

Imagination under Pressure: Ideology and History in Danilo Kiš' A Tomb for Boris Davidovich and Milan Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

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Abstract: *The present study focuses on fictional history and historical fiction as forms of oppositional discourse in the East-Central European literature during highly Stalinized communist regimes. The study evaluates comparatively Danilo Kiš' A Tomb for Boris Davidovich and Milan Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, two literary works that express a reality which takes place within restricted ideological limits.*

While exploring the fictional material reified by the writers' imagination being under the pressure of ideology, a number of aspects have attracted our critical attention. The first regards the importance of history, in general, and of the historical truth, in particular, as being expressed in the texts of the two writers. The second is represented by the authorial attitude towards the motif of 'memory and forgetting'. The third concerns the originality of the genre: both novels receive the form of a collection of individual stories consisting of certain narrative lines which, on one hand, are seemingly separate, but, on the other hand, are linked within a given collection as a means of expressing the historical truth. The fourth refers to the characteristic humor of Kiš and Kundera's novels. The works of the two writers reveal a very complex humor, alternating from black humor to thoughtful, from biting to sentimental, exposing the human experiences of grief, pain of existence and anguish at facing death. These aspects represent the main similarities between the two literary discourses, which were written in a period of crisis in the history of humanity, and, in order to reveal this, the investigation of these aspects in their thematic and narrative perspectives becomes the main aim of this study.

Keywords: *Fiction, ideology, history, historiography, genre, authorship, humor, postmodernity, postmodernism.*

Baskı Altındaki İmgelem: Danilo Kiš'in Boris Davidovich için bir Mezar ve Milan Kundera'nın Gülüşün ve Unutuşun Kitabı

Özet: *Bu çalışma, Stalin etkisinin yoğun olduğu komünist rejimlerdeki Doğu ve Orta Avrupa yazınında kurgusal tarih ve tarihsel kurguya ilişkin karşıt söylemlerin irdelenmesini içerir. Bu bağlamda belirli ideolojik sınırlar içerisindeki gerçekliği dile getiren Danilo Kiš'in Boris Davidovich İçin Bir Mezar adlı yapıtı ile Milan Kundera'nın Gülüşün ve Unutuşun Kitabı adlı yapıtı arasında karşılaştırmalı bir inceleme yapılmıştır.*

Yazarın ideolojik baskı altındaki imgelemiyle somutlaştırdığı kurgusal yapıtını incelerken, genel anlamda tarihin, özel anlamda tarihsel doğruluğun önemi, "bellek" ve "unutma" motiflerine yazarın yaklaşımı, görünüşte farklı olsalar da, tarihsel doğruluğu dillendirme aracı olarak benzer anlatı biçimleriyle bireysel öyküler içeren birbirinin bütünüleyicisi farklı eleştirel etmenlerin varlığı ve son olarak Kiš ve Kundera'nın mizah anlayışlarıyla karşılaştırılır. Her iki yazarın mizah anlayışının kara mizahtan düşündürücü mizaha, iğneleyici olanından duyguları hedef alanına kadar farklı mizah anlayışına sahip olduklarının ve çeşitli şekillerde insanın ölüm karşısında duyumsadığı acıyı ve yası ortaya koyduklarının ayırımına varılır. İnsanlık tarihinin belirli bir kriz döneminde kaleme alınmış yapıtlar olarak, iki yapıtın yazınsal söylemi ve biçimi arasında benzerlikler olduğu göze çarpar. İzleksel ve anlatsal bir çözümlemeyle, iki yapıt arasındaki benzerlikleri açığa çıkartmak bu çalışmanın temel amacıdır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Kurgu, ideoloji, tarih, tarih yazımı, tür, yazarlık, mizah, postmodernite, postmodernizm.*

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Introduction

The status of the writer of fiction in situations governed by oppression, deceit and deliberately blurred parameters, such as those occurred under the control of Russian Communism and its bleak aftermath, was both dangerous and appealing. Although precarious, the East-Central European writers of the highly Stalinized Communist regimes intensified their interest in historical themes and in the subject of re-presentation or interpretation of the past. Often they offered imaginative challenges or alternatives to the so-called 'official histories', questioning the established assumptions on which the verity of historical reconstruction was based. These writers questioned drastically the historians' assertions of truthfulness and accuracy of the past as represented in the standardized historical texts. Since the famous statement of Jacques Derrida in his *of Grammatology* that "*there is no outside-the-text*" (Derrida, 1974: 158) there appeared the suggestion of the impossibility of finding the truth, not just in its transcendental philosophical sense, but also in the prospect of a material and historical referent. This claim of the textuality of existence and the difficulty or impossibility of reaching a reality outside representation and signification were initially not applied particularly to history by Derrida, but in the postmodern world it created a powerful impact especially upon the oppressed people who experienced traumatic events and historical incidents. In the same line, the famous philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard declared that postmodernism takes place in the recognition that Enlightenment rationalism and scientific positivism are not connected to objective truth and reality, but, to a certain extent, are simply "*language games*", like fiction, that only produce "*the effects of reality*" and that, in the postmodern context, turn out to be "*the fantasies of realism*" (Lyotard, 1984: 74). In these circumstances, both 'realistic' fiction and 'objective' history not only become deluding in their endeavor to present the world as an extremely comprehensible and coherent system, but "*they also become ideologically charged deceptive practices that posit an immanent and essentialized world where none exists*" (Berlatsky, 2003: 101).

Concurrently during this period, historiography itself became the object of reevaluation. Important scholars such as Hayden White and Fredric Jameson persist on the impossibility of our 'knowing' the past, except the narrated, textualized and interpreted reconstruction. White claims that a historical work is "*a verbal structure in the form of the narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them*" (White, 1973: 2). Thus, in this context, the writer of history, like the writer of fiction, inevitably makes use of emplotment in order to outline the succession of historical events.

The postmodern emphasis on the 'real' as inseparable from the constructed and the textual became the matter of concern of the historical fiction, particularly in that dominant kind of "*historiographic metafiction*" that Linda Hutcheon defines "*in terms of its ability to contest the assumptions of the 'realist' novel and narrative history, to question the absolute knowability of the past, and to specify the ideological implications of historical*

representations, past and present" (Hutcheon, 1995: 71). The postmodern reader of the historiographicmetafiction responds to the historical material represented in such novels with a strong awareness of its emplotment (fiction) and its basis in the historical real (fact), admitting at the same time that the historical real might have potentially disturbing and political consequences.

I. History, Fact, and Fiction in Kiš and Kundera

This study evaluates comparatively Danilo Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) and Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978), two literary works in which the inaccessibility of the real and the truth blur the boundary between historical facts and fiction. While exploring the fictional material reified by the writers' imagination being under the pressure of ideology, a number of aspects have attracted our critical attention. The first regards the importance of history, in general, and of the historical truth, in particular, as being expressed in the texts of the two writers.

The Yugoslavian novelist Danilo Kiš (1935-1989) was totally conscious of the fact that any narration of historical events requires a poetic skill and that the writing of history or historical fiction means to select, to reconstruct, to make use of the probabilistic language that supplies a narrative with details which the historian cannot actually know, but rather guess, based on a general knowledge of the historical context. This is a practice which is especially encountered in topics, such as Stalin's purges and the gulag system, where hard documentary evidence is scarce. Kiš's claims that the filling in the emptiness of the gaps between two given facts with the "*hard stuff of the imagination which in its persuasiveness has the power of a document*" (Kiš, 1990: 188). This gives his work what Jennifer Levine has called "*the aura of the real*" (Levine, 1979: 133). In *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* Kiš makes references to a variety of historical documents, such as recorded memoirs, encyclopedias, case histories, general histories, newspaper articles, and also many of the presented events and characters are historically genuine. He uses the historical document in order to objectify his text, to confer to it the quality of truthfulness and credibility and to strengthen the reader's illusion of the text's authenticity. Moreover, "*it can serve as a form of self-censorship, preventing the author's consciousness from slipping into grandiloquence, sentimentalism, and pathos. Keeping in check the author's subjective or, lyrical impulse was, paradoxically, as much a device to authenticate the subject as it was to create an illusion of its authenticity*" (Gorjup, 1994: 162-163).

In order to make the indicated sources more credible, Kiš provides numerous footnotes throughout *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. Although it is expected that the use of footnotes would reinforce the documentary illusion, their reliability becomes doubtful due to the use of phrases such as "*some sources*", "*it is a known fact*", and "*some investigators*", etc. Instead of granting an air of authenticity, the footnotes suggest somehow that the main text requires some supplementation. The writer wants to call deliberately the attention of the reader to the fictionality of his work, while at the same time trying to give it the credibility of a historical documentary. This approach is employed by Kiš in order to

blur the boundary between fiction and reality. Kiš starts *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* following: “*The story that 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, 1980: 3).

A similar strategy is used at the beginning of another story: “*History recorded him as Novsky, which is only a pseudonym (or, more precisely, one of his pseudonyms). But what immediately spawns doubt is the question: did history really record him? In the index of the Granat Encyclopedia, among the 246 authorized biographies and autobiographies of great men and participants in the Revolution, his name is missing. In his commentary of this encyclopedia, Haupt notes that all the important figures of the Revolution are represented, and laments only the “surprising and inexplicable absence of Podvoysky.” Even he fails to make any allusion to Novsky, whose role in the Revolution was more significant than that of Podvoysky. So in a ‘surprising and inexplicable’ way this man whose political principles gave validity to a rigorous ethic, this vehement internationalist, appears in the revolutionary chronicles as a character without a face or a voice.*” (Kiš, 1980: 73)

By blurring the boundary between fiction and reality Kiš wants to emphasize the ways in which history and historical narration is frequently manipulated and twisted by various modes of employment. At the same time he warns about the danger of shaping some historical facts into a range of narrative forms that are ideologically predetermined and thus direct the future interpretation and the understanding of a traditional historical narrative. Kiš wants his readers to admit that if a work of fiction efficiently makes use of the technique of documentation, usually employed by nonfictional accounts of history, then the works of history, which pretend themselves as ‘true’, may also be fiction and might need some verification. *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* advocates the treating of any historical record with some doubts we experience toward works of fiction, suggesting the fact that history might be the product of the imagination of its witnesses, the writers. As Hayden White has pointed out, “*in this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience... historical stories ...give to reality the odor of the ideal*” (White, 1980: 20).

The suggestion of the unreliability of the historical records is appropriate exactly to the context of Stalinism, in which the official version of history was modified according to the impulse or desire of the dominant political situation. Kiš explicitly points out in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* that history is a matter of political construction, fiction, a text which is not true. In the story also entitled *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* the main protagonist Boris Davidovich is imprisoned in a Stalinist camp where he is forced to confess some crimes he never committed. As a punishment, Novsky’s torturer Fedukin executes some young people one by one in front of the prisoner until Boris Davidovich finally capitulates. Although Fedukin is conscious of the fact that the given confession has nothing to do with truth, he encourages the creation of a system of falsified reality in order to preserve the

power and supremacy of the Party and its ideology: "*Fedukin, the tall, pock-marked, and unbending interrogator, spent some hours alone with Novsky in this cattle car (the doors were locked from outside), trying to persuade him of the moral obligation of making a false confession*" (Kiš, 1980: 90). In the hands of such writers of authorized history, as Kiš points out, 'truth' becomes a very relative concept, since it was based on numerous confessions forced by the interrogators of the Party intended to present a wishful reality. As Fedukin the torturer says: "*Even a stone would talk if you break its teeth*" (Kiš, 1980:91). Such a representation of a 'voluntary' submission of the victims to the ideology of the Stalinist Russia intends to arouse the readers' precaution and to question whether a given fact is a reliable unit or not.

The Czech writer Milan Kundera (1929-)also explores the inaccessibility of the real and the truth and its political consequences in his work *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Kundera focuses on the illustration of the effacing powers of the institutional history. His novel opens with the description of a photograph, set in 1948, depicting a group of political leaders, among whom Gottwald and Clementis, standing on a balcony in front of a multitude of people on a cold and snowy day. Gottwald, while giving a speech to the people, wears a fur hat that has just been placed on his head by Clementis. Kundera refers to that account as a unique moment that was reproduced abundantly by newspapers, posters, schoolbooks and museums to such an extent that even a child could recognize the photograph. "*On that balcony the history of Communist Czechoslovakia was born*" (Kundera, 1982: 3). Four years after the photograph was taken, Clementis disappeared from all the pictures because he was accused of treason and hanged, leaving behind only his fur hat on Gottwald's head: "*The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history and, obviously, out of all photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only bare palace wall. All that remains of Clementis is the cap on Gottwald's head*" (Kundera, 1982: 3). In this fragment Kundera portrays the power and capacity of the Soviet regime to airbrush, efface, twist and re-write history in order to fit its own ideological purposes.

This meditation on the photograph also explores some aspects of the past. First concerns the flexibility of the past, since in the mechanism of social life, the past is not always a solid, concrete or factual reality. In our individual memories the past can be reconstructed, modified and adjusted. Second refers to our endeavor to present the past in a wishful manner, convenient to a certain moment of the present. But the attempt to erase the past is seldom successful, since the trace of the past does not exist just in the individual memory but also in some accounts, histories or someone's memory. Even though the individual makes some great effort to control the past, it remains a part of the present beyond any manipulation. The framework of Kundera's photograph illustrates that the past is loaded with ideological burden. It provides the possibility to justify the political and social agendas against those who do not embrace the recognized or official premises. Thus, not only a historical fact but also the past can be an ideological weapon.

Kundera's photograph shows an extremely twisted report of history from the experience of Clementis with the Communist Party. When Clementis and his fur hat are seen as components of Czech history (that is when this exemplary moment is a part of the Czech past and is intended to shape its present), the episode is permitted to be recorded in the story of the nation. Conversely, when the Czech leading party is disturbed by this past, Clementis is easily airbrushed from all official records of history. Kundera depicts and argues about the fact that Clementis' obliteration is a deformation of the historical record. Meanwhile, the theorists of 'history', like Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault, claim that the removal or silencing of the facts and events is inevitable and is a constitutive part of unifying the traditional history. De Certeau affirms that history "*customarily began with limited evidence... and it took as its task the sponging of all diversity off of them, unifying everything into coherent comprehension*" (de Certeau, 1988: 78). The Clementis episode is just another obvious example of the constant narrative violence in which all history participates. Milan Kundera, like Foucault and de Certeau, tries to show the impossibility of the coexistence of the real and the unifying narrative, the incompatibility of the real and its unifying narration.

The same danger of effacing a historical fact is presented by Kiš's narrative, in which the main character Boris Davidovich Novsky, a true revolutionary and a vehement defender of Communist ideology, "*appears in the revolutionary chronicles as a character without a face or a voice*" (Kiš, 1980:73). Once Boris Davidovich embodied the symbol of brotherhood, optimism and altruism of the Communist party; now he is obliterated from all records, becoming anonymous, inadequate to the present ambitions of the totalitarian regime.

In this context the question of history's competence obviously appears. Since history itself contributes to the committing of such violence, like erasing facts from the past and twisting the events, is history effective at all? Michel Foucault implies that "*history becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being... 'Effective' history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending*" (Foucault, 1984: 88). Foucault contrasts here the traditional or 'classical' history to a new history or genealogy that disassembles instead of unifying, meaning that Clementis and Boris Davidovich might be accepted to stay in the chronicles or pictures although they are not part of that leading ideology any longer and they might be allowed to remain in the memory of the posterity.

II. Memory and Its Fictional Implications

In fact, as an alternative to Foucault's new history, many thinkers started to advocate memory. Our past is our heritage; our tradition is shaped by our experiences, ideas and memories. Recollection, remembering is a moral and social responsibility, but what should be remembered exactly? Nowadays memory has become the subject of important research, exploring especially questions of individual and collective memories. Maurice Halbwachs,

a theorist notorious for his studies on 'collective memory', perceives memory as a phenomenon which preserves continuity and consistency within a community. Meanwhile history, in its records, gives priority to the dramatic changes and ruptures between past and present: "*History (...) is not interested in these intervals when nothing apparently happens, when life is content with repetition in a somewhat different but essentially unaltered form without rupture or upheaval. But the group, living first and foremost for its own sake, aims to perpetuate the feelings and images forming the substance of its thought*" (Halbwachs, 1980: 85-86). The collective memory, unlike history, is preoccupied mostly with how to protect and retain the shared heritage, traditions, feelings and images.

Pierre Nora makes an attempt to underline the difference between memory and history. In his work *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de memoire* Nora asserts: "*Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past*" (Nora, 1989: 8).

This distinction resembles the one implied by Milan Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. In this narrative memory is presented as a bond to a community and an identity that is jeopardized by the erasing powers of history. Similar to Clementis episode mentioned earlier, Kundera's novel continues to depict the manner in which history is manipulated and controlled by those in power, as well as its shocking impact upon collectivity. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is set during the rule of Gustav Husak, named by Kundera as the "President of Forgetting", famous for cashiering 145 Czech historians from the research institutes. Mirek, from the story entitled *Lost Letters*, an academic dismissed after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, tries desperately to avoid the erasure of history through the means of his own memory. He keeps vigilant records of political meetings and correspondence believing that "*the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting*" (Kundera, 1982: 3). Mirek, an activist among those who made the Prague spring, represents the "*generation who revolted against their own youth*", having "*an urge to reach back into the past and smash it with his fist, an urge to slash the canvas of his youth to shreds*" (Kundera, 1982: 13, 20). This is an urge that Kundera greatly doubts, since it proves to be futile. Mirek wants to retrieve the letters that provide evidence for the past love to the adamantly Stalinist Zdena he now remembers with shame. He wants to airbrush her from his past, from his memory in the same manner as Clementis was airbrushed from the history of his nation: "*The reason he wanted to remove her picture from the album of his life was not that he hadn't loved her, but that he had. By erasing her from his mind, he erased his love for her. He airbrushed her out of the picture in the same way the Party*

propaganda section airbrushed Clementis from the balcony where Gottwald gave his historic speech" (Kundera, 1982: 21-22).

The political implication of memory is an evident fact and Mirek tries to fight insistently to preserve his personal memory against the impending effacement of history. His protests against the erasure or manipulation of the historical fact seems to be caused by a defense mechanism that functions in the case of annihilation, but, ironically, while defending himself he also tries to destroy some fragments from his past that he is not willing to include in the process of building his identity. In his attempt to fabricate his identity, he makes the same abuse of power as the leaders of ideology of his time: "*Mirek is as much a rewriter of history as the Communist Party, all political parties, all nations, all men. People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories rewritten*" (Kundera, 1982: 22).

At the beginning of the story we seem to sympathize with Mirek for his efforts to retain public history, but this sympathy vanishes when we understand that he is not willing to accept the failures of his personal past as well. Mirek's labors to recover his love letters are futile and arrogant, "*his desire to bring his past under his own control evidences the assertiveness of selfhood, the-self-conscious exhibitionism that runs through the satiric targets of the novel (...), through the various sexual adventurers and pretentious politicians, to the sexless nudists of the last scene*" (Knight, 2004: 108). Politics is trivial, unappealing, but at the same time is attractive exactly due to its ability to confirm the individual self and also to 'overrepresent' the self. However, the process of 'overrepresentation' is an illusory one because it "*betrays or even annihilates the inner self*" of the individual. (Knight, 2004: 108) Zdena has become a blemish on his past, on his reputation and Mirek wants to 'forget' her, but the 'forgetting' of the personal history represents self-effacement, any discourse which erases the historical context of a person is totalitarian and abusive. At this moment Mirek betrays his inner self because his act of erasure symbolizes his complicity with Communist idealizations and oppression that he despises so much. The creation of the personal identity by the help of memory-construction is a very dangerous act, bringing with it many political consequences. In this context Kundera seems to suggest the resemblance between the 'official' history and individual memory, both of them being mere constructions, narratives, instrument of power and abuse.

Mirek tries to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality in a convenient manner, using the method of a novelist: "*One of a novelist's inalienable rights is to be able to rework his novel. If he takes a dislike to the beginning, he can rewrite it or cross it out entirely*" (Kundera, 1982: 11). Mirek's personal memory might be clearly represented in

his autobiography, giving the illusion of the objective representation of the self, Kundera suggesting that the depiction of the self through memory is impossible. In addition to this we may mention Paul de Man's description of autobiography as following: "*We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined in all its aspects by resources of his medium*" (de Man, 1979: 920).

By satirizing Mirek's urge to make a novel of his life Kundera makes satire of any authorial enterprise as well. Novelists always will assert their right to 'rework' their novels for the sake of creativity and perfection. But the writers' plight to create a unique work of art—by removing, silencing or adjusting the imperfections caused by human nature and history—may involve them in the same criticism hinted at Mirek. Revealing the process by which the author rewrites and adjusts his material, Kundera shatters the illusion that his text is timeless or objective. By drawing attention to the erasure or the solipsistic tendencies of revision, Kundera breaks the enchantment caused by art or ideology upon the readers.

The relativism and the mutability of memory are also the matter of concern of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. In his endeavor to oppose memory to forgetting, Danilo Kiš also tries to emphasize the fact that memory apparently safeguards, confirms and even defies false history, but by the end it proves to be just a mere construction with no concrete relation to the reality it asserts, vulnerable to manipulation and deformation.

At the beginning of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* Kiš presents the 'biography' of Boris Davidovich Novsky, a fervent Communist who has dedicated his entire life to the Party and its ideology. During the Stalinist regime of the 1930s, Novsky is arrested, being charged for treason. From the day of his arrest his life is spent in prison camps, being constantly subdued to extreme sufferings and tortures. In the past a leading revolutionary and a true defender of the progressive ideas of the Party, now Novsky is sacrificed for the sake of Stalin's ambitions, being destroyed by his own supposed 'comrades'. The elimination of Novsky from the history is opposed apparently by Kiš's narrator who tries to restore the memory of the brilliant revolutionary through the means of biography. He begins his narration in a promising manner, claiming that Novsky's "*biography does not lack information; what is puzzling is the chronology*" (Kiš, 1980: 77). However, the reliability of this claim becomes doubtful due to the "*obvious gap in our sources*" or "*his later whereabouts are more or less known*", creating the effect of a pleasant, but false satisfaction that the given text is true (Kiš, 1980: 81). Kiš's narrator somehow calls attention to the fictionality of his narration and, at the same time, to the fictionality of life and thus to the biography of this character: "*This brave man died on November 21, 1937, at four o'clock in the afternoon. He left a few cigarettes and a tooth-brush.... In late June 1956, the London Times, which still seemed to believe in ghosts, announced that*

Novsky had been seen in Moscow near the Kremlin wall. He was recognized by his steel dentures" (Kiš, 1980: 108). The reconstruction of the protagonist's denture, ironically, in this context suggests the reconstruction or re-creation of life and biography of Boris Davidovich, showing that not only a piece of history can be remodeled, reworked, invented, but a human existence as well might be a part of legend, that is, of fiction.

The unreliability of Kiš's narration calls us to investigate the reliability of Novsky's autobiography. We admire Novsky's stoicism in resisting the pressure of power, his determinism *"to ascertain his moral position, which was whispering demoniacally into his ear that his biography was final and well rounded, without flaws, as perfect as a sculpture"* (Kiš, 1980: 94). But if in the case of Kundera's character the past holds the control over memory and does not allow oblivion, Kiš's character is subdued by the present, represented by the official power, which is able to deform, adjust and manipulate its 'material'. Novsky realizes the dreadful situation of his life: he, who considered himself the master of his life, capable to create his own identity and biography, is annihilated completely by the authority. Boris Davidovich acknowledges that *"the perfection of his biography would be destroyed, his life work (his life) deformed by these final pages.... By his stubborn refusal to cooperate with the inquiry, he would find himself (indeed, he already did) at the beginning of a long series of murders committed in his name"* (Kiš, 1980: 94, 96).

The ability of the authority to construct not just historical evidence but even human life makes Danilo Kiš focus on the value of confession, apparently the most trustworthy piece of truth a human can ever produce. The confession becomes the center of attention of the writer especially when it is considered the context of the Christian tradition and, in particular, the Russian Orthodox tradition of public confession. But in this text the confession motif loses its sacred aura; instead, it becomes an instrument of pressure manipulated by the power. The confession does not allow the possibility to the protagonist to be sincere and truthful because *"the whole structure of this confession rested on a lie squeezed out of him by torture"* (Kiš, 1980: 98). Showing the unreliability of any written word, Kiš tries to depict the fact that what is left to us as recorded history is nothing else but a denaturalization, based on battle of interests, battle for domination, and the communal memory is a constant subject to manipulation. This is illustrated skillfully in the combat between Novsky and Fedukin over each word of Novsky's confession: *"This was why he fought with unsuspected strength for every word, every phrase. For his part, Fedukin, no less resolute and cautious, made maximal demands. Through long nights the two men struggled over the difficult text of the confession, panting and exhausted, their heads bent over the pages enveloped in the thick cigarette smoke, each trying to incorporate into it some of his own passion, his own beliefs, his own outlook from a higher perspective"* (Kiš, 1980: 98). Boris Davidovich's struggle over confession represents his attempt to retain the memory of himself against the probable effacement of history, represented by Fedukin.

As it was suggested above, both Kundera's and Kiš's protagonists struggle against the erasure or manipulation of historical facts. Both Mirek and Novsky believe that reality and truth do exist, and they can be preserved in the memory, but they are distorted by the totalitarian power. In this case the opposition between memory and forgetting seems to place the 'official' history/power on the side of forgetting; meanwhile, the character's personal effort is placed next to memory. Yet, memory cannot replace history. Instead, memory, as it was mentioned in the case of history, together with autobiography and confession, and as both Kundera and Kiš illustrate, are social constructions, texts, which are at least partially invented. Novsky's confession, a written narrative, is particularly configured by the novelist not only as history, but also as story: "*Fedukin knew just as well as Novsky that all this – the entire text of the confession, formulated on ten closely typed pages – was pure fiction... He was therefore not interested in the so-called facts or characters, but in those assumptions and their logical use*" (Kiš, 1980: 98). Following the definitions presented by de Certeau, Foucault and White, Kiš foregrounds his work as text, not as truth, depicting, like Kundera, the fact that memory, history and even identity are subjects to perils of emplotment, always part of ideological discourse and oppression.

III. The Issue of Genre

The blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality employed by the two writers in their works complicates more than ever any attempt to make any genre categorization. Both *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* receive the form of a collection of individual stories consisting of certain narrative lines which, on one hand, are seemingly separate, but, on the other hand, are linked thematically within a given collection. Both writers are inclined to produce a fusion of genres, mixing autobiographical narrative, historical narrative, historio-political narrative, biography, fictional biography, and, in the case of Kundera, also anecdote, musicological reflections, and critical essay.

Milan Kundera names his own work as "*a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual stretches of a journey leading toward a theme, a thought, a single situation, the sense of which fades into the distance*" (Kundera, 1982: 165). The writer makes an analogy between his narrative and Beethoven's Opus III piano sonata, though unlike Beethoven, who begins his work by the clear enunciation of a single theme, Kundera's variations "*move towards but never articulate his single underlying statement*" (Knight, 2004: 105). *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is composed of seven parts, seven separate stories which overlap unexpectedly with other parts. The First and The Fourth parts share the same title, *Lost Letters*, and The Third and The Sixth are both entitled *The Angels*. Some characters, themes and meditations reappear throughout the novel. The outcome of such 'variations' is "*a network of themes that allows significance to be switched from one topic to another, creating the essential polysemy that defines the novel's openness*" (Knight, 2004: 105). But what mostly connects the

parts of Kundera's novel is its concern with the continuity between the erotic experience of individuals and the collective experience of the totalitarian subjects. This theme is unifying principle in the novel's structure. Maintaining the polyphony of themes of light and darkness, personal and public voices, Kundera takes full advantage of the 'journey' of his novel through yet "another space and another direction", into "the infinity of internal variety concealed in all things" (Kundera, 1982: 164).

Milan Kundera employs a blend of different genres within his narrative, incorporating also their implicit modes of discourse. By mixing together his personal confession, fictional history of his characters with philosophical meditation, essay and historical commentary, Kundera tries to mark the discrepancy of the structural and the thematic principle of the novel. "The overall effect of this counterpoint is to dispel the intensity of any single or single-voiced, narration. By disrupting the seamless effect of narration, Kundera wakens his readers from the "spell" cast by art and confronts them with the burden of history" (Pifer, 1992:89). In order to evade from the effect of "spell", Kundera avoids any possible escape into 'lyricism' out of his novel. The writer tries to draw the distinction between the lyrical poetry, which is subjective, emotional, without any obligation to prove anything (except the intensity of emotion itself), and the novel. The latter must assume "the burden of history" and that of "proof". Such difference made by Kundera explains his insistence on blurring the generic boundaries and his desire to insert into it reflection, speculation and argument. Creating a self-reflexive narrative, Milan Kundera rejects the presence of the traditional omniscient narrator, since any form of omniscience is totalitarian and thus ideologically loaded. Instead, Kundera, via his narrator, constantly reminds his readers that the author is no prophet or foreseer, but just another limited voice, with its own constraints and inadequacies. The liberties Kundera assumes while using a fusion of genres suggest a political message, containing the individual assertion for freedom both in art and life. As it was aptly pointed out by Hans Bertens, Milan Kundera is "certainly not the first writer to define the novel as a genre that resists all dogmatisms, teleologies and totalities, that feels comfortable in a world of conflicting truths, that always begins its existence anew where the crisis of the world appears" (Bertens, 1997: 420-21).

Danilo Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* is also composed of seven different stories, the work being subtitled *Seven Chapters of a Linked Tale*. Apparently these tales are not related, since each of them has a different title, and different characters coming from Russia, Poland, Romania or Hungary. Even the historical period when the action unfolds differs from one story to another. But, as we have seen in the case of Kundera's novel, it is just another 'variation' on the same theme, all the characters being presented as victims ensnared in the same web of a totalitarian conspiracy. The main characters of each story have the impression that they understand the world they live in; however, ironically, they turn out to be destroyed by the same world they have praised and claimed to understand. At the same time, a careful reading of the text will reveal that the paths of the characters overlap at certain moments in the narrative. These connections are not made evidently, rather Kiš requires an active participation from the reader in the process of reading,

because the connections are very subtle, appearing sometimes in the footnotes, sometimes in seemingly unimportant narrative details. From one perspective these connections give the reader the feeling that everything is interrelated. From another, they help the reader to drop the passivity in the act of reading and give the possibility to involve himself/herself into this process by becoming inquisitive and reflecting upon everything written. What should not be omitted with regards to the recurrences of characters or events throughout the collection of stories is the single comprehensive vision of cyclical time as configured in antiquity and assumed by Kiš in his work. Cyclical time is especially understood as a circular process which recycles each of its stages incessantly in the predetermined order. The end of such a pre-established cycle signifies a new beginning, which repeats the previous cycle in every aspect. However, Kiš attempts to depart from the recurrence of identical events of the concept of cyclical time, instead proposing analogy and similarity. In Kiš's view, each drop of time has its own history and it is enough to observe the one in order to be able to evaluate all the others. By presenting one occurrence in his concise story Kiš makes clear the entire trajectory of history he proposes to recount.

Kiš considers his work to be a novel, since one common theme is the organizing principle of the narrative. Peter Esterhazy, who imitated Kiš's form and style in his works, calls it "*genre-less Danilo writing*", which was prompted by the latter's "*generic disorientations*": the mixture of biography and fictional biography, fictional autobiography, and faction (a fusion of fact and fiction). This combination of genres brings, according to Guido Snel, the creation of a "*hybrid genre*" so characteristic to authors of East-Central Europe who shared a similar experience, "*not only from a narratological and genre point of view, but also because they represent figures on the margins of history: exiles and inner-exiles, forgotten or persecuted under twentieth-century nationalism and Communism*" (Snel, 2004: 388).

The uniqueness of fiction includes also a historical dimension. And Kiš's narrative voice (much indebted to Borges) is "*highly self-conscious and pseudo-historical*" (Watchel, 2006: 137). His narrator speaks from the perspective of an investigator who has accumulated a great amount of information and facts about the persons he is portraying. He reminds us more of a historian who relates the given facts to some events rather than of a speaker from a novel. The aim is to create an illusion of authority and of 'truthfulness' of the historian narrator, illusion strengthened by the references in the text and in footnotes to books, documents, encyclopedias, most of them of course being invented. Reminding of the 'accuracy' of a historical narrator, Kiš's narrative voice avoids telling the reader the unknown facts and evades from psychologizing. As Andrew Watchel observed, "*this narrative trick gives his prose a somehow flat, cinematographic feel, though this is leavened by the narrator's meta-textual commentary, which also serves to prevent the reader from forgetting that the narrative has been carefully constructed by the historian*" (Watchel, 2006: 137).

A Tomb for Boris Davidovich challenges the traditional concept of the author as an omniscient authority, at the same time demanding a more active and critical attitude of

the reader. Kiš, like many writers of his time, invoke estrangement and participation from the reader, to reflect even upon most 'credible' documented sources and to draw his own conclusions in any situation. This blurring of boundaries encourages the reader to go into a dialogue with the text, dynamically participating in the creation of meaning. The fact that Kiš's narrative voice, although apparently omniscient, accepts the limitations of his knowledge and draws the reader's attention toward the missing 'gaps' in the narrated history, shows that he is not so omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient and, gradually, he has lost his powerful position to create a reality. Such a decentered idea of authorship is of course antiauthoritarian, and it appears unsurprisingly especially in the works of the writers who have lived under a totalitarian system and have tended, in their writings, to avoid any form of totalitarianism.

IV. The Place and Role of Humor

Danilo Kiš, much like Milan Kundera, creates a sense of irony of history, each of the authors employing a characteristic humor, sometimes whimsical, acerbic and playful, sometimes absolutely at odds with the brutality of the protagonists' lives. The works of the two writers reveal a very complex humor, alternating from black to thoughtful, from biting to sentimental, thus exposing the human experiences of grief, pain, anguish at facing death, living in a totalitarian society or being an exile of such a world. This pain of existence has been frequently illustrated in East-Central European fiction and it has had a tremendous impact upon the form of humor practiced by writers of this background, becoming gradually more sardonic, sarcastic and desperate. Nevertheless, this unusual form of humor, "*born from pain to grant the relief from pain, mimics the paradoxical relation of humans and human under duress, enemies and allies at once*" (Pinker, 1994: 189). In the fiction of Kiš humor grows unexpectedly out of elements of dreadfulness and brutality, the author interweaving shocking experiences with mockery, cruel parody and exaggerations. The reader of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* seems unlikely disposed to smile while reading, since in the course of the stories there is a succession of brutality, betrayal, suspicion, denunciation and manipulation that lead the character inevitably to his fall. The bitter humor arises when the characters from the stories, who have contributed to the construction of the totalitarian system they claim to know, are destroyed by this system, by their former 'colleagues'. Kiš's ludicrous mockery becomes visible when these protagonists before their death come to understand the world they live in and acknowledge that "*no matter how well-disciplined or politically correct one's acts according to the fleeting order of the day, the only recourse was to attain an honorable failure*" (Pinker, 1994: 190). In a world where nothing is certain except uncertainty and inevitability of death, Danilo Kiš recommends humor as a possible counterbalance to dishonor.

Milan Kundera employs humor in a gentler, softer manner than Kiš, but the result is the same: bitterness and brutality of truth, while depicting the insistently frustrating devastation of a bleak quotidian or the relativity of all ideological constructs. His novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, is both ironically humorous and tragic. His protagonists

with a sense of humor take pleasure in the ironic joy of life, but they constantly must face the social and political humorlessness present in the systems that are certain about their truths and are annoyed by any form of irony. Kundera's characters are not jeopardized by a definite existential problem but by people and institutions lacking sense of humor.

Humor and laughter are important thematic concerns in world literature, including in Milan Kundera's works. Their frequent use might be explained by the fact that humor and laughter represent efficient ways of resisting oppressive methods of behavior and ways of thinking, in particular those imposed by institutions of power. Such qualities of humor and laughter could not be denied, especially because they have the role of annihilating or ameliorating the consequences of different kinds of belief. But we should not ignore that humor and laughter often disclose and divulge some hidden and frequently painful struggle between freedom and belief, struggle viewed by Kundera as the typical condition of the modern Western mind. This is to say that humor and laughter do not simply represent a remedy against someone's enforced ethics or social order, but they also are the manifestation of the mind's effort to comprehend itself and the world in a situation when the crucial beliefs about how life should be become distorted. In the case of Kundera's characters, who could be neither free nor completely defined by beliefs (whether imposed or their own), humor and laughter prove incapable to solve their dilemmas. Instead, they represent circumstances under which Kundera's protagonists can investigate and try to discover freedom and, together with it, the anguish they have in common.

As the title of Kundera's book implies, laughter becomes one of the primary concerns of the novelist. Part Three of the novel, entitled *The Angels*, includes a digression on the two kinds of laughter: angelic and devilish. This digression gives an insight into "*the most basic human situation: serious laughter, laughter beyond joking*", which represents the image of "*all churches, all underwear manufacturers, all generals, all political parties* (Kundera, 1982: 58). The writer points out that the laughter originated in "the devil's domain": "*World domination, as everyone knows, is divided between demons and angels. But the good of the world does not require the latter to gain precedence over the former (as I thought when I was young); all it needs is a certain equilibrium of power. If there is too much uncontested meaning on earth (the reign of angels), man collapses under the burden; if the world loses its meaning (the reign of demons), life is every bit as impossible*" (Kundera, 1982: 61). Demon's laughter, according to Kundera, is prior to angel's laughter, as a response to the fact that "*things deprived suddenly of their putative meaning*". The angel's laughter was a reply to the demoniac laughter, which proved to be extremely contagious, and spread immediately. "*Whereas the Devil's laughter pointed up the meaninglessness of things, the angel's shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well conceived, beautiful, good, and sensible everything on earth was*" (Kundera, 1982: 62). When Kundera's angel hears the devil's absurd laughter, a disturbance of equilibrium takes place, thus giving birth to a fanaticism or a utopian dream, which will lead inevitably to a form of totalitarianism. The "*laughable laughter*" of the angel utopist is a response to

the demonic laughter and, according to Kundera it involves a semantic ambiguity which might lead to disastrous consequences: “*Laughable laughter is cataclysmic. And even so, the angels have gained something by it. They have tricked us all with their semantic hoax. Their imitation laughter and its original (the devil’s) have the same name. People nowadays do not even realize that one and the same external phenomenon embraces two completely contradictory internal attitudes. There are two kinds of laughter, and we lack the words to distinguish them*” (Kundera, 1982: 62).

The semantic indistinctiveness Kundera describes here is an example of how the same phenomenon, a utopian dream of equality, love of humankind and love for truth gradually has become perverted by its fanatics into their opposite: cruelty towards humans, denunciation, and so on. This semantic ambiguity causes a moral confusion generated by the angel fanatics of the Stalinism with its potential for cruelty and laughter. One of the most horrible episodes in the novel depicts an adult woman imprisoned on an island of children who only play games, laugh and enjoy their existence. For the woman this occurrence is infernal; for children it is delight. The experience on the island, devoid of past and any social laws except obedience, represents a dreadful side of joy, with its implied semantic uncertainty. Kundera presents the future of the society as one absolutely childlike due to its egocentrism, insistence on submission and conformity, and demand for cheerfulness. Laughter, as we can see, can be misinterpreted and even turned against itself by the misuse of historical or political purpose. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* opposes absolute conviction not with the skeptical laughter of devils, but with humor, with a metaphorical invitation for reflection, with irony and with authentic but not ideological mirth.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that both Danilo Kiš and Milan Kundera illustrate in their hybrid narratives of fact and fiction, of memory and forgetting the fact that memory cannot be used as a shield against master narrative of history, since memory itself generates history and it can be imposed or influenced by authority or ideology. Although the characters Mirek and Boris Davidovich cling to their past which, at least to a degree, represent their own construction, the two novelists admit the impossibility of accessing the truth by the help of memory. Memory is not permanent and indestructible, but rather, it is just a mere sequence of selections and erasures dictated by sociopolitical motives. Even though the two writers use different styles of writing, both of them illustrate the same distaste for univocal meaning and they both show that the belief in one single truth may have disastrous consequences upon generations of people.

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