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Vladimir ZORIĆ
(Nottingham, University of Nottingham)
vladimir.zoric@nottingham.ac.uk

THE MIRROR AND THE MAP: CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE LATE PROSE OF DANILO KIŠ

Key words: mirror, map, Central Europe, Yugoslav crisis, Holocaust, harbinger victim, occultism.

Abstract: The article examines Danilo Kiš's essayistic and narrative articulations of the cultural space of Central Europe in the context of dissident debates and the Yugoslav political crisis. In mid-1980s, Kundera's essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" sparked a heated debate prompting most writers of the time to take explicit and largely partisan views on Central European identity and its borders in Europe but also within Yugoslavia. However, in his essay "Variations on Central European Themes" and the short stories "The Apatrid" and "The Mirror of the Unknown" Kiš takes a more moderate and remarkably elusive approach which centres on the trauma of Central European Jewry before and during the Second World War. The main argument is that in the essay Kiš does not offer a clear and coherent theoretical platform on Central Europe's past and cultural diversity but proceeds to develop an imaginative one in his narrative fiction from the same period. This approach enables him to avoid the ideological pitfall of interpreting the Holocaust as a preparatory stage for the final demise of Central Europe during the Cold War. Instead of the trope of the harbinger victim, which addresses the past merely as a mirror of present developments, Kiš stresses the essential inaccessibility of obliteration as a distinctive Central European experience. Perspectives irretrievably lost through rapid obliteration of lives can only be conjured up by an occult mirror of imagination and it is precisely those mirrors that occupy Kiš as a motif in his stories.

The title of this article honours and at the same reinterprets the two crucial metaphors of M. H. Abrams' classic study on Romanticism, *The Mirror and the Lamp*. It honours them, because it shares Abrams' belief that the aesthetic ideologies of each historical period leave in literary works recurrent, tell-tale metaphors which work as self-reflective poetic allegories. It also reinterprets them, because in the specific context this paper aims to look into–namely, the images of Central Europe in the late prose of Danilo Kiš–the poetic metaphors of Romanticism take on different forms which testify to the changed, more thoroughly political, concerns of the time. More particularly, in the darkness of the political crisis and the wars in Yugoslavia, the feeble light of the writer's lamp proves to be of little avail for either enlightenment or orientation, and most texts of the post-Yugoslav

period turn upon another tool of spatial representation, the map. Yet, for those who deem that literature should not be bound by the spatial circumference defined by a nation-state's borders or by its outposts in diaspora, it is the mirror that emerges as plausible alternative for a metaphoric reappraisal of history. However, in some authors, the mirror does not serve the same rational purpose of reflection which Abrams attributes to realism but rather opens up to occult cognition. This article will look at the genesis and tropology of Kiš's occult mirrors and trace their role in the debates on the identity of Central Europe after the Holocaust.

Central Europe Lost and Found: Dissident Debates of the 1980s and their Echoes in Yugoslavia

The debates over Central Europe in the 1980s had peculiar repercussions in the Socialist Yugoslavia. Whereas the dissidents from the Soviet client states raised the issue of a specific Central European *identity* shaped by various imperial projects and by subaltern responses to these projects, Yugoslav authors addressed the issue from a different perspective, *pro domo sua*. By the mid-1980s, the federal state of the South Slavs had sunk into the final stage of dissolution accompanied by economic recession: gone were the times when the non-aligned position of Tito's Yugoslavia was seen as a paragon of liberal Socialism. By raising the Central European flag on the Yugoslav mast, a group of authors from Yugoslavia opened the question of the *borders* of Central European culture which would not necessarily overlap with state frontiers. A particularly indicative event was the formation of the regional organisation Alpe-Adria which gathered the writers from Slovenia and Croatia and their colleagues from Austria, Hungary and Northern Italy around what they saw as a shared Central European nexus of their national cultures.

The Slovene author Drago Jančar encapsulated the initial enthusiastic response of many Yugoslav authors to the dissidents' debate on Central Europe: "For small Central European nations such as us Slovenes (and such as other Yugoslav nations, too), for various minorities, the vision of Central Europe flashed as an opportunity to get away from our isolation in which we have enclosed ourselves with steady obstinacy and which others, too, have imposed on us." (Jančar 1987: 881) It could be argued that the vital part of this emphatic sentence is concealed in brackets: "such as other Yugoslav nations, too". Jančar adopts an inclusive view which besides Slovenes entitled other–possibly all–Yugoslav nations, to a place in the Central European realm. However, it is clear from his wording that it is Slovenes who should take pride of place in that realm; the other Yugoslav nations are but conjoint members and need not be named specifically lest awkward questions are raised. Marjan Rožanc,

another Slovene author, made it clear that for him "other Yugoslav nations" meant not all Yugoslav nations but only the Croats: "It is not just the end of the Slovenes, for with us is disappearing the entire Baroqueish space extending from Trieste to the Baltic and which is designated by the vague name of Central Europe. All the nations and peoples shaped to such a large extent by Central European culture – the Croats, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians – are dying with us." (Rožanc, quoted in: Matvejević 1989: 184) It is worth recalling that the notion that other Yugoslav nations – most notably Serbs, but also other "southern" nations such as Macedonians – simply do not have what it takes to qualify as a Central European culture is neither entirely new nor unique to the Yugoslav context. An argument with very similar structure had been raised a few years earlier by Milan Kundera in his much-debated essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe." In that essay, Russian and Soviet policies came across as an anti-European totalitarian force which captured the geographical centre of the continent causing a tragic split between its cultural identity and political loyalty. "Culturally in the West and politically in the East," Central European countries were, thus, left to languish in the oppressive grip of a radically different civilisation (Kundera 1984: 33). Rožanc's claim that the Serbs "have no Central European experience, but merely one of nation state, and therefore encounter great difficulties with Europeanisation" (Rožanc 1987: 205) had a familiar ring for Slovene intellectuals and initiated a full-blown Balkanist appropriation of Kundera's argument.

The response of Serbian authors was swift and expectedly vehement, all the more so because it was voiced in various writers' forums that reflected the country's federal structure and the conflicts rising within it. The playwright Slobodan Selenić retorted that the Slovene intellectuals' anti-authoritarian platform barely concealed the anachronous nationalist construal of the ethnic Other. According to Selenić, they all too often traced the anti-liberal forces to Serbian political agenda and ethnic traits and tended to disregard the ossified bureaucratic apparatus of the Yugoslav state (Selenić 1995: 17–18). Pushing his criticism even further, he suggested that the monolithic quality of the Slovene public sphere and the consensual support for secession made Slovenia a near perfect anti-candidate for the kind of pluralist and dialogic space to which it aspired (19–20). Selenić rounded off his argument with a surprisingly overt essentialist rebuke. Namely, conceding that Serbian culture was not Central European and had never been so, he also claimed that it was only for the better: "by our upbringing and the intellectual ambience into which we fit, by the books we read and by the way we interpret them […] we are equally, or even more, Europe (not Central Europe) than Slovenia" (25). From the present-day perspective, Selenić's criticism may seem reductionist: the Slovene authors' Central European pathos was not merely a belated reverence of the Habsburg rule but a pragmatic strategy for marketing a Slovene nation state whereby its colonial past was to be seen as

more valuable than that of Serbs. Likewise, to deny Serbian culture substantial links with Austro-Hungarian colonial legacy would be a sweeping negation of important strands of that culture (See: Gavrilović 2010). However, the rhetorical barrage against Central Europe was yet to come. For historian Milorad Ekmečić, Central Europe is plainly a geopolitical myth of the unity of Danubian Catholic nations. The myth, albeit historically "false" and pathologically "melancholic," has elicited a strong sense of solidarity among its adherents. In Ekmečić's line of reasoning, it does not take much historical imagination to move from the notion of solidarity to that of conspiracy: after all, it is a prudent and pragmatic management of the former (usually under the centralist rule of an imperial power) that brings about the latter. The pogroms against the Serbs in the quisling Croat state were thus "not the output of the domestic Croat grindstones but also a long-ripened product of Central European windmills." (Ekmečić 1992: 22) Since to Ekmečić Central Europe appeared as no more than a myth, it required no great leap of logic for him to enrich that myth by interspersing its bountiful fields with windmills. Yet, his attempt against the Central European myth was by no means Quixotic: in actual fact, it commanded a wide support in the years to come.

In the Yugoslav context, thus, Central Europe played a twofold role. On the one hand, it offered a seemingly equitable, pluralist alternative to hegemonic impasses of the ruling ideology and, equally importantly, a form of utopian compensation for the increasingly obvious failure of the South Slavic statehood project. On the other hand, Central European debate was also instrumental in the development of the crisis since it proved a rich source of ammunition both for "nesting orientalisms" (Bakić Hayden 1995: 21–231) and for endemic occidentalisms. Indeed, the claim that the northern parts of the country were Central European reinforced the existing divisions by implying a value statement on its southern parts. By the same token, the claim of the latter that they were not Central European (and did not want to be so) implied a value statement, not necessarily of Central Europe but of those who they believed denied their share in it.

Central Europe in a Fragmented Mirror: Kiš's Essay "Variations on Central European Themes"

In view of these circumstances, it is all the more surprising that one of the most resonant Yugoslav contributions to Central European debates comes from an author who invested his views on this subject with very few references to the immediate political context and who instead preferred to swerve the whole discussion towards things aesthetic. In 1986, Danilo Kiš wrote a series of thirty eight essayistic fragments, playfully entitled "Variations on Central European Themes," which appeared firstly in French in *Le messager européen*, several months later in English in the Central European yearbook *Cross Currents*, and

then finally in the Serbian literary magazine *Gradac*.[1] The curious musical metaphor in the essay's title testifies to Kiš's awareness that by the time his own reflections were put to paper Central Europe had become a hallmark theme among the dissident intelligentsia from the Eastern bloc and the scholars from the West. But the title also carries a recognisable allusion to Miroslav Krleža's series of essays "Variations on Musical Themes" that deal predominantly with the Viennese and German composers. This reference is by no means accidental because Krleža appears in Kiš's text as a paradigmatic example of the Slavic writer from Austria-Hungary whose allegiance to French culture is largely a consequence of his even more profound and indiscriminate loathing of the Dual Monarchy; (Kiš 1996: 98, 105–106) nor is the Krleža example deprived of self-ironic point: the son of a Hungarian Jew who perished in Auschwitz, young Kiš himself chose to turn his literary aspirations towards French authors and their cultural habitus. The only exception to this francophone canon is the Hungarian poet Endre Ady who himself lived in Paris for a considerable period of time. Kiš eventually rediscovered Central Europe as a rich theme in his mature autobiographic family trilogy but this narrative discovery occurred under the keen gaze of the *nouveau roman* techniques.

For one thing, coherence is not the salient feature of Kiš's essay and it would be arbitrary and contrived on the interpreter's part to try and look for one. One is tempted to reiterate apropos Kiš what Timothy Garton Ash has already said in his appraisal of Gyorgy Konrad's *Antipolitics*: "The peculiar (and peculiarly Central European?) quality of this work is the coexistence in a relatively small space of a remarkable diversity of formulations and arguments, as rich and as multifarious as the nations of the Dual Monarchy – and as difficult to reconcile." (Garton Ash 1989) Similarly to Konrad, in defining the region's elusive identity Kiš wavers between the shared Habsburg heritage ("the Viennese circle," 101) and the parochial anti-Semitism ("Jewry as gadfly," 103). In the same way, at the beginning of his essay he warns against the "oversimplification" of seeing "so broad and heterogeneous a region […] as a unit" (97) but later on argues that "negative attitude toward totalitarianism and its advocates is […] Central European *differentia specifica*" (111). Finally, Kiš's list of the coryphaei of Central European literature makes a motley crew of disillusioned Marxists in the West (Popper, Koestler), internal dissidents (Konrad, Havel), staunch leftist writers (Krleža), quintessential anti-nationalists (Ady) and, for that matter, quintessential nationalists (Petefy).

Bearing in mind that Kiš's thirty-eight fragments do not aim at presenting a systematic argument on Central Europe, it seems sensible to add that they also do not purport to make a cutting edge within the

[1] Danilo Kiš, « Variations sur des thèmes d'Europe central », *Le messager européen,* No. 1 (printemps 1987), "Variations on the Theme of Central Europe", *Cross Currents* 6 (1987), pp. 1–14, „Varijacije na srednjoevropske teme", *Gradac*, No. 76–77 (maj–avgust 1987), pp. 31–39.

intellectual debate on Central Europe,. Quite the contrary, "Variations on Central European Themes" remains one of the most inconclusive texts of that debate. To be sure, Kiš shows acute awareness of fiercely contentious questions, from the evaluation of different political and cultural hegemonies in the region, to the problem of dormant nationalisms concealed by the dissident idea of "international intellectual aristocracy", to the assets and pitfalls of non-violent resistance to totalitarianism. However, he chooses not to take sides in any of these issues and remains reticent as to their possible solutions.[2]

A likely reason for such an approach is to be found in Kiš's ambivalent position vis-à-vis, Hungarian, Czech, and Polish participants of the debate (Kundera, Konrad, Milosz, and Rupnik) on the one hand and, on the other, those émigrés from the Russian part of the Eastern bloc, like Joseph Brodsky. While he considered himself broadly associated with the émigré circles, especially those in Paris, he still found that any grudge he might have with Yugoslav version of Socialism was very different from the oppression experienced in the countries of the Soviet bloc. By the same token, from his own documentary and literary exploration of the age of the Great Terror, he also felt that a heavy burden of totalitarianism was also borne by those who were forced to live within USSR and that this human plight must not be underestimated. It is, thus, possible that Kiš thought a clear response to the Czech, Polish and Hungarian dissidents' anti-Soviet pathos would involve him in morally hazardous adjudication over the "real" victim of totalitarianism and this adjudication was something he was not prepared to do. But, the elaboration of this thesis would require another article; what matters here is that Kiš does not commit himself to giving a clear and coherent statement of his position on Central Europe.

It is equally important to note that in a later interview Kiš shows the same kind of restraint and syncretism in his specific assessment of Yugoslav attunement to Central Europe. Rather than selecting one or another Yugoslav nation as a natural part of the Central European project he squarely claims that the whole of Yugoslavia belongs to that "cultural circle." There is no doubt that at the time such a conciliatory statement may have had a soothing effect on the tensions between Slovene, Croatian and Serbian writers, who were caught in the vicious circle of Orientalist and Occidentalist rebuffs. However, Kiš's rationale for this inclusive approach comes across as eclectic. As a matter of fact, in a later interview, Kiš mentions only three major writers who were indeed a safe bet: "By their cultural associations,

[2] In his recent biography of Kiš, *The Birth Certificate*, Mark Thompson cites anecdotal evidence of the writer's dislike of what he perceived as the "pedagogic tone" of some Russian writers from the Soviet Union vis-à-vis their peers from other countries of the Soviet block. At a meeting of writers and intellectuals dedicated to Central Europe, Kiš is said to have reacted to Tatyana Tolstaya's talk with visible irritation claiming that she made him feel "like a child being lectured to" (Thompson 2013: 304). While the story certainly rings true of Kiš's temperament and cultural attitudes it is indicative that he left his dissatisfaction at the level of informal comments.

our great trio' – Andrić, Krleža, Crnjanski – belonged precisely to this space." (Roganović 1988: 13) To be sure, this trio of writers happened to stem from areas under the Habsburg rule and each started his literary career in the same realm before the beginning of the First World War. However, in their later works, primarily in essays and narrative fiction, they kept revisiting that realm with a strong critical inflection if not with overt enmity. Furthermore, even if one disregards these writers' critical attitude to the Habsburg Monarchy and sees them as part of a non-hegemonic Central European cultural "filtrate", it is hard to see how this rarefied milieu could override the lower cultural strata of the Yugoslav state. The more popular strata were also populist hotbeds of national and regional particularisms where Central Europe could only have been seen as a distant marker.[3] Thus, Kiš's syncretistic Yugoslavism within an equally syncretistic Central Europe was predicated on aesthetic elitism that took into consideration only the most prominent and, at the same time, the least contentious writers of the region's supranational canon.

The only sphere where Kiš seems to step out of this cautious neutral role in order to pass several more specific judgments is the issue of the obliteration of Central European Jews. In their polemical essays, some dissidents argued for a post-Holocaust re-evaluation of the Central European cultural space whereby its purported unity was not to be seen as the outcome of a struggle between centripetal and centrifugal national discourses (Austro-German, Hungarian, Slavic), nor for that matter between centripetal and centrifugal ideologies (absolutism vs. liberalism). It was rather to be seen as a result of the mediatory agency of Jewish intellectuals. It was claimed that Jews formed universalistic value systems which bridged the master-slave dialectical divide between Germanic-Hungarian (colonising) and Slavic (colonised) components of Austro-Hungarian Empire. (Kundera 1984: 35; Rupnik 1990: 252–254) Finally, a compensatory rhetoric trope was articulated to enable Central Europe at the present moment to come to terms with the loss of this precious connective agency. It was suggested, namely, that the destruction of Central European Jewry under Nazism was an advance symbolic image of the destiny meted out on Central European cultural space by the hegemonic powers, including the Soviet regime after the Second World War (Kundera 1984: 35).

The major problem with this trope is not so much the fact that it reduces the Jewish cultural presence in Central Europe to the narrow stratum of its cosmopolitan intellectual elite in Vienna and Prague while neglecting the local, segregated Jewish enclaves in western Hungary, eastern Austria and in Poland. The actual problem with this

[3] Some of these differences are recognised, albeit with a significant degree of essentialism and undue generalisation, in "Variations on Central European Themes": Croat writers are said to have nourished French affiliation of contempt for everything Viennese whereas Serbs are seen as anchored in Orthodox and revolutionary mysticism coming from Russia.

trope is in its being precisely that, a *trope*: Holocaust is not seen as an event in its own right but as a *mise en abyme* of the overarching master narrative about the downfall of Central Europe. By analogy, whatever Jews produced in cultural sphere would be considered with reference to Central European culture, as part of retroactive enabling narrative about that culture. The most extreme example of this rhetoric strategy is found again in Marjan Rožanc who in continuation of the aforementioned text claimed: "We are not dying alone; we are dying with the Jews of the region, Central Europeans par excellence and hence the first to fall, long since transformed into crematorium smoke" (Rožanc, quoted in Matvejević, 1989: 184).

With his own family scarred by Holocaust and with sharp sensitivity to the ethic of literary representation, Kiš felt summoned to respond in some way to this use of Judaism as a signifier. His response was by no means new: it had been articulated before by Hannah Arendt, among others, but Kiš was the first to employ it in Central European debates. In "Variations on Central European Themes", he admits that the loss of Jewish political and cultural agency has led to an irreversible impoverishment of Central Europe's creative potentials (103). However, he goes on to argue that the members of Jewish intellectual and artistic elite were able to communicate their views mostly through square assimilation and only to a lesser extent through mediation between Germans and Slavs. He alludes to Kafka's linguistic conversion to German and quotes one of his famous letters to his father: "I did not see what else to do with so heavy a burden than to rid myself of it as soon as possible" (109). Now in that assimilation – commonly styled as "emancipation" – their views and practices did not disappear but got changed, transformed within a new context. The obvious implication of Kiš's claim is that it was not only Jews who enriched the Central European culture under the auspices of the two empires but that there was also a reverse process in which these imperial settings nourished Jewish self-understanding as an ambiguous group and encouraged them to disown a part of the particularist heritage of Diaspora and pursue more universal values. At the crucial moment, however, Jews were forced to live through the Latin proverb "quod me nutrit me detruit": both the "imperial" and the "small" nations of Central Europe sided with Hitler's project of the extermination of Jews.

The second part of Kiš's response consists of his assertion that the Jewish predicament should be considered in a wider European context, the one that includes their position not only in Central Europe but also in Soviet Union:

> Besides the frustration of classical anti-Semitism, Central European Jewish intellectuals have experienced two major traumas: fascism and Communism. And while the fall of fascism (assuming they came out of it alive) might have lent them, as it did West European Jewry, the ambivalent status of victim, the coming of Stalinism, largely championed by Jews, denied them the fruits of liberation. (109)

This brief and dense parallelism is of fundamental importance because it introduces a subtle counter-argument against the interpretation of Holocaust as a *mise en abyme* of the demise of Central Europe. More precisely, it may be called a counter-trope: it is essentially rhetorical albeit not in the same way as the one proposed by the Czech dissidents. It relies on a double hypothesis of symmetry and then of asymmetry between Nazism and Communism. On the one hand, the two regimes are symmetric in ethical sense in that both are based on totalitarian mechanism of government: extinction of individual freedom and physical annihilation of the projected internal opponents. On the other hand, they are asymmetric in terms of the role of Jewish agency in each of them: whereas in the Third Reich the Jews were singled out as a group for extermination, in Lenin's and Stalin's Soviet state individual Jews had an important role in preparation of the revolution and subsequent enforcement of the oppressive regime.

The thoroughly rhetorical nature of Kiš's hypothesis of symmetry vs. asymmetry in totalitarian systems is obvious from its being remarkably non-specific. In a different context, Kiš could have easily applied the very same trope to the case of the most numerous national group in Central Europe, the Germans. Individual activists of the German minority in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia were instrumental in Hitler's annexationist policy in 1930s, but after the end of the Second World War, the whole group was subjected to quick and efficient wave of mass expulsions from all Central European countries other than Germany and Austria. However, what mattered for Kiš was not reaching to the indisputable historical truth but coming up with an alternative to the essentialist framing of Jewry as a function of the Central European identity construct. In other words, the hypothesis of reverse symmetries effectively extracts Jews from their assigned signifier role of symbolic victims in "the tragedy of Central Europe" and shows them as an ambiguous entity.

Had Kiš phrased his view in a more explicit way and criticised specific authors such as Kundera, Rožanc, and Rupnik over their use of Holocaust as a symbol, one can imagine that there would have been some form of polemical response. Instead, he preferred to take the sceptical and hesitant position over the value of contemporaneous reinvention of Central Europe. On the one hand, he certainly felt attracted by its anti-totalitarian ethos and favoured the idea of a shared intellectual front with his peers from the Soviet bloc. On the other hand, however, he also discerned a more parochial aspect of that reinvention, in which the self-inflicted loss of a constituent part was compensated for by retroactive inclusion of that lost part in enabling rhetorical tropes of victimhood. By a twist of irony Kiš died in October 1989, only three weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the event that opened the way for unification of Germany and suddenly made possible a real, rather than merely speculative, political perspective for Central Europe. Thus, the question of how he would respond to the new pragmatism of the dissidents, particularly to their

swift abandonment of the lachrymose image of Central Europe for the sake of a newfangled EU enthusiasm, is bound to remain in the realm of conjectures.

Instead of engaging in such precarious speculations, I will tread a more secure terrain and extend the source material for my enquiry to include Kiš's fictional narratives from the period that approximately coincides with the composition of his essay. It will emerge that while in the essay Kiš remains hesitant over the value of reinvention of Central Europe, in his short stories "The Apatrid" and "The Mirror of the Unknown" there is a more clearly defined image of Central Europe, one that rephrases the whole problem in poetic rather than in political terms.

Central Europe in Transparent Mirrors: Occult Vision in Kiš's Short Stories

At this point, it is necessary to address the tantalising question of how such a versatile and heavily debated ideologeme as Central Europe could ever become an efficient cause behind the structure of a literary text. Furthermore, it remains equally dubious how this cause could be proved to be efficient in a number of works by authors as different as Musil and Handke – or for that matter Krleža and Schultz – gathering them into a "Central European" group demonstrably different from other poetic formations. For one thing, Kiš's essay ends on a most unusual note, with an ardent case for a shared Central European poetics:

> Awareness of form is one of the common traits of Central European writers – form as a desire to make sense of life and metaphysical ambiguities, form as a possibility of choice, form as an Archimedean fulcrum in the chaos surrounding us, form as a bulwark against the mayhem of barbarism and the irrational caprice of instinct. (114)

This eschatological idea of art's mission in Central Europe is not entirely new. Before Kiš, the case for an immanently poetic community of Central European authors had already been made by Czeslaw Milosz. In his essay "Central European Attitudes" Milosz suggested that temporal organization of narrative fiction by authors from that region is more dynamic and outright "spasmodic" because "time is associated with a danger threatening the existence of a national community to which a writer belongs" (Milosz 1986: 102). Ardently argued though they are, such theories create their own pitfalls. In Kiš's essay, too, the writer's "awareness of form" is a consequence of his primary awareness of history. However, in his usage the "form" is an extremely vague determinant: he tells us what the form is not (barbaric mayhem and chaos, irrational and capricious instinct) but he does not give us any clue as to what it is.[4] It is almost a truism to remind that every

[4] Kiš's loose use of the concept of form has sparked some misunderstanding among literary critics as early as 1970s and the objection was raised that in his essay

work of literature, and of art too, is bound to have *some* form. Phidias' sculptures have something in common with Musil's novels and that is that they have a form.

There are two ways in which one can address Kiš's ambiguous statement. One can easily discard it as an instance of subjective and misapplied use of aesthetic category in the order of historical events. Or, otherwise, if one does not prefer easy solutions, one can go beyond Kiš's essay and look at his short stories which are broadly contemporaneous to the debate in order to search for further indices. In his stories "The Apatrid" and "Mirror of the Unknown" Kiš depicts two characters with a distinctly Central European hue, a cosmopolitan playwright and a Jewish merchant from Hungarian province with his two teenage daughters.[5] He traces their itineraries and guesses at their thoughts in a short period of time preceding their sudden, violent deaths. We may assume that if there is in Kiš's work a clue to how the form responds to the mayhem of Central European history, it is likely to be found in these two stories.

I will give a very brief summary of each of the two stories before I proceed to establish what links them. "The Apatrid" is a series of 26 prose fragments that capture different moments in the life of a fictional playwright Egon von Nemeth. The bulk of this fictional biography is actually gathered (compiled) from the lives of two real authors, the playwright Ödön von Horváth and the poet Endre Ady, with only occasional alterations of factual details such as the hero's name and a hint at his Jewish ancestry. The fragments of "The Apatrid" are disconnected in terms of temporal and causal link and introduce scenes from von Nemeth's childhood and mature age, mingled with the incidents from his numerous travels around Central Europe and references to his ancestors. Thematically heterogeneous, the fragments differ in narrative voice, too. In a seemingly offhand way, the reader is introduced to excerpts from von Nemeth's diary (transferred from von Horvath's correspondence), literary critical sketches on his poetics, and detached third person accounts of the occurrences leading to his untimely death in Paris. During his trip to Amsterdam, von Nemeth, obsessed with paranormal phenomena, visits a clairvoyant who tells him to go to Paris without delay because it is where his last chance is supposed to be. Soon after arriving in Paris, von Nemeth dies in a bizarre accident: during one of his promenades at Champs Elysees, he is caught in a sudden thunderstorm and hit by a falling tree branch right in front of a theatre.

"The Mirror of the Unknown" is more compact both in causal and chronological sense but here again the links are based on the same

he is seeing it as part of the old-fashioned dualism of form vs. content (see Jeremić 1976).

[5] There is ample evidence from Kiš's posthumously collected notes that in 1980s he contemplated a series of short stories centring on writers and bourgeois intellectuals from Central Europe. However, he did not take these plans beyond the stage of preliminary research and broad sketches (see Radič 359–361).

occult belief in clairvoyance. The story develops in two narrative lines which merge in a dramatic crescendo. The first one follows a Jewish Hungarian merchant Mr Brenner and his two daughters on their night travel in carriage from the town of Arad, where the girls have been enrolled in school, to a village near Szeged, where they live. The road takes them through deep forests and as they ride each of them is lulled into their own thoughts which the narrator can only guess at. The events in the second narrative line take place during the same night but are of different ontological status: the reader follows the dream of the third daughter, who is too young for school and has therefore stayed at their family home. In her dream, the girl wanders through forests and looks into a pocket mirror, the oneiric replica of a real mirror she holds under her pillow. The uncanny dream quickly turns into a nightmare; she sees in the mirror something which makes her wake up in utter horror and cry "They are all dead!" The reader never finds out what the girl has actually seen in her dream, but a newspaper article quoted at the end of the story informs that during the night the carriage in which her father and sister travelled was attacked by road thugs and that the travellers were robbed and massacred.

It is not difficult to see that despite their different settings and plotlines "The Apatrid" and "The Mirror of the Unknown" have a lot in common when considered as counterparts. To begin with, the two stories frame what Kiš perceived as two paradigmatic types of the Central European Jew, Egon von Nemeth standing for the cosmopolitan intellectual who makes his cultural impact in the urban centres of the Habsburg Monarchy and Brenner standing for the upbeat Ashkenazi merchant, who asserts himself in the economic life of provincial recesses of the empire. If one extends this line of reasoning, it comes into view that von Nemeth and Brenner also represent two forms of Judaic in-betweenness in Central Europe. In the case of von Nemeth, the bilingual of mixed descent, we encounter a truly synthetic spirit that transcends the parochialism of national cultures and puts forward the idea of shared tradition united in the nobility of spirit. In the case of Brenner, however, in-betweeness is not about creativity of cultural mediation but about orthodoxy: it is a self-enclosed cultural discourse which observes the heterogeneity of Central Europe from an external and detached viewpoint. One may rightly object that this distinction is far too schematic to reflect the historical variety of Central European Jewry, let alone Central Europe as a whole. Still, it is an important step away from the indiscriminate usage of Jews in the debates on Central Europe in 1980s and one which is conspicuously in accordance with Kiš's own insight from "Variations on Central European Themes."

Once we grasp the difference between von Nemeth and Brenner, we are in a position to appreciate the importance of the narrative fact that both of them end in a similar way. The playwright dies on the eve of the Holocaust, as Central Europe sinks into the abyss of Nazi ideology, and the merchant perishes in a gruesome assault bearing unmistakable anti-Semitic connotations. In other words, they bear,

symbolically or literally, the initial brunt of the tide of violence that will reshape the political map of the region and initiate metaphoric construals of its past.

The two characters are not the only elements to reflect aspects of historical Central Europe; equally importantly, in their respective stories the reflection itself is framed through the important role of the mirror imagery. This is particularly evident in "The Mirror of the Unknown" where the mirror has the key function in the development of the plotline since it connects the youngest daughter's dream and the sinister reality of her father and sisters. The mirror which the girl holds under her pillow but which finds its way into her dream displays typical markers of a Hoffmanesque uncanny object. It was *presented* to her by her father who bought it at a fair from a *lame Gypsy* who was selling copper kettles and who had *only one* mirror to sell. (Kiš 1989: 98) In "The Apatrid," the mirror does not feature so prominently in the narrative action, but appears in one fragment, briefly but possessing great symbolic charge. A few months before his death in Paris, von Nemeth visits a publishing house in Berlin. At the moment when the lift comes down to take him to the publisher's office he experiences a disturbing encounter: the lift cabin is empty, apart from an upright, black-lacquered coffin for a first-class funeral. The front part of the coffin features a beautiful piece of bourgeois extravaganza: a Venetian mirror is embedded into the wood so when the lift stops the astonished von Nemeth actually sees in it his own reflected image, "a pale traveller firmly holding under his armpit the manuscript for his new novel *The Man without Fatherland*." (Kiš 1995: 205)

Taken at their face value, both mirrors serve as instruments of the occult forces: they represent an immediate link to the scene of death and this link works either in space (as in "The Mirror of the Unknown") or in time (as in "The Apatrid"). However, I will submit that at a deeper level the mirrors also have their poetic implications. Petty kitsch products though they are, the mysterious power they suddenly acquire points towards artistry. If understood as artistic media – or to use Kiš's term, *the vehicles of form* – they enable us to rephrase the problem of Central Europe from the specific vantage point at which it occurred to Kiš. In the 1980s the dissident debates produced various forms of essentialist discourse on Central European identity but all historical structures which purportedly sustained that cultural space have disappeared. The Habsburg monarchy, the Wilhelmine empire, the Jewish mediatory agency were irretrievable but paradoxically still productive of nostalgic yearning and still produced a quest for harbinger victims. For Kiš, however, the problem of Central Europe was not the handling of cultural memory in the present but the question of accessibility of individual human experience lost in the past. This is epitomised in "The Mirror of the Unknown" when the narrator stresses that his account of their inner experience is only a guess:

> What a Central European Jewish merchant thinks about on the day of his death we can only guess. Just as we can have only the vaguest idea of what the daughters (thirteen and fourteen) of a Central European Jewish merchant think or dream of on the day they have been enrolled in a secondary school and had their first encounter with the great outside world. (101–102)

The same symbolic point is made at the end of "The Apatrid," when von Nemeth dies, hit by a falling branch. The narrator's confident pursuit of von Nemeth's path is interrupted by a sudden cognitive distance emerging from the experience of death:

> This sudden flash of light, like the flame of a torch which will be extinguished after a gust of wind, this radiance before the darkness, that is the furthest point to which we can trace the experience of the gentleman without fatherland. We cannot go further than that […], we are not granted that experience. Nor will we ever be. (219)

Indeed, how can the writer get to the historical correlate of what is retroactively projected as Central Europe – namely, the obliteration of Jews as a lived experience – without presenting a mirror image of his own temporal and cultural standpoint? There has to exist a peculiar mirror, a peculiar poetic stand, appropriate to the purpose.

If the writer avails himself of an ordinary looking glass, it is only going to reflect what he invests into it. For one thing, the mirror has been one of the most frequent metaphors in aesthetic and literary theory and, also, one with a fairly stable meaning: it always stressed the standard reflective aspects of literary work. Thus, in mimetic theories, the literary work reflects life in all of its aspects – one will recall Stendhal's parable of the novel as a mirror which a traveller carries along a high road and which reflects both the skies and the puddles along the way. (Stendhal 1973, II: 342) In this deft parable, skies and puddles stand for differing symbolic spaces of social circuit but also for differing ontological entities: ideas and ideals, as well as the concrete particulars of life (for a succinct overview of mimetic theories of literature, see Abrams 1953: 30–46). In Romanticist Neo-Romantic theories, too, the mirror negotiates between life and art but the process is reversed. It is now life that reflects the higher reality of art. This view is neatly illustrated in a parable in Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* when the narrator stares in the mirror and suddenly becomes overwhelmed by his own reflection: it is now the image which is stronger and the narrator becomes the mirror (Rilke 1958: 117–118). Finally, in Structuralist and deconstructive theories, the mirror was used as a metaphor for what is called *mise-en-abyme* or placing into the abyss. The master image turns out to be Borges' vision of "A boundless mirror which regards itself / In another mirror and no one there to see them." (Borges 1999: 437) Just as the two mirrors set one against the other reflect each other into infinity, so different parts of a literary text reflect one another, with some episodes encapsulating

the whole and vice versa (for a thorough overview of the structural forms and examples of *mise en abyme* in literature see Dällenbach 1977). What connects mimetic, Romanticist and Structuralist versions of the mirror metaphor is that they assume relations *in praesentia*. In other words, be it life into art, art into life, or internal links within a work of art, the conventional mirror will always link object and its reflection in space and time.

Given this semiotic versatility of the mirror metaphor, it is all the more surprising that very few scholars have explored its evolution and function in Kiš's narrative fiction. The almost insistent images of mirror reflection in his earlier works *Garden, Ashes* and *The Hourglass* have been paid only scant attention or for that matter simply glossed over.[6] Most of those who noticed the recurrence of mirror imagery in Kiš have routinely associated it with the *mise en abyme* vogue in modernist and postmodernist prose. They put down its emergence in Kiš's fiction to the influence of Jorge Luis Borges, despite the fact that in the prose of the Argentinean writer the mirror takes on a different form, not the one of an aesthetic expedient but of a sinister object that multiplies existence.[7] Even worse, some interpreters of Kiš did not hesitate to use the mirror for their own critical construals which did not have much in common with Kiš: "The desired meaning and the yet-to-be-reached ideal of Central Europe is precisely to see oneself in the mirror of the other but historical reality always reminds us that we are in the funfair house of convex mirrors." (Pantić 2002: 139)

Gabriel Motola's and Marianna D. Birnbaum's essays are remarkable moments of insight in this persistent blind spot in the Kiš criticism. (Motola 1993: 605–621; Birnbaum 1998: 29–44) Honing in on the specific features of Kiš's Holocaust narratives, they usefully point to the close proximity between the sundry mirror motifs and the scene of death. Indeed, examples of this fictional concurrence abound in Kiš's novels. In *Garden, Ashes*, the author's fictional stand-in, a boy named Andreas Scham, learns about his uncle's death and is lost in a train of thoughts over his own mortality which remind him of "a tube of toothpaste that my sister had bought a few days earlier, on which there was a picture of a young lady smiling and holding a

[6] Some comments on Kiš's mirror imagery are found in Petar Pijanović, *Proza Danila Kiša* (1992: 205–209 and Ivana Milivojević, *Figure autora* (2001: 151–152). On the other hand, a number of authors who discuss topics touching on the poetic problems of reflection do not mention mirrors. Tatjana Rosić in her otherwise very insightful study of patriarchal order in Kiš's poetics, *Mit o savršenoj biografiji* (2008) disregards androgynous connotations of mirrors and relies instead on the standard optical metaphor of the scene of writing. The same lack of reference to the mirror is manifest in Jörg Schulte's monograph on kabalistic symbolism in Babel, Schulz and Kiš, *Eine Poetik der Offenbarung* (2004) and Vladimir Zorić's study on the recycling of myths and legends in Kiš's short stories, *Kiš, legenda i priča* (2005).

[7] There is a remarkable disparity in frequency and connotations of the mirror imagery in Borges' prose and poetry. The mirrors feature prominently in some important short stories such as "The Masked Dyer: Hakim of Merv" and "The Mirror of Ink" "Aleph" and "The Mirror and the Mask" but never match the privileged status of labyrinths and library. However, the mirrors proliferate in Borges' poems, especially in the form of mutually reflecting mirrors.

tube on which a young lady was smiling and holding a tube." (Kiš 1975: 11) This curious advertising *mise-en-abyme* is then traced in its multiple reverberations in Kiš's next novel, *The Hourglass*. To begin with, the eponymous image of the hourglass works as a *trompe l'œil* which conceals the more substantial presence of a mirror with two humans watching each other. But, in this overtly experimental work, reflection takes on a structural function, too: a private letter surviving the protagonist E. S. after his departure to a concentration camp is placed at the end of the novel to become a mirror image and a rational interpretative clue to the fragmentary scenes and narrative indices strewn throughout the novel. It is interesting, however, that in his discussion of *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* Motola simply disregards "The Mirror of the Unknown", a story in which one could hardly identify any structural mirroring of the kind encountered in *Garden, Ashes* and *The Hourglass* yet which brings death and the looking glass into uncanny proximity.

Motola failed to notice an intrinsic link and at the same time an essential difference between the reconstruction of the vanished world of a Holocaust victim in *The Hourglass* and the occult cognition of "The Mirror of the Unknown." The letter at the end of *The Hourglass* – tantalizingly mundane as it is – still represents a precious extant trace of the hero's life, providing the narrator with a positive basis for his narrative quest. Reflection in "The Mirror of the Unknown," although driven by the same desire for the reconstruction of the past, is of an entirely different kind. For, a specific problem arises when the object is irretrievably lost, dissociated from the observer both in space and in time: in that case, Central Europe is to be grasped in its absence. It is this epistemic distance – so different from mirroring by proxy – that struck Kiš in the very first fragment of his "Variations." He compared Central Europe to Anatol France's Dragon of Alca of *Penguin Island*: "no one who claimed to have seen it could say what it looked like." (95)

Kiš's solution to the quandary of Central Europe's dragon is not conceptual but a poetic and intuitive one. It arose in the last decade of his life from his increased interest in the beliefs and practices of the suppressed and secret religious groups such as the Gnostics, the Mormons, the Kabbalists. (Zorić 2005: 59–87) Just as importantly, during the same period, he also explored, under the influence of Arthur Koestler, reports of paranormal occurrences, such as telepathy, and looked for ways in which these can help artistic creativity come to grips with the blunt rationality of authoritarianism. The occult mirror which appears in the stories "The Apatrid" and "The Mirror of the Unknown" represents one of these outlets, or more precisely, entry points. In parapsychology, it is believed that the occult mirror enables gazing into the surface beyond reflection. (See Addey 2007: 32–46) Different scrying records and manuals specify that this can be done with the real mirror when it is put on some dark surface such as black velvet and viewed under very low illumination. The reflected image

will disappear and the viewer will get the impression that the surface opens up into infinite depth, much like a window. Thus, the emergence of the transparent view is conditional upon one's self-effacement.

What interests us here is not the actual plausibility of these instructions, but their metaphoric value in Kiš's narrative retrieval of Central Europe. Just as Rilke's terrible angel need not belong to this world but still stands for his poetry as a whole, so Kiš's occult mirrors may counter all physical laws and yet become apt metaphors of his own poetics. At least, one may safely assume that he wanted them to be so: in one of his late interviews, "Baroque and Truth", he suggested that each story from *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* reads as an allegory of the writing process. (Kiš 1996: 265) I propose that the girl with the mirror who in her dream witnesses the murder of her father and sister is an allegorical counterpart of the writer in the quest for the lost epoch. Just as the reflective mirror from the girl's everyday life becomes a transparent mirror in her dream, so the writer, too, has to divine the obliterated past. A crucial part of what he has to divine is the actual event of obliteration: the experience of the victim and the perpetrators. The only way he can do this is to go beyond his personal past which is but a reflective and constraining image of his present concerns. This is what the hero of "The Apatrid" does in his unfinished magnum opus, *Farewell, Europe*. By thoroughly removing from his work all autobiographic elements he aims to capture the social and cultural palette of Central Europe that he feels is about to disappear.: after having completed his autobiographic family trilogy, he turned to fictional case studies that make up all short stories of his subsequent collections *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*.

However, in Kiš's work, the occult mirror, as well as the occult knowledge generally, is an ambiguous metaphor. While serving as a precious poetic medium that brings the writer into contact with what has disappeared, it also stands for certain problematic aspects of that same past. Although for the author the wilful suspension of self-interest leads to cognitive and imaginative breakthrough, it may also mean the suspension of critical attitude whereby one dogmatically believes in a vision that appears in the transparent mirror. In "The Apatrid", von Nemeth is obsessed with superstitious fears and at the same time finds himself irresistibly attracted to them. He is the one who visits the clairvoyant and blindly trusts his advice to go immediately to Paris to meet his destiny. Likewise, in "The Mirror of the Unknown", the newspapers of the Habsburg Monarchy and Europe are fascinated by the parapsychological aspect of the Brenner case to the point that they skip over the inherent evil of the triple murder. In both cases, the transparent mirror is an opportunity for evasion from the immediate reality: the ingress into the occult realm leads to death, as in the case of von Nemeth, or justifies death by revel in it from a distance, as in the case of Brenner. In Kiš's view thus, occultism is the connective thread that links heterogeneous aspects of Central Europe. It stands

for perilous readiness to suspend critical disbelief and open up to different ideologies of irrationalism.

To conclude, Kiš's preoccupation with Central Europe in the last years of his life differed from the cotemporaneous dissident debates in a few important aspects. Firstly, while most of the other participants articulated their positions in the form of polemical essays, Kiš's text "Variations on Central European Themes" remains fragmentary and essentially inconclusive. His position on the tantalising Central European "awareness of form" has to be reconstructed from the fictional texts he wrote during the debate rather than from his explicit pronouncements. Secondly, while his peers from Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary framed Central Europe as a pervasive cultural memory that still shapes the region's present, Kiš saw it as a field of cultural archaeology which has to reach out to the individual experience that is lost to the present moment. The dissidents' framing of Jews as the harbinger victims of Central Europe appeared to Kiš as a facile and ethically dubious act of mirroring of one's own attitudes in an irreducible and non-subsumable event of obliteration. This is why in his stories "The Apatrid" and "The Mirror of the Unknown" he resorts to the connective motif of occult cognition which is at the same time an inseparable part of Central Europe's spiritual past *and* a poetic allegory of how the writer, through retrospective divination, accesses the hidden layers of that past. More specifically, the occult mirror, being different from the real vision mirror, is assumed to have the unique capacity to suspend reflection and become transparent, i.e. to open up to space and time which are not immediately present. In the same way, the Central European writer has to give up on his/her autobiographic project and cross the threshold of the unknown by imaginative divination of obliterated human experience.

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Владимир Зорић

Огледало и мапа:
Средња Европа у позној прози Данила Киша

Р е з и м е

Чланак преиспитује есејистичке и приповедне исказе Данила Киша о културном простору Средње Европе у контексту дебате дисидената из совјетског блока, као и политичке кризе у Југославији. Средином осамдесетих година прошлог века, Кундерин есеј „Трагедија Средње Европе" изазвао је снажну полемику која је навела многе писце тог времена да заузму експлицитне и махом пристрасне ставове о средњоевропском идентитету и границама у Европи, али и унутар Југославије. Међутим, у есеју „Варијације на средњоевропске теме", као и у приповеткама „Апатрид" и „Огледало непознатог" Киш се опредељује за знатно умеренији и истовремено загонетнији приступ, који се заснива на трауми средњоевропских Јевреја пре и током Другог светског рата. Главни аргумент чланка је да у самом есеју Киш не нуди јасну и кохерентну теоријску платформу за разумевање средњоевропске прошлости и културних разлика, али да такву платформу развија на имагинативан начин у приповеткама насталим у истом периоду. Такав приступ му омогућава да избегне идеолошке ступице тумачења Холокауста као припремне фазе за наводну коначну пропаст Средње Европе током Хладног рата. Уместо тропа жртве као претече, где се прошлост посматра као пуко огледало садашњих догађаја, Киш истиче суштинску недоступност уништења као дистинктивног средњоевропског искуства. Перспективе које су неповратно изгубљене наглим уништењем живота могу бити призване једино кроз окултно огледало имагинације и управо таква огледала постају предмет Кишовог интересовања и конкретни мотив у његовим приповеткама.

Кључне речи: огледало, мапа, Средња Европа, југословенска криза, холокауст, претеча жртве, окултизам.

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