fact exist and was undoubtedly an anti-Semite). This in turn is followed by a curious narrative parenthetical aside: “(as for Prince Zhevakhov, I have a feeling I met him once on a cold day in a Novi Sad cafeteria in 1965 near the Catholic churchyard)” (141). In this way the narrator/author brings his own “I” into the story, personalizes it, playing a bit part with a trick taken from Hitchcock perhaps. This stylistic trick will be reused by latter-day Kišians.

As the story continues, our attention is shifted to another Russian emigrant, one Arkady Ipolitovich Belogortsev, about whom the narrator says: “We know very little about his past; he does not like to speak about it” (148). Belogortsev, finding himself down on his luck, sells his personal library to a Mr. X. The library contains a previously unknown book in French, which Mr. X recognizes to be the source text for the “Conspiracy” book. Rather than having been a work about Jews who wished to take over the world, it was originally written by one Maurice Joly to describe, in the form of a dialogue between Machiavelli and Montesquieu, the evils of the reign of Napoleon III. The book was banned and confiscated by the French authorities but apparently a few copies survived, one of which was translated and turned into an

anti-Jewish screed by a Russian. According to Kiš's narrator, the fraudulent nature of the "Conspiracy" was divulged in articles in the *Times* of London as early as 1921.

What then is Kiš's attitude toward history insofar as it can be gleaned from this story? First of all, we find here and elsewhere, a clear belief that the truth can be discovered. The entire point of the story, as well as of many of the stories in *A Tomb*, is that a careful reader (and the narrator is nothing if not a careful reader of his sources) can recognize historical truth hiding behind a confusing array of sources, any of which taken individually might serve to obfuscate rather than clarify. In this sense, although Kiš unquestionably makes use of many postmodernist devices, he is not a postmodernist thinker. He emphatically resists the postmodernist rejection of grand narratives and even more forcefully refuses the relativism that is generally linked to postmodernist thinking. This latter refusal lay at the heart of Kiš's strident opposition to particularist nationalism, a position for which he is much admired after the catastrophes that such thinking produced in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

The second, seemingly paradoxical point is that historical truth can best be captured not in traditional historical narrative but rather in the kinds of Borgesian fictional mystifications that Kiš provides. "What really happened" cannot be convincingly narrated solely through the use of historical sources but rather needs the help of imagined intermediaries and the narrator's meta-literary commentary that accompanies the real and created sources. Mystification, then, can lead to historical truth through the activity of self-conscious narration. Kiš takes Borges's interest in philosophical paradox and applies it to the central historical events of twentieth-century Europe—particularly the Holocaust and the Stalinist version of Communism. For example, the story we have been considering here can be seen as a "translation" of Borges's famous parable of Pierre Menard. In that story the "translator" rewrites *Don Quixote* word for word, and the story as a whole leads us to question the possibility of a stable meaning of a text given our recognition that in a new context the identical words mean very different things. Kiš's story is also about translation. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was merely a Russian translation (admittedly a slightly more free translation than that of Pierre Menard) of a French original. But while Borges appears primarily interested in the philosophical implications of his parable, Kiš is concerned with their practical historical consequences, "the crime" that would be committed "some forty years later." Indeed, millions of people would die because "a then un-

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7. Kiš's opposition to particularist ethnic nationalism was well known even during his lifetime. Perhaps the strongest statement of it appeared as early as 1973: "Nationalism lives by relativism. There are no general values—esthetic, ethical, etc. Only relative ones. And it is principally in this sense that nationalism is reactionary. *All* that matters is to be better than my brother or half-brother, the rest is no concern of mine." "On Nationalism" in *Why Bosnia?*, eds. Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifshulz (Stony Creek, CT: Pamphleteers Press, 1993), 127–28. This text was widely commented on in Yugoslavia.

known (as yet unknown) amateur painter" (150) would read the German translation of the Russian "original" and would take it as a basis for action, just as its Russian "author" had hoped.

Finally, and this is Kiš's crowning irony here and elsewhere, while the truth can be known, knowledge does not set the characters free. Thus, the *Times* published articles proving that the *Conspiracy* was a falsification as early as 1921, but this did not stop the "(as yet unknown) amateur painter" from writing that "the very fact that people persisted in trying to prove the book a forgery was 'proof of its authenticity' (*Mein Kampf*)" (150). The same futility of historical knowledge, at least to those caught up in the historical process, dogs the heroes of Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. In most of the book's seven stories, a character gets tangled in the nets of the Communist International in the 1930s and meets his or her death at the hands of its agents. Though they have been deceived as to the nature of reality earlier in their lives, most of these characters come to recognize their true situation before the end. But this does not save them from doom; rather it serves only to embitter their deaths. And this leads to the final question—if the truth does not help the characters, is it supposed to help the reader? Will recognition of the truth about the Holocaust or Communism make it any more likely that humanity will not fall into similar traps in the future? Kiš does not provide any direct answer to this question. On the one hand, his apparent belief in the cyclicity of history indicates serious doubt about humankind's ability to learn much from history or historical truth.<sup>8</sup> On the other, his insistence on getting to the bottom of historical reality may be an indication that he does harbor a hope that knowledge of the truth will eventually free us from the need to repeat endlessly the crimes of history.

Thus far, we have spoken about Kiš's main stylistic peculiarities and about his attitude to historical truth. Before moving to a consideration of how these manifest themselves in the work of his heirs, we need to pause for a moment to consider the structure of Kiš's most influential works. Although two of his earlier works (*Garden, Ashes* and *Hourglass*) can loosely be called novels, Kiš, like Andrić before him, was more comfortable with short forms. But although they both consist of short stories, *A Tomb* and *Encyclopedia of the Dead* are more than collections of stories in the usual sense of the word. Kiš's constructive method is perhaps most effective in the former.

The work is subtitled "Sedam poglavlja jedne zajedničke povesti" [Seven Chapters of a Linked Tale].<sup>9</sup> The chapters are indeed related, but in an unusual fashion. In each chapter save one, the characters are enmeshed in the same web of world Communist conspiracy. The central characters of each

8. The sixth story in *A Tomb*, entitled "Books and Dogs," describes the massacre of Jews during the early period of the Inquisition exactly 600 years before the time of the book's other stories and presents numerous parallels with events of the twentieth century.

9. For some reason the translator of the English edition saw fit to leave this subtitle out.

story believe they understand the world they live in, but in fact they turn out to be pawns in a game they do not understand (though as noted above, to a greater or lesser extent most of them come to understand their delusion for what it was before their inevitable death). Characters coming from Ireland, Russia, Poland, Romania, and Hungary are all part of the web. In this way, the stories appear to be six “randomly chosen” events that metonymically stand in for all of European life in the inter-war period. But the stories are not chosen entirely at random, for the attentive reader will recognize that the paths of the characters cross at various points in the novel. These connections are usually quite subtle and appear as seemingly throwaway lines in footnotes or in apparently unimportant narrative details. Taken together, however, they help create in the reader (for the characters do not recognize their connection to “other stories”) the sense that everything is somehow connected, even if such connections are hard to descry.

Drago Jančar is unquestionably Slovenia’s most accomplished prose writer. His wide-ranging oeuvre contains many works that bear no relation to those of Danilo Kiš, but many of his short stories are clearly indebted to Kiš.<sup>10</sup> We find a similar detached and ironic narrative tone, a fondness for reflexive meditation, and a tendency to describe events as would a historian rather than a writer of psychological prose. We also see an analogous mastery of structure, deft use of repetition both in individual stories and across stories in a single collection, and a similar, though not identical attitude toward history.

Jančar’s story “Joyceov učenec” [Joyce’s Pupil] starts with the conclusion, in a narrative voice that echoes Kiš’s: “This story will end with a mob dragging an old man with a weak heart—a retired professor and former Law School Dean—out of his house and loading him on a wheelbarrow as they cry out in anger and derision. He will be pushed through the winding streets of the old town towards the river, to be dumped into its rushing, freezing current. The final lines of the story will be cried out in Slovenian, in its upland, alpine dialect; mocking cries will resound on the street along which the wheelbarrow, with the bouncing helpless body on it, will rattle” (86).<sup>11</sup> This opening is similar to that of the “The Book of Kings and Fools” analyzed above. But a reader familiar with Kiš’s work will recognize the connection not so much with that story as with “The Knife with the Rosewood Handle,” the opening story in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* which begins: “The story that I am about to tell, a story born in doubt and perplexity, has only the mis-

10. Among Jančar’s works available in English are the comic novel *Mocking Desire* (Northwestern UP, 1998) and the darker and more psychological novel *Northern Lights* (Northwestern UP, 2001). Neither of these owes much to Kiš.

11. The story was published in the collection *Prikazen iz Rovenske* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva Založba, 1998), 149–64. It appeared in English as “Joyce’s Pupil,” trans. Andrew Wachtel, *Kenyon Review* 23.1 (Winter 2001), 86–98. Citations from this story will be made in the main text by page number of the English edition.



fortune (some would call it the fortune) to be true. But to be true in the way its author dreams about, it would have to be told in Romanian, Hungarian, Ukrainian or Yiddish; or, rather, in a mixture of all these languages” (3). The connection is through the hypertrophied concern with the proper language necessary to tell the “true” story (a story of death in both cases), a concern typical for a novelist, less so (or less overtly so) for a historian.

As the story continues, we discover that it is the tale of Boris Furlan, an almost forgotten Triestene Slovene who in the years just before World War I had the fortune to study English with James Joyce, who was living at that time in Trieste in self-imposed exile.<sup>12</sup> Jančar’s desire to tell history through the imaginatively recreated biography of a paradigmatic individual is clearly derived from Kiš. And the movements that swallow the story’s hero up are the same ones that fascinated Kiš—Fascism and Communism. At the same time, we can see here one important way in which Jančar differs from Kiš. Of all Yugoslav writers, Kiš was the most vocal opponent of nationalism, and he rarely wrote anything directly about the Yugoslav experience. This impulse was in keeping with, even as it went well beyond, the supranationalist thrust of Yugoslav ideology (undoubtedly it also grew naturally out of Kiš’s mixed identity and cosmopolitan outlook). To be sure, his early novels, based loosely on his own family’s experience, do contain Yugoslav characters, but the narrative interest is always in these characters as exemplars of tragic events at the very least pan-European in nature. And a striking fact about *A Tomb* is that it contains no Yugoslav characters even though Kiš’s readers understood that the events described were closely connected to the experience of many Yugoslavs as well.

Jančar, on the contrary, in this story and in many others, is concerned with teasing out the specifics of Slovene experience (if not identity) through his literary analysis, even if many of the experiences he describes overlap with those that concerned Kiš. Thus, it is no accident that the story’s main character is a Slovene. “Four years after his teacher, frightened by the tumult of the crowd, had run from his apartment (and, soon after, from Trieste and his pupil’s life), he was eyewitness to a new historical twist. On a gray November afternoon Italian troops disembarked in the port of Trieste. And not too long after this a new set of specters appeared on the streets. Young men from Italian suburbs and small towns marched about in black uniforms singing of youth and spring-time; they beat their political opponents, and set fire to a large building in the center of town—the Slovenian National Hall” (89). The Italian maltreatment of the Slovenes who lived under their rule in the inter-war period was not by

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12. The main character’s name is never mentioned in the actual text of the story. It appears only in the epigraph, taken from Richard Elman’s celebrated Joyce biography, in which Furlan’s name appears. Thus, in a sense the entire story can be seen as a long footnote to Elman’s biography, elucidating the fate of a character who would otherwise occupy the role of Macintosh in *Ulysses*.

any means as bad as the German treatment of Jews, but it was certainly bad enough. Jančar's hero organizes anti-fascist resistance in Trieste until 1930, when imminent arrest forces him across the border into Yugoslavia.

When the Italians take Ljubljana in 1941 he flees to England, where he becomes a well-known radio commentator. "His voice became famous in Slovenia. It was the voice of Radio London. His words were clear and determined, a call for resistance" (91). Like the characters in "A Tomb," Furlan is naively unaware of the nature of the Communists and decides to return to Slovenia as the war is ending. "By February 1945 he was on territory liberated by the partisans, and a few months later he was back in Ljubljana. When new people took power he was named Dean of the law school. Two years later he was arrested" (92). At first he is sentenced to death as an English spy (using the impeccable logic of the Communist era, Furlan's interrogator blames Joyce for the whole affair, for had Joyce not been in Trieste Furlan would not have learned English and could not have become an English spy). Eventually amnestied, he moves to a small Slovene town hoping to avoid the wheel of history, but this proves impossible. When in 1953 the international community makes the decision to award Trieste to the Italians, Furlan's "English" past is recollected by the local populace. It is they who parade him through the streets to his death.

This perfectly constructed story comes to its conclusion at the place where it began. Over the course of a scant fifteen pages, the reader has been given a schematic portrait of the tragedy of twentieth-century Slovenia through the experience of a single individual buffeted by "the whirlwind of history" (as Jančar calls it more than once in this story). Just as he was never fully aware of the significance of his English teacher, the story's hero is not fully conscious of these whirlwinds. Or at least he is not fully conscious until the moment of his death, when, like Hanna Krzyewska in "The Knife with the Rosewood Handle," he finally discovers but cannot articulate the word that could encompass his experience. At a number of key points in the text, Jančar's narrator tells us that, when confronted by the enormity of historical experience, Furlan's head would go blank, filled only by a dull roar. At the moment of his death: "It was an approaching roar. And in the distance, in some endless space, it grew out of a single word, a word neither Slovenian nor English that had never been written down in any language, a word that had never been spoken or used to describe anything, a word that could say everything although neither teacher nor pupil could utter it, a word comprehensible in its incomprehensibility but one that neither teacher nor pupil would ever be able to use. This was what he would have wanted to tell his former teacher, for he had come to understand that there is a word at the beginning and the end, and that that word has nothing to do with the language in which it is spoken or written" (97–98).

Jančar, then, borrows from Kiš a sense of the irony of history and the ability to use the fictional text as a laboratory for the imaginative reconstruction

of the bitter historical experience of the twentieth century. Unlike Kiš, who does not find anything particular about the Serbian or Yugoslav experience (though it can be claimed that he finds the Diasporic Jewish experience paradigmatic), Jančar is especially, though not exclusively interested in tracing the contours of modern Slovene history in his work. Stylistically, his distanced narrator who refrains from psychologizing his characters is close to that of Kiš, though Jančar's is less apt to engage in metaliterary commentary. Finally, his subtle sense of composition and a tendency to create links across stories in a given collection also link him to the later Kiš.

The Serbian Svetislav Basara is a far more overtly postmodern writer than Kiš or Jančar. Indeed, at first blush he would seem closer in spirit to Borges than to Kiš. Nevertheless, an analysis of his most recent novel *Srce zemlje* [*Heart of the Earth*] indicates a number of debts to Kiš. The novel is presented as an elaborate mystification, a *Thousand and One Nights*-like series of framed narratives describing an event that never happened—a three-month visit by Nietzsche to Cyprus. In one sense, Basara's aim is precisely the opposite of Kiš's in the story "The Book of Kings and Fools." There, fiction was used to trace a real event: the creation of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Here, real historical characters such as Nietzsche, Wagner, Freud, Stalin, and Hitler are deployed within a flamboyantly fictional narrative. Thus, on a compositional level Basara's novel can be seen as a parody of Kiš (though, of course, what is parody but an attempt to get out from under influence?). Still, what connects Kiš and Basara is that both narratives point up the irony and contingency of events dating from the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that led to the great historical tragedies of Communism and Fascism.

In this regard, the central theme of Basara's novel should be regarded not as the obviously far-fetched and sometimes hilarious accounts of Nietzsche's stay on Cyprus (where Basara currently serves as Serbia's ambassador), but rather the narrator's thoughts on the importance of Nietzsche's thought for Stalin and Hitler. And, it should be noted, such historical musings are foreign to Borges even if the overall style of Basara's novel is close to that of the Argentine master. Thus, Basara's narrator muses: "Stalin's secret motto was: suffering is always good for the soul and enjoyment is always harmful. What the west calls 'democracy' and 'liberalism' is merely hedonism incorporated into state ideology. Which is a mistake from the outset. Nietzsche gave him the right to this. The superman has only two choices: either a monastery or the army. All the rest is decadence. The abyss. Degeneration. If that is the case then the state needs to be divided into two pieces: a megamonastery and a universal barracks. Another Nietzschean, Adolph Hitler, who was beginning his rise in Germany, had similar ideas."<sup>13</sup>

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13. Svetislav Basara, *Srce zemlje*. Belgrade: Narodna Knjiga, 2004, 125.

On the surface, then, Basara looks more like a continuation of Borges than of Kiš. Still, his concern with explaining the great evils of the twentieth century—Fascism and Communism—and his apparent belief that the best method of doing this is a fictionalized presentation of history link him to Kiš, even as his lack of a sense of measure and hypertrophied irony point in other directions.

Aleksandar Hemon, like many émigrés, came to the United States with limited financial resources. He did, nevertheless, bring considerable intellectual capital from his native Sarajevo. A recent recipient of a MacArthur Foundation “genius award,” and now well established as an American writer, Hemon is frequently compared to Vladimir Nabokov for his carefully crafted English prose and sense of fun. Hemon himself, however, makes no secret of the fact that Kiš is one of his main sources of inspiration. Here is how Hemon concluded an article on Kiš written for the journal *Sarajevske sveske*: “In February, Danilo Kiš would have been seventy years old. He would have been older and surely wiser and I would have come to him for advice all the time. For sure, I am not the only one who sees Kiš as my teacher—an entire generation of young writers from the former Yugoslavia saw in Kiš an example of how morality could overcome the darkness of nationalist cultures. But even so, whenever I am asked whose writer Kiš is, the only legitimate, intelligent answer is, *mine*.”<sup>14</sup> Hemon’s claim here is of great significance. Any ex-Yugoslav writer who chooses to borrow stylistic or compositional techniques from Kiš is, in effect, engaged in something more than a literary activity. In so doing, he or she is implicitly making a statement of opposition to nationalist trends in the literature and politics of his or her new state. He is building on the great master of Yugoslav literature to create post-Yugoslav rather than Bosnian, Serbian, Slovenian, or Croatian literature.

It does not take much searching in Hemon’s first short story collection, *The Question of Bruno*, to sense the presence of Kiš. In the collection’s second story, “The Life of Alphonse Kauders,” the name Richard Sorge appears a few times without making much of an impression. The third story in the collection, “The Sorge Spy Ring,” brings him into focus. As in the case of Jančar’s story (and in contradistinction to Kiš, who often makes up his characters from composites of individuals), the main character of the story was an actual spy, the double agent Richard Sorge. The life of Sorge, however, is narrated, insofar as it is narrated at all, in the footnotes to this story, whose equally important subject is the narrator’s description of the obsessions of his Sarajevo childhood. These were connected to a book about spying in World War II in which Sorge figured prominently, and with his suspicions that his father was a Soviet agent.

Earlier I noted that Kiš had a Hitchcock-like tendency to put in an appearance in his stories. In “The Sorge Spy Ring” Hemon deepens this line, mak-

14. Aleksandar Hemon, “Čiji je pisac Danilo Kiš,” *Sarajevske sveske* 8–9, 2005, 11.

ing the story a dialogue of (imagined?) family and world history. The end of the story illustrates Hemon's virtuosic compositional abilities. The penultimate paragraph begins with the sentence: "In January 1980, Father was released from prison, diagnosed with brain cancer, curled into an old man, with most of his teeth missing."<sup>15</sup> The father's imminent death is balanced by the deaths of Tito and Sorge. That of Sorge appears in a footnote appended to the penultimate paragraph and written in the unmistakable tone of a Kišian historical narrator: "Moments before the execution, the chief chaplain of the Sugamo prison (accompanied by Yoshikawa and Ohashi) offered Sorge tea and cake and said: 'Life and death are one and the same thing to one who has attained personal beatitude. Impersonal beatitude can be attained by entrusting everything to the mercy of Buddha.' Sorge said: 'I thank you, but: no!'" (85). The final paragraph begins: "On May 4, Comrade Tito died." As in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, death is the link that connects characters across historical time, characters who have no notion of their relationship to one another, which in this case is constituted by the contingencies of the narrator's life and memory. Kiš would have been proud of this erstwhile student.

Of all the writers considered here, Muharem Bazdulj is perhaps the purest Kišian. His collection *The Second Book* is constructed in a fashion very similar to *Encyclopedia of the Dead*. It contains a series of intricately linked stories that cover a time period from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom ("The Hot Sun's Golden Circle") to the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul ("The Bridge on Land") to contemporary Europe. They include wonderful examples of literary critical satire ("The Poet"), philosophical musing ("Fiat Iustitia"), imaginative biographical recreation ("Tears in Turin," which like Basara's novel focuses on Nietzsche), and the book ends, as does *Encyclopedia of the Dead*, with an authorial epilogue that simultaneously explains and obscures the connections between the stories.

For the purposes of analysis, I will focus on the story entitled "A Red Flower for Tomislav Podgorač." As does Kiš in "The Book of Kings and Fools," Bazdulj has chosen to present a fictionalized version of a life story, this time not of a book but of a man, which is presented as paradigmatic for the experience of the twentieth century. But unlike Kiš, who died in 1989, Bazdulj wrote his story after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Communism, and the destruction of Yugoslavia, events that throw a somewhat different light on the actions of the character. Podgorač, we are told, was born in a small Croatian village in 1906. In the distanced and measured historian's prose that Bazdulj employs to give us the outline of Podgorač's biography, in the absence of attempts to present the main character's psychology through a fictional recreation of his inner life, as well as in the particularities of his historical experi-

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15. Aleksandar Hemon, "The Sorge Spy Ring," *The Question of Bruno*. New York: Random House, 2000, 84.

ence, we find a clear echo of Kiš's characteristic style and themes: "The early twenties of the twentieth century were a decisive period both for Tomislav Podgorač and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, for a man and an institution whose bizarre relationship would last until his and its more or less simultaneous death. Tomislav Podgorač spent his last high school years reading somewhat disparate books: The Bible and the works of the atheistic philosophers from the nineteenth century, philosophers who, despite disavowing God, pleaded for peace, justice, and goodwill among humankind."<sup>16</sup>

Like Kiš, Bazdulj enjoys making personal connections between the (apparently) fictional characters and the author/narrator's real life. Describing Podgorač's life in Travnik, the narrator says: "Perhaps on some of his walks he stopped to chat with Muharem Bazdulj, my grandfather and namesake, who also walked around Travnik beaming, as if suspecting that in this town he would live and die, and that his son and daughter would be born here" (121). This same trick is repeated in the very end of the story when the narrator recognizes that perhaps he, too, as a child once met the mysterious priest: "Tomislav Podgorač died in 1990 in Paris (*if he died at all*, as it says in one newspaper hagiography), and I (I who wrote this) am now asking myself who was the man with whom I talked in the grove behind the high school in the spring of 1989, Anno Domini. I was twelve. I was walking beneath the just budding chestnut trees. I liked to climb those trees. The grove was always deserted—the ideal place for a lonely boy to play. But this morning an old man in a frock coat was sitting on one of the stumps. He was smoking and smiling silently" (131).<sup>17</sup>

Other Kišian tropes in Bazdulj's work include the narrator's claim to incomplete knowledge of his characters as well as his appeal to various kinds of "documentary" evidence to back up what he does know: "It is not reliably known where Tomislav Podgorač was between 1937 and 1940, and precisely that time represents the beginning of his famous mysteriousness. Nevertheless, it can be determined fairly reliably that he was in Spain during the Civil War and that he fought on the side of the Republicans. Selim Efendić testifies that some *compadre priest of ours* fought for the Spanish Republic" (126). Unlike the characters that Kiš describes in "A Tomb," however, Podgorač is not destroyed by Communism—and this may well be a reflection of Bazdulj's different historical position vis-à-vis the twentieth century. Indeed, after the defeat of Fascism, Podgorač, we are told, went to Eastern Europe, where he attempted to resurrect the apparatus of the Catholic Church despite the Communist takeover. While his successes were modest, he did meet, and presumably influence, "the recent seminary graduate Karol Wojtyła" (129).

16. Muharem Bazdulj, "A Red Flower for Tomislav Podgorač," *The Second Book*, trans. Oleg Andrić and Andrew Wachtel. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2005, 119. Further citations from this story will be made in the main text by page number from this edition.

17. The theme of smoking is one of a number of leitmotifs that connect the stories in *The Second Book* despite their apparently disparate subject matter.

The story's finale is brilliant; the great mystifier Podgorač gives the then twelve-year-old author a red flower and disappears in a puff of smoke: "I turned around and went down toward the school building (then it was still called *Antun Mavrak High School*). The grove in fact is on a very steep slope and you must walk down carefully. Something tempted me to turn around, but I could not. I ran down in thirty seconds or so and looked back toward the grove. There was nobody on the stump. Thick bluish streaks floated in the air, it could have been cigarette smoke, but also fog. I thought I had dreamed it, but in my hand there was a flower" (131–32). This ending, in its mixture of reality (the narrator/author's) and fiction in the context of a story that has used a fictional figure whose life was a long series of mystifications and disguises to tell the secret history of the entire twentieth century, is a tour de force that Kiš himself, had he lived longer, would have appreciated.

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to think a bit about why Danilo Kiš, of all possible Yugoslav writers, seems to exert the strongest influence on writers from former Yugoslavia. From a purely literary perspective, other Yugoslav-oriented writers, arguably equally talented, could have potentially played this role. These include Ivo Andrić, Miroslav Krleža, Meša Selimović, and David Albahari. But what makes a writer as influential as Kiš for an entire generation of followers has to do with more than pure literary talent. Other attributes are also required, and taking these into consideration we can understand why Kiš came to trump his possible competitors.

- 1) Kiš achieved broad international recognition and popularity. His work was translated into most major European languages and he was highly respected both by Western writers and readers.
- 2) Though perceived as strongly pro-Yugoslav, Kiš was not identified with the Yugoslav state or with the communist project. Indeed, he was perceived as something of a dissident, at least from the mid-1970s on.
- 3) Though his education took place primarily in Serbia, he was not connected with any of the major Yugoslav nations.
- 4) Kiš combines postmodernist stylistic devices with a basically modernist mindset.

Miroslav Krleža was, to be sure, a productive and powerful writer. Though he never made any effort to hide his Central European background or Marxist inclinations, Krleža was strongly identified with the Yugoslav project and fiercely independent. Nevertheless, he is perceived, most likely, as too closely connected with Croatian culture and with the Yugoslav communist project to serve as a moral symbol as does Kiš. What is more, his fiercely modernist style is inimitable and he failed to achieve a level of international recognition that would allow followers, were he to have them, to ride his literary coattails. Some of the same problems also made it unlikely that Meša Selimović could have taken Kiš's place. Selimović was widely admired in Yugoslavia for his

novels *Drviš i smrt* [*Death and the Dervish*] and *Tvrđava* [*The Fortress*], but his work never achieved the international reputation it deserved. Like Kiš, and unlike Krleža, Selimović was not strongly identified with the Yugoslav project, but he was not perceived as a dissident. And though Selimović eventually moved to Belgrade and at times identified himself as a Serbian writer, his work is too strongly identified with his native Bosnia to serve as a model for non-Bosnian writers. Ivo Andrić should have been the most likely competitor for Kiš. As the only Yugoslav literary Nobel laureate, Andrić earned a major international reputation. He also had excellent Yugoslav credentials, having been connected with the Yugoslav project from his youth in pre-World War I Bosnia. Nevertheless, he was closely identified with official circles in both the Royal and the Tito eras, which likely affects his current status. Furthermore, although his oeuvre is broader than that of Selimović, his most famous novels and stories are set in Bosnia, which limits the breadth of his appeal.

In the near term, my guess is that the only serious competition Kiš will face is from David Albahari. Born in 1948, Albahari, like Kiš, comes from a Jewish background, which allows him to escape identification with any of the major ex-Yugoslav nations. Though not a dissident in the Communist era, neither was he identified with the regime. And although he remained in Serbia in the early 1990s, he was clearly not a Serbian nationalist and eventually emigrated to Canada, where he lives today. His spare short stories were widely admired in literary circles in Yugoslavia from the late 1970s, but his possibilities as a role model were limited by his lack of international reputation. Recently, however, he is beginning to become more widely appreciated in Europe and the United States, so it is possible that for a succeeding generation he could come to exert an important influence. Nevertheless, in the post-communist period it is extremely difficult for any writer to garner the level of social and cultural status that writers such as Kiš achieved during the Communist era, so even if Albahari comes to possess all of Kiš's central attributes, the reality of the post-Communist cultural situation militates against his chances of supplanting Kiš as a source of inspiration for post-Yugoslav literature.