

Living a Dream: History and Fiction in Danilo Kiš’ “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich” and “The Encyclopedia of the Dead”

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Abstract

In this article I compare two stories by Yugoslavian author Danilo Kiš, “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich” and “The Encyclopedia of the Dead,” which address the problems and possibilities of writing a truthful history. Although the stories seem to contradict each other, I will argue that in fact they do not. Instead, when read together

through frameworks of historiography and cultural memory studies, these stories show how literature can reflect on the past in meaningful ways outside of the means of scholarly historical writing, and in doing so offer a better understanding of the status of fiction about true events, in a time in which this is increasingly contested.

“Fake news” and “alternative facts” may be recent terms, but their manifestations are in no way new. During the twentieth century, totalitarian governments, on the left (communism) as well as the right (fascism), influenced the media to a substantial extent. Official truths, concerning, for example, military victories or agricultural production, often did not align with how people experienced these events, as became apparent after the fall of these regimes. Fake news was spread for propagandistic purposes, in favour of an idealised future. It was hoped that, one day, the world would shape itself according to these alternative facts and make the state’s dream come true. The Soviet Union and other communist countries under its influence were thus oriented towards the future, historian Stefan Plaggenborg argues, with economic five-year plans and the world revolution to-come. However, when around 1970 the utopian visions of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe resulted in nothing but disappointment, this future orientation could no longer be sustained, as historian Martin Sabrow argues. Sabrow writes in his book chapter “Chronos als Fortschrittsheld” that instead of looking ahead towards the future, public discourse that was heavily controlled by the government then turned towards the past. Writing history is problematic in itself, as many scholars—including Ernest Renan, E.H. Carr, and Hayden White—have pointed out, but even more so in countries with authoritarian governments and strong state ideology, such as the countries on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. Historical writing, therefore, found an outlet in the creative practice of literature, rather than in the books of historians working at state-controlled universities.

Yugoslavian author Danilo Kiš’ famous story “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich” (1976) has often been interpreted as a critique of historical writing. The story describes the strenuous and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to piece back together the life of the deceased Russian revolutionary Boris Davidovich Novsky. It is remarkable, then, to find that Kiš has written another story which features an absolutely perfect biography, containing all the historical details of a deceased man’s life,

namely the title story of *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (1983).¹ I intend to examine to what extent these two stories contradict each other in order to find out how Kiš reflects on the status of historiography in Yugoslavia and communist countries in general. This may help us to better understand the unstable boundaries between fact and fiction in a time in which they are again being problematised.

I will argue that reading “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich” and “The Encyclopedia of the Dead” side by side will tell us something that they cannot do on their own: although an objective, historical truth may be impossible to achieve, through writing or otherwise, we can still reflect on the past in a meaningful way through art (and literature in particular) by looking at it as a mediator of memory, rather than a “corrupted form of history” (Rigney 81). Close reading the stories side by side, while focusing on aspects of fact, fiction, and their relation to storytelling, will provide arguments for this claim. I will frame my analysis with theories developed in cultural memory studies, rather than historiography. After setting up my theoretical framework, I will demonstrate how the stories form each other’s mirror image. I will then discuss their main differences when it comes to fact and fiction and see how they can be reconciled.

The Modernist Event

Kiš was born in 1935, in a part of Yugoslavia currently belonging to Serbia. His and his family’s experiences during the Second World War and post-war communist rule had a strong influence on his work. The novel *Hourglass* (1972), for example, is partly based on the life of his father, who died in Auschwitz. Given these experiences, it is not surprising that Kiš criticises historiography. Historian Hayden White has argued that the way we deal with history has changed drastically during the twentieth century, due to what he calls “the modernist event” (*Figural Realism* 66). In *Figural Realism*, he describes the modernist event

¹ The italicised *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* or *The Encyclopedia* refers to the whole collection of stories, whereas “The Encyclopedia of the Dead” or “The Encyclopedia” in quotation marks refers to the individual story with that name. The same goes for *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich.” The word(s) *Encyclopedia* (of the Dead), without italics or quotation marks, refer(s) to the book as artefact within the story.

as the collective of the disturbing events that took place during the first half of the twentieth century: two world wars, genocide, totalitarianism, an economic crisis, and so on. According to White, these events “bear little similarity to what earlier historians conventionally took as their objects of study and do not, therefore, lend themselves to understanding by the commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry” (*Figural Realism* 70). He claims therefore that, instead of scholarly historical writing, literature is more suited to describe and make sense of the past. Literature can do so, White argues, because history already employs “all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play” (*Tropics of Discourse* 84), but literature allows for more freedom and room for innovation than history. According to White, this makes literature (especially literary modernism) more suitable for portraying the problematic events of the twentieth century.

Ever since White’s ground-breaking argument, which he first developed in *Metahistory* (1973), new academic fields have arisen that study the difficulties of representing the past in the present. One of these is cultural memory studies, which concerns itself with the way the past is represented in the present through various cultural artefacts, such as novels, films, and monuments. These artefacts keep the past alive in social contexts, often in more personal, non-institutionalised, and subversive ways than conventional history. Approaching the past via culture enables us to look at the relation between history and literature in a new way, building on White’s argument. Literary scholar Ann Rigney, for example, argues that we should see literature not just as “a corrupted form of history or as another world entirely,” but rather “as one mode of remembrance alongside others, yet one that may do distinctive things” (81). Astrid Erll, a major cultural memory scholar, writes:

Literature fills a niche in memory culture, because like arguably no other symbol system, it is characterized by its ability—and indeed tendency—to refer to the forgotten and repressed as well as the unnoticed, unconscious, and unintentional aspects of our dealings with the past. (153)

As such, literature can help our understanding of the past in ways that history itself is less capable of, as will become clear from a close reading of “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich” and “The Encyclopedia of the Dead.”

Mirror Image

In “A Tomb,” as Slavic studies scholar Renate Lachmann argues, Kiš uses fiction to tell facts. He does so, she writes, by making the fictional elements in the text similar enough to the historical situation in which the story is set to “mirror” the facts. As such, the story becomes “a trope substituting for the proper expression without erasing it” (222). In a similar way, “A Tomb” and “The Encyclopedia” form each other’s mirror image. The two stories are strikingly alike, but at the same time often go in opposite directions, the way a left hand, when seen in a mirror, turns into a right. In both stories, an attempt is made to narrate the life of an Eastern European man who lived during the early twentieth century. Boris Davidovich Novsky, the protagonist of “A Tomb,” is born in 1891, 1893, or 1896—sources differ—in a village in Russia. To add to the lack of clarity, this name might have been a pseudonym, “or, more precisely, one of his pseudonyms” (*Tomb* 72). The name of the character at the heart of “The Encyclopedia,” the narrator’s father, is entirely unknown to the reader, but we are told that his initials were D.M. and that he was born in 1910, in a village called Kraljevčani, which was at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, became Yugoslavian later, and currently lies in Croatia.

Novsky’s date and place of birth set him up to be a participant in the Russian Revolution of 1917. D.M. would have been too young for that and, moreover, lived in the wrong part of the world, but he lives through his own modernist events: two world wars and several border and regime changes. However, contradicting White’s argument that the modernist event requires a new kind of historical writing, the Encyclopedia of the Dead gives a perfect account, complete and fully truthful, of D.M.’s life. The narrator describes it as follows: “The reference (for example) to my father’s place of birth is not only complete and accurate (‘Kraljevčani, Glina township, Sisak district, Banija province’) but

is accompanied by both geographical and historical details. Because *it* records everything. Everything” (*Encyclopedia* 42; emphasis in original). Not only does it record everything, it does so “in what is doubtless an objective and impartial manner” (43). What Novsky has in common with D.M. is that there is also someone who has tried to write his biography. But Novsky’s life story is much more difficult to recover than D.M.’s. Historical records contradict each other, entire periods are blank, and when information is available, it is presented in a chaotic manner: “His biography does not lack information: what is puzzling is the chronology (which his aliases and the dizzying succession of places make only more difficult)” (*Tomb* 77). As in Novsky’s case, the sources for D.M.’s entry in the Encyclopedia of the Dead are unclear, but, in opposition to Novsky’s case, the compilers of the Encyclopedia apparently have gotten everything right. The narrator’s motivation for writing Novsky’s biography is to give him the place of remembrance that, according to the narrator, he deserves as a hero of the Russian Revolution. Novsky is in danger of being forgotten, as his name cannot be found anywhere in the history books (*Tomb* 73). The same is true for D.M., since “[t]he only condition [...] for inclusion in *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* is that no one whose name is recorded here may appear in any other encyclopedia” (*Encyclopedia* 43).

One of these two biographies seems to contain the full historical truth, while the other could hardly claim to contain even part of the truth. What complicates matters is that the Encyclopedia of the Dead turns out to be a product of the narrator’s dream. The perfectly factual Encyclopedia is a fantasy, but one that is recreated by the narrator in her narrative and as such, to a certain extent, brought into actual existence. To understand how we should read these stories in light of each other, it helps to look at their historical context.

Stalin’s Terror

“A Tomb” is set during the terror that swept over the Soviet Union in the 1930s, during which hundreds of thousands of people were killed under suspicion of being enemies of the state. Historian Mark Thomp-

son writes that *A Tomb* was Kiš' reaction to the reception of *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956* (1973) by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, which describes the terror and the labour camps in which many of its victims died. In France, where Kiš lived at the time, the book was heavily criticised by leftists who supported the Soviet government, Thompson writes, as they did not want to accept the gruesome information that Solzhenitsyn provided. Kiš, who had first-hand experience with the communist system, was heavily disappointed by this, according to Thompson, and decided to tell a story about the system that could not be doubted. His means for that was fiction:

His stories needed to harness this sense of remoteness. If the Gulag seemed too fantastic to be real, Kiš should show that the sheer reality of the Gulag was fantastic. As he put it later, "I had to find a fantastic way of writing realistically." (Thompson 230)

Lachmann writes about Kiš's strategy in *A Tomb* that, if reality is so outrageous that it becomes hard to believe, creating an even more outrageous fiction might make it easier to accept the truth:

By means of the fictive document the author tries to come to terms with the real document, trying to control its incredibility (or rather phantasticity [*sic*]). The fictive document substitutes the real one, the real document being less credible and more phantastic [*sic*] than the fictive one. (Lachmann 220)

The destruction and falsification that formed part of the terror are especially highlighted by Kiš in "A Tomb." All sources about Novsky are so corrupted that it is virtually impossible to know anything for sure about him. The narrator acknowledges this and often indicates where he encountered problems in his research and writing process. Although this foregrounds the information's unreliability, it also

heightens the sense of reality, as happens in the following passage:

After an obvious gap in our sources (with which we don't want to burden the reader, so he can retain a pleasant but false satisfaction in believing that this is a story like any other, which, fortunately for the author, is usually equated with the power of his imagination), we find him in an insane asylum in Malinovsk. (*Tomb* 81)

If Novsky's story were fictional, the narrator seems to say, it would have contained no gaps since they could have been filled up by the fantasy of the author. As Thompson argues, the narrator's references to his imperfect sources is more than just a postmodern play with fact and fiction: "[H]e reminds us of the Soviet destruction of alternative accounts of history, and the shelf-miles of documents locked away until the USSR disintegrated in 1991" (231). The problem the narrator has with finding reliable sources thus corresponds to the problems any real historian or biographer would have when writing about people who lived in the Soviet Union during the 1930s.

We find a reference to similar institutional oppression in "The Encyclopedia" when the narrator explains why the society responsible for the Encyclopedia is so secretive:

The reason for their secrecy resides, I believe, in the Church's long history of persecution, though work on an encyclopedia such as this understandably requires a certain discretion if the pressures of human vanity are to be avoided and attempts at corruption thwarted. (*Encyclopedia* 44)

The compilers of the Encyclopedia of the Dead are afraid that their work might be obstructed from higher up, as in "A Tomb." Although this remark is directed at the Church, it would not be the first time that Kiš writes "Church" when he means "communists": he does the same in the story "Dogs and Books," which is also part of *A Tomb*.

A Dream to Remember

Unhindered by the Church or communist purges, the Encyclopedia of the Dead is complete to an almost unbelievable extent, with entire years compressed into a single page. Yet the narrator's enthusiasm and her strong descriptions make the reader willing to believe that it has indeed recorded "every action, every thought, every creative breath, every spot height in the survey, every shovelful of mud, every motion that cleared a brick from the ruins" (*Encyclopedia* 56-7). However, once readers come to accept the idea of the perfect Encyclopedia, they are met with an unexpected turn at the end of the story:

And then, after copying the gigantic peeled orange into my notebook, I read the concluding paragraph and let out a scream. I awoke drenched in sweat. I immediately wrote down all of the dream I remembered. And this is what remains of it... (*Encyclopedia* 65)

Although the Encyclopedia was only a dream, the narrator has managed to write down a highly convincing account of it, not only corresponding with her knowledge about her father, but also with information that she had not even been aware of. The narrator wakes up startled when she sees a picture in the Encyclopedia of the basic pattern of the flower paintings that her father D.M. had started making during the final years of his life. When the narrator shows the pattern she has drawn based on her dream to her family doctor, he tells her that it corresponds to the pattern of the tumour that her father died of. Despite coming from a dream, this little piece of art shows us that that dream somehow contained a truth that was unconnected to the knowledge of the person dreaming it.

This ability, to go beyond a level of knowledge that is normally possible, is what makes the Encyclopedia of the Dead truly special, even if it only exists in the mind of the narrator. This is also the conclusion of the narrator herself: "[W]hat is most amazing is its unique fusion of external and internal: it lays great stress on concrete facts, then creates a logical bond between the facts and man, or what we call man's soul"

(58-9). No real encyclopedia would be able to do this, only a fictional one. A fictional piece of life writing might not be about a “real” person, but if many real people can identify with the fictional person, that character might be more real than any person in history. The strength of imagination rings true within the story as well: D.M.’s mental image of the sea is worth more than his actual experience of it, as were his ideas about foreign countries, until they were pushed aside by the reality of a trip to Trieste. Fiction, the Encyclopedia shows, can sometimes be more valuable than the truth.

The Final Testimony

For Novsky, fiction, and in particular written fiction, is also of greater value than fact, although he does not realise this immediately. When he is arrested under the accusation of espionage, the authorities try to persuade him to give false testimony for the benefit of the Revolution. Novsky refuses. He accepts that he will probably be given a death sentence, no matter what he does, but he is determined to have the final say over how he will be remembered:

In Novsky’s dull gaze one could read, as the only sign of soul and life, the decision to endure, to write the last page of his biography according to his own will and fully conscious, as one writes a last testament. (*Tomb* 92)

It is evident that writing is important for Novsky from the story’s special mention of his early-developed writing abilities. Moreover, the destruction of his personal archive and library during a house search is described as “the first step towards the liquidation of Novsky” (89).

During this process, innocent men are threatened with being shot if Novsky does not confess. For Novsky, this spoils the last pages of his biography, as it has the potential to make him into a murderer. Therefore, he complies, at least partly. As Novsky realises he will not be able to determine his own truth, the battle about whether he will write a false testimony or not turns into a battle about the contents of the false testi-

mony. Novsky and his prosecutor Fedukin know that they are creating a fiction, but they both want it to be *their* fiction: “Through long nights the two men struggled over the difficult text of the confession, panting and exhausted, [...] each trying to incorporate into it some of his own passion, his own beliefs, his own outlook from a higher perspective” (*Tomb* 98). It is through fiction, not through fact, that Novsky makes a desperate attempt to shape how he will be remembered. He decides, for example, that he deserves the death penalty, making his seemingly inevitable death into a personal choice. Instead of a death penalty, however, he is sent to a labour camp, where he kills himself during a failed attempt to escape. Although seemingly Novsky has finally determined his own life (and death), even this is uncertain. Nineteen years after his supposed death, the London *Times* reports that Novsky has been seen in Moscow. This report is pushed aside by the narrator as untrustworthy, but it is not any more or less trustworthy than any part of Novsky’s life story. Still, it shows that, through the scraps and pieces of fictional and factual documents, Novsky has somehow lived on as an almost mythical figure.

Concluding Remarks

We have seen that “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich” and “The Encyclopedia of the Dead” resemble one another in such a way that they appear to reflect each other. Although contradictory at first sight, both stories show that art, whether a painting or a fictional biography, can tell us something about the past that history cannot. In the end, it does not matter that we cannot be sure about what happened during Novsky’s life or that the Encyclopedia is part of a dream. It is because of the unreliability of the sources in “A Tomb” that we learn something about the political system of the Soviet Union during the 1930s and through the dreamed-up flower pattern that the narrator of “The Encyclopedia” realises what she has learned about her father’s inner life, on top of or through the historical facts that she already knew. The stories therefore count, according to Erll’s and Rigney’s definitions, as objects of cultural memory. They show that literature can have access to the past in meaningful ways that are unavailable to traditional historical writing. Prereq-

quisite for understanding this, however, is that one abstains from reading the text in question in terms of truths and lies. Despite White's argument about the difficulty of narrating the disturbing events that happened during this time period, Kiš, through his stories, has succeeded in letting his ideas about early twentieth-century Europe circulate in a large social-cultural sphere. Since his fiction is strongly rooted in Eastern Europe, it would be interesting to find out whether Kiš criticises the possibilities of writing history and writing factually in general, or only criticises writing history under communism or similarly repressive systems in the past and the future. At the very least, "A Tomb" and "The Encyclopedia" suggest that literary fiction, as a medium that can provide access to knowledge that is valuable regardless of its level of reality, is a relevant factor in times in which the status of truth is being contested by major political powers.

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Biography

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