Danilo Kiš

A Tomb for Boris Davidovich

Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča

Presented by: Ivana Perica

Consisting of seven interconnected stories which, despite their individual autonomy, together form the “seven chapters of a common story” (thus reads its original subtitle), *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* unfolds the inextricably complicated lives of characters caught between the revolutionary underground and the criminal milieu, including the shadowy intersections between political conspiracy, obscurantism and elite society. Parallelling the persecution of disloyal and supposedly counter-revolutionary subjects and the centuries-old mistreatment and pogroms against the Jews, *A Tomb* became the centre of a literary controversy – moreover, “our greatest post-war literary affair” (Kiš, *Čas anatomije* 5). Accused of plagiarism, political distortion (implying that Yugoslav Stalinism persisted long after its official abolition in 1948) and an idiosyncratic portrayal of Judaism, the novel was taken as an attack on ‘us’ – the socialist, but essentially increasingly provincial and nationalist collective.

“The central event of our century remains the Russian Revolution.” (Howe 207) Each of the seven chapters of *A Tomb* seems to underline this pithy statement: Hanna Krzyzewska (Hana Kšiževska), a young revolutionary who bears “maybe a mark of race and the curse, but not a mark of betrayal” (Kiš, *Tomb* 9), is brutally murdered with a knife wielded by “an individual with ‘indubitable knowledge of anatomy’” (12). She is the heroine of the first novella, “The Knife With the Rosewood Handle”, whose leitmotifs run through the rest of the novel and give it subcutaneous coherence. When she is stabbed to death by her cold-blooded executioner, this girl, like the voices that reappear in the following novellas, “began, before the death rattle, to speak – in Romanian, in Polish, in Ukrainian, in Yiddish, as if her death were only the consequence of some great and fatal misunderstanding rooted in the Babylonian confusion of languages.” (11)

The bloody revolution, which spares no one, and certainly not its own soldiers who are the bearers of the light of a world of tomorrow, is addressed in the title of the second novella as “The Sow that Eats Her Farrow” (“krmača koja proždire svoj okot”). The ‘farrows’ are not simply ‘children’, but literally and much less sentimentally the animals of the revolution, who – Kiš’s irony is here unrelenting – “are ready to die a noble, senseless death” (20).

Much of the controversy surrounding *A Tomb* centred around the chapter “The Magic Card Dealing” which is dedicated to Karlo Štajner, a “Yugoslav communist of Austrian descent”, as this Gulag survivor is commonly remembered (H. G. 1036). Because he relied heavily on Štajner’s camp testimony *7000 Days in Siberia* (1971), Kiš was accused of plagiarism. This refers e. g. to Kiš’s use of Štajner’s report on Karl Georgievich Taube (Karl Georgijevič Taube), who was brutally murdered on 5 December 1956, three years after his release from the Norilsk Corrective Labor Camp, where he worked as a prisoner-doctor. In Kiš’s version, Dr Taube’s fate is decided by a card game played by the so-called “socially acceptable” (*Tomb* 62, in the original “socijalno bliski” or ‘socially related’,

Grobnica 60) – individuals imprisoned because of their criminal activity, which puts them in sharp contrast to another large group of prisoners – the 'politicals'. Although Dr Taube escapes his imminent death for a long time (he was informed that an assassin was on his trail), his faith catches up with him when he is already free and living 3000 km north-east of his former place of detention, in the city of Kolyma. He is murdered with a tool called "timmy" (*Tomb* 71, in the original "svinjska noga", 'a pig's leg', *Grobnica* 68), which hits him three times in the head. Similar to Hanna Krzyzewska, Dr Taube's murderer does not care about his victim's face. He does not even look at it (*Tomb* 71). (Hanna Krzyzewska's murderer was told, "don't get taken in by appearances: a traitor's face can take on a look of great righteousness", 9.) In the face of this death, and similarly to the first chapter, suppressed languages began to speak again. In Dr Taube's case, this is his native German, which he had learned in the Hungarian province from which he had once fled as a young aspiring revolutionary, and which is now whispered by Frau Elze, who dares to speak it after so many years in the Soviet Union.

The climax of the ars combinatoria of this book – the two following chapters "A Tomb for Boris Davidovich" and "Dogs and Books" – make up two sides of the same coin. The first chapter was written to "bring to life the memory of the extraordinary and enigmatic person that was Novsky" (one of Boris Davidovich's pseudonyms, 73–74). A "vehement internationalist" (73), Novsky suffers monstrous torture before succumbing to accusations of counter-revolutionary activities and being sent to Norilsk. There he throws himself into a "boiling mass" (108) of iron during an escape attempt. "Dogs and Books" basically tells the same story, except that it is set in the 14th century, the time of the pogroms that cause Baruch David Neumann (Baruh David Nojman) to flee Germany and find refuge in the south of France, where he is once again persecuted by a Christian tribunal that forces him to renounce his Jewish faith. This story is also based on historical evidence ("Registers of the Inquisition", *Tomb* 123), which the narrator claims to have discovered at the same time as completing the chapter "A Tomb for Boris Davidovich".

The last chapter, "The Short Biography of A. A. Darmolatov", functions as an appendix and implicitly also as a commentary on the novel as a whole. Compared to the previous stories, this is only a very brief account of life, poetry and revolution as seen through the eyes of A. A. Darmolatov – one of many personalities who straddled the lines of revolutionary poetry and revolutionary politics and yet were not inoculated against mediocrity. In this chapter, the irony of the narrator, which is in fact the irony of history, is taken to extremes: despite his persistent efforts, Darmolatov does not go down in 'great history', but is remembered as a medical curiosity, namely as the owner of a gigantic scrotum that developed in his later years due to elephantiasis (135). The photograph of this scrotum, reprinted in pathology textbooks, is also, the narrator adds, "a moral for writers that to write one must have more than big balls" (135).

Kiš was attacked for plagiarism (use and falsification of archival documents and testimonies), for undermining Yugoslav ('our') statehood as well as for a distortion of Judaism. He responded to his critics in a series of polemical essays collected in *Čas anatomije* (The Anatomy Lesson, 1978). This collection, written in the style of Miroslav Krleža's seminal *Moj obračun s njima* (My Reckoning with Them, 1932), settles accounts with, as he puts it, "our literary tavern" (*Čas anatomije* 5), thus revealing the mud on "the face of our literary cuckoo's nest" (6). Taking Rembrandt's painting "The Anatomy Lesson" (1632) as a starting point, he "demonstrates some of the principles underlying *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, but also makes an anatomical incision into the moral and literary profile of the literary cosa nostra" (8).

The seven-month witch-hunt ("hajka", 6) against Kiš (Sept. 1976 – March 1977) was triggered by

the decision to exclude *A Tomb* from the selection for the prestigious Andrić Book Prize – for "moral" (19) reasons. Moral restrictivism, based on the notion that certain things (and certain forms of writing) are acceptable while others are simply wrong, is intertwined with the prevailing or imagined notion of collectively shared (and imposed) norms of behaviour and expression. Therefore, attacks on novels are often based on accusations directed against prevailing views – a recent example of which is the 2023 controversy over Adania Shibli's short novel *Minor Detail* (2017) in Germany. The difference between these two controversies, both of which produced political novels contrary to the explicit intentions of their authors, is that Kiš – unlike Shibli, who tried to get justice in court (see Perica, Schmitt and Uebachs 40) – elaborated extensively on the purpose of writing and polemicising, thus claiming in his own way the right of literature to be judged by literary standards and nothing else: "Ultimately, everything that happens to a writer, good and bad, is part of his literary destiny (and he has no other). Tout est à aboutir à un livre (Mallarmé). Everything in the world exists in order to write a book." (*Čas anatomije* 7).

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

This title was not censored before publishing