

Danilo Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*
in the Context of Gulag Narratives

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Introduction¹

“I’ve reached my mature years – why spoil my biography?”² This question lingers in the mind of Boris Davidovich Novsky, the protagonist of the title story in Danilo Kiš’s *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, as he wages a battle over the contents of his false confession with Fedukin, his interrogator. As “the only document that will probably remain after his death,” the confession will comprise his sole biography, and Novsky strives in vain to influence its contents, with hopes that it will “whisper to a future investigator, through skillfully woven contradictions and exaggerations, that the whole structure of this confession rested on a lie squeezed out of him by torture.”³ Perhaps more than any other in the collection, the above sentence most concisely illustrates the book’s two main preoccupations: first, the testimonial, (re)constitutive role of Kiš’s text and its place in the broader corpus of narratives addressing the Gulag experience; and second, its dialogue with what Leona Toker calls the “literature of disillusionment” – the writings of former Communists in response to Stalinist terror, particularly the 1941 novel *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler.

Biography, both through its testimonial function as a historical document and its role as a structural and literary topos, provides the main paradigm for Kiš in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. (Re)writing lives, honoring the victims through literature, and thus “building” the cenotaph evoked in the title story – this is the function of all Gulag narratives. At the same time, instead of beginning at the time of the arrest which is more common with other Gulag texts, Kiš’s stories reach back much earlier; thus, the biographical sketch, which provides the structural

¹ I would like to thank Professors Gordana Crnković and Galya Diment for all their input and invaluable support during the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank Professor Hedwige Meyer in the University of Washington’s French Department for her help with translation subtleties from the French. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

² Danilo Kiš. *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, trans. Duška Mikić-Mitchell (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), 92.

³ *Ibid.*, 98.

basis for almost all the stories in the book, allows Kiš to engage the past and the viability of the revolutionary ideal while also serving as a document of the camp experience. The tension between the “before” and “after,” so important for the literature of disillusionment, reaches its highest pitch in the interrogation scene, which is a crucial topos for both Kiš and Koestler.

This thesis aims to contextualize *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* within the broader corpus of Gulag narratives. What does Kiš’s book share with other texts addressing the Gulag, particularly those Kiš employs as his key sources? How does the formal structure of the collection – the biographical sketch as the main paradigm – affect its dual-function as both a literary and testimonial work? As Leona Toker points out, a key feature of all Gulag narratives is the “tension between the ethical drive and aesthetic impulse, closely associated with the bi-functionality of Gulag narratives as acts of witness-bearing and as works of art.”⁴ This tension is palpable in every story in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* whether in the dynamics between ethics and aesthetics, history and fiction, documentation and fantasy. Since considerable attention has been given to the use of key texts of Gulag literature in Kiš’s collection, such as writings of Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov, this thesis instead seeks to look outward –it attempts to examine the contribution Kiš’s book makes to the Gulag literary genre as a whole, especially given Kiš’s unique position as a writer from the Communist Yugoslavia and the reaction the book caused upon publication.

Background and Structure

Danilo Kiš’s use of documents in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* – in particular, his employment of testimonial narratives addressing the Gulag – became the subject of considerable critical attention shortly after the book’s publication. The initial attention given to the use of

⁴ Leona Toker. *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 74.

documents, however, focused on plagiarism charges leveled against Kiš, and the heated polemic which ensued in Yugoslav press in the year after the publication did not, at least not directly, engage the book's treatment of Stalinism but rather its formal features and Kiš's credibility as a writer.⁵ As Kiš himself points out, he was prepared for the public and the critics to question the likelihood of the events portrayed in the stories so that he could cite the appropriate documents and provide evidence for the authenticity of the horrific crimes depicted. In the end, a major effect of the polemic from the literary perspective was to spur a broader discussion of intertextuality in Yugoslav literature and criticism. Thus, the techniques employed and elaborated in Kiš's fictional works and critical essays – most notably his answer to his critics, the 1979 polemical book *The Anatomy Lesson* – constitute an important part of Kiš's legacy.⁶

Yet, in addition to the book's literary and technical innovations, Kiš's main preoccupation was thematic – addressing the horrors of Stalinism and the Gulag. Thus, viewing Kiš's work as part of the broader literary body of works dealing with Stalinism and the Gulag rather than merely focusing on its formal features, is more in line with the preoccupations of the book and intentions of Kiš himself. Like other fictional Gulag narratives, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* carries a clear testimonial purpose in the vein of firsthand accounts, while it also addresses the problem of representation – how to give artistic form to such horrific experiences as those of the camp survivors.

Recent literary scholarship has begun a more systematic study of Gulag literature as a genre, exploring the ethical and aesthetical characteristics of these narratives.⁷ These narratives

⁵ See Boro Krivokapić. *Treba li Spaliti Kiša (Should Kiš be burned?)* (Zagreb: Globus 1980) for a comprehensive collection of critical essays and newspaper articles that appeared shortly after the publication of the book.

⁶ For more on Kiš's influence on the subsequent generation of (post-) Yugoslav literature, see Andrew Wachtel. "The Legacy of Danilo Kiš in Post-Yugoslav Literature." *The Slavic and East European Journal*. 50 (1): 135-149.

⁷ Perhaps the most comprehensive study is Leona Toker's *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

range from memoirs and diaries, such as those of Nadezhda Mandelstam and Eugenia Ginzburg, a form that could loosely be described as factography, to the more “stylized,” sometimes fictional forms. One example is *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a work labeled as a novel yet clearly based on Solzhenitsyn’s direct personal experience in the camps. An even more unique case is Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*, a firsthand account, which, though certainly truthful to its author’s experiences nonetheless employs a literary and aesthetic style quite different from that of the factographic accounts. Thus, though the importance of the Gulag narratives as historical documents and forms of testimony has been established, the aim of this recent scholarship is to highlight and to examine their formal and aesthetic merits and consider this entire body of work, including fictional accounts, as a literary genre.⁸

In addition to first-hand accounts, a “subgenre” of Gulag narratives, the so-called literature of disillusionment – or the writings of a generation “rebellious against its youth,” to use a phrase which Toker borrows from Milan Kundera – plays an important role for Kiš in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. While not directly addressing the camp experience, these narratives focus on the purges, and come from former Communists, largely from abroad, who became disenchanted with the Stalinist Soviet Union. The first such major narrative to appear was Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, published in 1941 in France. It portrays the arrest and interrogation of a former revolutionary, resulting in his false confession and execution following a show trial. Koestler’s book has gone on to achieve classic status despite the initial varied reaction upon publication. Though it received considerable public acclaim, *Darkness at Noon* was vilified by the French Left and the Communist press, which, in the words of Martine Poulain “applied

⁸ Leona Toker underlines the same issue with respect to the study of Gulag fiction: “Literary critical writing about camp narratives is necessarily riddled with ethical caveats in respect to both its statements and its language.” *Ibid.*, 9-10.

silence (boycotting the book, no longer discussing it), censorship and invective.”⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre and his influential magazine *Les Temps Modernes* criticized the book, ultimately causing Koestler to break with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

The watershed event in the Western perception of the Gulag, however, was the publication in 1973 of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*. Much like was the case with Koestler’s book, Solzhenitsyn’s work provoked a similar reaction among Western Communists, particularly in France. Danilo Kiš, who at the time was living in Bordeaux, was incredulous at the refusal of the French leftist intelligentsia to believe in the magnitude of the Soviet crimes detailed in Solzhenitsyn’s book and this reaction would provide the impetus for the writing of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. As Kiš elaborates in an interview:

I lived in Bordeaux in the seventies, a time of leftist enthusiasm in France and the West in general, when the facts about the Soviet camps were not yet accepted. It mustn’t be forgotten that even though Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* appeared about then, leftist intellectuals not only refused to accept the horrible fact of Soviet camps – whose existence is one of the central facts of our age – but refused to even read it, considering it an act of ideological sabotage and right-wing conspiracy. Since it was impossible to discuss anything on the level of general ideas with them – they had a priori, aggressive attitudes about everything – I felt obliged to formalize my arguments in the form of anecdotes and stories.¹⁰

A Tomb for Boris Davidovich engages and incorporates many firsthand accounts, including those of Solzhenitsyn and Yugoslav survivor Karlo Štajner as well as those by historians, such as Roy Medvedev, thus providing a new contribution to the existing body of Gulag literature. In both its approach and the context in which it was written, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* assumes a dual function. First, as a literary retelling and reworking of other Gulag testimonies, particularly Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* but also the writings of Varlam

⁹ Martine Poulain. "A Cold War Best-Seller: the Reaction to Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* in France from 1945 to 1950." *Libraries & Culture*. 36.1 (2001): 176.

¹⁰ Interview with Danilo Kiš in *Homo Poeticus: Essays and Interviews*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1995), 187-188.

Shalamov, Nadezhda Mandelstam, and the Yugoslav Karlo Štajner. On the other hand, Kiš's employment of biography as the main structural paradigm greatly affects the main issue that defines the study of Gulag narratives as a literary genre, namely the tension between the testimonial and the artistic aspects of these works. Tracing the interplay between these two thematic strands – *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* in relation to other Gulag texts as well as the effect of its biographical approach – provides the crux of this thesis, and its structure mirrors these two strands of inquiry.

Thus, Chapter 1 examines *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* against the main issues present in all Gulag narratives, in particular the tension between the testimonial and literary aspects of these works. It attempts to trace this “bi-functional” nature by comparing Kiš's book to other narratives, in particular the works of Solzhenitsyn. In addition to the *Gulag Archipelago*, which is primarily a testimonial work, Solzhenitsyn's fictional works, such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, provide a good counterpoint to the problem of literary form and the employment of a paradigmatic approach. Kiš's use of biography as a paradigm and his preoccupation with form is examined here in light of the tension between the ethical and the aesthetical elements in Gulag narratives.

Chapter 2 turns to Kiš's employment of documents in order to examine the view of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* as a “collective biography,” or in Kiš's words, as a “historical novel.”¹¹ The idea that through literature and the paradigmatic approach to biography, the gaps in historical sources and documents are filled in and supplemented is examined through Kiš's portrayal of the French politician Édouard Herriot from the story “Mechanical Lions.” This case explores the ambiguous approach to documentation which directly pits historical against literary “truth.”

¹¹ Danilo Kiš, *Čas Anatomije*, (Beograd: Nolit, 1978), 114.

Chapter 3 further examines Kiš's biographical approach as well as dialogue with the Gulag literary corpus by comparing two stories that draw most prominently from other Gulag texts: "The Magic Card Dealing" and "A Short Biography of A.A. Darmolatov." These stories feature multiple references and intertextual connections with the major texts that address the Gulag such as Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* and Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*. In addition to looking at how Kiš incorporates these two texts, this section also analyzes how biography is employed in different ways, leading to two different portrayals, one closer to what we could call "collective biography" while the other assumes many attributes of myth.

Finally, Chapter 4 provides a historical context for the book and the reaction to its publication by comparing its reception to that of other Gulag narratives that appeared (or were prevented from appearing) in Yugoslavia at the time. Two narratives in particular crucial to Kiš – Karlo Štajner's *7000 Days in Siberia* and Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* – are briefly examined here, as is the path to publication of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* itself.

Chapter 1: *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* as a Gulag Narrative: Story vs. (Hi)story

The “bi-functional” nature of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* is evident at the outset, from the book’s subtitle. By calling the stories that follow “Sedam Poglavlja Jedne Zajedničke Povesti” or “Seven Chapters of a Common History,” Kiš highlights the interconnected relationship between the seven narratives, and points to the tension between the book’s testimonial—indeed, historical – function, and its status as literature. This issue becomes even clearer when one examines the subtitle more closely: the primary meaning of the word “povest” in Serbian (or BCMS) is “history;” yet a secondary meaning is simply a “story” or “tale.” Thus a more accurate rendering of the phrase is “Seven Chapters of a Common (Hi)Story” if we take into account the subtle interplay between these two meanings, and by extension, between history and fiction.¹²

Moreover, the book’s subtitle also firmly grounds *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* within the context of Gulag narratives since it clearly alludes to Solzhenitsyn—in addition, the title is a clear echo of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—and reiterates his role as an important influence in the book’s conception and structure. We may recall that Solzhenitsyn subtitles his *Gulag Archipelago* “An Experiment in Literary Investigation” (опыт художественного исследования) which, as Leona Toker points out, makes the same distinction between its testimonial and literary sides. For Toker, the “dialectical tension between the aesthetic and the ethical is immediately apparent in the collocation of khudozhestvennoe (artistic, literary) and issledovanie (investigation).”¹³ Though the *Gulag Archipelago* and *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*

¹² It should also be noted that the primary meaning of “povest” is the same in Russian – “повесть” is a longer “tale or story.” In an essay on the short story, Kiš evokes a quotation by Solzhenitsyn for his definition of “povest:” ...an intersection of themes, and in addition, almost necessarily, in a large time span.” Danilo Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1990), 118. On the other hand, Kiš has frequently compared the structure of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* to that of Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry*, calling both of them “novels.”

¹³ Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, 101.

are, of course, very different works, they both underscore the inherent difficulties of giving form to such unimaginable and horrific experiences as those of Gulag inmates.

Herein lies another crucial issue in the discussion of Gulag narratives as a literary genre—the ambiguous distinction between “non-fiction” and fiction, or rather the level of “experimentation” of a certain work as a function of the author’s proximity to the experience he or she is addressing. Of course, the primary function of first-person accounts is testimonial while, in Toker’s view, the secondary, post-testimonial corpus “clarifies, modifies, or refines the conceptual schemata initiated in the witness narratives.”¹⁴ This “refining” aspect characterizes the relationship between the first-hand accounts and the fictional ones, such as Kiš’s book, which is a result of the experiential distance and a clearly “marked testimonial function” of the first-hand accounts.¹⁵ Consequently, fictionalization leads to a paradigmatic approach—providing a representative model for the collective experience.

A paradigmatic approach is a key characteristic of fictional narratives whose authors seek the proper form to organize and include certain testimonial within the context of a literary work. We can see this issue in Solzhenitsyn’s own oeuvre between the clear testimonial works such as the *Gulag Archipelago*, and his fictional, indeed “paradigmatic” works such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. This novella presents a typical day in a camp—from reveille to lights-out—and fulfills the testimonial function by a “calculated inclusion of an optimal amount of data on camp life.”¹⁶ Thus, in addition to the creating and development of Shukhov’s character and the plot of the action that drives his day, we also get various information about camp life – different jobs in the camp, possible outcomes of a prisoner who gets caught with contraband while being frisked before leaving the barracks, the procedure for getting parcels from home, etc.

¹⁴ Ibid., 210.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 191.

In this case, the paradigmatic approach to form allows for both a literary work to emerge and a considerable amount of testimonial evidence and information gathered from personal experience and/or other testimony to remain within the text.

In Kiš's case, the problem of form was a constant preoccupation and it would be the same with *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. As Kiš elaborates: "...after the witnesses of all those horrors, Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov and others already wrote about them, I tried to carve out literature from that material. The important part was how, though mere facts, even for the thousandth time provoked dread."¹⁷ Kiš found an important model in Jorge Luis Borges, particularly in his first collection of stories, *The Universal History of Infamy*.¹⁸ This collection's primary model is the biographical sketch which Kiš employs in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* as the main paradigm to structure the narrative.

If we draw a parallel with *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, we realize that the biographical sketch (like one typical day) provides another model, one which allows for the conflation of many different cases into a paradigmatic whole. After all, these are chapters of the same history. Thus, just like Shukhov is one of millions of prisoners, so is the biography of Boris Davidovich Novsky or Karl Georgevich Taube a composite of the lives of many former revolutionaries or communists who suffered the same fate.¹⁹ As Tatjana Petzer sees it, "Kiš's complex biographical method takes a crosscut"²⁰ which combines many different destinies in

¹⁷ Quoted in Mila Stojnić, *Prilozi Proučavanju Srpsko-Ruskih Književnih Veza X-XX Vek*, (Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1993), 161.

¹⁸ Kiš has frequently described *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* as being the "counter-book" to Borges's *Universal History*, at least when it comes to the title. For Kiš the true "universal history of infamy" is the story of the 20th century with its camps, and not tales of small-time criminals from Borges's book. For more on the relationship between Kiš and Borges, see Kiš, *Čas Anatomije*, 52-56, and Jovan Delić, *Književni Pogledi Danila Kiša: Ka Poetici Kišove Proze*, (Beograd: Prosveta, 1995), 114-129.

¹⁹ If we return to Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, we can see a similar approach taken in the creation of the protagonist Rubashov, a composite of other old revolutionaries, most prominently Nikolai Bukahrin.

²⁰ Tatjana Petzer, "Der Olymp Der Diebe Spurensicherung Bei Salamov Und Danilo Kis." *Osteuropa Stuttgart Deutsche Verlags Anstalt*. 57.6 (2007): 219.

order to (re)construct the lives that are lost in the horrors of the Gulag, and forgotten by history. Returning again to the motif of the cenotaph in the title story, we see this reconstruction in the biographical structure as well. Moreover, as Petzer points out, Kiš attempts to fill in the missing “gaps” by supplementing the documentary findings with “plausible attributes and dates of other biographies,” in order to compress the collective biographies to a paradigmatic form.”²¹ In other words, the use of biography as a paradigm allows for a bridge between the collective experience and that of the individual—testifying to the suffering of the collective while simultaneously highlighting the role of individual in the face of history, and in the face of totalitarianism, which aims to destroy every trace of individuality.

This relationship between the individual and the collective underscores another important issue in Gulag narratives which we glimpsed earlier, namely the tension created by the burden of responsibility placed on an individual speaking on behalf of the others, on behalf of those who did not live to do so. This issue is, of course, more palpable in the case of the first-hand accounts whose primary purpose is testimony, yet, perhaps counter-intuitively, also places a strain on fictional works precisely because of this responsibility to the suffering of the victims. Fiction writers thus are not free to let their fantasy go wild, to experiment, and Kiš repeatedly stresses this aspect, claiming that he does not “believe in a writer’s fantasy.”²²

This brings us to one important aspect of the biographical topos in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, which is that biography—even the fictional pseudo-biography employed as a literary device—inherently lays claim to documentation, or at least to a minimal grounding in an external reality and history, or, as Kiš well understands, the *appearance* of such authenticity.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “I don’t believe in a writer’s fantasy...after everything the history of this century has dealt us, it is clear that fantasy...has lost all its meaning. Modern history has created such authentic forms of reality that today’s writer has no choice but to give them artistic shape.” Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, ed. Sontag, 271.

Indeed, Kiš has called *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* a “historical novel.”²³ The documentary method attempts to *convince* the reader that what he portrays is true, or at least carries the possibility of being so. In order to accomplish this, Kiš claims that every “arbitrariness, every weaving of fantasy must be proven by the truthfulness of details” and in turn, “the literary (psychological) facts are supported by the historical material, and the historical facts in turn by literary ones.”²⁴ Though it is not the goal of this thesis to examine thoroughly Kiš’s documentary poetics, it is nonetheless important to remember that this formulation characterizes his approach in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. In addition, it also again highlights the importance of the tension between the historical and literary facts.

Though *Gulag Archipelago* follows a different structure, we nonetheless see a similar approach, which Dragan Bošković characterizes as “investigative.”²⁵ Much like Solzhenitsyn in the *Gulag Archipelago*, Kiš’s narrator also guides the reader through history and through the lives of his characters with the help of available documents, both “real” and false. The balance between the historical and literary “truth” plays a crucial role in each case, though of course, for Solzhenitsyn the testimonial side completely outweighs the literary one, while in Kiš’s case, the balance is much more ambiguous. Nonetheless, Solzhenitsyn recognizes the testimonies of the witnesses immediately at the outset²⁶ and Kiš’s book begins with a similar recognition of the

²³ Kiš, *Čas Anatomije*, 114.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Dragan Bošković, *Islednik, Svedok, Priča: Istražni Postupci U Peščaniku i Grobnici Za Borisa Davidoviča Danila Kiša*, (Beograd: Plato, 2004) for more on the “investigative” method in Kiš’s book.

²⁶ “In addition to what I myself was able to take away from the *Archipelago* – on the skin of my back, and with my eyes and ears – material for this book was given to me in reports, memoirs and letters by 227 witnesses, whose name were to have been listed here. What I here express to them is not personal gratitude, because this is our common, collective monument to all those who were tortured and murdered.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, ed. Edward E. Ericson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), xi.

witness testimonies.²⁷ Yet, in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* there is a constant and conscious reminder of the lack of total authority of the narrator, and the influence of the writer's fantasy in historical facts and so undermining the testimonial force of the book. The most obvious one can be found in "Mechanical Lions," the third story in the collection in which the narrator tells us that

[p]erhaps it would have been wiser if I had chosen some other form of expression – an essay or a monograph – where I could use all these documents in the usual way. Two things, however, prevent me: the inappropriateness of citing actual oral testimony of reliable people as documentation; and my inability to forgo the pleasures of narration, which allows the author the deceptive idea that he is creating the world and thereby, as they say, changing it.²⁸

At the same time, the narrator claims not to be completely unreliable and admits to "supplementing" the material only in the absence of "documents." This is, of course, another literary device yet such authoritative interventions seem to comply with Tatjana Petzer's view of the collective biography discussed earlier—the supplementation and completion of a biography with the writer's imagination where the evidence is missing. In this view, the documentary approach to biography indeed resembles the approach in a historical novel where the characters and events are based on and supported by thorough research and documentation.

In *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, however, the approach to documents is slightly more complicated, as we shall see, and the idea of a faithful historical reconstruction based on available historical documents frequently clashes with the literary "truth," thus putting a different perspective on both the idea of a collective biography as well as the tension between history and fiction. Kiš's portrayal of the French politician Eduard Herriot, the "only historical personage" provides an excellent example of this issue.

²⁷ "The story I am about to tell, a story born in doubt and perplexity, has only the misfortune (some call it fortune) of being true: it was recorded by the hands of honorable people and reliable witnesses." Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

Chapter 2: Real Document/Fictional Biography: the case of Édouard Herriot

One of the few instances of direct citation in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* – another notable one is the sourcing of the story “Dogs and Books” as the translation of a testimony from the Registrars of the Inquisition – is the footnote on page 30 in the story “Mechanical Lions,” referring the reader to an article from *Le Monde* from March 28th, 1957 written by a certain “A. Ballit.” Unlike other documentary sources in the book that are embedded in the text and weaved throughout seamlessly, this article is quoted directly. Given the fact that Édouard Herriot, the French politician and one-time mayor of Lyon, is, as the narrator informs us, “the only historical personage” in the story, it indeed seems appropriate and credible that a contemporaneous account of him would be included. Consequently, we can view this citation as yet another employment of Kiš’s documentary method; as another instance of Kiš’s employment of a real historical document in order to show the reader that he conforms to the historical authenticity of the story.

Yet another way to look at this citation is as an invitation: indeed, despite the numerous documents that are used throughout the text, this is the only instance in which a source is revealed to the reader. As a result, it allows the inquisitive reader to actually verify the authenticity of the document, and it is as if Kiš prods us to do so by giving us a hint. In addition, in this instance Kiš permits us to undertake our own “investigation” and delve straight into the writer’s working process of arranging and employing documentary sources. To return to the issue of biography, this case is also striking because we have a “real” and authentic biography (or a biographical sketch) of a historical person. It provides an excellent counterpoint to Kiš’s fictionalized portraits and is a specific instance of the tension between the historical and literary material. Examining the use of this document thus allows us to gain great insight into Kiš’s

employment of historical documents, and hopefully, help us trace the line between history and writer's fantasy.

What then is the document in question, and how does Kiš employ it?

The 1957 article from the *Le Monde* is a long tribute and obituary from the day of Édouard Herriot's funeral written by one Andre Bellet (sic).²⁹ In the first two pages of the story "Mechanical Lions," Kiš quotes, presumably in his own translation, the second and third paragraphs of Bellet's article, an excerpt which itself is a biographical sketch dedicated primarily to Herriot's physical characteristics, his oratorical virtuosity, and certain aspects of his personality. At first glance, Kiš appears to be faithful to the original, translating Bellet's sketch with precision, and incorporating it into the story practically verbatim. Yet, examining the two texts more closely, we realize that Kiš's rendition strays from the original, besides the excision of a few sentences due to the flow of the story, in one important instance at the end of the text, and specifically in the last line. While A. Bellet describes Herriot as someone who with a certain "cautiousness, which certain people judged as touchiness" (in the original French: "une sensibilité toujours en éveil, que d'aucuns taxaient de susceptibilité").³⁰ In Kiš's story, this "touchiness" becomes "vanity" or "sujeta:" "he was always cautious – a sensitivity which many saw as vanity."³¹

This change may seem insignificant or minor at first, or even attributable to a translation error, yet we should not jump to such a conclusion so quickly, considering the precision with which Kiš claimed to have worked and his perfectionism. We also have no reason to doubt his

²⁹ See Appendix on pages 43-44 for the original article and Kiš's translation/citation.

³⁰ See Appendix, page 2 for the complete excerpt.

³¹ Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 30. In the original Serbo-Croatian this line reads: "...on [je] uvek bio na oprezu – osetljivost koju su mnogi proglašavali sujetom." Danilo Kiš, *Grobnica Za Borisa Davidoviča*, eds. Radoslav Bratić and Ljubiša Jeremić, (Beograd: Beogradski Izdavačko-Grafički Zavod, 1995), 36.

French proficiency considering that he was an accomplished translator from the French, having translated numerous books of poetry and prose.³²

Why then would Kiš change an authentic historical document – the testimony of a real historical witness – and turn Herriot from someone who is merely “touchy” or overly emotional to someone vain and arrogant? Looking at the document’s context and Herriot’s place in the story may give us an answer.

“Mechanical Lions” recounts Édouard Herriot’s 1934 trip to the Soviet Union, and in particular, his visit to Ukraine which at the time was ravaged by famine. This was an actual journey which Herriot later recounted in his book *Orient*.³³ Kiš’s story centers on one episode on that journey, namely Herriot’s visit to the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kiev. In the story, Herriot, wishing to see proof of religious tolerance in the Soviet Union, asks his Bolshevik hosts to arrange a visit to the famous cathedral. The other protagonist in the story, A.L. Chelystnikov (the use of the word “celyust” or [a lion’s] “jaws” here is not lost on the careful reader), an NKVD agent, stages an elaborate performance in which Herriot is treated to a Potemkin village in the form of a sham religious mass in the cathedral. This “performance” has to be orchestrated because, after the Revolution, the cathedral was converted into a brewery. Herriot falls for this elaborate deception and heads back to France, writing to his editor, not without a hint of self-satisfaction: “Dear friend, when I set off for Russia not only was I heaped with insults from our most prominent critics, but they foresaw the worst misfortune befalling me...I am returning from a journey that passed with ridiculous ease. They did not growl their mechanical lions at me.”³⁴

³² See, for example, Danilo Kiš, *Pesme i Prepevi*, ed. Ottó Tolnai et. al. (Beograd: Prosveta, 1992) for a collection of Kiš’s translations of French, Russian and Hungarian poetry into Serbo-Croatian. In addition to poetry, Kiš has also translated prose from the French, most notably Raymond Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*, see Raymond Queneau, *Stilske Vežbe*, trans. by Danilo Kiš, (Beograd: Rad, 1986).

³³ Édouard Herriot. *Orient*. Paris: Hachette, 1934. In English translation: Édouard Herriot, *Eastward from Paris*, trans. Phyllis M. Mégroz. (London: V. Gollancz, 1934).

³⁴ Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 50.

The fictionalization of Herriot in the story thus completely changes the way his character is perceived. By transforming Herriot from someone who is simply “touchy” or overly sensitive, as he was initially described by a real historical witness, to someone whom people saw as vain and arrogant, greatly affects his characterization in a short story whose main theme is deception, or rather, an inability or an unwillingness to accept certain truths due to arrogance. Thus, instead of a Herriot who is a fiery orator and a cunning politician, sensitive and constantly on the lookout for his enemies, we get a Herriot with a fair amount of self-assurance which blinds him from seeing behind the smoke screen. In addition, one cannot help but snicker at Kiš’s modification of the document, seeing in this change a poke at those French intellectuals who, much like Herriot, in their vanity and blind self-confidence, refused to believe the overwhelming evidence of the Gulag presented by Solzhenitsyn in the *Gulag Archipelago*.³⁵

Thus, by actively changing the characterization of the “real” Herriot to conform to the character in the story whose very important trait is vanity, Kiš underscores the precedent of literary logic and returns to the paradigmatic structure, placing the fictional “truth” ahead of the historical one. Instead of the specific literary figure and his specific journey – as would be expected of a documentary portrayal – Herriot becomes a model for all politicians and intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre who refused to suspend their blind faith and arrogance in their belief in the Soviet Union, despite the testimony of those such as Solzhenitsyn. It is therefore fitting that Kiš dedicates this story to Andre Gide who, unlike Sartre, refused to ignore

³⁵ Herriot’s actual response to his trip to Ukraine was not much different, and he appears to have been fooled by the Soviet propaganda and the staged visits, much like the ones in Kiš’s story, prepared by the Soviet officials. In *Orient*, he writes of his impressions in the Ukraine: “I saw the market gardens of the kolkhoz, excellently irrigated and cultivated; I saw French vines laden with grapes. The harvest was so abundant that it was difficult to find storehouses for the corn.” Herriot, *Eastward from Paris*, 130. Upon returning to France following his trip he is reported to have said in response to questions about the famine: “When one believes that the Ukraine is devastated by famine, allow me to shrug my shoulders.” See Etienne Thevenin, “France, Allemagne et Autriche face à la famine de 1932-1933 en Ukraine.” (paper presented at the International Association of Ukraine Studies Congress, Donetsk, Ukraine, June 29, 2005), <http://www.colley.co.uk/garethjones/ukraine2005/Etienne%20Thevenin.pdf>. Thus the poetic truth of Kiš’s (mis)translation actually trumps the literal one.

the facts, and after his return from a visit to the Soviet Union in the 1930s, published his own scathing account of what he saw there.³⁶

In addition, this example shows another side of Kiš's attitude towards documentation: this change proves, perhaps paradoxically, that the literary "truth" carries greater epistemological meaning than mere "historical facts," which Kiš well understands can be (and constantly are) altered and falsified. Dragan Bošković underscores this feature of the book which harkens back to the tension not only between the historical and fictional aspects of the narrative, namely the tension between the "official" and the unofficial history, a particularly important issue in Soviet and Gulag history. "In *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*," claims Bošković, "official historical texts abet the crime (or carry it out directly) by erasing historical events/individuals from historical memory, while the task of the investigator is to uncover the political crime and to seek the arbitration of historical or post-historical judgment."³⁷

Consequently, Kiš's approach constantly highlights the document's instability or its inability to stand on its own because of the constant danger of it being erased or perverted, or in other cases, filtered through an ideological lens. This is the reason why Kiš persistently reminds the reader in the unreliability of his narrator as an investigator, and consciously exposes the gaps in available documentation, sometimes even mystifying the process of factual discovery. For example, in the title story in the collection, a careful reader will notice numerous inconsistencies in the chronology of the protagonist's life, and at one point realize that Boris Davidovich Novsky is at two places at once: in June 1914 we find him in Tomsy prison, yet a bit later the narrator tells us that Novsky is in Paris at the time the war is declared (June 1914).³⁸

³⁶ See André Gide. *Retour De L'U.R.S.S.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936).

³⁷ Bošković, *Islednik, Svedok, Priča*, 35.

³⁸ Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 76-82.

Kiš's main detractors, and in particular Dragan Jeremić, the literary critic at the center of the controversy following the publication of the book, quickly grabbed onto such historical inconsistencies in Kiš's work, evidently misunderstanding both the paradigmatic method Kiš employs as well as any possibility of the narrator's unreliability. This was the case not only with respect to documents but also with other historical inconsistencies, such as Kiš's, perhaps careless, mistake in his chronology of the Spanish Civil War in the second story of the collection. Kiš places the main character in the Lincoln Battalion in January 1936 when in fact the Lincoln Battalion was not established until February 1937.³⁹ Yet, as Kiš vehemently argues and illustrates in his *Anatomy Lesson*, Jeremić's critique is misguided, as it would be wrong to assume that a work of literature is a mere transposition of historical events, and the Aristotelian distinction between the "universal" wisdom of poetry versus the "particular" concern of history is only one of the arguments against Jeremić's claims.

In addition, the paradigmatic approach to the case of Herriot – the trumping of the historical by literary logic - continues the circular motif that structures the book. In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Kiš describes the structure as a "European Chalk Circle in space and time."⁴⁰ In terms of location, the book traverses the entire European continent, while jumping five centuries back in time with the coincidental connection between the title story and "Dogs and Books" in which not only the initials of the protagonists match but also the dates of their arrests – Baruch David Neumann's on December 23, 1330, and Boris Davidovich Novsky on December 23, 1930, exactly six centuries later, which Kiš claims to have discovered only upon finishing his story.

Thus a-historicity or rather a claim of universality characterizes Kiš's paradigmatic approach. Not only does he expose the inherent instability and susceptibility of a document in the

³⁹ See Dragan Jeremić. *Narcis Bez Lica*. (Beograd: Nolit, 1981), 167.

⁴⁰ Kiš, *Čas Anatomije*, 60.

face of ideology, but he also attempts to examine the ahistorical nature of evil behind any form of totalitarianism. The testimony about the purges is embedded in specific historical circumstances, yet those temporal coordinates quickly disappear when one traces the root of such evil. In this way, Kiš's book stands alongside other Gulag narratives, such as those of Solzhenitsyn or Shalamov, whose narratives go beyond mere testimony of a historical case. "So let the reader who expects this book to be a political expose slam its covers shut right now," warns Solzhenitsyn, adding,

If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing the good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart.⁴¹

Likewise, in her examination of the ethical dimension of Shalamov's stories, Leona Toker stresses Shalamov's appeal to the individual ethics and the absence of a historically minded authorial consciousness which aims to explain the causes for the Gulag and the suffering of the camps. Instead, Shalamov consciously avoids a strictly documentary approach which focuses purely on the testimonial aspect of the narrative aimed at merely conveying information. In Toker's view, Shalamov understands that the "the amenity-type knowledge offered by documentary prose will eventually become obsolete."⁴² As a result, "Shalamov neglects the questions of the historical contingencies that led to the rise of the Gulag; yet through his way of staging the past, he calls the reader's attention to the liabilities of his or her own psychological make-up and habits of thought."⁴³ Much like the appeal by Solzhenitsyn quoted above, Shalamov's narratives in the Gulag are not merely political exposes of the Gulag conditions – though they certainly operate on this level as well – but are more complex due to both their

⁴¹ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, 75.

⁴² Leona Toker, "Documentary Prose and the Role of the Reader: Some Stories of Varlam Shalamov" in *Commitment in Reflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy*, (New York: Garland, 1994), 190.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

literary qualities and the appeal to individual ethics. Though Kiš's stories lack the psychological depth of Shalamov's—the reason being Shalamov's direct personal experience as well as the difference in Kiš's paradigmatic biographical approach – they nonetheless strive towards universal appeal and away from specific historical circumstances. This feature is even more prominent in Kiš's varying approach to biography in different stories, one that occasionally veers further away from the idea of a collective biography. We will examine this aspect in the following chapter by comparing two different stories: “The Magic Card Dealing” and “A Short Biography of A.A. Darmolatov.”

Chapter 3: Collective Biography or Collective Mythology? A.A. Darmolatov and Karl Taube

Two stories in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* that draw most prominently from the Gulag literary corpus while also serving as excellent examples of Kiš's paradigmatic use of biography are "The Magic Card Dealing" and "A Short Biography of A.A. Darmolatov." Numerous allusions and intertextual references to other Gulag narratives are intricately weaved throughout these two stories, with the "borrowed" sources emerging from the narrative as if from a palimpsest. In addition to this dialogue with other Gulag narratives, these two stories are remarkable because they employ the biographical structure in different, seemingly mirror-opposite, ways: the biography of the revolutionary Taube stands in clear contrast to the relatively short portrait of the sickly, mediocre poet A.A. Darmolatov. While both stories feature the same thematic motifs present in all Gulag narratives, "The Magic Card Dealing" veers further away from what we earlier termed "collective biography" and towards what could perhaps be called "collective mythology." The portrayal of Karl Georgievich Taube, the protagonist of this story comes closer to the image of a mythical hero while, in contrast, A.A. Darmolatov's life remains a "confused mass of facts,"⁴⁴ and the opposite destiny to Taube's.

In her *Return from the Archipelago*, Leona Toker outlines some shared motifs of all Gulag narratives which she outlines as nine different "topoi." They are the arrest, dignity, chance, stages, escape, moments of reprieve, the Zone and larger Zone, and end of term fatigue. According to Toker, each Gulag narrative features at least three of these motifs, and sometimes a single narrative can focus on only one.⁴⁵ In the case of the *Gulag Archipelago*, for example, there is a clear attempt towards totality, towards inclusion of all different aspects of the Gulag experience, and Toker compares the structure of the book to the periodic table with all topoi and

⁴⁴ Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 128.

⁴⁵ Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, 82.

testimony classified accordingly and dedicated a place.⁴⁶ Other narratives focus on specific aspects in shorter narratives. Such is the structure of Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, for example. Kiš's collection also falls in this category. In the case of "The Magic Card Dealing" and A.A. Darmolatov's biography, we get two primary topoi: the role of chance, portrayed by the card game that decides Taube's fate in the former story, and in the latter, it is the difference between the Zone and the Larger Zone, as A.A. Darmolatov remains on the outside and never gets arrested all the while constantly dreading the possibility of this happening.

"The Magic Card Dealing" recounts the story of Karl Georgevich Taube, a talented Jewish doctor and revolutionary whose biography before his imprisonment is as "perfect" as that of Boris Davidovich Novsky. After spending his formative years in a small Hungarian town which he is yearning to leave, Taube works as a journalist first in Vienna then in Berlin, and his biography is clouded in mystery until his arrival in Moscow in 1935 and subsequent arrest. In fact, Taube's early life is very similar to that of Arthur Koestler as he recounts it in his essay "The God That Failed" (birth in a Jewish Hungarian household, his work as journalist, membership in the Communist Party of Germany). The main source of the story, which centers on Taube's imprisonment and eventual death as a result of a camp card game, comes from Karlo Štajner's *7000 Days in Siberia*.⁴⁷ Kiš dedicates the story to Štajner and even provides him with an appearance as a character under the initials "K.Š." Though Kiš gets the *fabula* from Štajner's text, he incorporates motifs and references from other Gulag texts, primarily from Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*. The second and most important part of the story – the "magic" card

⁴⁶ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁷ For more on Štajner's role as a source for "The Magic Card Dealing" see Dragan Bošković, *Tekstualno (ne)svesno Grobnice Za Borisa Davidovića*, (Beograd: Službeni Glasnik, 2008), particularly the chapter titled "Georg (Bilecki), Karlo (Štajner), Karl Georgievich (Taube)" on page 37.

game from the title – is a retelling of Shalamov’s story “On Tick” which focuses on card games in the camps as well as the dynamics between the criminal prisoners and the “politicals.”

On the other hand, the last story in the book, “A Short Biography of A.A. Darmolatov,” provides a sharp contrast to Taube’s biography and other stories in the collection. The only story in the book without a dedication, the relatively short portrait of the “state” poet Darmolatov provides a negative reflection to the active, heroic lives of revolutionaries such as Taube and Novsky. Nonetheless, even with this negative portrait, this story draws just as heavily from other Gulag narratives, and in this case, the main source is not Štajner or Shalamov, but rather Nadezhda Mandelstam, in particular her memoir *Hope Against Hope*. As Dragan Bošković and other critics have pointed out, the character of Darmolatov is a composite of two poets associated with the “Acmeists” mentioned in Mandelstam’s account: Michael Zenkevich and Mikhail Lozinski. The clue to the identity of the former is also hinted at the end of the story (and also in *The Anatomy Lesson*⁴⁸) by a reference to Darmolatov’s translation of the *Mountain Wreath* by the Montenegrin prince and poet, Petar Petrović Njegoš, which Zenkevich indeed translated in the late 1940s. On the other hand, the attribute that Darmolatov inherits from Lozinski is his “elephantiasis,” which becomes a key metaphor in the story.⁴⁹

In addition, by drawing heavily from *Hope Against Hope*, as we shall see further on, Darmolatov’s destiny is also clearly juxtaposed with that of Osip Mandelstam, a poet whom Kiš translated and particularly revered. Furthermore, the multiple layers that tie this story to other Gulag narratives do not stop there (another connection is of course to Shalamov’s own story about Mandelstam titled “Cherry Brandy”) but are even more labyrinthine. For example,

⁴⁸ Kiš. *Čas Anatomije*, 108.

⁴⁹ “Lozinski..was stricken by a mysterious kind of elephantiasis – it was like something Biblical and seemed out of place in Leningrad. His fingers, tongue and lips had swollen to twice their normal size...But Lozinski was lucky and died of his own terrible and improbable disease.” Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope: A Memoir*, (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 306-307.

Darmolatov's initials "A.A.", as Dragan Bošković points out, more than likely come from Gogol's Akaki Akakievich, the minor government bureaucrat from "The Overcoat."⁵⁰ Yet, further literary sleuthing leads to another intertextual hall of mirrors and back to both Nadezhda and Osip Mandelstam: in *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda quotes a phrase from Mandelstam's *Fourth prose* in which Osip likened "official literature" and "upstart intellectual" to the "first Komsomol, Akaki Akakievich."⁵¹ In another instance of coincidental circularity of which Kiš may have been aware, Mandelstam's *Fourth Prose* was written in response to an unjust charge of plagiarism which centered around a translation that he had done, but in fact was due to anti-Semitism.⁵² The same echoes reverberate in the reaction to Kiš's book after publication, which in addition to the charges of anti-Communism also attacked Kiš's perceived "cosmopolitanism" which indirectly meant his Jewish identity and the Jewish and non-Serbian identities of his characters.

Thus, many aspects in the context of Gulag narratives, at least on the surface, tie these two stories together, and one could read their destinies as yet different chapters, or different sides of a common history or a joint collective biography. If Taube stands for the revolutionaries who perished in the Gulag, Darmolatov stands on the outside as either the passive citizen or one indirectly responsible for the system. When we look at the biographical structure, the stories seem to follow the same paradigm: they start with the protagonist's birth, move through the early youth and formative years, and end, like every biography, with the protagonist's death. Yet, though the structure of Taube's biography in the first part of the story progresses in the same fashion as that of Darmolatov, the crucial change in Taube's destiny is his arrest and

⁵⁰ Bosković, *Tekstualno (Ne)Svesno*, 123.

⁵¹ Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 178.

⁵² See Osip Mandelstam, *The Noise of Time: and Other Prose Pieces*, ed. Clarence Brown, (London: Quartet, 1988), 165-168 for Clarence Brown's commentary about the Fourth Prose and charges of plagiarism.

imprisonment. This is where their paths diverge. Much like Novsky's, Taube's "perfect" biography is destroyed by the Stalinist terror, while Darmolatov assumes the role of the state writer like so many others in the Soviet Union (and Yugoslavia for that matter) at the time, compliant and silent while others around him perish.

As a result of their destinies, the biographical paradigm shifts as well, and while the remainder of Darmolatov's biography resembles that of an aging elephant – struggling with his "elephantiasis" and living in terror, decorated by the state yet his life lacks a purpose – Taube's destiny is one of intense suffering and senseless death. In addition to the trajectory of the two protagonists, in the stories such as "The Magic Card Dealing" (and also the title story) the biographical events and the development of the characters, as Gordana Crnković points out, adhere to no causal order, but rather exist as a consecutive enumeration of discrete facts marked only by the year or sometimes only the protagonist's age. As Crnković puts it: "The mode of Kiš's articulation of one's becoming a revolutionary is that of a chronicle, a narrative 'parataxis' that does not display any apparent causality."⁵³ In addition, there is a deliberate mystification of the course of events, and establishing a clear timeline, indeed a "history," of the protagonist's engagement during the revolutionary years is very difficult. While at certain points clear dates are given, at others the narrative switches to marking time by following the protagonist's development.⁵⁴

This kind of circular temporal structure and a lack of causality – the motif of circularity present throughout the book returns yet again – propels a story such as "The Magic Card Dealing" out of the realm of biography and into the realm of mythology, or for Vladimir Zorić,

⁵³ Gordana P. Crnković. *Imagined Dialogues: Eastern European Literature in Conversation with American and English Literature*. (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 33.

⁵⁴ In the preceding chapter, we have mentioned the "mystification" of Novsky's biography, for example.

legend.⁵⁵ Kiš himself, in answer to the question “Are your characters heroes?” answers affirmatively “Indeed, true heroes.”⁵⁶ One consequence is that the documentary approach, not unlike in the case of Herriot, further dissipates in the face of literature and writer’s fantasy. Consequently, the idea of a collective biography, one supplemented and amended by this fantasy, as some critics have argued, shifts instead towards a collective mythology, one embodied by a myth of the revolution in which Kiš’s heroes engage and perish as a consequence.

Another crucial part of “The Magic Card Dealing” comes in the second half of the story, in the eponymous card game which further embeds the protagonist and the portrayal of the story in the world of myth and legend while rearranging the Gulag testimonial material Kiš employs from Štajner and Shalamov. As we mentioned earlier one of the topoi that defines Gulag narratives is chance and in Kiš’s story this motif is a crucial part of Taube’s biography because it is chance in the form of a card game that ultimately decides Taube’s destiny. In many aspects, this story is a retelling of Shalamov’s story “On Tick” in which a card game between two criminal prisoners decides the fate of one of narrator’s friends, another political prisoner who refuses to give up his sweater to be used in the card game and as a result is killed by the criminals. Though Kiš employs much of the same motifs from Shalamov’s account – for example, what Leona Toker calls the “Lentian mode” of Gulag narratives⁵⁷ – the two stories are strikingly different. Shalamov’s story employs a detached narrative voice which despite certain metaphysical overtones and appeals to chance nonetheless focuses primarily on the physicality and materiality of the experience. There is not much room for metaphysics in Shalamov’s world

⁵⁵ For more on the employment of legend and myth in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* see Vladimir Zorić. *Kiš, Legenda i Priča: Preoblikovanje i Prenošenje Predanja U Grobnici Za Borisa Davidoviča i Enciklopediji Mrtvih* (Beograd: Narodna Knjiga-Alfa, 2005); and Vladimir Zoric. "The Poetics of Legend: the Paradigmatic Approach to Legend in Danilo Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*." *Modern Language Review*. 100.1 (2005).

⁵⁶ Kiš, *Homo Poeticus* (1990), 304.

⁵⁷ Lentian mode is another characteristic that defines Gulag narratives. See Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, 94-100.

and it is sheer power that decides. In fact, the card game does not even begin before the fate of the prisoner is decided. For example, Shalamov's description of the cards stresses their stark material quality:

A new deck of cards lay on the pillow. These were not the ordinary cards, but a home-made prison deck made with amazing deftness by the local wizards. They needed only paper, a piece of bread (chewed and pressed through a rag, it produced starch to glue the sheets together), an indelible pencil stub, and a knife (to cut stencils for the card suits and the cards themselves).⁵⁸

Kiš, on the other hand, gives us an entire treatise on cards of chance – which in his case are tarot cards – and his description employs motifs that draw heavily from myth and legend, relying on archetypes and symbols. “All kinds of games of chance were played, from the simplest like skat, poker, and blackjack, to a kind of secret Tarot,” the narrator tells us, before explaining the symbols that were featured on the cards.⁵⁹

Another motif in the story is that of the tattoo which the criminals display on their chests. While Štajner juxtaposes the tattoos with the cross that hangs around a neck, for Kiš the tattoo assumes an even greater symbolic quality⁶⁰ than the cross and is what gives the two main criminals their identity: one of them is called “Eagle,” the other “Monkey.” The battle between the two resembles the “Great Lottery” or the “Wheel of Fortune.” In turn, the bunk on which the criminals sit and play cards resembles a kind of empyrean, an upper echelon which Kiš describes as a “criminal Olympus.”⁶¹

The worlds of Novsky and Taube are mythical worlds and as such are predetermined: the heroes who engage in the revolution cannot escape their fate, even though they possess all the virtues such as courage and strong individualism that Darmolatov lacks. Dragan Bošković

⁵⁸ Varlam Shalamov. *Kolya Tales*, trans. John Glad. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 5.

⁵⁹ Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 64.

⁶⁰ ..”the tattoos on the chest, back, and bottom of the prisoners have the same meaning that the signs of the Zodiac have for Westerners, and could be connected to the Devil by the same principle.” *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

stresses this point: “even though it is insisted on their biographies, in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, there are no developed characters...their life journeys are determined like the destinies of mythical heroes.”⁶² Yet, as Bošković understands, this predetermined destiny also implies that any attempt to change this fate, this “continuity” – for example, Novsky’s resistance not to spoil the last segment of his biography – inevitably demands a return to the predetermined path.⁶³ One consequence of such an approach is the portrayal of the revolutionary and the revolution which emerges – one clearly different from that of Koestler for example – while at the same time providing a fitting tribute to the victims through literature.

On the other hand, if Taube’s biography veers towards myth, Darmolatov’s plight in Kiš’s words, becomes a “fable, and as such, the moral of the entire novel.”⁶⁴ In Darmolatov’s life there are no heroic deeds, and his biography is merely a “confused mass of facts,” as the narrator tells us. Yet, even out of this mess of facts there “emerges a naked human life,”⁶⁵ and despite of this ordinariness (or indeed perhaps because of it), his biography may be the most typical, one closer than the destinies of Taube and Novsky to a “crosscut” or a “collective biography” outlined earlier. Thus, when critic Viktoria Radics asks: “maybe Darmolatov’s life was the most paradigmatic?” there may be something to this question.⁶⁶ Darmolatov’s biography may indeed be the most typical, and his plight serves as a warning against passivity and inaction.

Radics pinpoints this tension clearly when she elaborates:

Darmolatov was a mere bubble of soap, his life and poetry do not have weight, they are one big nothing – yet it could be that they have weight nevertheless because such careers enabled the existence of a bloody system...he was an ordinary little man; he was a writer and poet.⁶⁷

⁶² Bošković, *Islednik, Svedok, Priča*, 199-200.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Kiš, *Čas Anatomije*, 60.

⁶⁵ Kiš, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 128.

⁶⁶ Viktória Radics, *Danilo Kiš: Život & Delo I Brevijar*, trans. Marko Čudić, (Beograd: Forum Pisaca, 2005), 297.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Returning to Nadezhda Mandelstam, we surprisingly find an echo of this view in her description of the poet Zenkevich (and by extension A.A. Darmolatov):

Nowdays I have a different feeling about Misha Zenkevich, the self-appointed Roman who, in the ruins of his Colosseum, preserves a few manuscripts by the poets who have been killed. I now find his life touching and, even though it has been free of great disasters –he has never been in prison or gone hungry – almost tragic. Frail by nature, Zenkevich succumbed earlier than others to the plague that infected all our minds; with him, however, it was no the acute attack I suffered in the railroad car, but a long-drawn-out chronic form from which no one ever recovered.”⁶⁸

The contrast between Darmolatov and Taube (paralleling the one between Mandelstam and Zenkevich) illustrates Kiš’s employment of the biographical paradigm in different ways. The typical destiny of Darmolatov stands against the mythological qualities of Taube and Novsky. Moreover, this dichotomy serves as an interesting counterpoint to the tension between the aesthetic and testimonial aspects of Gulag narratives: the suffering of a character like Taube is commemorated through literature, while a mediocre poet like Darmolatov misuses its power or lacks talent to realize its potential.

⁶⁸ Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 47.

Chapter 4: Reception, Revisited.

As we mentioned in the introduction, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* provoked an intense polemic in the Yugoslav press shortly after its publication – a veritable “witch hunt” to use Kiš’s expression—which produced numerous newspaper articles, two polemical books (Kiš’s *Anatomy Lesson* and Dragan Jeremić’s *Narcissus Without A Face*) as well as two libel lawsuits – one against Kiš and another against Kiš’s friend and fellow writer, Predrag Matvejević. Both lawsuits were ultimately dismissed.⁶⁹ Revisiting this controversy is not the goal of this paper, yet it is helpful to offer a few details about its publication, and more importantly, attempt to contextualize it against the reaction to other books addressing the Gulag that appeared (or were prevented from appearing) at that time. Two important cases that have been mentioned throughout this paper for their influence on Kiš’s book particularly stand out: the publication of Karlo Štajner’s 1971 account *7000 Days in Siberia*, and Solzhenitsyn’s reception in Yugoslavia. The latter case provides an interesting parallel to the French reaction to *Gulag Archipelago* which was important as the impetus for *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*.

Karlo Štajner’s *7000 Days in Siberia* was one of the first Gulag accounts to appear in Yugoslavia. Austrian by birth, Štajner joined the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in the 1920s, and after spending some time in Yugoslavia, he moved to Moscow where he was arrested in the first major purge following the death of Kirov in 1934, for whose murder Štajner like so many others would be convicted. Štajner spent nearly 20 years in various Gulag camps, and was released in 1956, following the “thaw.” This year marked a *détente* in the Soviet-Yugoslav relations with the first official visit between the two countries since Tito’s famous break with Stalin in 1948. It was on that visit, as Danilo Kiš recounts in his reminisces about meeting

⁶⁹ For more information about the controversy, see (in addition to Krivokapić 1980) Serge Shishkoff, “Košava in a Coffee Pot: The Danilo Kiš Affair,” *Cross Currents* 6 (1987): 340 – 371.

Štajner, that Tito handed Khrushchev a list of 113 Yugoslav Communists who were in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, and asked how many were still alive. Khrushchev came back with the answer the next day: three. One of them was Karlo Štajner.⁷⁰

Though Štajner wrote his memoirs shortly after returning to Yugoslavia in 1956, *7000 Days* would only be published some 15 years later. The reason was not clear, even to Štajner, and copies of the manuscript simply “disappeared” when he handed them over to party officials.⁷¹ Only through Tito’s personal intervention would the book find its way to press. According to Tito’s cabinet chief at the time, Marko Vrhunec, Tito met with Štajner personally, unbeknownst to the Croatian Communist leadership where Štajner had originally sent the manuscript, and approved the book.⁷²

Štajner’s account would go on to win the prestigious “Ivan Goran Kovačić” Prize, again, as Predrag Matvejević confirms, with Tito’s blessing. Matvejević was a member of the jury that year and recommended Štajner’s book for the prize. As Matvejević remembers, during this time “there were many people who were afraid of some kind of “iron hand” or re-Stalinization”— this was, in Matvejević words immediately following the “settling of scores with nationalism and the

⁷⁰ See Danilo Kiš, “Karlo Štajner, Witness for the Prosecution,” in *Homo Poeticus*, ed. Sontag, 139-148.

⁷¹ As Štajner recounts in an interview: “You gave the manuscript for review?”

Karlo Štajner: I gave one copy personally to Zvonko Brkic, the secretary of the central committee in Zagreb. And a second copy to Veljko Vlahovic in Belgrade. And both copies disappeared.

Disappeared?

K.S. Yes, they disappeared. Simply no trace of them. That’s what I was told.

So you could have...?

K.S. No, I could not have! The original was stored in a safe place. With my brother in Lyon. Siberia taught me a few things.”

Karlo Štajner, *Ruka Iz Groba*, (Zagreb: Globus, 1985), 101.

⁷² According to Vrhunec: “When Štajner was released, he returned home to Zagreb where his startling memoir.

When he wanted to deliver it personally to Tito, the Croatian leadership did not allow him to burden Tito needlessly, so that it would be better to send him the book. Not accepting that answer, Štajner called me personally, told me what was happening and asked me to inform Tito. When I did so – not informing the Croats, of course – Tito immediately ordered Štajner’s request be granted... They spoke privately for a long time. Štajner’s book gathered a big reaction and the surprise in public was caused by the fact that Tito met with him personally despite the wishes of the Croatian leadership and the upcoming meeting with Brezhnev (or maybe even because of it).“ Marko Vrhunec. *Šest Godina S Titom: 1967-1973: Pogled S Vrha i Izbliza*, (Zagreb: Nakladni Zavod Globus, 2001), 207-208.

so-called liberalism”⁷³ and he believed that Štajner’s book winning the prize would be a positive reaction to this climate. The only problem was that Tito was scheduled to visit the Soviet Union only a few days later and the jury was worried about possible repercussions. They decided to check with Tito’s office and received the answer the next day: Štajner’s book should be awarded but the news of the award not announced until after the visit.⁷⁴

The popular reception of the book was also extremely positive and in 1982 Štajner would go on to publish another memoir, *Return from the Gulag*. One of the reasons for the continued positive reaction from both the press and the government was Štajner’s commitment to socialism. He continued to view the Stalinist years as a perversion of the original idea. Štajner died in Zagreb in 1995, and in a cruel twist, the Croatian government had suspended his state pension a few years earlier because he had remained a Communist. Predrag Matvejević had to write a personal letter to then-President Franjo Tuđman requesting his pension be reinstated, pointing out that no one in Yugoslavia had done more to expose the evils of Communism than Štajner.⁷⁵

Solzhenitsyn’s reception in Yugoslavia is also a complicated story, and one perhaps not without a hint of irony, considering such a negative reaction to the *Gulag Archipelago* in France, which Kiš protested so vehemently. As Dušan Puvačić points out, Solzhenitsyn’s works prior to the *Gulag Archipelago* had been received extremely well in Yugoslavia. In fact, it was the “only Communist country where more or less all of Solzhenitsyn’s works had been translated and published.”⁷⁶ Prior to his expulsion from the Soviet Union and the publication of the *Gulag Archipelago* in France in 1973, the critical and official stance in Yugoslavia was pervaded by

⁷³ 1971 was the year of the Croatian Spring.

⁷⁴ See Predrag Matvejević, “Literatura i Gulag” in Karlo Štajner, *Ruka Iz Groba*, 15.

⁷⁵ See Matvejević, Predrag. *Istočni Epistolar*. (Zagreb: Ceres, 1994), 248.

⁷⁶ See Dušan Puvačić, “Yugoslav Reactions to Solzhenitsyn,” in John B. Dunlop, et al (eds.). *Solzhenitsyn in Exile: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*. (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 1985), 91.

“the common idea: that Solzhenitsyn was fighting for an ‘ethical socialism,’ and that his struggle was thus essentially similar to the one that the Yugoslavs themselves were waging.”⁷⁷

Everything would change with the *Gulag Archipelago*. The book was banned by the government and would not be published in Yugoslavia until 1988. Such a negative reaction came in the wake of the Soviet press campaign against Solzhenitsyn and part of the reason was certainly the Soviet pressure on the Yugoslav authorities. Yet, as Puvačić further points out, this was not the crucial factor with respect to the *Gulag Archipelago*. Instead, it was Solzhenitsyn’s revelations that the first Gulag camps were created not by Stalin, but, in fact, by Lenin who established the early prison camps on the Solovetsky Islands.⁷⁸ This “defamation” of Lenin, along with Solzhenitsyn’s “messianism” and his total repudiation of Communism and call for a return to Christian values, proved too much for the Yugoslav leadership. Though criticizing Stalin after 1948 was allowed, even encouraged, an attack on Lenin was tantamount to an attack on Communism. Moreover, international pressures, especially the relationship with the Soviet Union, following the Prague Spring and the Brezhnev doctrine, made the government very cautious. Solzhenitsyn’s book was a case that could lead to real repercussions. As Mark Thompson writes, when a Croatian publisher attempted to bring out the book a few years later, the Soviet consulate “came knocking on the door: if the publisher went ahead, the USSR would cancel its ship-building contracts with Yugoslavia.”⁷⁹ Even in the late 1980s, the Communist leadership in Bosnia prohibited the book from being published until eventually a Belgrade house was given the green light to do so.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁸ For more on the history of the Gulag see Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History*. (New York: Doubleday, 2003), and Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁷⁹ Mark Thompson, *Birth Certificate: The Story of Danilo Kiš*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 236.

⁸⁰ See Ivan Lovrenović, “Kako u Sarajevu Nije Objavljen Arhipelag Gulag.” Accessed May 27, 2014. <http://www.jergovic.com/ajfelov-most/kako-u-sarajevu-nije-objavljen-arhipelag-gulag/>

A Tomb for Boris Davidovich appeared in this climate, and certainly some of the reactions it provoked, such as the charges of anti-Communism, stemmed from the same place as the criticisms of Solzhenitsyn. In fact, Kiš initially had difficulties getting the book published – the first publishing house he sent the book to passed on it – and it was only with the help of Miroslav Krleža, the famous author and Tito’s personal friend, that the book would find its way to the public. Slavko Goldstein, whose publishing house Liber in Zagreb had published even more controversial works such as *Moscow Diary* by dissident Mihailo Mihailov, agreed to publish it.⁸¹ The initial reviews for the book were extremely positive, yet it would not be long until the same *košava* – the southern wind which Kiš, in an excised passage from the *Anatomy Lesson* used as a metaphor to describe the attack in the press -- that had blown in the case of Solzhenitsyn would reach Kiš as well.

⁸¹ Thompson, *Birth Certificate*, 237.

Conclusion

A Tomb for Boris Davidovich shares many characteristics of post-testimonial Gulag narratives and should be considered a part of the Gulag literary corpus. The tension between the testimonial function and its status as literature, as well as the difficulty of giving literary form to the immense suffering of Gulag prisoners, is a constant preoccupation in Kiš's book as it is in all texts attempting to address the Gulag experience. In addition, Kiš's stories, like many other post-testimonial fictional Gulag narratives, engage the first-hand accounts by not only including the specific thematic motifs or topoi but also by incorporating and rearranging them in such a way as to stay true to their testimonial purpose. However, as we have seen in the case of the story "Mechanical Lions," Kiš's documentary approach is not strictly historical, but rather the documents serve as guiding posts and limits to the writer's imagination, and the tension between the historical and the literary sides of the book often resolves in favor of literature. This is hardly surprising as the function of any literary work is to be as universally relevant as possible, even when dealing with a specific historical context. Many Gulag narratives from Varlam Shalamov's stories to Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir transcend their historical context and in addition to their testimonial purpose, assume the role of true works of art. Nonetheless, Kiš constantly evokes the responsibility of the writer to stay true to the document, repeatedly calling attention to the misuse and misappropriation of not only history but also literature.

Much like other fictional works addressing the Gulag experience, Kiš's approach is paradigmatic, and the primary paradigm he employs is biography. Each story addresses a different aspect of a "common" history. Yet, as we have seen, the biographical approach is not consistent and strays from the idea of biography as a collective experience and toward myth and legend, which also serves to obfuscate and remove historical and documentary coordinates.

Though such approach Kiš is able to pay fitting tribute to those who perished or who were erased from history by giving them “immortality” and by building them a fitting cenotaph in literary form. Conversely, Kiš’s approach to the biographical paradigm and employment of myth makes it difficult to consider the novel solely as a historical tract or an anti-ideological critique, though it is certainly carries those functions. Thus, a comparison with Arthur Koestler and *Darkness at Noon*, besides the nominal “polemic” with respect to the topos of the interrogation, does not prove very fruitful as Koestler’s book remains firmly grounded in the historical circumstances and the psychology of the old revolutionaries it depicts.

Nonetheless, the perpetual conflict between the “Yogi” and the “Commissar,” an idea which Kiš borrows from Koestler and which he frequently evokes to describe the tension between the ethical and aesthetical elements in his works, is perhaps most palpable in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. This tension, as we have seen, is also a crucial issue in all Gulag narratives.

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Grand, fort, les épaules massives, la tête carrée surmontée d'une brosse de cheveux touffus, la figure taillée à coups de serpe, barrée d'une courte et épaisse moustache, l'homme donnait une impression de puissance. La voix, magnifique, apte aux nuances les plus subtiles, aux accents les plus modulés, dominait aisément les tumultes. Il savait en jouer avec art, comme des expressions changeantes de son visage.

C'était un vrai spectacle que de le voir à la tribune, passant du grave au plaisant, de la confiance à l'affirmation claironnante d'un principe. Un contradicteur se révélait-il ? Il acceptait l'interruption et, tandis que l'autre s'expliquait, un large sourire s'épanouissait sur la figure d'Edouard Herriot, signe prémonitoire de la réplique mordante qui allait déchaîner le rire ou les applaudissements, à la confusion de l'interlocuteur pris en défaut. Ce sourire, il est vrai, disparaissait quand à la critique se mêlaient des propos offensants — et Dieu sait si au cours de sa carrière il lui arriva d'être abreuvé d'injures ! De telles attaques le mettaient hors de lui et provoquaient des apostrophes d'autant plus indignées qu'il n'était pas exempt d'une sensibilité toujours en éveil, que d'aucuns taxaient de susceptibilité.

“Big, strong, broad-shouldered, with an angular head covered by thick, bristly hair, a face shaped as if by a pruning knife, and cut off by a short, thick mustache, this man gave the impression of great strength. His voice, marvelous in itself and adaptable to the subtlest nuances and most modulated stresses, easily dominated any disorder. He knew how to control his facial expression.” The same source gives the following description of his character: “It was a real spectacle to see him on the podium, alternating between serious and playful tones, between confidential and Jeremian proclamations of some principle. And if someone contradicted him, he accepted the little provocation; while the other expounded his views, a broad smile spread over Édouard Herriot’s face—the preliminary sign of a devastating remark, which, the moment it was spoken, provoked a riot of laughter and applause to the utter confusion of the speaker caught in the trap. That smile, it is true, would disappear if the criticism was voiced in an insulting tone. Such attacks infuriated him and provoked in him a violent reaction, the more so since he was always cautious—a sensitivity which many saw as vanity.”

A Tomb for Boris Davidovich, pgs. 29-30

“Krupan, snažan, širokih ramena, čoskaste glave pokrivene gustom čekinjastom kosom, lica kao kosirom istesana i presečena kratkim gustim brcima, taj je covek odavao utisak velike snage. Njegov glas, divan vec po sebi, prilagođen najtananim sasencenjima i najmodularnim akcentima, lako je dominirao nad svakim metežom. Znao je njime da vlada majstorski, kao sto je znao da vlada majstorski i izrazom svoga lica.” Isto svedočanstvo daje ovakav opis njegovog karaktera: “Bio je to pravi spektakl videti ga za govornicom gde prelazi s ozbiljnog na šaljiv ton, od poverljivog do jerihonskog objavljenja nekog principa. A pojavi li se neko ko mu protivureči, on prihvata taj mali izazov i, dok taj drugi razlaže svoj stav, jedan se širok osmeh razliva po licu Eduara Erioa – preuranjeni predznak jedne sverazarajuće pimedbe koja ce netom izazvati buru smeha i aplauza a na sveopštu konfuziju sagovornika uhvaćenog u stupicu. Taj je osmeh, istina, nestajao čim bi kritika bila izrečena uvredljivim tonom. Takvi bi ga napadi dovodili do besa i izazivali u njemu žestoku reakciju, utoliko pre što je on uvek bio na oprezu – osetljivost koju su mnogi proglašavali sujetom.”

(Original Serbo-Croatian)

Excerpt from Le Monde Article, March 27, 1957