

BRIDGE TO NOWHERE: DANILO KIŠ'S "MUDDY TALE" AND EUROPE'S SHIFTING FRONTIERS

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This paper discusses Danilo Kiš's relationship to Hungarian culture in general and Hungarian literature specifically. It also presents Kis's views of the regional geography of Pannonia and analyzes the three complementary elements in Kis's identity: the Serbian, the Jewish, and the Hungarian.

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In 1986, the Yugoslav novelist Danilo Kiš wrote the following passages in an essay about his hometown, Subotica (Szabadka), in northern Vojvodina, where he was born in 1935:

It was in this city, then, that two crucial factors in my life took shape, as ordained by God or Chance: here is where my father, Eduard Kiš (orig. *Kohn* – JKC), senior inspector of the state railways and author of the Yugoslav Timetable for Railroad, Bus, Ship and Air Traffic, met my mother, Milica Dragičević, a Montenegrin beauty, away from her native Cetinje for the first time, on a visit to her sister. A rare encounter, perhaps unique in those times.

I first saw Subotica sometime around the end of the 1970s, if I don't count the train station, which I saw from the train when I was seven, at the time of my journey to Hungary, and again when I was 13, upon my return. I don't know what mechanism of memory was in play – perhaps it was because the train stood so long in the station – but I remembered the muscadine-filled baskets that served as decoration on all train depots in those days.

That winter of 1942 was one of the coldest winters of the war; the temperature dropped below 30 degrees Celsius; and thus the massacre of the Jewish and Serbian population was known in those parts as "the cold days," as if people wished to avoid the real, and more fitting, construction "the bloody days" by using a meteorological meta-

phor. For in these Central European and Balkan regions of ours, we have a lot of “bloody days,” and it would seem that some serviceable causal factor was being sought, insofar as the discussion was not about the human need to avoid calling horrifying things by their rightful names.

[T]he language (In the spring of 1942, my father decided to teach us Hungarian ... the courtyard at twilight, open windows with bright red geraniums in berry-shaped enamel pots. My sister and I are sitting on a low wooden bench, with my father opposite us in a squeaking wicker armchair; suddenly he jerked his head up straight, probably because a snowflake had landed on a page of his open book. “Hull a hó,” he says. “Repeat after me: hull a hó.” That means: it’s snowing. This meteorological sentence, the first sentence I learned in Hungarian, would hover above my Pannonian childhood like the title of a catchy ballad.)¹

These excerpts from a little-known essay give a good feel for some of the material and intellectual culture of the Vojvodina that was so important to Kiš in his cycle of autobiographical novels.² Kiš’s connections to Vojvodina and his own mixed ethnic background³ make him a logical subject for investigation as a cultural actor in the Hungarian–Serbian borderlands. The goals of this essay are to delineate Kiš’s role in this important zone of cultural exchange and to analyze this role in the context of his life-long artistic engagement on many fronts.

That Kiš’s *de facto* approach to acting as a bridge between cultures is likely to be undramatic, fitful, or lukewarm is set up by two pillars of the author’s intellectual world. The better known of these is his opposition to nationalism, which Kiš derided as kitsch and moral relativism of the worst sort; this aversion left him allergic to singing any particular culture’s “greatest hits,” even sympathetically or to a sympathetic audience. When trying to account for Kiš’s rejection of nationalism’s emotional or political worth, one could argue for the influence of two strands of thinking. First, there is the tortured epistemology of his tales; whether making use of incipient post-modern self-referentiality, intertextuality, or “cataloguing,” or of competing modernist points of view, Kiš shies away from the well-defined, seamless narratives that serve a political nation, its historians, and its leaders so well. Second, Kiš deviates sharply from the most famous Central European and Balkan writers from the century or so before him because he is not in any way involved in a nation-building project, nor is he even plumbing the depths of the character or “soul” of any national group. He is no Petőfi, Prešeren, Mickiewicz, Andrić, Botev, Krleža, Shevchenko, Fishta, or even Kadare. His project, his quest, is a filial one: to track, in the family cycle, with whatever tools he can, including his own deficient memory, the “muddy tale” of his father and to make sense of it in the political cycle. This filial quest is a concern at once norma-

tive and, literally, formative: it shapes his work and drives his hunt for narrative form as a bulwark against oblivion and chaos. Kiš is his father's son and he is a son of literature, but he is no son of the Hungarian, Serbian, or any other nation.

These factors led Kiš to advocate literature with universal moral relevance; specific characters or settings in his work, be they ethnic, political, or biographical, are merely the case studies he employs as he "writes what he knows." To tie the relevance of one's art to a specific group is, in essence, to suppress truth about the human condition. Far from doing that, Kiš struck out radically in the opposite direction, encouraging all sorts of comparisons and confessions and discouraging triumphalism of any sort.

The second hallmark of Kiš's thinking that discourages "bridge-building" is his extensive, albeit not flawless, rejection of traditional regional typologies. If Serbia is Balkan, the wishful argument might go, then Hungary is Central Europe and Kiš spans, links, and interprets the two to each other. Kiš, however, does not accept the existence of the gulf requiring a bridge. Analysis of Kiš's fiction and non-fiction texts shows, at a minimum, that he expands the idea of Central Europe to include nearly all of southeastern Europe; Transylvania, Bucharest, and Bosnia he includes in the "mildly Baroque" area extending from the Baltic Sea to Trieste or in the zone of, to paraphrase, Vienna and its allies or the zone of the Danubian tribes. Where the Balkans exist, they have something to do with an Ottoman legacy (including, jocularly, a lack of punctuality which Kiš thought he shared) and, most importantly, with the condition of being ruled from outside; that, in turn, is also generally held to be a Central European historical trait. More radically, Kiš sometimes stands the traditional hierarchy of Central Europe over Balkans on its head. For him, Central Europe was where his family met death and where cold, muddy, intolerant childhood misery was visited upon him; by contrast, the Balkans was for him the fertile southern garden of mountain vistas, citrus blooms, and the peaceful, quiet, reading of French literature and glorious family history in his mother's Montenegrin home. Most radically, he replaces the venerable regions of Miłosz, Kundera, Konrád, and Schöpflin with new ones, such as Pannonia and the Mediterranean. There might be tension between "Europe" and "Russia," but more interesting for Kiš is why the small or unfamiliar languages of "Eastern Europe" have such difficulty slipping into the canon of the West. It is less a plea for particularism than recognition of cognitive and cultural reality that prompts Kiš to defend his own and others' first languages. The East European writer drags with him or her on all journeys a piano (beauty, intelligibility) and a dead horse (historical and linguistic specificity, in all its dimness and grimness). There we have it: if no nation, if no regions, then no arbiters and no moderating. But we can still ask: are there nonetheless some kinds of frontiers that do separate people, and what does the work of managing or effacing those frontiers look like?

For Kiš, frontiers were mental and moral, but his childhood, personality, and cultural identity were shaped by three major factors. All of these are reflected in his writings across the spectrum of genres. Arguably the most fundamental of these strata is his Serbianness. During the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s, Kiš's status as a "good Serb" (i.e., an anti-nationalist, for better or worse) brought this cultural and ethnic association into the foreground; Kiš's well-known intolerance of nationalism and political narrow-mindedness and his truly multicultural Yugoslav affinities made revanchist Serbs wary of him in the 1980s, just as they endeared him to the international community in the 1990s. But we should not forget that although Serbs do not, by a long shot, appear in the "starring" roles in Kiš's fiction, he wrote almost exclusively in Serbo-Croatian, and Serbo-Croatian was the target language of his voluminous translations. Serbia and Yugoslavia were the focus of his professional world, even though he worked for many years in various cities in France. After his death in Paris, Kiš was, after all, buried without controversy in Belgrade.

"Language," Kiš wrote, "is a writer's fate." Less than half of his corpus has been translated into English or German; slightly more is available in French. The fact that so much of his writing (the critical essays as well as short stories, plays, and more) is "hiding" from so many of us in Serbo-Croatian means that a sense of his full thematic range is elusive. Some of his most interesting essays treat neither nationalism, nor French symbolism, nor Yugoslav cultural polemics, but great South Slavic writers. He prized Miroslav Krleža (a Croat) as a great chronicler of Pannonia, Miloš Crnjanski (a Serb) as a high modernist, and Ivo Andrić (a Bosnian Serb, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962) for his skillful portrayal of women and others as outsiders and victims.

The second component of Kiš's personal and artistic identity was his Jewishness. His early life was overwhelmingly dominated by the impact of World War II on his family. He was born in the northernmost part of Serbia, which since 1918 had been part of the new country of Yugoslavia, and his family moved to the capital of his home region, Novi Sad (Hungarian: Újvidék) in 1939, but they fled to Hungary in 1942 after Yugoslavia fell to a multilateral Axis invasion. Kiš then spent the remaining years of the war in Zala county, but his father was deported to Auschwitz, never to return, in 1944. In 1947 the surviving family members returned to Montenegro, where they lived with the family of Kiš's mother. In Kiš's fiction as well as in his understanding of his family's history, Jewishness is viewed fatalistically as a kind of martyrdom. This is the case even though Kiš's parents wrestled over his identity, his own religious views ranged from the existential to the agnostic, and his father was persecuted (though not lethally) for his alcoholism, public rages, and eccentricities as well as his ethnicity.

Kiš was eventually criticized in communist Yugoslavia for the supposed Jewish "particularism" of tales of characters victimized by intolerant states and ideol-

ogies. But in response he asserted the exact opposite: his characters were selected for their universality, since in their historical setting the (mostly) Jewish characters were plausibly portrayed as victims of both extreme left and extreme right, and since every writer has the right to pick a certain material, preferably familiar or intimate, with which to work. Kiš suspected that the real reasons for much of the mistrust, especially in Serbia, of his work had to do with the lack of ethnically Serbian voices therein and the equation of leftist and rightist extremism.

Nonetheless one feels, from Kiš's first writings in the 1950s to his final interviews in the 1980s, the overwhelming centrality of his awareness of his family's Jewish identity and the importance of the example of Jewish suffering in understanding the 20th century. That his father's struggles and death would shape Kiš's entire career is foreshadowed by his powerful but little known poem, "Biography," from 1955:

That Eduard Kohn was a prodigious drunk.
He wore eyeglasses of glistening prisms
and watched the world through them
as if through a rainbow.

1.

Even as a child
he had to urinate after the others at school,
for he was circumcised.
Once he was in love
with a baker's daughter,
felt a touch of happiness then.
When she learned he was circumcised,
she didn't think
she could share his bed.
From that point on
he loved to slip his wages to csárdás-fiddlers
and trade kisses with Gypsies.
And then,
seeking comfort,
he grew enamored
of Deliria,
and she wrapped him up in her sincere embrace.

2.

The wind scattered his ashes
through the narrow smokestack
at the crematorium,
higher, higher,
all the way
to the rainbow.⁴

Finally we arrive at the last component of Kiš's identity, his Hungarianness. Kiš's memories of his earliest childhood are couched largely in Hungarian; the dream-like "hull a hó" quoted earlier is paralleled in other stories by the wartime phrases "bűdös zsidó" ["stinking Jew"] and "Éljen Szálasi!" ["long live Szálasi," leader of the Arrow Cross party that was installed in Hungary by the occupying German forces in autumn 1944]. Hungary's impact was also felt positively: Kiš's first great literary fascination was with Endre Ady. He translated many of Ady's poems into Serbo-Croatian and remained an advocate of Ady's elevation into the Western canon his whole life. Ady at once inspired Kiš and convinced him to concentrate on prose instead of poetry for, as he put it, Ady "castrated" him as a poet. If the great Transylvanian showed what the Hungarian language could do in the era of revolutionary modernism, Kiš was convinced that Ady had done it both for Hungarian and for poetry.

Kiš remained attracted to and engaged with the Hungarian literary tradition for his entire life, however. He translated works by a wide range of Hungarian authors, from "revolutionaries" such as Petőfi and Ady to his modern favorites Ottó Tolnai and Ferenc Juhász, and he was a strong advocate for the works of György Petri, whose "The Under-Secretary Makes a Statement" he both translated and praised in an essay. The poem's ribald flavor and invocation of misogyny and pessimism remind one to a certain extent of Kiš's own works, even though Kiš was seldom grotesque. But above all it is Petri's lampooning of autocratic officials that reminds one of Kiš, especially his own late poem "The Poet of the Revolution on Board the Presidential Yacht."

References to Hungary and Hungarians are abundant in Kiš's fictional works, especially of course in the family cycle. A useful summation of Kiš's attitude towards his own years in Hungary is found in the essay "A and B." Here Kiš describes southwestern Hungary, where he labored on a farm until 1947, as a "rat-hole" characterized by urine smells, rust, rotten wood, wet clay, and howling wind. These terms can just as readily be viewed as his boyhood understanding of the war years and the tragedy it brought to his family, and his appreciation of Hungarian literature and the Hungarian language, as well as that country's similar post-Stalinist political evolution through the one-party state with a socialist system, were undimmed by these early hardships.

In this essay, an attempt has been made to see Danilo Kiš as something other than a national cultural representative of one or more groups, something more than even an arbiter between groups. As individualistic and cosmopolitan as Kiš could be, he kept about him an earthiness and a pragmatism that was to some extent in competition with this cosmopolitanism and also with his incipient post-modernism. His work as a translator would seem to be the field in which we can profitably search for Kiš's role in cross-cultural processes, bridge-building, so to speak. He is not so much introducing one culture to another as merging his in-

tellectual and ethical tasks in copious and wide-ranging sets of translations from French, Russian, Hungarian, English, and even Vietnamese.⁵ Kiš translated not as the representative of one culture or another, and not as the conservationist or advocate of a particular place, but as the architect of a certain type of mental space. In its broadest expanse, Kiš's filial quest becomes an examination of intolerance and the outsider, and in order to portray these concepts fully in the era of Hitler and Stalin and from the point of view of a "minor" European culture, an embrace of revolutionary artistic tactics (going back as far as Petőfi and Akhmatova) is necessary.

In the revolutionized space at the junction of Kiš's artistic and political thinking, the two kinds of people on our planet, if you will, are the tolerant and the intolerant. Intolerance is the barbarism and oblivion of the absence of form; intolerance is the state that denies individual rights and the culture that sneers at pluralism. Kiš's translated literary modernists and suffering revolutionaries, along with his characters, confront the world and history as individuals, not as groups. The reason for this confrontation is so that, to paraphrase the author, no one forgets to notice a day on which a child's death occurs. For Kiš, the human condition seems to this historian akin to a walk down a hallway that ends in a tub of poison and a shattered mirror. The mirror, difficult as it is to use, holds the only hope of inspiring wakefulness and awareness of alternate paths. Ferenc Juhász, one of the Hungarian authors whom Kiš most admired, wrote a famous poem entitled "The Grave of Attila József." In this poem, which Kiš translated into Serbo-Croatian, we find these grave words about the artist's ultimate responsibility, mirroring Kiš's own views about the supra-national, individualistic, and revolutionized space that art can create:

For woe to us, woe to the earth, if with our star-dense
words we cannot
steady the world's pivot, with words lark-wing light, or
words fire-trailed, words whale-spouting, or mastodon-heavy...
seal shut the furnace at the white-hot world's core, and
with words soft as babies' soles pad our frail small body,
your soapbubble frail body taken down from the cross of
the world.⁶

Notes

¹ Source: Danilo Kiš (1995) *Skladište* (Beograd: BIGZ), 315–21, 379–81. Mirjana Miočinović, editor of the *Skladište* volume, introduces the parenthetical material from another source into the essay at hand via a footnote at this point. Her argument is that it is "thematically connected" and the association would seem legitimate because of the high degree of overlap between many of Kiš's autobiographical texts.

- ² This cycle, usually said to consist of the two great novels *Garden, Ashes* (1965) and *Hourglass* (1972), should also be considered to include the short stories of *Early Sorrows* as well as the play *Night and Fog*. These critically acclaimed prose works are paralleled by another cycle of sorts, the “hermetic” or historico-political story collections *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) and *Encyclopedia of the Dead* (1982). These two cycles comprise the lion’s share of Kiš’s fictional output, though he also wrote, before his untimely death in Paris in 1989, other stories, three other novels, four other plays, and a wealth of essays and criticism.
- ³ Kiš’s father was a Hungarian Jew from southwestern Hungary; his family had once been German-speaking. Kiš’s mother, Milica Dragićević, was a Montenegrin who practiced Orthodox Christianity.
- ⁴ “Biografija” in Mirjana Mioćinović (ed.) (1995) *Pesme; Elektra* (Beograd: BIGZ).
- ⁵ See Kiš’s contributions to *Druže, tvoja kuća gori* (Beograd: Udruženje književnika Srbije, 1968).
- ⁶ Ferenc Juhász (1970) ‘The Grave of Attila József’ in Kenneth McRobbie and Ilona Duczynska (translators) *The Boy Changed into a Stag: Selected Poems, 1949–1967* (New York: Oxford University Press), 150.