



**Ales Debeljak**

## My Balkan master

Ales Debeljak discusses the political, moral and historic implications of Danilo Kis's writings.

The Balkans is not only a mountainous peninsula in the southeastern Europe, lacking the natural borders with Western Europe and carrying a name that was picked by German geographer August Zeune at the beginning of nineteenth century, who, in turn, followed in the footsteps of an earlier Turkish cartographer. In the last two centuries of war and violently shifting borders under the pressure of Habsburg, Ottoman, and Yugoslav empires, amply assisted by Western powers, the Balkans became a convenient metaphor, too. It became a metaphor for a particular *forma mentis*, for a savage and primeval mentality, not subjected to the sway of modern reason, a mentality whose metastases can infest "healthy" civilisations in the world of global capitalism.

"Balkanisation" of a given community is today predominantly a slur word, suggesting a narcissistic fragmentation of large collectives into ever smaller splinter groups that assert themselves in bloodshed and cruel hatred, in cunning moralism of purity and in ritual evocation of ancient herds. "European" habits of life and mind are not immediately available here in the Balkans. Where is, however, "here"? Does it begin on the southern side of the terrace of Hotel Esplanade in Zagreb, as Miroslav Krleža, the leading modern Croatian writer, pointedly remarked? Is its doorstep really to be found in dingy *gastarbeiter* taverns around the Southern Railway Station in Vienna, as the tabloids of the Austrian petite-bourgeoisie inveigh day after day? Does the Balkans begin on the southern bank of the river Kolpa that separates Slovenia from Croatia, as a major part of Slovenian public is wont on arrogantly believing?

The marker setting apart the stable and orderly society from tribal passions is but an imaginary one. It can be moved around in keeping with the changing need of communities to make sense of their identity in flux, though the consequences of these shifts affect both sides of the divide. The modern image of the Balkans has namely emerged as a result of the manifold conceptual mutations, where colonising Western narratives of the other, different and distinct often went hand in hand with the pursuit of the native, ethnogenetically original, and superior anti-Western culture of Balkan "Barbarogenius".

There is, however, a cultural tradition that allowed for an intense trafficking in ideas, attitudes, and symbols across the linguistic and ethnic borders, a tradition of cosmopolitanism. This tradition between the two world wars may have been thin, but it did include the historical avant-garde movement with the genuine Balkan twist, *Zenitism*; the elegies for lost certainties in the Serbian

writer Milos Crnjanski; the prophetic voice of the Slovenian poet Srečko Kosovel; the elegant meditations on the passing of time in Croatian poet Tin Ujević; the cauldron of fatalistic acceptance of misfortune in Ivo Andrić whose work claim Serbs, Croats and Bosnians alike. But none of these writers continues to exert such a powerful pull to my feverish imagination than the work of Danilo Kiš.

Danilo Kiš (1935–1989), a fiction writer, prolific translator and charismatic bon-vivant, anti-communist dissident was an aesthetic liberator from under the yoke of stifling realism. His cultural background was animated by Jewish, Serbian, and Hungarian traditions as he wrote at the crossroads of Austro-Hungarian and Balkan heritage, accepting the designation of "the last Yugoslav" which implied his ceaseless resistance to nationalist exclusivism. I was guided, however, by his no less relevant recognition that it is precisely a writer's calling to sustain an existential necessity which can and should reject the alluring delusions of "free-floating" internationalism. A writer whose home is in his mother tongue is aware that the language is not only an instrument of communication. It is instead a metaphysical worldview. If "free floating" internationalism assumes that a person may be fully at home in a transnational social class which demands the renunciation of immediate ethnic and cultural ties in the name of communist loyalty, I wanted to believe that it is possible to remain faithful to the primordial realms of intimate geography, history, and community even as one fosters links to global cultural movements. Defying both the rigidity of nationalist navel-gazing and the blithe nonsense of "global citizenship," I have attempted to trace the concentric circles of identity that emanate from images of the self-embedded in communal experience and ripple through the currents of local, national, and regional identities.

This identity is revealed only to that particular gaze that has a transformative power to corrode the locally entrenched descriptions of everyday life, gradually turning them into stories of universal meaning. This is the gaze of the masters, artists and writers in whose work a mature reflection travels in the same compartment as the commitment to a chosen community that differs from one's ethnic or linguistic group. Such a cosmopolitan perspective indeed necessitates one's individual choice, as it transcends an organically grounded membership. It necessitates a choice of a membership in an elusive community in which an imperative to be human is not a given right alone, but a responsibility as well. What can possibly protect all of us, who want to participate in the kind of life in which the idea of a common humanity has not yet completely withered away, is perhaps only a frail hope that the critical attitude toward fashionable ideologies offers at the same time a resistance to the status quo and prevents us from a fatalistic acceptance of evil as an inalienable aspect of experience.

Danilo Kiš was a writer-hero for me. With his moral insistence that the central question for writers of the twentieth century was the question of camps, Auschwitz and Gulag; with his lyrical procedures that accommodated both, the reveries over the litany of provincial railway stations and the tremor of an anxious soul; with his claim that kitsch is indestructible like a plastic bottle; with his resigned, yet not defeatist understanding of the fact that to him, having lived the second half of his life in a voluntary Parisian exile, contemporary French intellectual debates were familiar while the debates of his native realm remained alien to his French peers; with his persistence in a belief that literature is being written with the totality of one's being, not only with the language alone, which made him cling to his Serbo-Croat literary idiom

despite the false comforts of French, the adopted language of exile's everyday life; with his principled attitude of Jewish apertained who cannot be oblivious to the destructive consequences of chauvinist elevation of a "chosen nation" to the level of a metaphysical idea which justifies each and any means to advance its protection; with the comprehensive narrative of his life and work, Danilo Kis for me represented the most noble accomplishment of the Balkan imagination.

I had discovered Danilo Kis early in the 1980s, when, as a student at Ljubljana University, Slovenia, I shared with Kis a larger home of Yugoslavia. My having come across his stories was something of a revelation as his work was not canonised yet. In fact, in the wake of a publication of his collection of short stories, *The Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (first published in 1976; two years later, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich published the English translation), a vociferous controversy erupted over the proper use of literary methods. Kis became subject to public character-assassination and harassment by communist cronies that ultimately precipitated his emigration. Kis went into exile of Paris. I went into exile of his books. Two decades later, I am still its happy denizen. I continue to draw sustenance from Kis, never more than in the pre-apocalyptic world in which little European themes of national divisions and their attendant separation between "us" and "them" assume fearfully global incarnation in the American-British war in Iraq. Of course, to contemplate in such times the spirit of the library as a repository of a sense of community is to indulge in literary daydreaming. Yet, such are the consolations of imagination that I cannot stop daydreaming about my master.

In his work, notably in a story *Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (first published in 1983; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux published the English translation in 1989), Danilo Kis exploited the metaphor of a particular kind of library. Where there's Danilo Kis, of course, there's Jorge Luis Borges. It was Borges's metafictional strategy that made Kis exclaim that all literature is divided into "the one before Borges and the one after him". This claim is debatable, but the fact remains that Borges decisively affected Kis's literary use of documents, chronicles, and fact-based references. Ploughing through their respective truths, Kis created fictional works of the highest aesthetic order. Borges devised a metaphor of a library whose aim was to be the universe. In his eponymous story of 1941, the library of Babel is an enormous one as it contains the infinity of all past, present and future events. Borges's conception of the library assimilates past, present, and the future. Borges' library is as unlimited as the anxiety of the people who look in vain for an explanation of the chaos in the orderly rows of bookshelves.

Kis was impressed, but not content. He chose a sharp, passionate and doubtless a polemically pregnant rendition of this trope in his *Encyclopaedia of the Dead*. First, Kis's encyclopaedia, the quintessential book of the library, is open only to those people who are already dead. Second, the selective mechanism is at work even within a community of the dead as Kis's library excluded those whose names have already merited an inclusion in any other book, lexicon, or library. The people who have made it into none of the *Who's Who* have thus found their sole recognition in the genuine encyclopaedia of the dead, the encyclopaedia of the nameless, the accidental passers-by, the people next door. This methodological gesture is nothing else but a celebration of the equalising power of death. It is a kind of macabre reminder for the ignored principle of freedom, brotherhood and equality.

I am not saying that in the time of constant social perturbations Kis plays only a role of a charitable servant whose job is to relieve a pain. After all, the pain forces us to think, thinking can evolve into wisdom, and wisdom makes life somewhat bearable. What I am saying is that the radical subversion of the fantasy of equality is Kis's original contribution to the understanding of the modern human condition: the equality of the dead continues to be marked with concrete social relations that marked people's lived experience. In other words, the divisive political beliefs and separating social statuses of individuals follow them beyond the grave.

The logic of the encyclopaedia's entries is connected with a certain kind of exfoliating hermeneutics. The web of events, the lullabies sung by the deceased, the relatives and wedding guests, the postmen of feather-light feet and gruff milkmaids, the web of all the people the deceased used to see, know or smell is endless. But isn't this lamely said? The web in which an individual is caught is after all so extensive that it literally captures the entire world, for every person sooner or later crosses paths with the person who has been in touch with the deceased man's acquaintance. As the web branches out to include the relatives and relatives of the relatives as well as acquaintances and casual encounters, the assumption of the encyclopaedia of the dead is ultimately liberating: it intimates that we are connected with all living and dead things and people in the world. The labyrinth, the impossible-to-entangle yarn of links, running horizontally and vertically, this labyrinth is so vast that during my first reading of Kis's story I had a thrilling sense of resemblance to that exceptionally accurate map of England which is actually England itself, as Josiah Royce reported in his book *The World and the Individual* (1899). His map welcomed a constant repetition *ad infinitum*, for every map of England must contain itself and thus progressively accumulates multitudes of its own image.

Kis's encyclopaedia, however, is the multitude which is always already there. In Kis's brilliant rendition, the technique of amassing a vocabulary of entries is metamorphosed from the linear quality of the written record, which sets laws to our everyday speech and chronological life, into a simultaneous presence of many slices of life the deceased suffered through. In a few sentences, the entire history of an individual is condensed, summarised and described; it is described not only in a tedious perspective of information regarding birth, education, marital status, addresses changed and jobs held, but rather with an artistic sensibility which presupposes that calls out the ambitious of ideals, the totality of being.

Mallarmé's secret project of the Book shines through this unfulfilled desire to sing the totality of being, to live the totality of song. The absolute book which was *abstractum* for his author, implied that the linguistic instruments and the conditions of European metaphysics at the time when the only things that mattered were "poetry and economy", as Mallarmé pontificated, were not yet driven to the point where the challenge could be undertaken in any other way but in an abstract one. Mallarmé, to be sure, never wrote his book. However, his maxim that everyone and everything that occurs in the world must one day arrive into the book, received not only aesthetically beautiful but also socially sensitive recuperation under the trembling pen of Danilo Kis, my Balkan master.

*Story of Master and Disciple*

from Prague dawns and bluish gloom,  
as heavy as a pigeon death in Saturday idleness,  
from a faded book which I dare not open  
for I know it by heart, imitating the universe,  
from a symmetry of forty years and six books  
that were written by my many selves in despair,  
from love, from courtyard dust, from poems read through  
in one single breath, from two or three neologisms,  
from patience and discipline, which trickles into my lungs,  
from impotence and a sour taste of repetition,  
from faith in thirty–six wise men,  
from the first Talmud lesson,  
from hazy visions and failed allusions,  
from eternal solitude and equal pride,  
from courage and a lark's useless song,  
from unpleasant memories of the Pygmalion myth  
more alive today than ever, from a story  
inserted into somebody else's story and maybe even less  
successful than the original, which is itself but  
a bad chronicle of a legend that came to pass  
countless times, from the arrogance of the master  
blind for worn–out metaphors and student confidence,  
from hunches and nonsense, from the game the read–through  
book is playing with me, from the master's insistence  
that he must feel the burning pain of conceit if  
he wants to give a lesson about its danger,  
from reflections and shadows in the mirrorless room,  
from wisdom and subdued voices from the past I cannot  
write a story which will be years from now dreamt up  
by a man as devoted to reading and writing  
as myself. I do not know if this man will be me again.

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Published 2004–01–07  
Original in English  
Contribution by Nova Istra  
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