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KIŠ'S *VIGILANCE*: ETHICS AS AESTHETICS IN THE PROSE OF  
DANILO KIŠ

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of Westminster  
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This thesis offers a reading of the late Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš by looking at how a particular tradition of European aesthetics and ethical philosophy (namely Levinas and Blanchot) can be compared to Danilo Kiš's poetics. Beyond critically evaluating Kiš, I am to make connections between ethics, literature and philosophy. The major objective of my thesis is to argue that ethical is embedded as aesthetical in Kiš's poetics as both Blanchotian and Levinasian understanding of ethics, i.e. as a non-dialectical and non-intentional movement from 'I' to the 'other' in the midst of passivity of dying (which is for both Blanchot and Levinas 'other' death). The thesis demonstrates that there are a number of strands in Levinas's and Blanchot's thought that, while differently expressed, can also be traced at work in Kiš's writing, and which can, as such, help to elucidate certain crucial aspects of the latter.

Taking into consideration Kiš's obsessive writing on the violence of the last century – both left and right – I argue that what permeates his prose is death as both possibility and a radical impossibility consequent upon the *il y a*, a crucial philosophical concept in Levinas's ethical philosophy and Blanchot's literary 'theory'. For this reason, the thesis aims to assert that what permeates Kiš's prose is what Critchley terms 'atheist transcendence': the burden of responsibility for the death of the other human radically excludes theodicy.

My research is significant in so far as conceptualisations of death to be found in continental European philosophy have hardly been directly juxtaposed with those found in Kiš's prose. Since according to Blanchot, literature's demand is always ambiguous and as such it exposes us to the question of being, in my thesis I analyse how this refusal of language to cease the tension of pluralism operates in Kiš's prose as the ethical.

We call ethical a relationship between terms such as are untied neither by a synthesis of the understanding nor by a relationship between subject or object, and yet where the one weighs or concerns or is meaningful to the other, where they are bound by a plot which knowing can neither exhaust nor unravel – Levinas

But I say: beware of writers who don't know what they've written and why – Kiš

My books are, in a certain way, cenotaphs, empty tombs created in memory of them [E.S. and Novsky] – Kiš

[The human relation], as it affirms itself in its primacy, is terrible. Most terrible, but without terror. It is most terrible because it is tempered by no intermediary. For in this view there is between man and man neither god, nor value, nor nature. It is a naked relation, without myth, devoid of religion, free of sentiment, bereft of justification, and giving rise neither to pleasure nor to knowledge: a neutral relation, or the very neutrality of relation. Can this really be asserted? – Blanchot

I am extremely grateful to my supervisor Dr. David Cunningham for his invaluable advice, time and selfless dedication to this thesis. His encouragement kept the project going even when at times it felt almost impossible to complete.

To my nephew, Lennox who, like any child, is the insatiable source of all creative thinking – “Als das Kind Kind war, ging es mit hängenden Armen”.

To Dennis, for your friendship and “a house of music for our bright affection” – from Rimbaud to Mark E. Smith.

This thesis is dedicated to my mother Milanka for her unconditional love that humbles me every day – “with such knowledge, *the waging of dying is love*”.

I, Marijana Nedeljkovic, declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work. Any information that has derived from other sources has been acknowledged in the thesis.



# Kiš's Vigilance: Ethics as Aesthetics in the Prose of Danilo Kiš

## Introduction

*My literary work within the realm of belles lettres is a clearly construed attitude [approach] and escape, because I believe in the primordial aspects of art as such and literature as such. Because I believe that art, that literature, is not only a realm of aesthetics but also a realm of ethics. And thus, the so-called pure art, which is today mentioned only pejoratively, is also a form of engagement; it is not only a school of aesthetics but also a school of ethics.*<sup>1</sup> – Danilo Kiš

Danilo Kiš is one of the most important European writers of the second half of the twentieth century. A survivor of fascism, his prose often deals with the relation between an oppressed individual or outsider and totalitarian mechanisms of power. In Kiš's literature, I will argue, history is a collection of repetitive slaughterhouses (or, as he once claimed, 'terrifying Pascalian spaces') in which the power invested in an ideology (whether political or religious) must ultimately destroy the singular lives of individuals in order to achieve its own goals;<sup>2</sup> a destruction that the literary work *must* both reflect and resist in simultaneously aesthetic and ethical form.

Kiš was born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1935 in Subotica, a Yugoslav-Hungarian border town, to a Hungarian Jewish father and Montenegrin Orthodox Christian mother. During World War Two, he lost his father and several other family members in Auschwitz. In 1942, he survived the massacre of Jews and Serbs in Novi Sad that was carried out by Hungarian fascists only by virtue of the fact that he was baptised in the town's Orthodox Christian church. He spent his early childhood in Hungary and, after the war ended, moved to Montenegro with his mother and sister. He

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<sup>1</sup> My translation. From an interview 'Moć i Nemoć Angažovanosti' [Power and Powerlessness of Engagement], in Kiš, Danilo, *Po-etika, knjiga druga* (1974), glavni i odgovorni urednik Milutin Stanislavac, Konferencija Saveza studenata Jugoslavije (Mala edicija ideje), Beograd, pp. 31-2. In Serbian: 'Moje književno stvaralaštvo u okviru i u zagrljaju Beletre jeste jasno koncipiran stav i bekstvo, jer verujem u primordijalne kvalifikative umetnosti kao takve, književnosti kao takve, jer verujem da umetnost, da književnost, jeste etičko, a ne samo estetičko opredeljenje i da je tzv. danas u pejorativnom smislu pominjana, čista umetnost takođe svojevrsan angažman, to je ne samo škola estetike, nego i škola etike.'

<sup>2</sup> See Kiš's 1980 speech 'Između Nade i Beznađa', [Between Hope and Hopelessness] for the Grand Aigle d'Or award from Nice. In Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.142-145. Translation into English by Paul Milan Foster can be read here: <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Three+essays.-a015074220>. Last visited September 8, 2016.

studied comparative literature in Belgrade and was the first student to graduate from the Department of Comparative Literature (which was back then newly formed). After leaving university, he wrote both fictional and non-fictional works, including plays, essays and literary-theoretical writings, and was also responsible for the translations of many important works from French, Hungarian and Russian into Serbo-Croat language. Amongst French authors Kiš, for instance, translated both *Exercices de style* (1947) and *Zazie dans le métro* (1959) by Raymond Queneau. Together with his then wife Mirjana Miočinović, he also translated Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* in 1963, as well as, from Hungarian, Endre Ady's and Attila Józseph's poetry and, from Russian, the poems of Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva.<sup>3</sup>

In 1962 Kiš published his first two novels, *Mansarda* [*The Attic*] and *Psalam 44* [*Psalms 44*]. These books were followed by the autobiographical trilogy: *Bašta, pepeo* [*Garden, ashes*] (1965), *Rani Jadi* [*Early Sorrows*] (1969) and *Peščanik* [*Hourglass*] (1972). Also in 1972 he published the collection of essays *Po-etika*, followed by *Po-etika, knjiga druga* (1974), a collection of his interviews. Kiš received the prestigious NIN award for his novel *Peščanik* [*Hourglass*] in 1973, which he returned a few years later as a result of the (unjustified) accusations of plagiarism that he received in Yugoslavia following the publication of his book *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča* [*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*] (1976). As a result of these accusations, he published *Čas Anatomije* [*The Anatomy Lesson*] (1978), a polemical book that, in turn, sought to re-evaluate the foundations of the Yugoslav literary-critical scene. He worked as a lecturer in Serbo-Croat language and literature at several universities in France from the seventies on, and also received a highly acclaimed French prize *The Knight of Arts and Bruno Schultz*. In 1983, three other books were published: a drama *Noć i Magla* [*Night and Fog*], *Homo Poeticus*, another collection of his essays and interviews, and his very last prose work, *Enciklopedija Mrtvih* [*The Encyclopaedia of the Dead*] (1983). During the last ten years of his life he lived between Paris and Belgrade. Kiš died in Paris, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October, 1989 at the age of fifty four and was buried in Belgrade.

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<sup>3</sup> The full list of Kiš's translations can be found at: <http://www.danilokis.org/prev-fr.htm>. Last visited 9 August 2016.

Kiš was not by any means a prolific writer, and his career was cut short by his untimely death. Nonetheless, the significance of Kiš's contribution to post-war literature has been consistently acknowledged, not only in his own country Yugoslavia (as it was called before its disintegration) but also worldwide. Susan Sontag, who was partly responsible for introducing Kiš to an Anglophone audience through her editing of *Homo Poeticus* (1995) - a translated collection of some of Kiš's essays and interviews – asserts, for example, that Kiš's prose 'preserves the honour of literature',<sup>4</sup> while, for Milan Kundera, Kiš remains both 'great and invisible', as well as one of a few modern writers who never betrayed literature for the sake of politics and ideology.<sup>5</sup> The recent publication of his biography - the first one in English - *Birth Certificate (The Story of Danilo Kiš)* (2013) by Mark Thompson, attests, too, to an abiding, if quiet interest in this writer's work. And yet, as Kundera implies, while Kiš's books are certainly still read and studied, particularly in Serbia and other former Yugoslav republics, and his works have been translated into over thirty languages (most recently into Korean, Thai and Persian), as far as Kiš's 'global existence' is concerned, as Adam Thirwell notes, Kiš can appear today a largely forgotten writer, at least so far as academic work is concerned.<sup>6</sup>

To begin to understand Kiš's poetics and his marginal position in (especially Anglophone) literary culture, what must first be considered is the distinctive character of his response to the radical violence of the twentieth century. Although many have written on the Holocaust, there are few works that approach this subject with the same delicate 'grace of form'<sup>7</sup> (as Kiš himself termed it) and singular style which is evident in both Kiš's *Garden, ashes* (1965) and *Hourglass* (1972). For the likes of Kundera and Joseph Brodsky - who considered *Garden, ashes*, in particular, 'a veritable gem of lyrical prose, the best book produced on the Continent in the post-war period' – it is in such novels that Kiš uniquely, among writers on the

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<sup>4</sup> *Homo Poeticus: essays and Interviews* (1995), edited and with an introduction by Susan Sontag, translations: Ralph Manheim, Michael Henry Heim, Francis Jones; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> See Kundera's article in *Le Monde* (October 1999). The text is translated into Serbian and can be read here: <http://pescanik.net/jedan-veliki-i-nevidljivi-pisac/>. See also: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/books/review/Simon-t.html?pagewanted=all& r=1>. Last visited: July 2016.

<sup>6</sup> As Thirwell puts it, this fact is a 'scandal', both 'morally and aesthetically'. See Adam Thirwell's review of Mark Thompson's biography of Kiš 'Why We Need Danilo Kiš', October 2013. The review can be read here: <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/why-we-need-danilo-kis/>. Last visited: 17 September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> In Serbian: 'do milosti uobličenja'.

Holocaust, transfigured this historical tragedy into works of poetry.<sup>8</sup> This, however, does not mean that such works are to be judged only as aesthetic achievements. On the contrary: it is precisely in those moments when the tangible beauty of such works is felt most strongly that, arguably, their profoundly ethical power is also most clearly revealed. Indeed, as we will see, for Kiš, more generally, the relationship between aesthetics and ethics is too intimate ever to be severed in literary discourse, even as their 'different' aspects are preserved and respected in his prose. As he puts it in the citation with which I opened this thesis:

I believe that art, that literature, is not only a realm of aesthetics but also a realm of ethics. And thus, the so-called pure art, which is today mentioned only pejoratively, is also a form of engagement; it is not only a school of aesthetics but also a school of ethics.<sup>9</sup>

The aim of this thesis is thus to examine what I describe as the ethical form of the aesthetic in Kiš's prose. It does this, first of all, by looking at a particular tradition of European philosophy - mainly that of Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas, whose works were similarly informed by a response to twentieth-century violence and by a question of how to write 'after Auschwitz' - and by comparing it to Kiš's own poetics. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate that Kiš's underlying ethical, aesthetical and philosophical concerns are rather closer to both Levinas and Blanchot than to, for instance, Sartre or Borges (with whom he is frequently compared). A major concern of this thesis is, in this way, to demonstrate that there is a crucial conception of *ethics as aesthetics* at the core of Kiš's poetics, or, to put it another way, that, for Kiš, the ethical is inseparable from an aesthetic understanding of literary space. This is because, I argue, for Kiš, the question of (literary) language is - as it was for both Blanchot and Levinas - closely related, above all, to the experience of the death of the other human being, understood in terms of an exposure to a radical otherness beyond the self, as well as beyond

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<sup>8</sup> See Brodsky's Introduction to Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* in Kiš, Danilo, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (2001), introduction Joseph Brodsky, afterward William T. Vollmann, translation Duška Mikić-Mitchell, Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois, xii.

<sup>9</sup> My translation. In Serbian: 'Moje književno stvaralaštvo u okviru i u zagrljaju Beletre jeste jasno koncipiran stav i bekstvo, jer verujem u primordijalne kvalifikative umetnosti kao takve, književnosti kao takve, jer verujem da umetnost, da književnost, jeste etičko, a ne samo estetičko opredeljenje i da je tzv. danas u pejorativnom smislu pominjana, čista umetnost takođe svojevrsan angažman, to je ne samo škola estetike, nego i škola etike.' In Kiš, Danilo, *Po-etika*, knjiga druga (1974), Konferencija Saveza studenata Jugoslavije (Mala edicija ideje), Beograd, pp. 31-2.

literature's necessary desire to 'encompass as much as possible of the totality of the world and its phenomena, and [to] avoid the banality of the common, philistine point of view.'<sup>10</sup> And, indeed, although the 'theme' of death has always been one of literature's major preoccupations, there are few modern writers who engage with death quite so obsessively as Kiš does.

My central claim, then, is that there are a number of strands in Levinas's and Blanchot's thought that, while differently expressed, can also be traced at work in Kiš's writing, and its obsessive relation to dying, and which can, as such, help to elucidate certain crucial aspects of the latter. Regarding Levinas's philosophy, these include, as I will show: a revival of the primacy of the concern for the Other, and his critique of ontology as that which subordinates ethics; the refusal to give in to nihilism and an insistence on addressing it; the notion of a subjectivity whose 'structure' can be found not in consciousness but in sensibility as vulnerability and suffering; the *impossibility* of death and an idea of infinite dying; a notion of freedom that challenges the ego's his or her right 'to be'; and the question of language understood as a realm of ethical relation. With regard to Blanchot's thought, equally important are: the work of the *neuter* that maintains the relation with the other as a relation of radical strangeness or otherness; the idea of the 'two slopes of literature'; writing as exile; and the notion of infinite dying as constituting the only true 'community'.<sup>11</sup> Above all, I argue in what follows, it is the simultaneously ethical and aesthetic consequences of the relation between the catastrophic repetition of history and an individual subject's loss of self in the midst of chaos that is most tangibly felt in Kiš's work, particularly when read alongside that of Levinas and Blanchot. In my reading of Kiš's *oeuvre*, the 'aesthetics' of his prose thus expose the reader to the catastrophic events and trauma of twentieth-century history, but in the form of a radically 'non-linear' narration, as *an other* side of history, which has a profoundly 'ethical' significance in itself. In particular, Kiš's distinctive use of defamiliarisation and alienating forms opens up a relation to history, and to an ethical question of having to do justice for the victims of totalitarianism, in such a way that the 'hidden' centre of each work's narration – that is, the massive violence of totalitarianism itself,

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<sup>10</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.195.

<sup>11</sup> My analysis draws upon both early and late works of Levinas and Blanchot: for instance, *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974); and *The Writing of the Disaster* (1986), *The Infinite Conversation* (1969) and *The Instant of My Death* (1994), respectively.

as manifested in the Shoah or the Gulag - is rendered as always beyond the grasp of any art or writing *tout court*.

### **1. Kiš's Poetics: *Homo Poeticus*, *Regardless***

2016 marks the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976), a collection of short, thematically-connected stories about Stalin's purges. Considering that it was this particular publication that more than any other contributed to the indelible mark left by Kiš on European literature - not only, positively, in terms of the international recognition that it brought him, but also, negatively, by virtue of the accusations of plagiarism made by some critics in Yugoslavia with regard to it, which I discuss more fully below - it is perhaps worth beginning this introduction by considering certain aspects of *A Tomb* that may shed some light on Kiš's poetics in more general terms.

A productive starting point is provided in this respect by Aleksandar Hemon, a Bosnian-American writer, who has claimed that what is most crucial to Kiš's overall work, and, consequently, even to his 'politics', is 'the absolute value of the individual' that is affirmed within them.<sup>12</sup> As Hemon goes on to argue:

History as the sum of human destinies or the totality of ephemeral events is a different concept from national history or the history of nations, including nationalist history. As soon as an individual life is organised on the basis of ethno-national historical hierarchies, that life is swallowed up by nationalist ideology. And the ideology of nationalism, like the ideology of communism, is a story about a collective, never about an individual. The collision between Kiš's poetics or politics and the dominant concept of history in this part of the world is perfectly clear.<sup>13</sup>

Writing, then, for Kiš, is a distinctive kind of democratic space, as Hemon presents it: the only realm wherein the irreducible singularity of an individual life is truly acknowledged in the midst of the historical barbarities of the twentieth century. His prose opens, for the reader, in this way, a literary space that points *beyond* the 'collective' stories of both nationalist or communist ideology and sectarian identity politics. Indeed, in its literary forms, identity politics in its nationalist or culturalist

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<sup>12</sup> 'Introduction: Danilo Kiš and pocket-sized novels' in Kiš, Danilo, *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (2015), introduction Mark Thompson, Penguin Classics, UK, xvii.

<sup>13</sup> 'Introduction: Danilo Kiš and pocket-sized novels' in Kiš, Danilo, *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (2015), introduction Mark Thompson, Penguin Classics, UK, xvii-xviii.

senses is *always* another form of ghetto-ism, according to Kiš. As he puts it in his 1986 interview 'Life, Literature' with Gabi Gleichmann:

Literature uses the specific, of course, to get at the general, but without literary transposition every specific, biographical detail, everything that sets you apart from others, everything that's private to the nth degree, the distinguishing features on your identity card, seems like a facial growth or a physical defect. Literature feeds on the specific, the individual, and is at pains to integrate it – short of losing track of it – into the general. That's why I so oppose reducing a work of literature to a life and object to literary biography that overemphasises the particular and fails to integrate the subject's 'distinguishing features' into human destiny as a whole; that's why I reject all 'minority' literature and literary ghettos. When feminism, homosexuality, or Judaism takes over, it turns into a form of reductionism. Any ideological reductionism is the worst of all.<sup>14</sup>

Kiš, then, resists any overemphasis upon the 'particular', which would fail to integrate specific forms of identity into the narration of 'human destiny as a whole'. In addition, akin to Levinas, any totalising tendency that would reduce the singular for the sake of ideology Kiš considers to be an identity of the *same*: all forms of 'reductionist' ideology, whether political, religious or cultural, de facto entail a form of social violence.

One consequence of this is, as Tatjana Jukić rightly observes, regarding, for instance, his story 'The Book of Kings and Fools' from *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1989), that Kiš 'aggressively asserts a thesis that there are no fundamental differences between Nazism and Stalinism, nor does he make a distinction between Stalinism and the October Revolution. In other words, Kiš in this instance not only aims to totalise different totalitarianisms into some kind of homogenised totalitarianism in the singular, but, in addition, he wants to extend such a totalitarianism to the level of revolution itself.'<sup>15</sup> If this is one of the more controversial

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<sup>14</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, pp.232-3.

<sup>15</sup> My translation. In Croatian: 'Time u stvari agresivno postavlja tezu da nema fundamentalne razlike između nacizma i staljinizma, niti pravi razliku između staljinizma i Oktobarske revolucije. Drugim riječima, Kiš ovdje ne samo što teži totalizirati različite totalitarizme u nekakav homogeni totalitarizam u jedini, nego takav totalitarizam pokušava protegnuti i na događaj revolucije.' In 'Plus d'un: Narrative Collectives in Danilo Kiš', p.104. This text can be read here:

[http://www.academia.edu/1755313/Plus\\_dun\\_narativni\\_kolektivi\\_Danila\\_Ki%C5%A1a\\_Plus\\_d\\_un\\_Narrative\\_Collectives\\_in\\_Danilo\\_Ki%C5%A1](http://www.academia.edu/1755313/Plus_dun_narativni_kolektivi_Danila_Ki%C5%A1a_Plus_d_un_Narrative_Collectives_in_Danilo_Ki%C5%A1)

aspects of Kiš's politics, for obvious reasons, it must nonetheless also be acknowledged that it is from this 'aggressive' thesis that there emerges, in his work, a uniquely radical defence of a poetics of the singular, in which literary writing seeks to reinforce, always anew, a scepticism with regard to all totalizing claims made in the name of history, political power, democracy, modernity, or forms of cultural or national identity. In 'The Magic Card Dealing' - arguably one of the most powerful and poetically charged stories from the *A Tomb* collection - the protagonist Dr. Taube, for example, warns 'the world of the danger': "A phantom stalks through Europe, the phantom of fascism".<sup>16</sup> The echo here of Marx's slogan from *The Communist Manifesto* 'a spectre is haunting Europe - a spectre of communism', is by no means accidental. Indeed, Kiš consciously asserts an *equation* between fascism and communism at this point, in so far as it is the same Dr Taube, a survivor of fascism, who ends up dying as a victim of Stalin's purges in Kiš's story.

There are several other examples where Kiš's stories tend to identify religious and political ideology as being, in effect, always the same form of (false) messianism, resulting in always repeated violence against the individual and the other. The story 'The Encyclopaedia of the Dead' in the last collection, for instance, focuses on the biography of a Yugoslav man, set against the backdrop of a nationalist and communist history of that (now disintegrated) country. In this way, an individual's life is taken from the abstract context of a nation and acknowledged in its singularity in the story. At the same time, since this story revolves around detailing all the ephemeral things that made up this singular life, by the 'compilers' of a *total* book of the dead, the story is also effective as a critique of a positivism/scientism that reduces everything for the sake of a complete knowledge. Thus, the story 'The Encyclopaedia of the Dead' is exemplary of what will be posited throughout this thesis as the main poetic impetus of Kiš's prose: on the one hand, a recognition of the desire apparent in each literary text for some absolute consciousness or representation of the totality of the world, and yet, simultaneously and inseparably, Kiš's *conscious destruction* of such an ideal, that is, his affirmation of the impossibility of any such totality, on the other. It is the latter, as a kind of quasi-dialectical counter-movement to the ideal of totality, which, I will argue, provides the

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<sup>16</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (2001), introduction Joseph Brodsky, afterward William T. Vollmann, translation Duška Mikić-Mitchell, Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois, p.58.



primary ethical basis for his aesthetics as such. For it is precisely through this representation of the *impossibility* of a complete knowledge of the world, or the other human being, that Kiš addresses not only the need for a post-Auschwitz poetics - in so far as he works to preserve the human as radically other in his texts – but also the problem of nihilism itself. In so doing, Kiš re-inscribes, in a literary form, both our freedom in the world but also the burden of responsibility that accompanies it.

In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that Kiš's last project before his untimely passing in October 1989 should have been a documentary series, *Goli Život (Bare Life)*,<sup>17</sup> which focused on the lives of two Serbian-Jewish women, who were the survivors of anti-Semitism in *both* its fascist and Yugoslav communist forms.<sup>18</sup> Interviewed by Kiš in Israel in March 1989, the singular lives of Jovanka Ženi Lebl (Jenny Loeb) (1927-2009) and Eva Panić Nahir (1918-2015), are presented as strong evidence for Kiš's uncompromising belief that the power of *any* ideology over an individual always resorts to the same violence. In his 2013 biography, Mark Thompson acknowledges that Kiš was 'consistent in his anti-nationalism, as also in his anti-communism',<sup>19</sup> and, in the same paragraph, quotes a Hungarian writer from Vojvodina, Oto Tolnai, regarding Kiš's rejection of both left and right ideologies: 'Danilo was practically the only Serbian writer who held back equally from leftist ideology, Marxists, Bolsheviks, and from rightists, nationalists.'<sup>20</sup> If the contemporary reader of Kiš's prose texts may then be, as it were, 'perplexed' (in John K. Cox's words) by his incorporation of both left-wing and right-wing forms of totalitarianism into one single *homogenised* entity, as Jukić describes it, these two women are, for Kiš, the very embodiment of the thesis that such politically divergent forms may nonetheless manifest essentially the *same* violence against the singularity of the other.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as Cox rightly notes: 'This boldly dissident-like

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<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3034808/>. Up until recently the series was available on YouTube.

<sup>18</sup> Another term for Yugoslav communism is, of course, Titoism. Following Tito's break from Stalin's influence in 1948, many who were considered an enemy of the official regime were taken to *Goli otok*, a barren island located on the Croatian coast of the Adriatic Sea. It was used as a labour camp for both political and non-political prisoners, both men and women. The camp was closed in 1989. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goli\\_otok](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goli_otok)

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, Mark, *Birth Certificate: The Story of Danilo Kiš* (2013), Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, p.170.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, Mark, *Birth Certificate: The Story of Danilo Kiš* (2013), p.171.

<sup>21</sup> In addition, I would argue that any suggestion that Kiš exhibits a kind of 'male monism', as one recent reviewer in English suggests, demonstrates a lack of understanding of the very genesis of Kiš's poetics. In fact, the feminine is emphasised as the source of creation, wisdom and knowledge throughout Kiš's work; this is

assertion was rooted in ethical, emotional and artistic truth, in the *lived* experience of individuals, and not in comparative analysis of political programmes or in a methodical historical dissection of origins, convergences and mutual repulsions' in Kiš's literary work.<sup>22</sup>

As a historian and a translator of Kiš's work into English, Cox eloquently elaborates, in his 2012 essay, upon the complex and often overlapping political scenes of late Yugoslavian history during which Kiš lived and worked:

Kiš's rejection of censorship, political violence, and gnostic political ideologies, along with his insistent evocation of an asynchronous, epistemologically challenged, death- and history-soaked world by means of a non-linear form of narration, kept many communist critics at arm's length. On the other hand, his rejection of ethnic criteria as determinants of nationalism; his condemnation of subculture or niche designations based on ascribed, essentialist identities for writers and readers; his propensity for innovative, even revolutionary forms that undermine all stable narratives, such as nationalism certainly aspires to be; and his emphatic metaphorical use of the image of Jew as outsider made nationalist critics wary.<sup>23</sup>

Cox's concise and accurate description of Kiš's prose contains several points that I wish to focus upon here since they are crucial in placing Kiš's poetics alongside the writings of both Levinas and Blanchot in this thesis. Most importantly, Kiš's insistence on the judgment of history and violence in relation to the apparent powerlessness of the individual is achieved or experienced in his prose by way of what might be called a *diachrony* of time - or, in Cox's terms, an 'asynchronous',

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evident in, for instance, Kiš's first novel *Mansarda (The Attic)* (1962) where, akin to Blanchot, Eurydice represents the writer's desire for the very origin of writing, an ideal itself and creative principle. Similarly, in his last collection of stories *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1989) - in particular, the story 'Simon Magus' - Sophia represents the allegory of writing itself and of a desire for the absolute. The fact that many of Kiš's protagonists happen to be men is, I would argue, more than anything a result of the need to write about the barbarity of the last century. See the recent review in English by Dominic Alexander: <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/book-reviews/18122-the-encyclopedia-of-the-dead>. Last visited: July 2016.

<sup>22</sup> In John K. Cox. In 'Pannonia Imperilled: Why Danilo Kiš Still Matters' in *History*, October 2012, Volume 97, Issue 328, pp.591-608, p.591. (My emphasis).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.599. Mark Thompson points out that even though nationalism was (officially) banned in Yugoslavia in the seventies, Kiš's attack on 'literary' nationalism in 1973 underlined his awareness that culturally such ideological tendencies were very much alive. Thompson goes on to argue that Kiš's anti-nationalistic sentiment, then, may only appear to be 'aligning' with 'communist repression'. Instead, it indicates a strong conviction that nationalism is never absent from the culture. See, Thompson, Mark, *Birth Certificate: The Story of Danilo Kiš* (2013), Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, p.169.

'non-linear form of narration' - which is, as we will see, for Levinas precisely an *ethical* time. Here, the use of a 'non-linear form of narration', as Cox puts it, alongside the characteristic (and much celebrated) deployment of both real and apocryphal documents in Kiš's prose, blurs not only the borders between life and fiction, as has often been noted, but, furthermore, exposes the reader to what is, I will argue, a more visceral or affective (and thus *non-epistemological*) experience of history. In Kiš's work the redemption of the violence of history is only ever-so-silently alluded to, and, crucially, never fully guaranteed; instead of enabling a kind of false humanism by way of some heroic narrative that would redeem the suffering of the individual once and for all, I will suggest in what follows that what interests Kiš more is to expose the reader to the horror of existence *without* directly enabling a promise of a hope. Strikingly then, for Kiš, it is only through the presumption of a profound sense of vulnerability on the part of the reader that a redemptive gesture can be implied in his prose. In this sense, Kiš, like Levinas, asserts that the passage to the fabric of the ethical relation stems from a subjectivity understood in terms of sensibility and vulnerability, rather than in terms of epistemological mastery or the self-contained ego. Most importantly, in these terms, what Kiš constantly wishes to address in all his works is an *unworking* of the idea of death as power (in terms of absolute truth or knowledge) where, instead, the death of the other is precisely what opens the ethical relation towards a pluralism of the self. In other words, through defamiliarised language, death in his prose is an experience of passivity and vulnerability itself.

If writing is here always defined by its intimate relation with dying, and with the responsibility demanded by the death of the other, at the same time, for Kiš, literature, as a 'freedom in itself', *exists* only in terms of the act of questioning itself. It is, in part, for this reason that Kiš rigorously rejects a 'committed' literature that would, in any way, be constrained by the utilitarian concerns of ideology. The only 'engagement' as such for Kiš is the ethical commitment to an engagement with the death and suffering of the other human. In his essay 'Buridan's Ass or Writer in the Chaos of the World' (1986), Kiš asks the following:

Why do we write? For whom do we write? Is writing not a futile and meaningless labour? Has it with its actions added to this sorry state in which the world is

today? Does it, thus, bear guilt and the eastern sin of totalitarianism, wars, religious and national intolerance, poverty, famine, pollution of the planet? Or has it, on the contrary, with its underground, barely visible actions at least made an influence so that this state is not even worse? And has it not, in a certain manner, contributed to positive values of mankind: democracy, freedom, the search of truth? Has not, in a word, literature been and remained in the chaos of history a type of *lux in tenebris*?<sup>24</sup>

Considering this passage, one could argue that, for Kiš, as for Blanchot, literature's realm can be, paradoxically, only made possible in so far as it addresses its *own* existence in the world in the form of a question: why write, and for whom? ('I question the very concept of literature', Kiš writes in *Homo Poeticus*.<sup>25</sup>). Unlike other, more utilitarian or everyday activities, literature is a kind of quasi-action (to adopt Kiš's own term), 'underground' and 'barely visible', but one that is, as such, always at risk of 'bad faith' as regards its own purposelessness. Moreover, by contrast to other 'worldly' activities, literature cannot *be* literature, for Kiš, I will suggest, without questioning its own purpose. Towards the end of this essay, Kiš suggests a key analogy with Buridan's ass: 'today's writer has these two possibilities: to either take up a fight for Principles or to cultivate his garden. Should he choose the first, he, in a way, betrays literature; if he chooses the second, he is left with permanent regret that he lived his life in vain and that he betrayed his talent.'<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the writer's situation entails an *impossible* aporia and impossible exigency: on the one hand, writing should be an act of revolt against the barbarity and injustice of the world, but, at the same time, writing cannot but be driven by an insatiable desire to create a beautiful (autonomous) work that would be somehow free from that world. Yet Kiš concludes his essay by quoting Jean Ricardou: 'without the presence of literature (and the word presence should be understood in its full meaning) the death

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<sup>24</sup> My translation. In Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), Svetovi, Novi Sad, p.176. In Serbian: 'Zašto pišemo, za koga pišemo? Nije li pisanje uzaludan i besmislen posao? Da li je i šta uradila literatura u našem veku? Da li je svojim delovanjem doprinela ovom žalosnom stanju u kojem se svet danas nalazi? Da li, dakle, nosi na sebi krivicu i istočni greh totalitarizma, ratova, verske i nacionalne netrpeljivosti, bede, gladi, zagađenja planete? Ili je, naprotiv, svojim podzemnim, jedva vidljivim delovanjem uticala koliko-toliko na to da to stanje ne bude još gore, i nije li na neki način doprinela pozitivnim vrednostima čovečanstva: demokratiji, slobodi, traženju istine? Nije li, u jednu reč, literatura bila i ostala u haosu istorije nekom vrstom *lux in tenebris*?'.

<sup>25</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.206.

<sup>26</sup> *Eseji autopoetike*, p.178 In Serbian: 'Kao Buridanov magarac, pisac danas stoji između te dve mogućnosti: da se baci u borbu za Principe ili da obrađuje svoj vrt. Izabere li prvo, on je na neki način izneverio literaturu; izabere li drugo, ostaje mu permanentno kajanje da je proživeo svoj vek uzalud, i da je izneverio svoj dar.'

of a child somewhere in the world would not be of greater significance than a death of an animal in an abattoir'.<sup>27</sup> This is why when, for example, Kiš quotes Shklovsky's famous formalist definition of literature as defamiliarisation - 'the new form makes its appearance not in order to express a new content, but rather, to replace an old form that has already outlived its artistic usefulness' - Kiš also wishes to suggest that the writer's responsibility is always defined by the ethical as well as aesthetic demand to address differently and always anew the alterity of death and the radical alterity at the heart of the otherness of man himself.<sup>28</sup>

If nothing else, this means, among other things, that questions of aesthetics can never be disconnected from the ethical in his work. When, for instance, Kiš firmly distinguishes Céline the writer from Céline the anti-Semite, with regard to the work *Bagatelles pour un massacre* [The Trifles for a massacre] (1937), Kiš also opens up an ethical discourse regarding the poetics of death and truth and, through this, the ineluctable question of the forms of responsibility at stake within writing itself. Thus, in his short letter 'Povodom Selina' [Regarding Céline] (1971) (induced by the defence of Céline's anti-Semitism by Aleksandar Lončar), although Kiš praises Céline's work in question, in terms of style, as one of the best works in French language, Kiš rightly points out that the reason this book is no longer printed in France is due to the portrayal of anti-Semitism: for Kiš, *Bagatelles's* anti-Semitism is as poisonous and perilous as Hitler's ideology.<sup>29</sup> Although then Kiš here separates Céline's style from ethics, this does not mean that Kiš's own writing is not firmly constrained by the primacy of ethics: literature for him is, on the one hand, freedom par excellence and, even revolt as such, in Baudelaire's sense, but it still serves the 'human conscience'. In his 1980 award speech in Nice, Kiš claims: '[I dare express] that these books have not contributed hatred, either class or racial. That is all. Perhaps insufficiently for one conscience and for one "work". But I wished to justify this award before my own conscience and to bring a glimmer of optimism to my own

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<sup>27</sup> *Eseji autopoetike*, p.179.

<sup>28</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp.40-1.

<sup>29</sup> 'Povodom Selina' in Kiš, Danilo, *Varia* (2007), priredila Mirjana Miočinović, Prosveta, Beograd, pp.497-503; 498-499. In the same letter, Kiš also discusses the genesis of the false document 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', that plagiarised the work of Maurice Joly, which will have become the basis of Kiš's story 'The Book of Kings and Fools'. This story will be analysed in chapter two and the question of responsibility.

pessimistic conception of literature. Literature, nonetheless, serves some purpose: the *human conscience*.<sup>30</sup>

In his 'definition' of his own work, in his 1983 short piece 'Poslednje Pribežište Zdravog Razuma' [The Last Refuge of Reason], he therefore argues that it oscillates, necessarily, between two inseparable 'poles': Nabokov and Orwell, the former who avoided politics for the sake of art, the latter who cherished his social principles above all and wrote explicitly about politics.<sup>31</sup> Yet, in fact, I would argue that Kiš's work does not, as he claims, so much 'oscillate' between these two kinds of poles but, rather, that these two points of reference are closely imbued in Kiš's work in the form of an ethics as aesthetics.

In focusing on his consistent themes of the catastrophic repetition of historical events and of a metaphysics of evil (which Kiš closely relates to a problem of nihilism and the absurdity of existence), part of what this thesis aims to argue is, therefore, that, although Kiš's prose is itself profoundly atheistic, he nonetheless succeeds in preserving, through the 'act' of writing, what he often termed a 'metaphysical dimension' to every human being, which is as much ethical as aesthetic. Both ethically and aesthetically, this is underpinned by the profound prohibition placed in Kiš's work upon any historical justification for human suffering. Akin to Blanchot's conception of the 'two slopes' of literature, as we will see, the leitmotif of Kiš's novels is an oscillation between two kinds of languages in relation to dying, between possibility and impossibility, continuation and rupture, power and powerlessness, so as to set to work what might be described as a permanent interruption of any utilitarian account of human existence. This is for Kiš crucial both ethically and aesthetically in terms of establishing a chasm in his work between the reader and the object of narration that purposely *fails* to achieve full artistic consciousness regarding its subject matter (such as the Shoah or the Gulag). For this reason, as I argue in what follows, his entire work could be said to correspond to what Simon Critchley terms a form of 'atheist transcendence',<sup>32</sup> or 'ethics of finitude', for which it

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<sup>30</sup> English translation Paul Milan Foster. The text can be read here:

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Three+essays.-a015074220>. In Serbian, 'Između Nade i Beznađa', in *Eseji autopoetike*, p.145.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, 'Poslednje Pribežište Zdravog Razuma' [The Last Refuge of Reason] (1983), in Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, p.162.

<sup>32</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, p.28, p.82.

is the acknowledgment of the dying of the other human being that is, both aesthetically and ethically, the most important aspect of the literary text.

From this kind of approach to writing it becomes evident, that, for Kiš, despite his own resistance to any overdetermination of art by politics or history, modern literature's autonomy cannot but be ultimately constrained or transformed, then, by catastrophic events such as the Shoah and the Gulag. In his essay 'Romani na Dlanu' [Novels for the Palm of Your Hand] from 1976, for instance, Kiš claims that the idea that a piece of writing, like a fragment, can carry an *image* of 'the totality of the world', as was the case with the traditional novel prior to the catastrophic events of the mid twentieth century, is now doomed to failure in the face of Auschwitz or Stalin's terror. One consequence of this is, for example, that the difference between a short story and the post-war novel is becoming, formally, more insignificant or rather blurred. As Kiš claims:

For this reason stories are more and more becoming short novels, details are multiplied, seemingly insignificant and non-functional details, but the writer's voice is still there that says: in this story nothing is supremely meaningful and nothing is meaningless: descriptions of things and topics, proffered with cold objectivity, carry the same significance as the spiritual condition of heroes in tales of old; they are the cells of a single organism; every topic – like every pore on the hero's skin – is a sort of micro-organism which bears witness to the malady and crisis of the world in which he, my hero (if there's one at all), lives.<sup>33</sup>

What this means, I think, is that Kiš here asserts a kind of equality of representation in the novel's engagement with the everyday in order to affirm, always anew, the meaninglessness at the heart of the existence, which is, nonetheless, not devoid of responsibility. Akin then to Beckett, and even Nietzsche, for Kiš, the tragedy of human defeat must be acknowledged in writing precisely through a return to the

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<sup>33</sup> Original translation by Mark Thompson. Translation modified. In 'Introduction: Danilo Kiš and pocket-sized novels' in Kiš, Danilo, *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (2015), translation Michael Henry Heim, revised and introduction by Mark Thompson, Penguin Classics, UK, xiii. In Serbian: '[Stoga, i samo stoga] priča postaje sve više kratak roman, a short novel, detalji se množe, detalji naizgled beznačajni i nefunkcionalni, ali pisac je tu, [osećamo njegov dah] i njegov glas koji kaže: u ovoj priči ništa nije od prevashodnog značaja i ništa nije beznačajno: opisi stvari i predmeta, dati sa hladnom objektivnošću, imaju isto značenje kao i duševna stanja starinskih junaka priča, oni su ćelije jednog integralnog organizma, svaki je predmet kao i svaka pora na koži junaka priče neka vrsta mikroorganizma koji svedoči o bolesti i krizi sveta u kojem on, moj junak (ako ga uopšte ima), živi.' In 'Romani na Dlanu' in Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.123-137, p.128.

concern with 'a sort of micro-organism' of everyday life. Hence the paradox at the heart of his writing in which 'nothing [is] supremely meaningful' and yet there is 'nothing meaningless' at the same time. This is why, I argue, Kiš's prose language oscillates between a desire for totality and a kind of simultaneous destruction of any possible realisation of such a quest.

In discussing the difference between the novel and short story (or, even, *novella*), Kiš concludes that the number of elements that connect different individual human destinies as a whole is the criterion that distinguishes these two forms of writing. Thus, it is no longer a question of the sheer length of a written prose text: the pluralism of a novel will always contain a greater number of intersected elements of different human destinies than a short story.<sup>34</sup> As regards Kiš's own poetics, 'bearing witness to the malady and crisis of the world', as he puts it in the passage above, becomes, in particular, an increasingly significant criterion for the work itself. Indeed, the trajectory of his complete *oeuvre* could, arguably, be said to be framed by its simultaneous desire to bear witness to the world *and* its recognition of the fundamental impossibility of doing so in any remotely adequate form. In fact, this is evident across Kiš's work from his first novel *Mansarda*<sup>35</sup> [*The Attic*], published in 1962, to the very last story 'A and B' which was posthumously published in the collection *Lauta i Ožiljci* (1994).<sup>36</sup> Kiš's aesthetics as ethics is, in this sense, not only about a 'modernist' crisis of language, concerning the adequacy of any existing genre and style (as in the example of *The Attic*, which is a novel about the writing of a novel), but also, and even more importantly, inscribes a task to juxtapose as 'many human destinies' in a condensed form of writing. Tellingly, it is the very shortest of Kiš's short stories, 'A and B', that, paradoxically, more than any other work within his *oeuvre*, carries the burden of the novel as an image of 'the totality of the world', within which the fate and the disappearance of the Central European Jewry is registered in the story's movement from point 'A' to the desolate (autobiographical) point 'B'. (This will be discussed further in the last chapter of this thesis).

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<sup>34</sup> Kiš, 'Romani na Dlanu', pp.136-7.

<sup>35</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Mansarda* (1962), Kosmos, Beograd, new edition (2011), Arhipelag, Beograd

<sup>36</sup> Kiš, Danilo *Lauta i Ožiljci* (2011), priredila Mirjana Miočinović, Arhipelag, Beograd; in English, Kiš, Danilo, *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), preface Adam Thirlwell, translation John K. Cox, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, Dublin, London



Already in his first novel *Mansarda* [*The Attic*] Kiš addresses, in fact, the intimate relation between writing and dying and, most interestingly for the purpose of this thesis, presents an interpretation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice that is very close to that famously articulated by Blanchot in his essay 'The Gaze of Orpheus'.<sup>37</sup> Kiš's protagonist Orpheus, whose muse/lover is Eurydice, must travel far away from her in order to preserve his enchantment with her. Living with his flatmate Jarac Mudrijaš<sup>38</sup> in a Belgrade attic infested with cockroaches, Orpheus the poet dreams of reaching the stars, that is, he dreams of achieving absolute consciousness of the world. The novel is, essentially, a novel about writing a novel where the *ruination* of a completed novel is already guaranteed. Here is an example of citation from the novel itself:

Igor, I created Eurydice. I sang her form into existence!

I was able to follow from day to day the metamorphosis of her breasts ... Igor, my friend, I transformed her fingers into endearments ... I turned her into my own selfishness, my friend Igor, into a sigh, into breath.<sup>39</sup>

Through a series of different forms and styles, seemingly disassociated within the text, Orpheus's relation with Eurydice becomes both his hope and also his despair, a dream of a union that cannot be obtained or rather that it is always deferred. Thus, already in Kiš's first novel, something of the future foundation of his distinctive poetics is clear: what is noticeable and what will have become the foundation of his poetics is the consciously deployed ruination/destruction of a work or text that will also be apparent in Kiš's trilogy (in particular *Garden, ashes* and *Hourglass*) and in others of his subsequent works. Such a poetic impetus is, I suggest, following Blanchot, closely related to an ambivalent relation to death in writing where no form of writing can, as it were, achieve an absolute knowledge in relation to the radically unknown death. It is this, then, that I address in the thesis that follows - specifically

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<sup>37</sup> Kevin Breathnach's review of Kiš's *The Attic* is the only text I have found that directly places Blanchot's essay 'The Gaze of Orpheus' alongside Kiš's novel. See: <http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-attic-by-danilo-kis>. Last visited 30 July, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Translated as 'Billy the Wise Goat'.

<sup>39</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *The Attic* (2012), translation John K. Cox, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, London and Dublin, p.48.

in relation to certain convergences between Kiš's work and both Blanchot's and Levinas's thought.

Kiš's first novel *The Attic*, where Eurydice represents a desire for elevation through different forms of writing and a ruination of such a prospect, corresponds interestingly to Blanchot's own interpretation of the myth of Orpheus in this respect. Here, Blanchot emphasises that Eurydice is both Orpheus's limit and the limitlessness of the artwork whereby what Orpheus forgets whilst being driven by a desire for the origin of the artwork is the work itself. This means that, for Blanchot, only a poet's *gaze* always already promises a ruination of the work – which is, as we have seen, at the heart of *The Attic* also – since, in order to sing the song, a poet's desire for the origin of his inspiration must have already taken place. The poet, according to Blanchot, is *destined* to betray Eurydice, the work and what Blanchot terms 'the night'. This 'Orphic measure', as Blanchot calls it, is the *other* night 'which is endless death, proof of the absence of ending.'<sup>40</sup> In these terms, the entire novel *The Attic* is a kind of Blanchotian 'absence of the book', as that which *undoes* the possibility of a complete knowledge of the world (which Blanchot calls *worklessness*).

Read in this light, what essentially defines Kiš's prose is the consciously embedded *worklessness* through which Kiš seeks to address the phenomenology of evil of the last century. In terms of his characteristic incorporation of apparently 'real' documents into his prose, for example, this implies that, for Kiš, the modern is defined, among other things, as that 'age' in which 'the time of (literary) fabrication is past' and where, instead, it is a *fantastic reality* (as Kiš cites Dostoevsky) which most precisely defines the events of the twentieth century, with Hiroshima as its 'focal point'.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, for Kiš, it is not so much a question of literature turning into some kind of actual *documentary archive* of history's ruins - though it is true that literature's mimetic power records the wreckage - but rather that historical documents are almost presented as almost too fantastic, as if they were a work of fiction themselves. For example, regarding the search for a new form in which to

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<sup>40</sup> 'The Gaze of Orpheus' in Blanchot, Maurice, *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, Barrytown, p.438.

<sup>41</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp.52-3.

write about the Gulag, Kiš claims: 'Obviously the documents are incomplete, because the reality of the concentration camps, especially before Solzhenitsyn, struck Western readers as unreal, not to say fantastic. In my case the process had to be reversed; that is, I had to find a fantastic way of writing realistically.'<sup>42</sup> Considering that Kiš's 'faction' – as a deployment of both real and false documents – precisely functions as a form of 'worklessness' in Kiš's prose, I hope thus to demonstrate, in this vein, that Kiš's conception of both the ethical and aesthetic is comparable to both Blanchot and Levinas in this respect. A need to testify to the violence of last century preserves a kind of scepticism toward any closing dialectic within his texts and thus, for Kiš, it is not truth that is the aim of his work but rather affectivity itself.

## 2. A Brief Literature Review

Having considered some of those aspects of Kiš's poetics that will be discussed in relation to Levinas's philosophy and Blanchot's theory across this thesis, I want in this section briefly to consider the reception of Kiš's work both during his own lifetime and in more recent criticism, and to contextualize this a little in relation to my own concerns.

Mark Thompson's recent biography, *Birth Certificate: the Story of Danilo Kiš* (2013), has perhaps been chiefly responsible for a minor resurgence of interest in Kiš's work within the Anglophone literary world, so it is perhaps worth beginning here with some short reflections on that publication. Thompson's book is, first and foremost, an attempt to give a cohesive portrait of a writer for those largely unfamiliar with Kiš's legacy. The fact that Thompson chooses to write on Kiš by deploying some of Kiš's own trademark devices (such as the encyclopaedic inventory, and the blurring of fact and fiction) already indicates Thompson's obvious dedication to the distinctive forms of Kiš's prose. Most specifically, the form of *Birth Certificate* is structured around Kiš's 1983 autobiographical piece 'Izvod iz matične knjige rođenih' ('Birth Certificate (A Short *Autobiography*)').<sup>43</sup> This short piece, written with irony, Kiš decided to append to his 1983 *Collected Works* in order to avoid clichéd questions

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<sup>42</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, from the 1986 interview 'The Conscience of an Unknown Europe', p.219.

<sup>43</sup> English translation in *Homo Poeticus*, pp.3-5.

as regards his family's tragedy (the disappearance of his father at Auschwitz), which was often, in his view, connected to a 'typically Socialist Realist brand of biography'.<sup>44</sup> Thompson acknowledges this 'vital friction called irony' in this short piece and seeks to discover the biographical genesis behind every sentence in the text.<sup>45</sup> However, from the beginning of the book there are also several inconsistencies apparent in Thompson's account of Kiš as a writer. Thompson incorrectly asserts, for example, that in Serbia Kiš is 'contested' and 'his fame still resented as the Western world's reward to a purveyor of flashy techniques.'<sup>46</sup> Such a sentiment runs the risk of placing too much emphasis on a handful of nationalistic attempts to discredit Kiš as a writer. That in itself would not make Kiš a unique writer since many other twentieth-century European writers have certainly been read both during their lifetime and posthumously through the lenses of particular political ideologies. Yet given the fact that Thompson is clearly more than familiar with Kiš's life and poetics, and is thus aware that Kiš firmly stood against both *any* form of nationalism and communism (including the Yugoslav version), one begins to wonder what purpose there is to his juxtaposition of Kiš's works with someone like Dobrica Ćosić, a writer who clearly aligned himself with nationalistic tendencies in Serbia in the 1990s.<sup>47</sup> If one is interested in creating a kind of *local* version of Kiš's literary (and even political) genealogical kinship, as Thompson appears to be, surely it is more appropriate to place Kiš alongside writers such as Borislav Pekić (who spent five years in prison for being a member of the Union of Yugoslav Democratic Youth, and who emigrated to Britain where he lived until his death in 1992), David Albahari, Mirko Kovač and so on.<sup>48</sup> Ironically, it appears that Thompson's account of Kiš's life and work is not itself immune to the framing of its account according to a specifically Serbian nationalism in order to address the Yugoslav war of the 1990s; but this, again, runs the risks of misreading Kiš as a writer.<sup>49</sup> It invites a recalling of Kiš's

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<sup>44</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp.182-183.

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, Mark, *Birth Certificate: The Story of Danilo Kiš* (2013), Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, p.3.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, Mark, *Birth Certificate: The Story of Danilo Kiš* (2013), Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, xii.

<sup>47</sup> *Birth Certificate*, p.171.

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, the work of Petar Pijanović, *Proza Danila Kiša* (1992), Jedinstvo: Priština; Dečje novine, Gornji Milanovac. In this book he suggests parallels between Kiš, Pekić and Kovač in terms of the ways in which each recycles old literary forms and adjusts them in relation to new ways of relating to modernity.

<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, Roger Luckhurst acknowledges that both Serbian and Croatian nationalists were involved in 'acts of ethnic cleansing'. See Luckhurst, Roger, *The Trauma Question* (2008), Routledge, London, p.168.

famous essay 'The Gingerbread Heart, or Nationalism', from his 1978 polemic book *The Anatomy Lesson*: 'The nationalist feels not only that hell is other nations but also that everything not his (Serb, Croat, French ... ) is alien to him'.<sup>50</sup> Considering that Kiš opposed any form of nationalism, the problem is then not that Thompson seeks to address the relationship between Yugoslav nationalism and Kiš's life and art, the writer who placed literature above any ideology, as both Hermon's and Cox's earlier citations underline; the problem is mainly in that he wishes to address only Serbian nationalism.

Given Thompson's own fixation upon the specifically Yugoslav contextualization of Kiš's work, it is perhaps appropriate to return back at this point to the mid-1970s and to the notorious reactions to the publication of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* in 1976. This is the work that caused - in Kiš's own words - the most 'scandalous literary affair' in Yugoslavia at that time, and consequently shook the foundations of the literary culture in that country, as well as serving to inform almost all subsequent readings of Kiš's work. Usefully, *Treba li Spaliti Kiša?* [Should We Burn Kiš?]<sup>51</sup> (1980),<sup>51</sup> a collection of all the polemics generated by *A Tomb* edited by Boro Krivokapić, traces all the reviews and attacks that Kiš received in the three year period following *A Tomb's* publication. It also traces responses to Kiš's *Čas Anatomije* [*The Anatomy Lesson*] (1978), a polemical work that started as a vehement defence of his own aesthetics and literature, for which Kiš was eventually taken to court. (Today *The Anatomy Lesson* is considered by many in former Yugoslavia to be a ground-breaking study of inter-textuality in literature.<sup>52</sup>)

The 'controversy' regarding the elements of 'plagiarism' in *A Tomb* was started by a journalist Dragoljub Golubović, who managed to publish an article 'Ogrlica od tuđih bisera' [Necklace made of other people's pearls] in the Croatian magazine *Oko* in November 1976.<sup>53</sup> In this article he claims that Kiš stole many parts of his collection of stories from other people: for instance, for the fragments that depict the church in

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<sup>50</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, p.17, pp.15-34.

<sup>51</sup> Krivokapić, Boro, (editor), *Treba li spaliti Kiša?* (1980), Globus, Zagreb

<sup>52</sup> Some parts of this work were translated into English in *Homo Poeticus*. The complete translations currently exist in German and Spanish. Jovan Delić, the author of a few studies on Kiš, for instance claims that *The Anatomy Lesson* is 'our first and one of the most important books with regard to the question of intertextuality'. In Serbian: 'naša prva i jedna od najznačajnijih knjiga o pitanjima intertekstualnosti.' See Delić, Jovan, *Kroz Prozu Danila Kiša* (1995), Prosveta, Beograd, p.37.

<sup>53</sup> *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, pp.42-47.

Kiev in the story 'Mechanical Lions', Kiš borrowed fragments from the study on Russian art *L'Art russe* (1921) by Louis Réau; and for the title story 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich', from Roy Medvedev's book *The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (1972). The reactions to this article eventually erupted into a full scale conflict around Kiš's work that lasted for over two years, and even resulted in a court case brought by Golubović against Kiš and Predrag Matvejević. It is difficult to give an answer to the question of whether this attack on Kiš was merely political or at least partly literary in character, especially since several people who attacked Kiš were involved in the nominations for *Oktobarska Nagrada* [October Award] and therefore had a personal stake in the polemics.<sup>54</sup> What is certain, however, is that literary means were used against him to justify the attack. It is thus appropriate that Kiš responded by publishing a polemic concerning literary theory as his major response.<sup>55</sup>

While several attacked Kiš's supposed plagiarism, many other critics defended Kiš's literary devices, comparing, for instance, his paraphrasing, intertextuality and encyclopaedic entries to the use of such devices by Borges (for instance, in readings by Velimir Visković, Tvrtko Kulenović and Nikola Milošević)<sup>56</sup> or comparing his montage technique to that of Thomas Mann (again Nikola Milošević).<sup>57</sup> The reading of his work through a Borgesian paradigm did, however, confirm that Kiš's deployment of both real and apocryphal documents also has a profoundly ethical basis in its relation to the reality of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, which, much as it may have borrowed from it, was significantly different from Borges's own deployment of similar techniques.

This recognition should no doubt also inform the now customary tendency to draw parallels between - with regard to form and style - for instance, Kiš and Joyce (in relation to Kiš's novel *Hourglass*, his use of metonymy and meta-textuality, and his

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<sup>54</sup> This included Branimir Šćepanović and Dragan M. Jeremić, one of the most prominent critics in Belgrade at that time, who eventually published another book against Kiš's work, *Narcis bez lica* [Narcissus without Face] (1981), where Kiš is charged with a lack of originality.

<sup>55</sup> Hence the reason why Kiš's polemic regarding, for instance, nationalism is dealt with early on in *The Anatomy Lesson*. The rest of the book responds to the accusations of plagiarism on mainly literary levels. See, also, Kiš's brief interview 'Dobro nameštene zamke', carried out in the year he died, where he affirms his belief that the attack on *A Tomb* was 'primarily political'. In Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Remnant of Experience] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, p.270.

<sup>56</sup> *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, pp.80-86, 86-91, 110-115.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 151-154.

depiction of son and father relation<sup>58</sup>); or between Kiš and Proust in relation to the affirmation of the sensibility of a child, and in relation to the representation of death and trauma in *Garden, ashes* also. Works by Jovan Delić (*Kroz Prozu Danila Kiša* (1997)), Milivoj Srebro (*Roman kao postupak* (1985)) and Petar Pijanović (*Proza Danila Kiša* (1992)) have further contributed to a wider debate concerning how Kiš semantically transformed the modernist tradition and adapted it to new possibilities. In addition, Taras Kermauner has offered a thoroughly anti-bourgeois reading of *A Tomb* where the *comforting* myth of revolution (as an ideal, 'pure' and, as it were, 'clean' historical event) is replaced, by way of Kiš's experimental use of documents, with the reality of blood, uncertainty and discomfort.<sup>59</sup>

Two important collection of studies on Kiš that are worth mentioning here are *Roman Kao Peščanik*<sup>60</sup> (1998), edited by Jovan Zivlak and *Spomenica Danila Kiša* (2005), edited by Predrag Palavestra, a collection of essays from various authors dedicated to Kiš, which was published to coincide with the seventieth anniversary of Kiš's birth in arrangement with the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU).<sup>61</sup> The readings of Kiš here include, among the most significant, accounts of Kiš's exclusion of pathos in dealing with the twentieth century evil and prismatic approach to historical truths (Guy Scarpetta);<sup>62</sup> Delić's juxtaposition of Kiš's obsessive theme of death with the myth of Gilgamesh, where the search for eternal life through writing and revolt against death offers neither religious nor ideological consolation;<sup>63</sup> and Božo Koprivica's examination of the theme of suicide in Kiš's first book *The Attic*

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<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, the work of Tatjana Jukić, 'Between Auschwitz and Siberia: James Joyce, Danilo Kiš and a Zoning of Totalitarianism'. The text can be read here:

[http://www.academia.edu/5456252/Between\\_Auschwitz\\_and\\_Siberia\\_James\\_Joyce\\_Danilo\\_Ki%C5%A1\\_and\\_a\\_Zoning\\_of\\_Totalitarianism](http://www.academia.edu/5456252/Between_Auschwitz_and_Siberia_James_Joyce_Danilo_Ki%C5%A1_and_a_Zoning_of_Totalitarianism). Last visited: 30 July 2016. See also, Ivana Milivojević's paper 'Otac i sin, Eduard Sam', on the transformation of the father/son relation, as a kind of trajectory from psychological to the aesthetic. She compares the father in Kiš's trilogy – the real, symbolic and the imaginary E.S. – with the relation in Joyce's *Ulysses* between Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom and William Shakespeare. In *Spomenica Danila Kiša* (2005), p.155.

<sup>59</sup> *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, 'Slika Parodične i Tragične Sudbine', [An Image of Fate as Parody and Tragedy], 116-124. Kermauner asserts that, whilst society shows its own 'non-revolutionary' face in so far as it thrives on 'security', 'bourgeois morality' and is 'devoid of eroticism' and 'passion', Kiš's protagonists in *A Tomb*, on the other hand, affirm a kind of openness to fate and ruination, murder, passion and so on.

<sup>60</sup> *Roman kao Peščanik* (1998), urednik Jovan Zivlak, pripovedačka umetnost Danila Kiša, Kulturno-prosvetna zajednica grada Novog sada, Svetovi, Novi Sad.

<sup>61</sup> *Spomenica Danila Kiša*, (2005), urednik Predrag Palavestra, Srpska Akademija Nauka i Umetnosti, Beograd

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, Scarpetta, Guy, 'Istinolaža Danila Kiša', p.35, p.37.

<sup>63</sup> Delić, Jovan, 'Vječna priča o detetu i smrti ( Proza Danila Kiša prema Epu o Gilgamešu)', in *Spomenica Danila Kiša*, p.41, p.43.

and also in *Hourglass*.<sup>64</sup> In *Spomenica Danila Kiša* (2005), Predrag Palavestra discusses the emergence of critical art in the sixties in Yugoslavia and how Kiš, being a part of that tradition, defended artistic freedom against the backdrop of a repressive political regime and offered a reevaluation of human dignity.<sup>65</sup> Providing a kind of deconstructive reading of Kiš, equally important is the reading of Tatjana Petzer's comparison between Kiš's *Hourglass* and the Dutch graphic artist Escher. Petzer asserts that just like Escher's Möbiusband which, in regards to its spatiality, is perceived as two endlessly intertwined ellipses that constantly initiate an endless beginning, so Kiš's intertwined relation between facts and fiction does not permit one definitive image of the horror of the Holocaust in *Hourglass*.<sup>66</sup> With regard to Kiš's repetitive use of enumeration across his *oeuvre*, and the ethical and aesthetic function that this method has in his work, Ilma Rakusa's essay 'Književni Inventari Danila Kiša' also offers an interesting reading of Kiš that has some parallels with my own.<sup>67</sup> Finally, Dragan Bošković's book *Islednik, svedok, priča* (2004)<sup>68</sup> is primarily focused on the psychological dialectics of oppression in relation to Kiš's *Hourglass* and *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and deploys the likes of Foucault, Koestler, Lyotard and Bakhtin, in order to elaborate upon the role played by the sublime, and the depiction of totalitarianisms, in Kiš's novels.

More closely relevant to the concerns of this thesis, other important critical studies of Kiš would include, for example, Mihajlo Pantić's focus on eschatology in Kiš's prose. Pantić claims: 'Danilo Kiš belongs to that wide tradition of eschatological writers for whom the obsession with the disappearance of the world is as important as its invocation and reconstruction'.<sup>69</sup> This thesis will also explore the notion of

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<sup>64</sup> Koprivica, Božo, 'Okrutni bog i Danilo Kiš', p.116.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, see Predrag Palavestra, 'Da li Kiš pripada (srpskoj) kritičkoj književnosti?', p.75.

<sup>66</sup> Petzer, Tatjana, "Beskrajna uvrnuta traka. Suplementarno pisanje Danila Kiša", in *Spomenica Danila Kiša*, p.91.

<sup>67</sup> Rakusa, Ilma, 'Književni inventari Danila Kiša', in *Spomenica Danila Kiša*, p.166.

<sup>68</sup> Bošković, Dragan, *Islednik, svedok, priča* (istražni postupci u Peščaniku i Grobnici za Borisa Davidoviča Danila Kiša) (2004), Plato, Beograd

<sup>69</sup> My translation. In Serbian: 'Danilo Kiš se, u stvari, uključuje u široki krug eshatoloških pisaca kojima je opsesija nestankom sveta važna isto toliko koliko i dozivanje i rekonstrukcija njegovog počela.' Kiš, Danilo, *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (1997), predgovor Mihajlo Pantić, Knjiga-Komerc, Beograd, p.9. Among other 'philosophical' readings of Kiš's writings, Marianna D. Birnbaum, in her essay 'History and Human Relationship in the Fiction of Danilo Kiš' (1989), for example, discusses Kiš's novel *Hourglass* through its juxtaposition with a form of Spinozean pantheism, drawing upon a passage in which the main character, E.S., 'reflects' that 'there was but one substance and that all bodies in the universe were modifications of this substance'. In



eschatology with regard to Kiš's prose, but in specifically Levinasian terms, for which eschatology is the *uprooting* from history (as a history of violence) that opens up the passage to the ethical relation. Even closer to my own interests, the late Svetlana Boym in her essay on 'Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and *The Protocols of Zion*' (1999)<sup>70</sup> briefly identifies some parallels between Levinas's question of responsibility for the other and Kiš's story 'The Book of Kings and Fools' (one of the stories from *Encyclopaedia of the Dead*). As she puts it: 'Levinas writes that one has to recognise the humanism of the other man; in Kiš's story one also has to recognise his paranoia.'<sup>71</sup> Boym remarks, too – in a formulation that echoes my own (although she does not develop it) - that 'The ethical in Kiš is connected with the aesthetic. Kiš's stories present a peculiar dialectical, or rather ethical, montage of multilayered literary allusions and aesthetic palimpsests disrupted by violence'.<sup>72</sup>

In her essay 'Dream Structure of Kiš's novel *Hourglass*',<sup>73</sup> also included in the collection *Spomenica Danila Kiša*, Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover comparably analyses the novel *Hourglass* via a Derridean conception of the deconstructive text. Vladiv-Glover reminds us of Kiš's own description of his novel, for which 'hourglass' is a 'portrait of a cracked era, of cracked beings and of its cracked creator. Hourglass is a perfect brisure.' According to this author, the concept of Kiš's novel is already given in the title itself: *hourglass* represents a metaphor for 'a gap or brisure'; it is a total system or structure, which is closed and perfect in its hybridness. In relation to this, Vladiv-Glover refers to Derrida's concept of *arche*-writing whereby the structure of a novel must be 'deconstructed' in order to be comprehended. In this kind of literary narration, however, the moment of deconstruction can never be chronologically located in time; instead, it represents an 'explosion' which results in 'brisure'.<sup>74</sup> As a result of this kind of narrative style in Kiš's *Hourglass*, Vladiv-Glover suggests that Kiš is an 'anthropologist-thinker' who deploys documents in a

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Birnbaum, Marianna D., 'History and Human Relationship in the Fiction of Danilo Kiš, in *Cross Currents*, Vol. 8 (1989), pp.345-360, p.345.

<sup>70</sup> Boym, Svetlana, 'Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and *The Protocols of Zion*', in *Comparative Literature*, Vol.51, Number 2 (Spring 1999), pp.97-122.

<sup>71</sup> Boym, 'Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and *The Protocols of Zion*', p.118.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p.119.

<sup>73</sup> Vladiv-Gorov, Slobodanka, 'The Dream Structure of Kiš's novel *Hourglass*', in *Spomenica Danila Kiša*, p.207.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p.208.

reconstructive manner and establishes a new postmodern form of history as an archaeology of knowledge. This new form of 'history' is 'self-referential' in so far as it is self-sufficient in its 'trace structure'. Reading, then, becomes an 'act of participation', an everlasting 'awakeness' whereby both the author and the reader aim to find a meaning of the text. Vladiv-Glover concludes that, in these terms, there is a 'performative testimony' accomplished in *Hourglass* that 'produces' new 'historical consciousness' in itself.<sup>75</sup>

In the same book, David A. Norris, in his essay 'Testimony, Witnessing and The Holocaust in *Garden, ashes*',<sup>76</sup> also focuses on the notion of testimony in Kiš, seeking to establish the relationship between concerns drawn from recent 'trauma theory' (in particular, in relation to the Holocaust) and the forms of literary narration exhibited in *Garden, ashes*. In particular, Norris examines how an original event, which happened in the past and is therefore absent, retains its presence within a community as an experience of the present. Norris concludes that this is only possible insofar as the cultural memory of each generation allows for a possibility of transformation of an original event as an experience of narration through remembrance. In relation to the event of the Holocaust, testimony becomes a problem of narrative or, rather, it becomes an inability to find a linguistic structure that would be able to express such an experience. Literary narratives, following Adorno, aim to approach the problem of testifying to the Holocaust through the inclusion of silence. In other words, as long as traumatic events remain relevant to an ever-changing cultural identity, testimony must be provided through narration which becomes a form of 'witnessing to the witnessing of events'. Norris relates this to Kiš's novel *Garden, ashes* as an example of a novel that testifies to the Holocaust in Serbian literature. Furthermore, he reminds us that Kiš's seemingly personal, traumatic experiences are actually a testimony of an epoch in which he lived. In this manner, general historical events become concrete and personal, and vice versa.

Norris's essay is perhaps particularly significant as regards the contemporary context for my own thesis, since, with its emphasis on witnessing and testimony, it

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<sup>75</sup> 'The Dream Structure of Kiš's novel *Hourglass*', p.213.

<sup>76</sup> David A. Norris, 'Testimony, Witnessing and the Holocaust in *Garden, ashes*', in *Spomenica Danila Kiša*, p.225.

brings Kiš's work into the orbit of the currently influential body of scholarly work known as 'trauma theory', and of its intersection with both memory studies and Holocaust Studies in particular. Notably, such trauma theory still owes much to post-war discourses concerning both aesthetics and ethics, including work by the likes of Adorno and Derrida, as well as, indeed, Levinas and Blanchot. For instance, John Cohen's 2005 significant study *Interrupting Auschwitz: art, religion, philosophy*, addresses the issue of a possibility of redemption after Auschwitz by, paradoxically, asserting its impossibility, in a fashion not so different from my own arguments here. Drawing variously upon Adorno, Levinas, Blanchot and Derrida, Cohen asserts that the only way one can preserve a kind of Adornian new categorical imperative that Auschwitz should not happen again is by way of interrupting the possibility of redemption.<sup>77</sup> My thesis partly addresses the political aspects of what I term Kiš's po-ethics with a similar approach.

As Cohen's book suggests, certain strands of trauma theory have, in this respect, often been understood to be extending the interest in Levinas's thought that was particularly dominant in the Anglophone world in the 1980s and 1990s with the return to ethical thought in continental philosophy and critical theory. (This ethical turn was often attributed in large part to the influence of Levinas's own doctrine, particularly following the translation of Derrida's 1967 essay on Levinas 'Violence and Metaphysics', and the significance it acquired in the work of several leading Anglo-American 'continental philosophers' such as Simon Critchley or Robert Bernasconi.) Tellingly, as one fairly recent study, Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* (2008), demonstrates, much of the discourse surrounding cultural trauma and memory in literary studies (as elsewhere) has also revolved around a certain concept of 'aporia', a notion that has an evident lineage in Levinas, Derrida and others.<sup>78</sup> The work of Cathy Caruth has been especially influential in this respect,

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<sup>77</sup> Cohen, John, *Interrupting Auschwitz: art religion, philosophy* (2005), Continuum Holocaust Studies, New York and London. Simon Critchley also argues alongside this kind of sentiment with regard to the relation between question of history and the question human finitude. See 'Impossible Redemption: Adorno on nihilism' and 'Hope against hope – the elevation of social criticism to the level of from (Adorno II)' in Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing (Death, Philosophy, Literature)* (1997), Routledge, London, pp.18-24 and pp.154-156 respectively.

<sup>78</sup> Luckhurst, Roger, *The Trauma Question* (2008), Routledge, London, p.5, pp.4-9.

not least in its readings of various literary texts, as well as of, for example, Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras's film, *Hiroshima mon amour*.<sup>79</sup>

It is perhaps worth briefly mentioning here Kiš's own review of Resnais's films, which he wrote in 1960 at the age of twenty five. In his short piece '*Night and Fog and Hiroshima, mon amour*' [Noć i magla i Hirošimo, ljubavi moja], Kiš argues that Resnais's new filmic technique is created out of the need to address and shock 'our conscience in the first place' and not only for aesthetic reasons. Kiš, however, goes on to say that in Resnais's attempt to avoid 'the horror of forgetting' the horror of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Resnais has in fact dismissed what Kiš argues is that basic and important right of an artist: the right to *forget*. It is in this right to forget that Kiš insists, akin to Blanchot, on the need to remember the horror.<sup>80</sup> For Caruth, by comparison, Resnais's film establishes a new technique not only in aesthetic terms of how to tell a story that deals with catastrophic events (Hiroshima), but also ethically in terms of what to tell, or, as she puts it, 'how not to betray the past'.<sup>81</sup> This means that, for Caruth, Resnais's new technique demonstrates that in order to tell the story of trauma (Hiroshima) there has to be 'the necessity of betrayal in the ineluctability of sight.'<sup>82</sup> The story is told by the introduction of another story (fiction) in order to approach that specific historical event: the story of a French woman and a Japanese man and how what appears to be their seemingly impossible way to communicate their own traumas is, paradoxically, precisely what enables the very communication of catastrophe itself. Caruth argues that what 'resonates beyond what we can know and understand' in *Hiroshima, mon amour* is 'the event of incomprehension' and that our 'witnessing may begin to take place' only by way of 'our departure from sense and understanding'.<sup>83</sup> Luckhurst mainly elaborates upon Caruth's own account of the film and underlines her argument that it is precisely this

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<sup>79</sup> See 'Literature and the Enactment of Memory: Duras, Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*' in Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, pp.25-56.

<sup>80</sup> See Kiš's essay, 'Noć i magla i Hirošimo, ljubavi moja' in Kiš, Danilo, *Varia* (2007), priredila Mirjana Miočinović, Prosveta, Beograd, pp.91-93. See also Kiš's 1983 drama *Night and Fog* which specifically revolves around the concept of forgetting as a form that underlines the need to remember. In Kiš, Danilo, *Noć i Magla* (2014), Arhipelag, Beograd, pp.13-43.

<sup>81</sup> *Literature and the Enactment of Memory: Duras, Resnais, Hiroshima mon amour*, p.27.

<sup>82</sup> 'Literature and the Enactment of Memory: Duras, Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*', p.30.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p.30.

'aporia' in the film that enables a narrative on Hiroshima; that is, the seemingly controversial aspect to the film of 'explicit parallelism established between the public story of Hiroshima and a private story of transgression' is necessary to tell the story.<sup>84</sup>

Crucial for both Caruth and Luckhurst in their approach to the question of literature's engagement with trauma is that the latter can only, according to Caruth, be experienced *belatedly* (that is *after* the event) - i.e. there is a necessary *disjunction* between the event (the cause of trauma) and its traumatic temporalisation.<sup>85</sup> It is this disjunction that presupposes 'a crisis of representation, of history and truth, and of narrative time', according to Luckhurst.<sup>86</sup> However, this does not 'eliminate' a reference to history but rather the opposite: it 'permit[s] history to arise where immediate understanding may not.'<sup>87</sup> In other words, it is in the shock of traumatic experience that the ethical and political relation to our past may address truly our future.

If such a conception of trauma and the (im)possibility of testimony seems close, then, to the Levinasian and Blanchotian conceptions that inform this thesis, much of the theory surrounding this complex concept in recent criticism, including that of Caruth, Lacapra, Shoshana, Felman and others, also revolves around ideas drawn principally from psychoanalysis, something that this thesis will largely not address. As his own conception of the modern novel as a means of 'bearing witness to the malady and crisis of the world' suggests, it is undoubtedly true that Kiš's prose is much concerned with the experience and effects of trauma, particularly in historical terms, by virtue of his obsessive focus upon the victims of twentieth-century totalitarianisms. Nonetheless, this has to be set alongside Kiš's own rejection of individual psychology as a means by which to approach the historical catastrophes of the twentieth century. In literary terms, this is, for example, one of the reasons why, despite certain criticisms of it as a 'genre', Kiš often placed himself in alignment

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<sup>84</sup> *The Trauma Question*, p.186.

<sup>85</sup> *The Trauma Question*, pp.4-5.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p.5.

<sup>87</sup> *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, p.7, p.11.

with the aims of the French *nouveau roman*.<sup>88</sup> Kiš's essay 'Schizopsychology', from *The Anatomy Lesson* (1978), referred to throughout this thesis, is one particularly important text in this respect that very firmly defines the genesis of his work as 'po-ethical' rather than psychological in character. Despite the danger of seeming to return to now somewhat 'unfashionable' figures in the face of more recent psychoanalytically-inspired forms of trauma theory, it is, therefore, partly for this reason that this thesis approaches the issues of testimony and witnessing at stake in Kiš's work directly through the philosophical writings of Levinas and Blanchot, rather than explicitly (for the most part at least) through contemporary trauma theory as such. Especially crucial in this respect is my understanding that the ethical in Levinas's work is not only the question of trauma itself but also of the *aesthetic*; it is in the language of the 'said', the language of essence, truth and conceptualisation that, in Levinas's terms, the 'saying' as signification of infinity and ungraspability (as ethics) unfolds. In thinking the aesthetic and ethical together, this thesis will thus hopefully enable a more direct philosophical discourse regarding Kiš's contribution to a kind of literary 'humanism' that addresses questions of the (im)possibility of death and totality intrinsic to the modern space of literature in general.<sup>89</sup>

### 3. Thesis Outline

As has been made clear above, my primary research in this thesis centres on the question of the ethical dimension inherently accorded to the aesthetic in Kiš's prose. The thesis will therefore combine close readings of selected prose texts by Kiš with arguments drawn from various philosophical texts of Levinas and Blanchot in order to show, in particular, the ways in which their analysis of what they term the *il y a*, and of the subject's responsibility for the death of the other, can be productively juxtaposed with Kiš's own distinctive aesthetic of defamiliarisation (to use Shklovsky's term) as that which generates a place for ethical encounter within the literary work. The thesis is divided into four chapters on Kiš's work, each of which is

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<sup>88</sup> See *Homo Poeticus*, p.218. Kiš did not particularly admire *nouveau roman* as a genre itself; nonetheless, he always expressed his gratitude for the way this genre had rejected psychology as something anachronistic.

<sup>89</sup> For Kiš, as for Blanchot, philosophy, in its original questioning with regard to the human condition, is close to literature; significance remains in the questioning itself rather than in finding truths. Kiš claims that there is 'the destruction of philosophy in the name of science, of the philosophy that didn't claim to be a science but only a reflection on the human condition.' In *Homo Poeticus*, p.190.

focused on a series of closely related issues within his writing, and on the simultaneously ethical and aesthetic questions that they provoke: death, responsibility, freedom and suffering.

Chapter 1 examines Kiš's trilogy (*Early Sorrows*, *Garden, ashes* and *Hourglass*) as a depiction of what Levinas terms the *il y a*, arguing that it thereby takes the form of a kind Blanchotian  *récit* (in the case, specifically 'of' the Shoah) that cannot be narrated and yet which demands narration. Focusing on the obsessive theme of death in Kiš's work, the chapter addresses Kiš's 'indirect' representation of the Shoah, in particular as the narration of the *impossibility of death* (or, of death as infinite dying), a concept that arguably defines the work of both Levinas and Blanchot in their respective responses to Heidegger's monumental writings of the mid twentieth century. The chapter seeks, in this way, to argue that the 'experience' of dying is inseparable from both ethics and writing to the degree that it entails an *unintentional* exposure to the ethical relation with the unknown and the irreducibly other. If the Shoah, as an 'object' of narration, remains beyond the grasp of any literary work, Kiš here, like Levinas and Blanchot (or Adorno for that matter), also resists any idea of a possible restoration of theological meaning after the Shoah. In the first part of the chapter I elaborate upon what I term Kiš's 'aesthetics of ugliness', in terms of the intimate relation it establishes between writing and death, placing it alongside Blanchot's notions of work and worklessness. The second part addresses the experience of the *il y a* in relation to Kiš's distinctive form of 'faction', i.e. his deployment of real and apocryphal documents, arguing that the *Pannonian sea* of Kiš's trilogy is best read as an inscription of the immemorial Levinasian *trace* and that which instantiates the possibility of the ethical in his 'family cycle.' The third part focuses on a more detailed analysis of Kiš's trilogy understood as a sequence of narratives concerning the 'impossibility of death'.

Chapter 2 discusses how, for Kiš, the question of responsibility as an infinite ethical demand to bear witness to the mortality of the Other is not separable from the writer's literary responsibility, and how this thus means that, for Kiš, ethics *is* aesthetics. This necessarily entails an analysis of the relation between Kiš's poetics and his treatment of history. In the first part, drawing upon a comparison with Levinas's notion of *eschatology* as the passage to the ethical, Kiš's rigorous

understanding of the writer's responsibility will be read in terms of a conception of language as a rupture in or with history and as an excess that cannot be situated in any continuous historical narrative. The second part continues by exploring Kiš's 'pessimistic' understanding of history as taking the shape of a repetitive violence that can be related to 'the eternal return of the same', as well as his equation of political with religious forms of ideology. The third part analyses in more detail Kiš's collections of stories *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) and *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1983) as narrations of infinite eschatology. These stories demonstrate, I argue, a conception of literary language as constituting a rupture or excess in history and, in addition, an idea that books have their own 'fate', as Kiš asserts. This is exemplified by the story 'The Books of Kings and Fools' which, in tracing 'the historical' impact and genesis of another book, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, establishes a kind of counter-narrative to the forged and anti-Semitic 'fictions' of the former.

Chapter 3 deals with the question of the freedom of the modern artwork and the problems attended upon such freedom. The first part discusses, in this light, the aesthetic theories of Adorno, Blanchot and Rancière, alongside Kiš's own pronouncements, and their respective understandings of the ethical dimensions of such freedom. I argue that, for Kiš, it is precisely a sense of ethics as aesthetics that accords transformative potential to the modern artwork. The second part draws parallels between Levinas's 'art of proximity' (as Gerald L. Bruns calls it) and Kiš's language of materiality as a non-dialectical experience of subjectivity. The third part focuses on what Critchley terms a 'comic-antiheroic paradigm' (which he places alongside Levinas's and Blanchot's conceptions of the impossibility of death), and argues, in this way, for a reading of the humour in Kiš's *Hourglass* as an interesting example of such a paradigm that is connected, in turn, to the latter's vision of a possible 'atheist transcendence'.

With Chapter 4, my thesis comes full circle in returning to the question of suffering. Addressing, again, the ineluctable theme of death, in terms of its intimate relation to the experience of suffering, the first part of the chapter focuses on the importance of a certain idea of Central European culture in Kiš's work, and the questions of exile and loss of identity that, for him, now accompany it; something discussed here



through readings of Blanchot's *The Idyll* (1936) and his later notion of 'unavowable community'. The second part of the chapter addresses the notion of *debt* in Levinas's thought, as the ineluctable condition of a community in dying, together with Kiš's story 'Dug' [The Debt] (1986), posthumously published in Serbian in 1994, and in English translation in 2012. The third and last part of this chapter analyses Kiš's story 'A and B' as an embodiment of a necessarily recurring sense of *homelessness*, and as an a priori condition for the exigency of the ethical relation that is generated through writing/reading.

In its Conclusion, the final section of my thesis reflects upon the arguments presented in the previous four chapters – concerning the relationship between ethics and literary writing, the ways in which our relations to death can be communicated through language, and the writer's responsibility in light of this - and underlines the ways in which, on this basis, my objective to articulate a distinctive conception of ethics as aesthetics in Kiš's work has been addressed. At the same time, I briefly consider the importance of Kiš's work within a contemporary political as well as literary context.

## Chapter One – Kiš's Trilogy, the Shoah and *Impossibility* of Dying

The central concern of this chapter is to explore the ways in which Kiš's semi-autobiographical trilogy (*Hourglass* (1972), *Garden, ashes* (1965) and *Early Sorrows* (1969)) responds to the question of how literature may engage with, or respond to, the Shoah by considering it in relation to Levinas's and Blanchot's thought and, in particular, to their notion of the *il y a*; the principal focus of this chapter. I argue that Kiš's differential and yet repetitive addressing of the unthinkable event (the Shoah), in his intertwined use of testimony and fiction across the trilogy, points to the possibility of a language of witnessing through the experience of the *il y a*;<sup>1</sup> in other words, the chapter seeks to argue that it is the *il y a* that opens a passage to the *witnessing* of such an event (Auschwitz) by way of a deferral of meaning and of redemption. For this reason, I argue that Kiš's trilogy can also be considered a kind of  *récit*, in the specific sense in which Blanchot understands this term; that is, according to Blanchot's own 'definition', not the narration of a relating to the event but that event itself.<sup>2</sup> Hence, although these three works form a trilogy constituting the so-called 'family cycle' or 'family circus' in Kiš's oeuvre, they do not attain any unity of narration or representation with regard to the Shoah itself. Instead, they constitute what one may call a kind of pseudo-trilogy in so far as the agent of their - so to speak - 'unity' is the ways in which each deals, representationally, with what I am terming the *impossibility* of death in dealing with the Shoah. The chapter seeks to argue then that for Kiš, as for Levinas and Blanchot, the encounter with dying is inseparable from both ethics and writing to the degree that it entails an *unintentional* exposure to the relation with the unknown and the irreducible other that is essential both to writing and ethical experience. In so far as Kiš's entire opus obsessively deals with the (often violent) death of an (oppressed) outsider, I hope thus to demonstrate that a juxtaposition of Levinas's and Blanchot's thought with Kiš's prose is not a more or

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<sup>1</sup> According to Levinas's descriptions throughout his *Existence and Existents* (1947), the *il y a* is the 'horror' of 'irremissible existence' and an 'anonymous' 'eternity of being'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Encountering the Imaginary' (in 'The Song of the Sirens'), in Blanchot, Maurice, *The Book to Come* (2003), edited by Werner Hamacher, translation Charlotte Mandell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, pp.6-7.

less arbitrary conjunction but, rather, that it serves to further an understanding of the place of the *ethical* 'itself' within Kiš's poetics.

## 1. Kiš's 'aesthetics of ugliness'

In the posthumously published collection of stories *Lauta i Ožiljci* (1994) (*The Lute and the Scars*),<sup>3</sup> one of Kiš's protagonists, Nikolaj Aleksinski, claims:

a writer is supposed to observe life in its totality. The writer has to point out the great theme, dying - so that humans might be less proud, less selfish, less evil – and, on the other hand, he or she must imbue life with some kind of meaning. Art is the balance between those two contradictory concepts. And a person's duty, especially for a writer...involves leaving behind in this world not work (everything is work) but rather some goodness, some knowledge. Every written word is a piece of creation.<sup>4</sup>

This duty constitutes, arguably, Kiš's ethical *and* aesthetical impetus in all his work. Akin to Blanchot, writing is, for Kiš, not supposed to preserve the work of art *per se*; instead, I argue here, it is a realm of *transcendence* - understood specifically in Levinas's and Blanchot's terms - as an intersubjective relation to the death of the other human by way of 'questioning'.<sup>5</sup> In this, Kiš consciously preserves a notion of the sacredness and strangeness of any intersubjective

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<sup>3</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Lauta i Ožiljci* (2011), priredila Mirjana Miočinović, Arhipelag, Beograd. This collection of stories was translated into English and published in 2012. See, Kiš, Danilo, *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), preface Adam Thirlwell, translation John K. Cox, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, Dublin and London.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Lute and the Scars' in *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), pp.59-60. This story was written in 1983 and published for the first time in Serbian in 1993. In Serbian, the cited passage reads: 'Pisac treba...da sagledava život u celini. Da nagovesti veliku temu umiranja – kako bi čovek bio manje gord, manje sebičan, manje zao – a, s druge strane, da osmišljava život. Umetnost je ravnoteža te dve protivurečne misli. Dužnost je čoveka, pogotovu pisca ...da ode sa ovog sveta ostavivši za sobom ne delo, delo je sve, nego nešto od dobrote, nešto od saznanja. Svaka napisana reč je postanje', p.53.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Hayat, for instance, argues in his Preface to Levinas's *Alterity and Transcendence* (1989) that Levinas's understanding of 'transcendence' is 'the intimate structure of subjectivity', and, further, 'it is subjectivity that is found at the beginning of the movement of transcendence.' In Levinas, Emmanuel, *Alterity and Transcendence* (1989), translation Michael B. Smith, The Athlone Press, London, xi. Levinas's account of subjectivity implies that there is an unbearable *ethical* demand from the self to the other and, in addition, that to be a subject in the first place presupposes ethics or ethical responsibility, as Levinas perceives it. In this manner, Levinas reintroduces transcendence, as transcendence *of infinity*, as a response to nihilism. In other words, he does not want to succumb to nihilism as a response to the question of the Shoah. However, for Levinas, as for Adorno, this reintroduction of transcendence must not be considered in a traditional way that relates it with theodicy. Therefore, for Levinas, the return to metaphysics is only possible after the Shoah in terms of it being a transcendence of infinity, which is, for Levinas, ethics itself.

relation – what Levinas terms a ‘curvature of intersubjective space’<sup>6</sup> which is defined not in relation to the subject’s power but in relation to a demand that is always already addressed to the subject by the other. As such, Kiš’s work is, at least on my reading, imbued with a kind of *religiosity* but without succumbing to the danger of any return to theodicy. (Like Levinas, or indeed Adorno, to reduce transcendence to the latter would be to offer a form of redemption that could only be ‘odious’ in the face of that ‘suffering for nothing’ revealed by the Shoah. As Levinas puts it: ‘[pain] renders impossible and odious every proposal and every thought that would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead.’<sup>7</sup>) Although essentially post-metaphysical and profoundly atheistic in character, Kiš’s work addresses the modern problem of nihilism precisely by way of an attempt to reinscribe man’s freedom and the burden of responsibility that accompanies freedom as a condition of modernity itself.

Writing, at least where Kiš is concerned, is always already, then, I will argue, animated by a vestige of the ethical relation that, as Levinas argues, ‘knowing can neither exhaust nor unravel’.<sup>8</sup> As such, it constantly challenges an epistemological mastery of history through writing by constructing a literature that offers an exposure to a different, *non-chronologica*<sup>9</sup> sense of history – a history which, according to Kiš, is always a history of violence. This, however, does not imply that his work is a critique of all knowledge *per se*; rather, it is a critique of dogmatising knowledge for the sake of an oppressive and totalizing ideology that often violently reduces an individual to nothingness in order to achieve its goals. In one of his last interviews ‘I Don’t Believe in a Writer’s Fantasy’ (1989), Kiš claims:

With the disappearance of fascist/nationalist ideology and the ever faster crumbling of Marxist/Communist ideology, the situation has largely lost its edge. The world – it is now quite obvious – is turning to different forms of faith. This holds not only for Muslim states but for Catholic and Orthodox countries as well. Even

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<sup>6</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity, (An Essay on Exteriority)* (2005), translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, p.291. I will address this notion in more detail in chapter two.

<sup>7</sup> See, Levinas, Emmanuel, *Entre Nous* (1998), translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Continuum, London and New York, pp.81-86.

<sup>8</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, ‘Language and Proximity’, Chapter 7, in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (1987), translation Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, footnote for p.116.

<sup>9</sup> In the following chapter I develop an argument that this non-chronological experience of history in Kiš’s prose could be said to correspond to Levinas’s notion of *diachrony* of time, i.e. the *ethical* time in Levinas.

Western, industrialised nations show a trend towards mysticism. People obviously need a total, totalitarian explanation of the world. Marxist ideology gave them a totalitarian explanation by attempting to define the mechanics of life and existence in terms of the class-struggle hypothesis. As people have come to realize that the Marxist explanation is inadequate, even incorrect, they have turned to a variety of faiths in the hope of finding an acceptable explanation. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries constitute the age of the great ideologies, the age when religious and mystic utopias were replaced by allegedly unified philosophical and political concepts. This project, which was a consequence of the Enlightenment, must now be regarded as a failure. We are turning again to mysticism and religious utopias.<sup>10</sup>

In resisting such a 'writer's fantasy', Kiš's 'factional' juxtaposition of real and apocryphal documents has, in this way, an essential function in all of his texts, in so far as it serves to maintain a scepticism towards an idea that any final 'totality' of absolute knowledge can ever be achieved in the work. In Blanchotian terms, one might say, Kiš's work deliberately oscillates *between* work and worklessness, power and powerlessness, in order to, as it were, tease the reader with their apparent need for authentic knowledge or truth. What Kiš 'establishes' within the genre of 'faction' is, in this sense, the active persistence of a kind of permanent rupturing within the text itself, which is thus revealed to be *essentially* incomplete.

In the introduction to *The Anatomy Lesson* (1978) Kiš claims that he chose Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* to be both a 'visual metaphor and the dust cover'<sup>11</sup> for his book because it preserves an Aristotelian 'aesthetic of ugliness'. (Kiš wrote this polemical book not only as a response to accusations of plagiarism, discussed in my introduction, but also as a vehement defence of literature in general.) As he quotes from Aristotle's *Poetics*, Chapter IV: 'Though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies'.<sup>12</sup> While Kiš used this citation specifically as a way of framing

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<sup>10</sup> In *Homo Poeticus: essays and Interviews* (1995), *Homo Poeticus: essays and Interviews* (1995), edited and with an introduction by Susan Sontag, translations: Ralph Manheim, Michael Henry Heim, Francis Jones; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p.273.

<sup>11</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp. 13-14.

what his polemical book was about to challenge – the hostile reality of literary criticism in the former Yugoslavia at that time – it can, nevertheless, also serve to designate a kind of *po-ethical* impetus to be found across his entire work. That is to say, as a writer who experimented with and, arguably, radicalised the use of form in his work – a work that focuses mainly on the barbarity of the twentieth century, his prose preserves a kind of Adornian paradox with regard to the ‘representational’ qualities of high modernist art: namely, that the more alienated or abstracted (at the level of form) a work of art appears to be from the world, the more genuinely *realist* it becomes in relation to that world (a claim I will elaborate upon more thoroughly in chapter three).<sup>13</sup> For Kiš, apparently, as Adorno puts it in his essay ‘Commitment’: ‘The uncompromising radicalism of their works, the very features defamed as *formalism*, give them a terrifying power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time.’<sup>14</sup> It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that Edmund White calls *Hourglass* a novel of ‘reckoning’ and ‘demystification’, whose very literary technique ‘invents realism’, as he puts it.<sup>15</sup> According to this account, it is then, paradoxically, Kiš’s most experimental use of form that enables a way of looking at reality (e.g. of the Shoah) and at the existence in general in the most detached and *realist* manner due to *Hourglass*’s very alienating character itself.

While I will address this point in rather more detail later on in this chapter, one might already note that alienating form is, arguably, crucial in this way to Kiš’s obsessive need to interrogate the idea of totality in literature, in order to, as it were, address what is always already *beyond* totality, and, hence, beyond the modes of literary representation associated with it. This *beyond* is, at least on my reading of Kiš’s work, an acknowledgment, above all, of both the mortality of the (other) human and, crucially, the uniqueness and/or singularity of every being. In other words, for Kiš, it is precisely the alienating form of the text that preserves

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<sup>13</sup> I shall dedicate the first section of Chapter three to this debate and to Adorno’s claim concerning the question of freedom of modern art. For now, it is worth recalling here Adorno’s claim in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) regarding modernist works: ‘The more ruthlessly artworks draw the consequences from the contemporary condition of consciousness, the more closely they themselves approximate meaninglessness.’ In *Aesthetic Theory*, p.340.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno, Theodor, ‘Commitment’ in *Aesthetics and Politics*: the key texts of the classic debate with German Marxism (Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Brecht, Lukács), translation editor Ronald Taylor, afterword by Frederic Jameson, Verso, London and New York, pp.188-189; 177-195.

<sup>15</sup> White, Edmund, *Danilo Kiš: Obligations of Form*, in *Southwest Review*, Vol. 71, No.3 (Summer 1986), pp.363-377; p.368, p.371. Article accessed here: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43469863> (last time visited 7 February, 2016).

both the ethical and aesthetic aspects in regard to the subject matter (e.g. the Shoah) in so far as it leaves beyond grasp the 'object' of narration. It is in this way, we might say, that Kiš's poetics insists, with particular rigour, upon what Adorno names the 'unbarbaric side of philosophy',<sup>16</sup> a kind of necessary element of *distance* in the process of thinking/conceptualisation itself with regard to the object being represented or judged. (This will be considered in more detail in chapter three, in which I more directly address the question of freedom in Kiš's work.)

Notably, Kiš's prose is devoid of any appeal to theological narratives that would justify the slaughterhouse(s) of the last century, instead placing man solely at the centre of all human tragedy. For this reason, I argue that what permeates Kiš's prose is what Critchley terms an ethics of 'atheist transcendence',<sup>17</sup> whereby the absurdity of existence does not thus exempt the subject from the burden of responsibility for the other human. In Kiš's work this is most emblematically obvious in the title story of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) where the interrogator Fedukin finds a way to 'break' the revolutionary Novsky by way of this 'moral' dilemma: 'For if Novsky had discovered the saving but dangerous idea of the futility of one's own being-in-time and suffering, this was still a moral choice; Fedukin's intuitive genius had sensed that this choice does not exclude morality – quite the contrary.'<sup>18</sup> For Kiš, as such, the absurdity and the horror of existence is not devoid of an ethical demand and/or relation; instead, it is, perhaps, the ethical relation itself that somehow frames, or at least attempts to frame and/or give meaning and form to, the horror of existence in the literary work. It is this crucial aspect of Kiš's poetics that invites a juxtaposition, I suggest, with Levinas's own philosophy of ethics and of the ethical relation.

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<sup>16</sup> From fragment 'Keeping one's distance', in Adorno, Theodor, *Minima Moralia (Reflections from Damaged Life)* (2000), translated by E.F.N.Jephcott, Verso, London and New York, pp.126-7.

<sup>17</sup> In *Very Little...Almost Nothing (Death, Philosophy, Literature)* (1997), the work that addresses the issue of overcoming nihilism (or rather the impossibility of overcoming it), Critchley's main argument is that one must affirm the meaninglessness of existence without recourse to religion. Furthermore, Critchley insists that mourning, as the acknowledgement of finitude in the midst of infinite dying, is perhaps, first and foremost, what gives some meaning to our everyday life.

<sup>18</sup>Kiš, Danilo, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (2001), introduction Joseph Brodsky, afterward William T. Vollmann, translation Duška Mikić-Mitchell, Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois, pp.93-94. In Serbian: 'jer ako je on (Novski) došao na spasonosnu i opasnu misao koja govori o uzaludnosti sopstvenog trajanja i stradanja, to je još uvek moralni izbor; Fedjukinov intuitivni genij naslutio je i to da takav stav govori o jednom izboru koji dakle ne isključuje moralnost, naprotiv.' In Kiš, Danilo, *Grobnica za Borisa Davidovicha* (2000), urednik Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.107-8.

As I have already observed, much of the work of Levinas and Blanchot focuses on the notion of what they term the *il y a* (literally, 'there is') in order to challenge the Western philosophical tradition's privileging of totality in thought, as the idea of an absolute consciousness or knowledge. To begin to understand what is meant by the event of the *il y a*, particularly as it might be related to Kiš's prose, it should be noted that, *contra* Sartrean existentialism, for Levinas, the question of being and nothingness is not the only question. In *Existence and Existents* (1947), written mostly during Levinas's imprisonment during World War II, he describes the event of the *il y a* as, first and foremost, an overbearing and inescapable condition or relation that the existent has with itself; a relation which Levinas describes as one of horror: 'the rustling of there is ... horror'.<sup>19</sup> Here, the feeling of fatigue, insomnia and weariness overwhelms the existent which is 'stripped of subjectivity' and, as it were, 'depersonalised', Levinas writes.<sup>20</sup> This is not, however, because of the subject's own finitude (its being-towards-death), or its confrontation with nothingness (as Heidegger, for instance, argues in *Being and Time*), but because there is an overwhelming sense of *too* much being. In other words, the existent is burdened and crushed by itself (by being) not because it is a finite being but because it is condemned to exist in the first place. This is the fate that the existent cannot find an exit from, according to the Levinas of the 1940s. In this respect, the *il y a* is then the *pre-condition* of both being and nothingness; it is that which *de facto* totalises the disappearance of the existence of everything – or as Levinas claims, it is a 'universality of existence even in annihilation'.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, this implies that, for Levinas, the *il y a* is that which is always already outside of consciousness and, thus, outside of a possibility of being negated and, thereby, totalised. As Levinas, for instance, claims in *Existence and Existents*: 'this presence which arises behind nothingness is neither a *being*, nor consciousness functioning in a void, but the universal fact of the *there is*, which encompasses things and consciousness'.<sup>22</sup> In the words of Leslie Hill (one of the most precise readers of Levinas in this respect), 'the *il y a* is a strangely ambiguous moment of

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<sup>19</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Existence and Existents* (2001), translated by Alphonso Lingis, foreword Robert Bernasconi, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, p.55.

<sup>20</sup> *Existence and Existents*, p.56.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Existence and Existents*, p.61.



ontological foundation' in so far as '[it] is logically prior to all propositions, including negative ones, and cannot itself be negated'. As such, Hill goes on to claim, 'it serves as a moment of foundation for being' and, at the same time, it is also an 'ineliminable challenge to the autonomy and stability of that world.'<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, then, the *il y a* is that which both founds a possibility of the world and, simultaneously, threatens its foundation.

It is in their thinking of this 'outside' that Levinas and Blanchot are perhaps most similar, yet also, paradoxically, where they perhaps most profoundly differ. Certainly, for both Levinas and Blanchot, the inescapable condition of the *il y a* places death in a position of radical *impossibility*<sup>24</sup> (from the perspective of truth, power, consciousness), in which the subject's powerlessness in the midst of the experience of the *il y a* does not lead either to recuperation of the self or full comprehension of the given world. In *The Space of Literature* (1955) Blanchot, for instance, claims:

It is the fact of dying that includes a radical reversal, through which the death that was extreme form of my power not only becomes what loosens my hold upon myself by casting me out of my power to begin and even to finish, but also becomes that which is without any relation to me, without power over me – that which is stripped of all possibility – the unreality of the indefinite. I cannot represent this reversal to myself, I cannot even conceive of it as definitive. It is not the irreversible step beyond which there would be no return, for it is that which is not accomplished, the interminable and the incessant.<sup>25</sup>

In this manner, in the midst of the *il y a*, the future is both uncertain and one's control over it is always deferred.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, however, whereas Levinas's doctrine would seek to overcome the burden of the *il y a* with the event

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<sup>23</sup> Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p.63.

<sup>24</sup> *Existence and Existents*, p.61.

<sup>25</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (1982), translated by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, p.106. See also 'Literature and the Right to Death', In Blanchot, Maurice, *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, p.389.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Blanchot, Maurice, *The Writing of the Disaster*, (1986), new edition, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, pp.47-8. See also, Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, p.60; see also, Lars, Iyer, 'The Unbearable Trauma and Witnessing in Blanchot and Levinas', in: *Janus Head*, Vol. 6, No.1, 2003, pp.37-63.

of the arrival of the existent (which Levinas terms 'hypostasis'<sup>27</sup> or the subject's *separation* from anonymity of the *il y a*) that emerges from this experience (and with, subsequently, his/her responsibility for the other), Blanchot considers the *il y a* to be the condition of a precisely literary *space*.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, arguably, Blanchot's entire theoretical corpus revolves around this idea to the degree that it is the *il y a* that is the fundamental condition of writing as what he famously calls 'exteriority'. As he puts it in *The Infinite Conversation* (1969):

Writing, the exigency of writing: no longer the writing that has always (through a necessity in no way avoidable) been in the service of the speech or thought that is called idealist (that is to say, moralizing), but rather the writing that through its own slowly liberated force (the aleatory force of absence) seems to devote itself solely to itself as something that remains without identity, and little by little brings forth possibilities that are entirely other: an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation, by which everything is brought into question and first of all the idea of God, of the Self, of the Subject, then of Truth and the One, then finally the idea of the Book and the Work so that this writing (understood in its enigmatic rigor), far from having the Book as its goal rather signals its end: a writing that could be said to be outside discourse, outside language.<sup>29</sup>

These two forms of 'writing' characterise, in turn, what Blanchot defines as 'two slopes of literature'.<sup>30</sup> The first 'slope' of literature - derived by Blanchot from the Hegelian account of the subject's power to negate things in the world within language<sup>31</sup> - would, he suggests, grant the writer the power to negate things in the world by replacing them with concepts or ideas: it is 'the movement of negation by

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<sup>27</sup> *Existence and Existents*, Chapter four

<sup>28</sup> In *The Infinite Conversation*, (2003), xii. See also *The Writing of the Disaster*, (1986), new edition, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln. See also Critchley's eloquent reading of the difference between Blanchot and Levinas with regard to the *il y a*, Lecture 1 in *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), pp.31-82.

<sup>29</sup> *The Infinite Conversation*, xii.

<sup>30</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death', pp.385-386. In Blanchot, Maurice, *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill.

<sup>31</sup> In the essay 'Literature and the Right to Death', written in 1949, Blanchot refers famously, in this context, to Hegel's articulation in the *Phenomenology* of a 'life that endures death and maintains itself in death'. This is the work of consciousness itself, whereby the Subject - which, for Hegel, has the absolute power to negate within the dialectic or sublation - maintains itself through a constant relation to death through language. Thus, for Hegel, language is the tool that annihilates, as it were, things for the sake of Geist itself as philosophical activity. Things are replaced in their specificity for the sake of meaning, concept and understanding. See, for instance, Critchley's rather humorous interpretation of this in Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, pp.52-3.

which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated.<sup>32</sup> The second 'slope' of literature, however, names the *impossible* attempt of the writer to seek the singularity of things *before* they are, as Blanchot claims, 'destroyed' by the concepts of the first slope.<sup>33</sup> In other words, to paraphrase Blanchot himself, language *abandons* the meaning and sense of the first slope (which is granted by the power of subject) due to the fact that what it seeks now, on the second slope, is precisely to become 'senseless' and, as such, free.<sup>34</sup> In particular, according to Blanchot, it is what this signifies for the relation between literature and death, above all in relation to the Shoah, which constitutes an ineluctable need to commemorate *through* writing the suffering afflicted in Auschwitz, but in such a way that no absolute understanding of that event is possible. In 'After the Fact', Blanchot thus, for instance, claims that: 'No matter when it is written, every story from now on will be from before Auschwitz.' That is to say, since, for Blanchot (like Adorno), with Auschwitz the foundation of humanity *qua* humanity has been lost, including the foundation of 'all narration, even all poetry', in order for a work of fiction to continue to exist it must do so on the basis of forgetfulness. Yet this, of course, does not imply forgetting Auschwitz in any conventional sense. On the contrary, Blanchot seems to suggest that thinking (and thus remembering) Auschwitz is *only* possible by virtue, paradoxically, of a forgetting.<sup>35</sup>

In this way, Blanchot highlights literature's task to preserve scepticism as a form of responsibility in relation to the death of the other by way of a loss of identity and what he terms a permanent questioning. As he claims in *The Writing of Disaster*:

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<sup>32</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death', p.386.

<sup>33</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death', p.386. See also, for instance, Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p. 112.

<sup>34</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death', p.383. For an excellent account regarding the relation between writing and death in Blanchot, and, in particular regarding the understanding of Blanchot's two 'slopes', see Critchley's Lecture 1 on the *il y a* in *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, pp.48-65. See also, 'Writing the neuter', in Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, pp.103-158.

<sup>35</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, Barrytown Ltd., p.495; for this argument, see also Mole, D. Gary, *Levinas, Blanchot, Jabès: Figures of Estrangement* (1997), University Press of Florida, Gainesville, pp.142-3.

The I that is responsible for others, the I bereft of selfhood, is sheer fragility, through and through on trial. This I without *any* identity is responsible for him to whom he can give no response; this I must answer in an interrogation where no question is put; he is a question directed to others from whom no answer can be expected either. The Other does not answer.<sup>36</sup>

Part of my argument in what follows is, then, that, similarly, Kiš deliberately foregrounds this duality within writing itself, where the overlapping between Blanchot's two 'slopes' – that are never reconciled<sup>37</sup> – aims to highlight two major aspects of his own work: on the one hand, the critique of a modernity that seeks absolute knowledge (which Kiš often, albeit rather idiosyncratically, closely relates to a form of 'positivism' in his interviews and essays), and, on the other, the poetic licence that is claimed by the writer in order to expose subjectivity to a more visceral dimension of existence; something which is, for both Levinas and Blanchot, also necessary for the ethical relation with the other to be maintained. Regarding Kiš's *Early Sorrows* (1969), Edmund White claims that the 'subtlety' of these stories can be found precisely in their 'phenomenology' or, as he puts it, in 'the[ir] presentation of sensuous experiences with a minimum of interpretation and a maximum of incomprehension.'<sup>38</sup> In this manner, Kiš addresses the horror of the Shoah in such a way that it remains beyond the grasp of representation or fiction, and yet, I argue, it is profoundly sensed in its absence as this is effectively figured in the work itself: that is, what exposes the reader to the horror are the 'images' rather than the 'content' as such of these vignettes in a text like *Early Sorrows*.

Writing of his 'family triptych', Kiš famously claims: 'we began with a sketch (*Early Sorrows*), moved on to a drawing (*Garden, ashes*), and came finally to the painting itself (*Hourglass*).'<sup>39</sup> Correspondingly, *Early Sorrows* is a collection of short stories written from a child's point of view upon the chaotic world that surrounds him,

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<sup>36</sup> *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.119 (my emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> In Blanchot's terms, their potential reconciling would signify a totality. Hence, Blanchot's insistence on a quasi-dialectic within literary language: what is at 'work' - so to speak - are always 'two languages' of both possibility and impossibility. As Blanchot puts it: 'there must always be at least two languages, or two requirements: one dialectical, the other not; one where negativity is the task, the other where the neutral remains apart.' In *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.20.

<sup>38</sup> White, Edmund, 'Danilo Kiš: Obligations of Form', p.365.

<sup>39</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.262

while *Garden, ashes* is a novel that bridges the child's point of view with that of the narrator (a man in his thirties). This is the novel for which Kiš coined the term 'intellectual lyricism' as a way of defining his attempt to prevent prose becoming naively lyrical (an 'irony against feelings', as he claimed).<sup>40</sup> By contrast, *Hourglass* is most often read known as a 'historical fiction' where narration unfolds from an objective point of view, or 'author-God view', as Kiš calls it (echoing Barthes).<sup>41</sup> Yet, crucially, all three books also deal with the *unthinkable*, i.e. with the event of Auschwitz as such, implying, in themselves, the degree to which, as Blanchot argues, the very form of the 'story' is rendered at some level 'impossible' by such an event. As a trilogy, *Early Sorrows*, *Garden, ashes* and *Hourglass* embody in this way a form of 'infinite fragmentation' rather than offering any absolute comprehension of this historical event.

It is in this sense that Kiš indicates an agreement with Adorno's famous dictum that *it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz*,<sup>42</sup> recognising the validity of its resistance to any possibility of redemption or pathos in narrating the holocaust; a kind of 'redemption' that would, in turn, only diminish the senseless suffering of its victims, and so serve to justify it. Consequently, Kiš's trilogy exposes the reader, I argue, to a metamorphosis of evil from *without* so to speak: decentering the books' apparent centre (Auschwitz) by focusing instead on personal events and experiences from his childhood (the first two books), and by dismantling/disintegrating the chronological order of events of the real historical document that the books incorporate (specifically, as we will see, the father's letter in *Hourglass*). As a kind of intense Shklovskyan *ostranenie* or estrangement, in which to 'represent' the Holocaust can only be to do so 'indirectly', for Kiš, then, a fragmentation through images on the one hand, and the innovative deployment of documents on the other, appear to be the primary methods in his work for dealing with, as he calls it, twentieth-century man's 'schizopsychological' behaviour.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.252

<sup>41</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.262

<sup>42</sup> 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in Adorno, Theodor W., *Prisms* (1997), translation from German Samuel and Shierry Weber, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p.34

<sup>43</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp.53-54.

## 2. 'Faction' as *impossibility* of committing a perfect murder: tracing the document and/or documenting the trace of the *il y a*

Kiš's innovative deployment of documents in his prose is perhaps the first step in redefining what he considers specifically *modern* in post-Auschwitz literature; that is, the rejection of, as he calls it, literary 'fabrication'.<sup>44</sup> According to him, literature can no longer ignore the culmination of violence of the twentieth century (with Hiroshima as its 'focal point'<sup>45</sup>), and so writing itself must not only commemorate the 'fantastic reality' of, for instance, the Shoah, Gulag, and so on, but, in addition, literary language itself can only do so in the form of a kind of testimony, rather than pretending to any completed explanation of such a 'reality' in its totality. In *The Anatomy Lesson* (1978), in the section titled 'Schizopsychology', Kiš, for instance, claims:

No longer, even on the level of literature do psychological approaches suffice, based as they are on the dichotomy of good and evil and on the moral categories man wrestles with, categories such as the Ten Commandments or the Seven Deadly Sins ... Bearing this in mind, the writer no longer approaches his heroes with an eye to interpreting their actions psychologically, in terms of moral consistencies or violated taboos; he tries instead to garner a mass of documents and facts which, when yoked together in a wild and unpredictable fashion, provoke a senseless massacre encompassing sociological, ethnological, parapsychological, occult, and other like motifs. To deal with such motifs in the old way would be more than senseless, for what lurks immediately behind them is man's schizopsychological behaviour, a paranoid, in other words, fantastic reality; and the writer has an obligation to put that paranoid reality on paper, to examine the absurd plexus of circumstance on the basis of documents, probes, investigations, and to avoid proffering personal, arbitrary diagnosis or prescribing medicines and cures.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp.52-3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp. 53-4. Some crucial sections of *The Anatomy Lesson* (1978) were translated into English and edited by Susan Sontag in *Homo Poeticus* (1995).

This does not, however, imply that documents' transposition into a literary realm removes the possibility of the imaginary altogether, for that would suggest that we are no longer in the space of literature at all; instead, for Kiš, the documentary plexus within the literary text, 'when yoked together in a wild and unpredictable fashion', only increases the demand for the imaginary upon the reader that is provoked by an intricate, intertwined relation between what is 'true' and what is not. Responding to a question regarding the function of documents in his work, Kiš states that: 'the stories that most resemble documents contain most fiction [because] that's where the imagination predominates ... What is true and what is false, what is a genuine document and what is forgery – that is, a document modelled after a genuine one – is neither here nor there. All that matters is conveying the *illusion* of truth.'<sup>47</sup> In fact, the use of documents, for Kiš, signals the beginning of a trajectory of a movement that might best be described as one from work to worklessness in Blanchot's terms, where what lurks behind their 'signalling', as it were, is an *absence* – what is *not* (or cannot be) represented - as *the trace* of the Other. In this chapter on Kiš's trilogy, I want, then, to juxtapose his deployment of documents in terms of this (literary) trajectory of 'absence' - as the foundation of his oeuvre – with the Levinasian/Blanchotian notion of the *il y a*, in order to argue that without the experience of the *il y a*, there can be, on his account, neither ethical relation nor aesthetics in Kiš's work; this includes, specifically, the introjection of documentary forms themselves. In Kiš's prose, it is the trace of the *il y a*, as it is 'figured' as horror in writing, that induces a heteronomy of the self which, as experience, is arguably the condition of the ethical relation.

In the essay 'The Trace of the Other' (1986) Levinas argues that Western philosophy as a tradition of truth and knowledge is, essentially, a tradition of egology or egoism: 'the *outside of me* is *for me*', as Levinas puts it. 'The tautology

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<sup>47</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, pp.198-99 (my emphasis). In addition, as I mentioned in my introduction, in dealing with the problems of representation of the Shoah, Kiš's rejection of outdated psychology as a method of interpretation of his protagonists finds, he suggests, its parallel in the *nouveau roman*. Although not a fan of the genre, Kiš thus acknowledges the importance of its rejection of psychology in writing. See *Homo Poeticus*, p.218.

of ipseity is an egoism.<sup>48</sup> In these terms not only is 'self-consciousness' in agreement or equated with a 'consciousness of being' but, in addition, there can be no knowledge without a reduction of everything *other* that is outside the self: 'the alien being is as it were naturalised as soon as it commits itself to knowledge'.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, Levinas equates Western metaphysics with a desire for absolute knowledge that must always, ultimately, negate the alterity of the other.<sup>50</sup> As he puts it in 'The Trace of the Other':

The God of the philosophers, from Aristotle to Leibniz, by way of the God of the scholastics, is a god adequate to reason, a comprehended god who could not trouble the autonomy of consciousness, which finds itself again in all its adventures, returning home to itself like Ulysses, who through all his peregrinations is only on the way to his native island.<sup>51</sup>

The figure of Ulysses becomes here not only a figure of the return of the self to itself but also a figure of the desire to reason for the sake of reason itself. In the same essay, however, Levinas also articulates a different notion of transcendence understood as *beyond being*, that is, as *irreducible* to what he terms the 'imperialism' of the ego. By contrast to Ulysses, this is embodied in the figure of Abraham, who, on Levinas's reading, constitutes a figure of no return of, or to, the self, but who, instead, opens up an experience of irreducible alterity in an encounter with the Other.

This 'beyond being' is what Levinas terms an experience of a 'third person'<sup>52</sup> or *illeity* that is signalled as *absence* in the 'face' of the other. As Levinas puts it: 'The supreme presence of a face is inseparable from this supreme and irreversible absence, which founds the eminence of visitation.'<sup>53</sup> In this way, Levinas speaks of the *trace* of the Other precisely as a radically *non-phenomenological* aspect of the face whose absence is its paradoxical condition, i.e. the face signifies (*as face*)

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<sup>48</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, 'The Trace of the Other', translation Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, edited by Mark C. Taylor, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp.345-59; 345.

<sup>49</sup> 'The Trace of the Other', p.346, p.345.

<sup>50</sup> 'The Trace of the Other', p.346.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> 'The Trace of the Other', p.356. Levinas states: 'Beyond being is a third person'.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*



precisely because of its irreducible (absent) trace that cannot be categorised by the self. According to Gary D. Mole, this impossibility of reducing the trace is precisely 'Levinas's God of revelation ... the means by which ethics is introduced into the human.'<sup>54</sup> What it *reveals* without revealing per se is a plurality within the self that is beyond the cognitive power of the self to grasp. And it is this that constitutes, for Levinas, the ethical relation with the Other.

For the purpose of this chapter what is most important here is the parallel suggested between Levinas's description of the trace of the Other and his conception of the *il y a*. As Critchley has argued, although Levinas seeks to overcome the *il y a*, it would appear that his descriptions 'of the alterity of illeity' are somewhat similar to that of the *il y a*: they are both experiences of nonsense overcoming sense (which, in this context, should be understood as cognition and reason of the self) as indicative of a certain powerlessness of the subject.<sup>55</sup> Levinas speaks of the trace (of illeity) - precisely as 'a disturbance imprinting itself and 'engraving itself'<sup>56</sup> - as an *irreparable* absence in this regard.<sup>57</sup> As he puts it:

Its original signifyingness is sketched out in, for example, the fingerprints left by someone who wanted to wipe away his traces and commit a perfect crime. He who left traces in wiping out his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left. He disturbed the order in an irreparable way. He has passed absolutely. *To be qua leaving a trace* is to pass, to depart, to absolve oneself.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, paradoxically, the absence of a trace is, for Levinas, permanently present (or, as it were, *etched* in the fabric of the *il y a*) such that no removal of it can be possible. Could it be, therefore, that it is precisely the *horror* of the *il y a* - as a *totalising* absence at the heart of existence - that preserves the irreparable and irremovable imprint of a trace of the murdered? This establishes what would thus seem to be a paradoxical situation regarding the temporality of the ethical relation in Levinas's thought: there can be no overcoming of the burden of the *il y*

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<sup>54</sup> Mole, D. Gary, *Levinas, Blanchot, Jabés: Figures of Estrangement* (1997), University press of Florida, Gainesville, p.63. Levinas calls this 'liturgy'. See 'The Trace of the Other', p.350.

<sup>55</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, pp.78-79.

<sup>56</sup> 'The Trace of the Other', p.359.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Trace of the Other', p.357.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

a by way of the advent of the responsible subject *without* the *il y a*. If the *il y a* is the very horror of existence, it is also a condition for the ethical relation 'itself.'

For Blanchot, significantly, the *il y a* is, then, precisely that 'absence' which literature seeks to recuperate as absence: 'Something was there and is no longer there. Something has disappeared. How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*? The language of literature is a search for this moment that precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence.'<sup>59</sup> The moment that literature seeks to 'recover' is, in this sense, the *il y a* itself (as that which comes 'before' literature): an *incomplete* oscillation between sense and nonsense that constitutes the 'space of literature'.

What Blanchot terms the 'materiality of language' in literature is privileged to this degree because, counter to the 'first' slope of literature, it is this that precisely enables the freedom of 'things', by way of a constant deferral of (a completed or totalized) meaning or sense. As Blanchot states in 'Literature and the Right to Death': 'My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature'.<sup>60</sup> What he means by 'materiality' is, I think, in this sense the very obfuscating power of the language of poetry in its opaque dimension of being as a *physical* existence in the text. As Blanchot states (alluding to Mallarmé, in particular): 'everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail on the ink, the book.'<sup>61</sup> In this respect, although the *récit* is, according to Blanchot, the narrative of an *other* time that escapes conceptualisation (a time that is also different from, as he claims, the everyday familiarity of the world), it is precisely the materiality of language that enables an exposure to that other 'foreign' 'point' of the narration itself which is (at least as I read it), above all, the time of *dying*.<sup>62</sup>

In fact, as Leslie Hill puts it with regard to the relation between thought and dying in Blanchot's work, 'thought itself is already a manner of dying, already a way of

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<sup>59</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death' in *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), p.383.

<sup>60</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death', p.383. I shall thoroughly discuss this in relation to Kiš and aesthetics of *proximity* in chapter three.

<sup>61</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death', p.383.

<sup>62</sup> 'Encountering the Imaginary' (in 'The Song of the Sirens'), in *The Book to Come* (2003), edited by Werner Hamacher, translation Charlotte Mandell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, pp.6-7.

approaching the impossibility of dying which is but a name for the limitless impossibility of thought itself.<sup>63</sup> In this respect, in the midst of the *il y a*, thinking and dying become effective synonyms for a certain powerlessness, since what escapes the power of subjectivity (in the process of, for instance, reading) is precisely the power to comprehend and grasp. Hence, *contra* Heidegger – for whom death is the ultimate possibility of giving a meaning to finitude – for Blanchot (and, indeed, Levinas) dying is in fact a passive *unworking* of such possibility. As Blanchot writes:

There is in death, it would seem, something stronger than death: it is dying itself – the intensity of dying, the push of the impossible, the pressure of the undesirable even in the most desired. Death is power and even strength – limited, therefore. It sets a final date, it adjourns in the sense that it assigns to a given day [*jour*] – both random and necessary – at the same time that it defers till an undesignated day. But dying is un-power. It wrests from the present, it is always a step over the edge, it rules out every conclusion and all ends, it does not free nor does it shelter. In death, one can find an illusory refuge; the mortuary is the loophole in the impulse. But dying flees and pulls indefinitely, impossibly and intensively in the flight.<sup>64</sup>

With regard, specifically, then to the relation between the Shoah and writing which traverses all of his work, Kiš's trilogy revolves precisely, in this light, around a notion of the trace as a *disturbance imprinting itself* in the very core of existence that, although absent, cannot finally be removed. Significantly, at the centre of Kiš's triptych is the presence of a Central European Jewry that, barbarically removed during Nazi pogroms, also no longer exists today. In this respect, Central European Jewry is therefore not only a collective *trace* of the Shoah but a permanent (geopolitical) *absence*, which is etched nonetheless as presence in the fabric of history. In more specific terms within the trilogy itself, Kiš's reference to the '*Pannonian Sea*' – an ancient sea in Central Europe region – represents, as others have noted, a particularly significant metaphor for the

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<sup>63</sup> Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p.194.

<sup>64</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *The Writing of the Disaster*, (1986), new edition, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, pp.47-8

disappeared/murdered Jews in this work. But it is also, as such, for Kiš the very vehicle of possibility for narration itself. Consequent upon the work of mourning, *Pannonian Sea* enables that aspect of the narration which appears as a desire for justice and (an albeit impossible) desire for comprehension of that event, or, in other words, what Blanchot would call 'the first slope of literature'. Consider, for instance, this passage from *Hourglass* (1972):

[because] somewhere down there, at a depth of a few hundred meters, lies the corpse of the Pannonian Sea, not quite dead yet, just smothered, crushed beneath ever-new layers of earth and rock, clay and muck, animal corpses and human corpses, corpses of human beings and human works, just immobilized, that's all, for it is still breathing, has been for thousands of years...just crushed by the Mesozoic and Paleozoic strata ... if you glue your ear to the moist clay, especially on these quiet nights, you'll hear its breathing, its long death rattle.<sup>65</sup>

In this respect, what Kiš wants to resurrect or bring to the surface of existence in his writing is, it might be said, the *Pannonian corpus* of the victims of the Shoah. Yet this is something that is not, in phenomenological terms, actually materially or visually available. In other words, Kiš wants to bring back, via literature, that absent world of central European Jewry precisely as absence, preserving the sacredness of this relation and, thereby, respecting the necessary distance that this ethical relation with the dead requires.

The first role played by documents (both real and false) in Kiš's work is in reconstructing that world of the victims of the Shoah. In this sense, however, the *materialist* sensibility of his prose has a dual function: it does not only enable a reconstruction of a past but, in addition, it also, paradoxically, serves as an obfuscation of what is being narrated. I shall address this in more detail in chapter three by placing this aspect of Kiš's prose in the context of what Gerald L. Bruns terms an 'aesthetics of proximity' in Levinas's philosophy. What can be noted already, however, is the way in which Kiš thus preserves what is, I think, best

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<sup>65</sup> *Hourglass*, pp.26-7. In Serbian: 'jer tu negde, na dubini od nekoliko stotina metara, nalazi se lešina Panonskog mora, ne još sasvim mrtva nego samo pridavljena, pritisnuta sve novim slojevima zemlje i kamenja, peska, gline i kalofonijuma, leševima životinja i leševima ljudi, leševima ljudi i leševima ljudskih dela, samo prikležtena, jer još uvek diše, evo već nekoliko milenija...samo pritisnuta slojevima mezozoika i paleozoika...kad [čovjek] pripije uši uz vlažnu glinu, naročito za ovakvih tihih noći, može čuti njeno dahtanje, njen produžen ropac.' In *Peščanik* (1973), p.42.

described as an *ethical* distance from the Shoah (whereby the Shoah is never an *object* of narration) through his distinctive use of various literary devices. For instance, Kiš often focuses on the detailing of quotidian elements of a life (such as the sentimental objects that belonged to his family in *Garden, ashes*) and on long, seemingly absurd list-making (for example, in *Garden, ashes*, the father's *Bus, Ship, Rail, and Air Travel Guide*, and, in *Hourglass*, the long list of victims and their perpetrators). In this way, one could argue that the deployment of documents in Kiš's prose (regardless of whether it is a collection of stories or a novel) always has the same trajectory. That is, Kiš begins with a document in order to, as it were, trace the *immemorial* past but he does so in such a way that what the narrative documents instead (with a montage-like disavowing of a complete picture) is the trace of the *il y a*. In these terms, the 'image' of the Shoah is experienced as suffering and vulnerability in terms of a relation to the death of the other (for example, as we will see, the death of Eduard Scham in *Garden, ashes*) rather than suggesting that the Shoah 'itself' could be fully comprehended, imagined and/or explained. The father's *Bus, Ship, Rail, and Air Travel Guide* in *Garden, ashes*, and CET train time (Central European Time) in *Hourglass*, are, above all, examples of the narration of a time of dying within these texts that, to define this in Blanchot's terms, undo what the initial 'first slope' of the literary work would seem to have instantiated as its 'aim': a full grasp of the horror that could be 'represented'. As such, these examples can therefore be considered akin to a Blanchotian *récit* or the narration of *other time*, in spite of being conveyed, most directly, through Kiš's focus on the detailed everyday ephemeral aspects that constitute a life. It is not the Shoah therefore that ends up being the *object* of narration of Kiš's trilogy but the human conscience itself; that is to say, in my reading of Kiš's prose, he exposes the reader to the catastrophic events of history in a non-linear narration as *an other* side of history, but in such a way that, at the same time, Kiš always addresses the future by way of a relation to the dying of an other human. In this way, the image in Kiš's oeuvre is always *futural* even when (as most often) it relates to the past. Although Kiš's texts obsessively deal with the totalitarianism and state violence of the last century, what they, nonetheless, address is the bleak reality of a modernity – through the repetition of historical disasters - which makes the horror of the past all the more horrific in the face of the uncertainty of the future.

### 3. 'Family Circus' as the narratives of *impossibility* (of death)

*Was it thus in the days of Noah? Ah, no.  
– Anon., seventeenth century*<sup>66</sup>

*It is our task, and such a task consists not only in humanising or in mastering the foreignness of our death by a patient act, but in respecting its 'transcendence'. – Maurice Blanchot*<sup>67</sup>

#### a. *Hourglass*

Having considered Kiš's 'documentary' approach to fiction, along with Levinas's and Blanchot's concepts of the *il y a* and their relevance to Kiš's work, it is now necessary to place these arguments within the context of a more detailed discussion of Kiš's trilogy. As is the case with much avant-garde literature, Kiš's prose opens up a fluid and blurred relation between life and literature, in which the reader is, for instance, often reminded of the multilayered structure of his texts. (This is perhaps most clear in *Hourglass* and *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*). The space of literature, at least where Kiš is concerned, transcends the transposition of the *lived* dimension of existence, but in such terms that it must also always already transcend its own inadequacy in relation to lived experience. So, Kiš, for instance, claims:

I know that nothing is more horrific and Romanesque than reality; but also, nothing is more arbitrary and dangerous than an attempt to, by means of literature, clench reality that had not been permeating our lives; a reality that, pathetically speaking, we do not, as it were, carry, like miners do, lead dust on their chest. Only that kind

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<sup>66</sup> *Hourglass's* epigraph. In Danilo Kiš, *Hourglass* (1992), translation Ralph Manheim, Faber and Faber Ltd., London.

<sup>67</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *The Space of Literature*, (1990), new edition, translated by A. Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, pp.127-8. In discussing the immanence of death in Rilke's thought, Blanchot here emphasises that another side of relating to death's sovereignty is that of patience as passivity. In these terms, death is not something one can have power over.

of reality, that kind of world I am able to touch upon, [the kind] I need to cough up and vomit out of myself.<sup>68</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising then that Kiš's triptych achieves both the transcendence of a lived experience – understood as questioning by way of affectivity - while registering its necessary failure to grasp the reality of the Shoah. Form, in this respect, is nothing but an attempt to differently - if, at the same time, across the 'trilogy', repetitively - touch upon the horror of the Shoah through a mode of fragmentation that also increases the importance of the affective power of the text's visceral dimension.

In these terms, the 'composition' of Kiš's *Hourglass* (1972) is comparable, for example, to the composition of Paul Celan's much-discussed *Todesfuge* (*Death Fugue*).<sup>69</sup> That is, like Celan's poem, whose main *theme* is divided into four different scenes of the same reality, and where 'black milk' symbolises the tragic fate of the Jews, *Hourglass* is similarly divided into four different narratives that nonetheless engage the same 'reality' in crucial respects.<sup>70</sup> These four different stanzas that overlap without a linear progression within the novel, finally progress onto the major 'theme', as it were, when we come to the father's letter at the end of the novel. Dated the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, 1942, the letter refers to the 'cold milk' as the only meal for the family, which, also like Celan's poem, symbolically alters the meaning of the family's fate. It is only in these last few pages of the novel, whose decentred 'centre' is Auschwitz, that the content of the letter translates the questions raised by the novel regarding the nature of the ethical onto a more personal level: in particular, the protagonist E.S.'s anger towards the lack of humanity his own sisters offer to his wife and children. The letter, for instance, begins with:

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<sup>68</sup> My translation. In Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Remnant of Experience] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, the interview 'Ne Usudujem se da Izmislijam' [I Don't Dare Invent] (1973), pp.24-25. In Serbian: 'Ništa nije užasnije od realnosti, to znam, ništa romanesknije, ali ništa ni proizvoljnije i opasnije nego pokušaj da se sredstvima literature fiksira ona stvarnost koja nas nije prožela, koju ne nosimo u sebi, patetično rečeno, kao rudari olovni prah u grudima. Jedino takvu stvarnost, takav svet sam u stanju da dodirujem, koje moram da iskašljem, da izrigam iz sebe.'

<sup>69</sup> Božo Koprivica's article 'Peščanik je jednonoćna fuga smrti' [*Hourglass* is the night's death fugue] juxtaposes these two works and argues that the entirety of *Hourglass* is a variation of a delay before the final departure to death. The article can be accessed here: <http://www.vijesti.me/caffe/pescanik-je-jednonocna-fuga-smrti-820331>. Last time visited: January 2016.

<sup>70</sup> I exclude here 'Prologue' and 'Letter, or, Table of Contents'.

Dear Olga ... It's a pity for you that you did not come here, because you missed an Easter banquet that could easily have fed two Montenegrin villages for a whole week; indeed, the whole house could have been repaired for the outlay. My children, on the other hand, had cold milk for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in a cold house, though I prepared a modest Easter feast for them by bringing a kilo of pork-leg, chops, and innards – home from Bakša. But fate is a dog and gobbled it up.<sup>71</sup>

In this manner, Kiš asserts, both literally and metaphorically, the ambivalence of the passage to the ethical that is consequent upon a profound sense of homelessness; as such, Kiš shifts the nucleus of the novel's discourse about the ethical from the violence of collectivism (Nazism) to what one may call a *subjectivism* grounded in, or conditioned by, the person's suffering and vulnerability.

This insistence on a more personal or 'singular' understanding of ethics (as opposed to the universalistic dogmas of morality) is evident throughout Kiš's prose, regardless of the fact that the narrative voice is differently deployed in each one of his texts. Kiš, for instance, claims in one interview that his writing shifts

... from first-person singular (in *Early Sorrows* and *Garden, ashes*) to the third-person singular (in *Hourglass*) to the third-person plural, them (in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*). Call it commitment if you like: an enlargement of a circle of reality as well as an increase in the obligations resulting from it, the need to come to grips with the period in question.<sup>72</sup>

And yet, what arguably permeates his prose as a whole is, above all, the silent gesture of a *personal* responsibility in relation to the ethical demand which his texts inscribe. The following passage, which is incorporated twice into his texts, almost *verbatim* (hence establishing a kind of metonymic relation internal to his prose), perhaps best exemplifies this concern: 'the degree to which one's personal attitude and [the] courage of the inhabitants could in hard times change that fate

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<sup>71</sup> *Hourglass*, p. 263. In Serbian: 'Draga Olga! ... Možeš da žališ što nisi došla kući, jer si izgubila jednu takvu uskršnju gozbu od koje bi dva crnogorska sela mogla i nedelju dana komotno da žive, ili bi se po tu cenu mogla na kući izvršiti temeljna opravka. S druge strane, moja su deca u hladnoj sobi hladno mleko doručkovala, ručala i večerala, mada sam se i ja bio spremio za proslavu njihovog skromnog Uskrsa, donevši im iz Bakše 1kg svinjetine, nešto buta, rebara, slanine, iznutrica. Ali Sudbina je pas i sve je to požderala.' In *Peščanik*, p.337.

<sup>72</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, from the interview 'Banality, like a plastic bottle, is forever' (1976), pp.169-170.



which cowards believe to be inevitable and pronounce to be fate or historical necessity.<sup>73</sup>

Kiš's refusal of all justifications for the existence of camps (whether fascist or communist) may be placed, in this regard, alongside Levinas's broader, metaphysical doctrine of the ethical relation to the Other. In these terms, for Kiš, ethics may be said to begin with the *subjected me*. Arguably, such an understanding of an ethical relation corresponds in particular to what I will argue in the last chapter of this thesis is an *a priori* condition for ethical temporalisation - the notion of a *homelessness internal to subjectivity itself*. This is crucial not only to Levinas's understanding of ethics but also, as I will argue throughout this thesis, to Kiš's own po-ethical impetus. To refer now back to the novel itself, the radically alienating form of *Hourglass* achieves this necessary condition of a sense of homelessness as the opening of the ethical temporalisation within the text itself. As a fugue, and, dare one say, a *death* fugue for that matter, *Hourglass's* 'tempo,' so to speak, does not permit the reductionism of what Kiš often terms a 'metaphysical dimension' and/or a 'musical soul' of a literary text.<sup>74</sup> On the contrary, all these different forms that create different narratives within the novel itself never enable the completion of the full picture in Kiš's trilogy that, from the perspective of what Blanchot terms literature's 'first slope', they apparently promise: Auschwitz remains *outside* of conceptualisation and, thereby, the event that cannot be comprehended. In these terms, the entirety of *Hourglass* is a suspension of time and, equally, an experience of an *other* time.

It is the paradoxical relation established in Kiš between a notion of the world as a representable totality and his insistence on a necessity of a fragmentary writing - deliberately oscillating between an expression of the desire for totality (consequent upon mourning), or for complete documentation, and, simultaneously, a destruction of such a possibility - that points to a kind of deliberate *achievement* of the Blanchotian 'second slope' of literature (or *unworking* of power, truth, knowledge) in his work. This in turn constantly undoes any possibility that one

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<sup>73</sup> This quote is first time mentioned in a footnote to a story 'Psi i Knjige' ['Dogs and Books'] in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976), p.121. The second time in a story 'Dug'[The Debt] in a collection of stories *Lauta i Ožiljci* (2011), [*The Lute and the Scars* (2012)], p.88.

<sup>74</sup> From the interview 'Banality, Like a Plastic Bottle, Is Forever' (1976), in *Homo Poeticus*, p.178. Kiš often equated *nouveau roman* with twelve-tone music.

might provide a 'fixed' and, in ontological terms, stable *image* of reality (the Shoah) depicted in the literary text. In this respect, again, akin to Blanchot, we might say, more specifically, that Kiš also *doubles* death as both possibility and impossibility, comprehension and otherness, aiming, as it were to preserve the texts' heteronomy and/or pluralism of language in all of his works.<sup>75</sup> By heteronomy here I mainly refer to the simple idea that there are two 'languages' at 'work' in Kiš's prose. First, and consequent upon the work of mourning and a sense of justice for the dead, there is a desire in his work to not only resurrect the world that no longer exists but also to comprehend the violence of history; second, however, 'language' also generates a counter-production or destruction of any such idealist attempt to 'resurrect'.

Nonetheless, if this is true in Kiš's oeuvre as a whole, it is in *Hourglass* that this duality in and of language is, arguably, most radically realised. Published in 1972 as the third and last novel of Kiš's 'family cycle'<sup>76</sup> (apart from the 'Prologue' and 'Letter, or Table of Contents'), the narration oscillates between 'Travel Scenes', 'Notes of a Madman', 'A Witness Interrogated' and 'Criminal Investigation'. In other words, the structure of the novel is divided into four different accounts of the same reality that overlap and intertwine during the course of the novel. (Hence, my comparison of it to Celan's poem above). Thus, 'Notes of a Madman' is written in the first person, from the point of view of the protagonist E.S.; 'A Witness Interrogated' is written as a form of a dialogue between an unknown persecutor and E.S.; 'Criminal Investigation' narrates that same reality by placing E.S. in the third person; and 'Travel Scenes' is written from an objective third person point of view.

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<sup>75</sup> In *The Step Not Beyond* Blanchot claims: 'Death, being-dead, certainly unsettle us, but as a gross or inert event (the thing itself) or even as the reversal of meaning, the being of what is not the painful non-meaning that is, nevertheless, always taken up again by meaning ... But dying, no more than it *cannot* finish or accomplish itself ...'. In Blanchot, Maurice, *The Step Not Beyond* (1992), translation and introduction Lycette Nelson, State University of New York Press, Albany, p.93. On the pseudo-dialectic of language between possibility and impossibility, see also Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.70.

<sup>76</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, pp.36-7, Kiš claims the following: 'In my case, however, and not only in my case, Jewishness is, psychologically and metaphysically speaking, the unalterable sentiment which Heine called "family misfortune" (*Familienunglück*), and I would gladly give those of my books that constitute a 'family cycle' the overall title "Family Misfortune." This sense of family misfortune is a kind of angst which, on both the literary and the psychological level, nourishes a sense of relativity and the irony that follows from it. That's all. "My Jewishness is without words, like Mendelssohn's songs" (Borges)'

According to Kiš's own account in *Homo Poeticus*, everything that is narrated in the novel actually occurs in the course of a single night in the mind of the protagonist E.S. In fact, Kiš writes:

*Hourglass* has a very clear chronological line to it, a precise order of items and events: everything in the novel occurs in the course of a single night, from the moment E.S. sits down to write at sixteen minutes before midnight (Chapter 16) until shortly before dawn the following day, 'civil (morning) twilight," that is, about four o'clock the following morning (Chapter 62); everything that occurs in E.S.'s mind within this very clearly chronological order in the dead of the night and of the soul, when laws other than those of chronology prevail – laws of association and organization.<sup>77</sup>

My main argument here is that the entirety of *Hourglass*, which, as Kiš describes it, takes place 'in the dead of the night and of the soul' may, in fact, be thus read as articulating E.S.'s experience of what Levinas terms the *il y a*. Or, in other words, reading *Hourglass* is itself a kind of experience of the 'other night', which, as Blanchot describes it, is that night which 'is not a provisional absence of light', and which 'far from being a possible locus of images, is composed of all that which is not seen and is not heard, and, listening to it, even a man would know that, if he were not a man, he would hear nothing'.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, in the prologue to the novel, the reader immediately enters a world strikingly akin to this Blanchotian 'other' night: immersed in the darkness of the room, in which, as Gabriel Montola points out, like 'Plato's cave',<sup>79</sup> the spectator (the unnamed narrator, and, allegorically at least, also the reader) must try to comprehend what is reality and what is illusion:

The flickering shadows dissolve the outlines of things and break up the surfaces of the cube, the walls and ceiling move to and fro to the rhythm of the

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<sup>77</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, p.161.

<sup>78</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, 'Thomas the Obscure' in *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, p.120

<sup>79</sup> See, for instance, Gabriel Motola, 'Danilo Kiš: Death and the Mirror', in *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 51, Number 4, (Autumn 1993), pp.605-621, p. 615. Here Montola argues that reading *Hourglass* is akin to an experience of Plato's cave. This, of course, is something that Kiš himself suggests in *Hourglass's* 'Prologue'. See also Blanchot's passage on Plato's cave being an instantiation of the 'first slope of literature', as a quest for knowledge, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.35. In these terms, literature, for Blanchot, is a *simulacrum* of the absence of death where death as the ultimate possibility of knowledge and power of thought is here never reached. Instead, for Blanchot, there is an endless powerlessness of dying, and the (beginning) of writing is, thus, a form of endless witnessing of this very powerlessness.

jagged flame... The whole room trembles, expands, contracts, moves a few centimetres to the right or left, up or down ... Slowly the eye becomes accustomed to the half darkness, to the swaying of the room without clear contours, to the flickering shadows. Attracted by the flame, the gaze makes for the lamp, the only bright spot in the vast darkness which twinkles like some fortuitous distant star.<sup>80</sup>

Kiš here already signals, as it were, Jewish fate and the Shoah with the obvious metaphor: 'in the vast darkness which twinkles like some fortuitous *distant star*'. In addition, the intentionality of the narrator's gaze (and the reader's) is, like Orpheus's gaze – as Blanchot famously describes it – governed by the desire of this night in which everything exceeds comprehension: 'the whole room trembles, expands, contracts', 'in vague confusion' and 'all that remains to be discovered amid the folds of shadow and emptiness'. In the darkness of the room, guided only by the flickering shadows of light (a 'jagged flame'), the narrator's eye must take the flickering shadows on the wall as his own reality. However, the eye soon realises that what it sees as *reality* is, in fact, illusion and that ultimate reality cannot be achieved:

If the eye did not distinguish it before, it was only because the *mind* resisted the illusion, because the mind refused to accept the appearance (as in the picture where the eye perceives a white vase or an hourglass or a chalice, until the mind – or is it the will? – discovers that this vase is an empty space, negative, hence an illusion, and that the only positive, that is, real thing in the picture, is the two profiles turned toward each other, face to face as it were, as in a mirror, a nonexistent mirror, the axis of which passes through the axis of the no longer existent vase-hourglass-chalice into a double mirror, so that both faces, and not just one, become real, for otherwise the second would be only a reflection, an echo of the first, in which case they would no longer be symmetrical, let alone real; so that both faces would be Platonic archetypes

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<sup>80</sup> *Hourglass*, pp.3-4. In Serbian: 'Treperenje senki koje rastaču ivice predmeta i razbijaju površine kubusa, odmičući plafon i zidove po čudi grebenastog plamena koji se čas rascvetava, čas vene, kao da se gasi... Cela prostorija treperi, šireći se ili smanjujući, ili samo menjajući svoje mesto u prostoru za nekoliko santimetara levo-desno ili gore-dole... Oko se sporo privikava na polutamnu, na zalelujanu prostoriju bez jasnih kontura, na treperave senke. Privučen plamenom, pogled se ustremiljuje na lampu, na tu još jedinu svetlu tačku u velikom mraku sobe, ustremiljuje se na nju kao zalutala muva i zaustavlja se na tom jedinom izvoru svetlosti, koji treperi kao neka daleka, slučajna zvezda.' *Peščanik* (1992), peto izdanje, Bigz, Beograd, p.11, p.12, p.13.

and not just one, for otherwise the second would be a mere *imitation*, a reflection of a reflection, a shadow; and consequently these two faces, on prolonged scrutiny, move closer to each other, as though wishing to unite and so confirm their identity.<sup>81</sup>

In these terms, the only 'real thing' that the narrator's gaze can see is 'two profiles turned toward each other' like an *hourglass*. Here, as I read it, Kiš introduces the three central aspects of the novel. The first of these is the image of the hourglass itself which, as he claims in *Homo Poeticus*, is a 'symbol of creative principle',<sup>82</sup> which provides a metaphor for the experience of a literary text in which one 'profile' is the consciousness of the writer and the other 'profile' is the consciousness of the reader reading the text (i.e. the *afterlife* of the writer's text). In Blanchot's terms, both of these profiles merge into each other in their 'unrelated' (i.e. non-contemporaneous) relation.<sup>83</sup> Secondly, however, this symbiotic relation between the two profiles is also conceived, within the narrative 'content' of the text, as the relation between the father, E.S., and the son (Kiš), which opens up a distance and/or rupture in the text. (For instance, towards the end of the novel, E.S. hopes that his 'material herbarium' of *Pannonia* will be perhaps discovered by his son.) And thirdly, this symbolises the subject/object relation established between the reader and the Shoah wherein Kiš allegorically asserts that in this relation, as erosive as the sand in *hourglass*, no knowledge will or ever can exhaust the horror of Auschwitz. Kiš thus effectively asserts already at the beginning of the novel that *Hourglass* represents what Blanchot terms the 'absence of the book' or an *unworking* of the first slope of literature. In Blanchot's terms, the demand of the book, which is the demand for totality, the demand for absolute meaning and truth, is always 'under erasure' due to the law of what

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<sup>81</sup> *Hourglass*, p.5. In Serbian: 'i ako ga oko sve dosad nije primećivalo, to je bilo samo stoga što se duh opirao toj varci, što duh nije hteo da prihvati privid (kao na onom crtežu gde oko vidi belu vazu, vazu ili peščanik, ili putir, sve dok duh – volja? – ne otkrije da je ta vaza praznina, negativ, dakle privid, a da su pozitivna, i dakle, stvarna ona dva identična profila, ona dva lika okrenuta licem jedan prema drugom, taj simetrični *en face*, kao u ogledalu, kao u nepostojećem ogledalu, čija bi osa prolazila kroz osu sad već nepostojeće vaze-peščanika, putira, sasude, dvostrukom zapravo ogledalu, kako bi oba lika bila stvarna, a ne samo jedan, jer u protivnom, onaj drugi bio bi samo odraz, odjek onog prvog, i tada više ne bi bili simetrični, ne bi bili čak ni stvarni; kako bi, dakle, oba lika bila ravnopravna, oba platonovski prauzori a ne samo jedan, jer u protivnom onaj drugi bi bio nužno samo *imitatio*, odraz odraza, senka; pa stoga ta dva lika, posle dužeg posmatranja jednako se približavaju jedan drugom, kao u želji da se spoje, da potvrde svoju identičnost)'. In *Peščanik*, p.14.

<sup>82</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p. 160

<sup>83</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 23

Blanchot terms the neuter – that is, the constant movement and/or oscillation between the two slopes of literature that condition literature's realm.<sup>84</sup>

For Kiš and Blanchot alike then, the 'image' is what provides the condition of (im)possibility for (literary) reality to exist in the first place; the image is, in Blanchot's sense, at a *distance* from the thing (the object of the world). Indeed, the moment the thing becomes an image it is, for Blanchot, de facto ungraspable. The distance itself means that the immediacy of the thing must be thought of from the *immemorial* past where the 'ungraspability', as it were, of the thing remains irreducible to discourse by becoming an image. As Blanchot puts it in 'Two Versions of the Imaginary':

Here the distancing is at the heart of the thing. The thing was there, we grasped it in the living motion of a comprehensive action – and once it has become an image it instantly becomes ungraspable, noncontemporary, impassive, not the same thing distanced, but that thing as distancing, the present thing in its absence, the thing graspable because ungraspable, appearing as something that has disappeared, the return of what does not come back, the strange heart of the distance as the life and unique heart of the thing.<sup>85</sup>

This suggests that Blanchot's understanding of literary experience may be taken as, essentially, *antirealist* (regardless of the reality depicted in the text), due to the fact that the thing, as an image, is never *realised* completely; an incompleteness which has itself an ethical significance for Blanchot, in particular with regard to the Shoah, the responsibility to bear witness and dying itself. For instance, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot addresses the intimacy of the relation between writing, dying and the Shoah in terms of a 'fragmentation' and a 'rupture' 'through [the] very writing'.<sup>86</sup> For Blanchot, since both death and the Shoah are what he refers to as an 'unrepresentable representation'<sup>87</sup> – that is, as both Blanchot and Levinas insist, what is an *impossibility* of dying itself – it is the fragment that, as he

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<sup>84</sup> Here the word 'absence' does not imply a noun but rather a verb or a verbal process of erasure of the text due to the work of the neuter.

<sup>85</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, 'Two Versions of the Imaginary' in *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, Barrytown Ltd., p. 418

<sup>86</sup> *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.118.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* This, of course, corresponds to Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same.

claims, '*mimes*' the representation of the dying of the other man and, as such, carries the burden to bear witness to the other. In this sense, it could be argued that Kiš's *Hourglass* is both, as the title of the novel, and as an 'image' of the 'distancing' or 'distanced' thing (the Shoah), the synecdoche for both dying itself and for the *unrepresentability* of the reality of the past that it 'contains'.

What is significant here is the impact of the *immediacy* of the relation with the image that Kiš's work suggests, since for Blanchot it signifies the paradoxical relation with the thing: a relation of both intimacy with and a distance from the thing (as in the relation between the text and reader).<sup>88</sup> In *Hourglass*, Kiš foregrounds this strange relation to the thing, with specific regard to the Shoah, by alienating form. Thus, in the prologue of *Hourglass* the disaster has already taken place, as it were, and what 'mimes death', as Blanchot claims, is the darkness of the room as a kind of image of Plato's cave: 'because the mind refused to accept the appearance', 'this vase is an empty space, negative, hence an illusion'. Instead, everything that is about to be written (and read) will have already been subject to the process of unworking as the reader is introduced to the protagonist E.S. with the phrase: 'a hand approaches the flame'.<sup>89</sup> E.S. is waging a personal war against death and against time, in the midst of World War II. In this way, he presents what may be regarded as a quasi-encyclopaedic and even positivist ambition to 'summarise' his life and the events that made up that life during the course of a few hours when composing a letter to his family. If this is akin to Blanchot's first 'slope' of literature (which I discussed earlier), however, this apparently *positivist* project is itself rendered futile in the novel (a fact of which E.S. is already aware) by Kiš's deployment of parody. The world seen through

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<sup>88</sup> In regards to Levinas's notion of immediacy as a condition for transcendence with relation to the Other, Blanchot, for instance, claims: When Levinas defines language as contact, he defines it as immediacy, and this has grave consequences. For immediacy is absolute presence – which undermines and overturns everything. Immediacy is the infinite, neither close nor distant, and no longer the desired or demanded, but violent abduction – the ravishment of mystical fusion. Immediacy not only rules out all mediation; it is the infiniteness of a presence such that it can no longer be spoken of, for the relation itself, be it ethical or ontological, has burned up all at once in a night bereft of darkness. In this night there are no longer any terms, there is no longer a relation, no longer a beyond – in this night God himself has annulled himself.' In *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.24. See also, for instance, Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, p.82. The influence of Derrida here – 'immediacy is absolute presence' – would seem evident also.

<sup>89</sup> *Hourglass*, p.7

E.S.'s eyes is instead a world of his own private madness in the midst of a perishing of the world of the Jews in Central Europe.

Before I move on to consider the other two works that make up this family triptych, it is worth mentioning here a few more important aspects that are a part of the structure of *Hourglass*. As I already mentioned earlier, Kiš's critique of epistemology that reduces everything to a scientific instrumental rationality – notwithstanding the West's identification with a broader Enlightenment rationality that failed, as Adorno and Horkheimer persistently noted, to prevent the advent of Nazism – corresponds to Levinas's critique of Western thought as totality which, accordingly, reduces being *qua* being. Kiš, for instance, deploys catechism in sections of *Hourglass* in 'A Witness Interrogated' in a way that culminates in the absurdity of the very interrogation. As a parody, these sequences in the novel precisely equate to a *nonsense within sense*, as, I am arguing, a way of 'figuring' within the literary work the experience of the *il y a*. In terms of dramatic effect itself, the more there is an insistence on the truth (by an unknown persecutor questioning E.S.), the more there is a kind of *achievement* of meaninglessness within the novel. I shall return to this aspect of the novel in chapter three, placing this in the context of what Critchley describes as 'comic-antiheroic paradigm', in order to show that humour in *Hourglass* is presented as, ultimately, the only bearable way of dealing with human finitude (E.S. being the agent of this 'comic-antiheroic' element). For now, it can be noted that this tragic humour is mainly achieved in the sections of 'Notes of a Madman' where E.S.'s existential fear, consequent upon the madness that surrounds him, results in a kind of split personality. For instance, consider this passage:

on one side E.S., fifty-three, married, father of two children, who thinks, smokes, works, writes, shaves with a safety razor; and on the other side, next to him, or rather inside him, somewhere in the centre of his brain, as though asleep or half asleep, another E.S., who is and is not I... this pursuit of the other man, who is and is not I, is the terrifying fact that this other self, who is connected with me like a Siamese twin by the backbone... something terrible has just happened to him, a disastrous thought has flamed his brain, the thought of death, an intense, merciless thought, as when a man wakes up in



his grave, but I, E.S., don't know the exact meaning of his thought, I don't even know that it's the thought of death, but I feel the intensity, the weight of the thought, its dangerous pessimism, its killing reality, and I begin to tremble somewhere in the depth of my being...<sup>90</sup>

E.S.'s fear is not only then a Heideggerean fear of nothingness and of death as the ultimate possibility of nothingness; in fact, this is something E.S. desires. Instead, it is a fear of the *il y a*, of, as Simon Critchley puts it, 'the simple facticity of being riveted to existence without an exit'.<sup>91</sup> In 'Notes of a Madman (IV)', in fragment '51', E.S. acknowledges, for example, that he is incapable of killing himself. He is contemplating suicide but he is unable to carry out the final act:

Aware that I am incapable of killing myself, because my body, death, blood, and all the trappings of death (rope, razor blades, weapons) disgust me ... I thought of a painless way of throwing off all my worries and fears without submitting to any Grand Guignol spectacle: death in the snow, a gentle death without blood...<sup>92</sup>

'Death in the snow, a gentle death without blood' functions here on two levels. Firstly, E.S. dreams of a perfect death which is death without violence, and, thus, the kind of death that he senses is not 'destined' for him. At the same time, however, 'death in snow' is also, paradoxically, the death with violence that was destined for him (in the Shoah), but from which he was, if only briefly, released.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *Hourglass*, pp.145-147. In Serbian: 's jedne strane E.S., pedeset i tri godine, oženjen, otac dvoje dece, razmišlja, puši, radi, piše, brije se mašinicom za brijanje, a s druge strane, kraj njega, zapravo u njemu samom, negde u središtu mozga, kao u snu ili polusnu, živi neki drugi E.S., koji jeste i nije Ja... u tom lovu na Drugog koji jeste i nije Ja, to je strašna činjenica da taj drugi koji je vezan za mene kao da smo sijamski blizanci... jer se tom drugom dogodilo nešto strašno, neka mu je kobna misao oprljala mozak, misao o smrti, misao intenzivna i nemilosrdna kao u čoveka koji se probudio u svom grobu, ali ja, E.S., ne znam tačno značenje te misli, ne znam čak ni da li je to misao o smrti, ali i ja osećam intenzitet, težinu te misli, njenu pogibljenu pesimističnost, njenu ubitačnu realnost, i počinjem da drhtim negde u dubini svog bića...' In *Peščanik*, pp.186-190.

<sup>91</sup> Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, p.32

<sup>92</sup> *Hourglass*, p.144. In Serbian: 'Svestan činjenice da sam nesposoban da dignem ruku na sebe, gadeći se svoga tela, gadeći se smrti, krvi i svih rekvizita smrti, konopca, britve, oružja... osetio neko ozarenje zbog mogućnosti da se bezbolno otarasim svih strahova i briga, a da pri tom ne izložim sebe nekim granginjolskim zahvatima: smrt u snegu, slatka smrt, bez krvi...'. In *Peščanik*, p.185.

<sup>93</sup> As Kiš recalls, on January 23rd 1942, in Novi Sad, in Vojvodina, Hungarian fascists had taken many Jews and Serbs as hostages to the bank of the river Danube, shelled the ice of the river and begun ethnic cleansing. The victims were ordered to wait in line to be killed. Many of them drowned and some of them were shot whilst being in the frozen river. Kiš's father, Eduard Kohn (on whom *Hourglass* is founded and thus, whose 'double' is the protagonist E.S.), was one of those people ordered to wait in line. He was, as Kiš

In this manner, with dreaming of death in snow as a 'gentle' death, Kiš ironically underlines the inescapability of E.S.'s fate, signalling also the factual aspect of this prose text. In fact, already in fragment 53, which is also part of 'Notes of a Madman IV', E.S. says the following:

This feeling of being abandoned by my own self, this perception of myself through the eyes of another, this confrontation with myself as a stranger\*

\*Incomplete. A line is missing.

while I stood in line on the bank of the Danube.<sup>94</sup>

Several critics have made the point that in leaving the sentence incomplete and footnoting it, Kiš reminds the reader, in a Borgesian manner, that he is reading a text rather than a transparent document of 'reality'. Yet, this is also an example of how the ethical is *inseparable* from the aesthetic in Kiš's prose in so far as such a passage validates the sacredness of the (auto)biographical in one man's life over and above what could, he suggests, be provided by a mere work of imagination. As Gabriel Montola argues: 'By doing so, Kiš not only calls attention to the line that precedes the one allegedly missing, but also authenticates the entire work with biographical verisimilitude: its documentary nature, with E.S. as its chronicler, has greater historical weight than a work of imagination – even if derived from the anguished experiences of the Holocaust by the author's father.'<sup>95</sup> My own reading of this is that Kiš exposes the reader, in this way, to a *diachrony* of time, as it is understood by Levinas – that is, as the *ethical* time of a *sensuous* breaking up of subjectivity by the other. This is a claim which I will develop further in Chapter two.

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recalls, saved that day by a 'miracle' and told to return home, but the experience left him mentally ruined. On being asked why his father was saved that day, Kiš claims the following: 'A technical glitch that meant no more than a stay of execution. Still, international opinion apparently got wind of the Hungarian military's barbarous behaviour and someone intervened and put at least a temporary halt to the massacre. My father came home late that afternoon, broken, suddenly aged, and with the terrifying look he'd had in Kovin three years earlier. The day he spent on the Danube, waiting his turn by the cabins, the anteroom of hell (he couldn't help hearing the shots, the screams, the splashing), completely ruined his already shaken health.' In *Homo Poeticus*, pp. 246-7.

<sup>94</sup> *Hourglass*, p.145. In Serbian: 'To osećanje da me je napustilo moje sopstveno Ja, to viđenje sebe iz aspekta nekog drugog, taj odnos prema sebi kao prema strancu\* \*Nedovršeno. Nedostaje jedan list. na Dunavu dok sam stajao u redu.' *Peščanik*, p.186.

<sup>95</sup> Gabriel Montola, in 'Danilo Kiš: Death and the Mirror', in *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 51, Number 4, (Autumn 1993), pp.605-621, p.616.

Another literary device that Kiš often deploys is that of list-making.<sup>96</sup> In *Hourglass*, particularly, this operates on two levels: first, mimetically, to successfully reveal the extent to which E.S.'s madness has taken its toll; second, to demonstrate that any form of literary writing de facto entails a form of violence, and that what always escapes grasping/reductionism is precisely what could be said to be Kiš's hallmark – the 'metaphysical', as he calls it, richness of every singular individual life. List-making, also exemplifies the double character of Blanchot's two 'slopes' of literature. Kiš's lists are never complete, but, instead, a kind of leitmotif that reminds us that the writer's project to grasp the totality of the world - Blanchot's first slope of literature - is essentially impossible. This is the writer's bad conscience or 'faith'. At the same time, their incomplete character is also a *critique* of our need for truth/knowledge. An example of one such list from the novel is from the section 'Criminal Investigation II', fragment 34, where the unnamed person asks which acquaintances E.S. and Mr. Gavanski had in common. I will only quote here one small part of this list, which in fact spans five pages:

Mr. Dragutin Floriani, court clerk, who in a game of simultaneous chess against nine opponents (in 1924) had beaten the celebrated Otto Titusz Bláthy of Budapest; Mr. Richárd Engel, merchant and sufferer from claustrophobia, who had thrown himself under the wheels of an express train in 1938, leaving behind a widow and two daughters; Mr. Jovan Gondja, gravedigger, who was murdered in the cemetery along with his child; Helmár Béla, the town knacker, with whom the two friends had taken a drink now and then at Weinhebbel's, near Catholic Gate, and who had recently sawed a woman in two before throwing her into the Danube..<sup>97</sup>

What is noticeable from this example is that it is a list of dead people, many of whom died a violent death: 'who had recently sawed a woman in two before

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<sup>96</sup> For a good reading of Kiš as a list-maker in particular in relation to positivism, see, Katharine Holt, 'Enlisting Words Against Words: Danilo Kiš's Enumeration' in *Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies*, Vol. 22, Number 1, (2008), pp. 1-15.

<sup>97</sup> *Hourglass*, p.70. In Serbian: 'Gospodina Dragutina Florijanija, sudskog pristava, koji je godine 1924. pobedio u simultanki na devet stolova čuvenog Ota Titusa Blatija iz Budimpešte, gospodina Riharda Engla, trgovca, koji je bolovao od klaustrofobije i koji je godine 1938. skočio pod točkove brzog voza, ostavivši za sobom mladu udovicu i dve kćeri; gospodina Jovana Gonđe, grobara, koji je ubijen na groblju zajedno sa ženom i detetom; opštinskog strvodera Helmara Bele, s kojim su pili nekoliko puta u Katoličkoj porti, kod Vajnhebla, a koji je tu nedavno prepilio jednu ženu i bacio je zatim u Dunav...', pp.103-4.

throwing her into the Danube'. Thus, in the world of 'general chaos' where human beings are reduced to nothingness, the responsibility for suffering humanity stems from the immediacy of the relation one has with others. To paraphrase Adorno: the splinter in his eye is E.S.'s best magnifying-glass.<sup>98</sup> In attempting to recollect the conversation he had with Mr. Gavanski regarding mutual acquaintances, the splinters of the 'smashed' dead world he knew, he illuminates the descent of a man into inhumanity. His private madness is, in this way, just an immediate microcosmic fragment that is surrounded by a much greater madness. In this list, Kiš / E.S. names many people who have perished as a consequence of a quasi-rationality that reduces everything to the same (the Nazi death machine), and where the only 'value' difference has is death. As Adorno puts it in *Minima Moralia*: 'Murder is thus the repeated attempt, by yet greater madness, to distort the madness of such false perception into reason: what was not seen as human and yet is human, is made a thing, so that its stirrings can no longer refute the manic gaze.'<sup>99</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that E.S. in *Hourglass*, as the very *trace* of an 'immemorial past' (as Levinas calls it), is the outsider par excellence: he is that which enables the narration within the novel but also - through four different prisms - that which radically denies 'reality' being reduced to its conceptualisation; what might be regarded as a central issue of all Kiš's prose. In Levinasian terms, this means that the reader of *Hourglass* is figuratively open to a *face-to-face* relation with E.S. as the Other, where the singularity of E.S. is preserved by way of four different dimensions of looking at E.S.'s reality.

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<sup>98</sup> Adorno, Theodor W., *Minima Moralia* (2000), translation E.F.N. Jephcott, Verso, London, p.50

<sup>99</sup> The full passage from *Minima Moralia* is as follows: 'The possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally-wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze - "after all, it's only an animal" - reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure themselves that it is "only an animal", because they could never fully believe this even of animals. In repressive society the concept of man is itself a parody of divine likeness. The mechanism of "pathic projection" determines that those in power perceive as human only their own reflected image, instead of reflecting back the human as precisely what is different. Murder is thus the repeated attempt, by yet greater madness, to distort the madness of such false perception into reason: what was not seen as human and yet is human, is made a thing, so that its stirrings can no longer refute the manic gaze.' p. 105.

Having considered here some of the aspects of the vast number of elements that go into the construction of *Hourglass*, one could argue then that, as the parody of an idea of absolute knowledge, the novel precisely achieves the Blanchotian *unworking* of sense as the *il y a*, thus enabling an exposure to alterity (not least for the reader). It is now necessary to consider then, more specifically, how the other two works in Kiš's trilogy may be understood in relation to what I have called, following Levinas and Blanchot, the *impossibility* of dying.

### **b. Garden, ashes**

*Garden, ashes* was published in 1965 and is the second novel of Kiš's 'family cycle' (although published first).<sup>100</sup> Unlike *Hourglass*, the narration of which unfolds entirely, on my reading, as the revealing of the *il y a* to the protagonist E.S., *Garden, ashes* juxtaposes two intertwined narrations: on the one hand, the story of a boy, Andreas Scham, growing up in the midst of war and faced with those limits placed upon his capacity to comprehend it;<sup>101</sup> and, on the other, a grown up Andreas Scham, attempting to reconstruct the instance of time of his childhood in which he lost his father. In this way, it could be said, the narration opens up a space of an *irreducible* relation between a son (Andreas Scham) and a father (Eduard Scham). I argue that what this relation exemplifies, consequent upon mourning (in terms of the father's disappearance in Auschwitz), is what in Levinas's thought is a relation to the 'other' (*autrui*); that is, the father's absence is that which produces a profound loss of Andreas' identity as an intimate relation to dying. The primary scene of disaster, the moment of the *il y a* for the young Andreas Scham, functions as a creative device for a grown up Andreas Scham in his desire to reconstruct his childhood. This desire to remember his childhood is, in this sense, adult Andi's first slope of literature: the novel begins with the memory of the summer morning when mother would enter the room carrying with her a tray 'with her jar of honey and her bottle of cod-liver oil'. The materialist sensibility of Kiš's narration, which is embodied in his desire to reconstruct the world by way of detailing the objects that belonged to that bygone era, by contrast, ends the novel

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<sup>100</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Garden, ashes* (1985), translation Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Faber and Faber Ltd., London.

<sup>101</sup> This might be said to correspond to what Cixous terms a 'limiting transcendence'. See Cixous, Hélène, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva* (1991), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p.23.

with the sentence 'Lord, how quickly it gets dark here'.<sup>102</sup> (This is the scene when young Andi, together with his mother and sister, goes to the woods where 'father's ghost hovered'.) With this sentence, Kiš suggests, in a kind of allegorical form, what are arguably two important aspects of the novel's 'meaning' as a whole: that God was absent in humanity's descent into barbarity and that the Shoah remains radically beyond grasp. For this reason, I argue, the novel affirms a poetics of atheism whilst preserving a kind of 'religiosity' of the intersubjective relation in so far as the adult Andi's relation with the other (young Andi, his father, death) is that of *sacredness* in spite of the darkness in the midst of existence. As such, at the very end, the novel cancels, or at least delays, a possibility of redemption in the literary work's encounter with the Shoah.

The central aspect of what is, essentially, a *Bildungsroman* - narrated through young Andi's coming of age and adult Andi's reminiscing about his childhood - revolves around a *double absence*: on the one hand, the absence of the father who, before his 'disappearance' (i.e. his final departure to Auschwitz) only sporadically emerges in the novel (as a 'Wandering Jew'), and whose 'presence' becomes hauntingly more palpable after the war due to boy's trauma; and, on the other, the absence of the Shoah 'itself'. My point is not only that the 'absence' of the father and the Shoah in the novel are what enable its two different narratives (and the overlap of narrations between young Andi and a grown up Andi's reminiscing), but, in addition, that they are the absent *centre* of the novel experienced *as absence*. Consider, for, instance, the opening of the chapter midway through the novel 'two years after [father's] departure':<sup>103</sup>

quite unexpectedly and unpredictably, this account is becoming increasingly the story of my father, the story of the gifted Eduard Scham. His absence, his somnambulism, his messianism, all these concepts removed from any earthly – or, if you will, narrative-context, this subject is frail as dreams and

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<sup>102</sup> *Garden, ashes*, p.170.

<sup>103</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Garden, ashes* (1985), translation Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, p.98.

notable above all for his negative traits: his story becomes a densely woven, heavy fabric, a material of entirely unknown specific weight.<sup>104</sup>

As often is the case in his prose, Kiš here metaphorically suggests, I think, that at the centre of the novel is the Shoah, 'a material of entirely unknown specific weight', and, in addition, that the absence of the father thus constitutes a double negative – his negation both as a narrative subject and as an actual 'frail' human being. In fact, Kiš only once mentions the real father's name in the entire novel, as *Eduard Kohn*, who after the war arrives, ironically, from Germany, as part of a delegation of 'inmates who had survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald'.<sup>105</sup> As G. J. A. Snel rightly observes, this moment at which the real name of the father is used in *Garden, ashes* is precisely the instant of the *real* element of the family's history within the novel and, as Snel argues, is thus an element of *Pannonia* prior to 'assimilation'. For that reason, everything else in the novel, including Andi *Scham's* own bearing witness to the Shoah (*without* bearing witness), is therefore an 'unreliable' testimony.<sup>106</sup>

*Eduard Kohn*, as a vehicle of narration and a *proper* name, remains himself/itself, then, radically other. He is the *trace* itself of an immemorial (i.e. non-representable) past within the text. As the outsider par excellence, therefore, *Eduard Kohn* is that which radically denies any possibility for the book to complete itself as a totality or absolute consciousness, even though he is that which enabled its narration in the first place. In fact, if one considers their trajectory specifically in terms of the order of publication of Kiš's trilogy, and *Eduard's* *passage* as a name within that order of publication, there appears to be something akin to a deconstruction of naming itself across the trilogy as a whole. In *Garden, ashes*

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<sup>104</sup> *Garden, ashes*, p.99. In Serbian: 'Tako, sasvim neočekivano i nepredvidjeno, ova istorija, ova skaska, postaje sve više istorija mog oca, istorija genijalnog Eduarda Sama. Njegovo odsustvo, njegovo mesečarstvo, njegovo misionarstvo, sve pojmovi lišeni zemnog i, ako hoćete, pripovedačkog konteksta, materija krhka poput snova, obeležena pre svega svojim primordijalnim negativnim svojstvima, sve to postaje neko gusto, teško tkanje, materija sasvim nepoznate specifične težine.' In Kiš, Danilo, *Bašta, pepeo* (1992), peto izdanje, Bigz, Beograd, p.141.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, p.118.

<sup>106</sup> Snel, for instance, claims: 'Andreas not just conceals the holocaust, he denies the family history before assimilation'. In Snel, G.J.A., 'Fictionalised Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe' (2003), p.86. G.J.A. Snel dedicates Chapter three of his thesis to a discussion of imaginary historical space in the case of both Kiš and the Croat writer Krleža. This PhD thesis was awarded by Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis in 2003. The thesis can be found here: <http://dare.uva.nl/record/1/220521> (Last time visited 15, March 2016).

(1965) he is known during the war as Eduard Scham, and in the post-war period only once mentioned, *hauntingly*, as Eduard Kohn (the real father's name). Then in *Early Sorrows* (1969) he is addressed as the 'father' and, lastly, in *Hourglass* (1972), within four different narratives, his name is reduced to an abbreviated E.S. (apart from the letter signed with 'Eduard'). In these terms, Kiš's work does not only testify to the irreducible *singularity* of the *other* (or, as Kiš calls it, the 'metaphysical dimension' of every human being) by way of this reduction in naming, which only radicalises further the father's otherness; it also implies that writing itself must work towards preserving the possibility of bearing witness to such an irreducibility of the Other. As an image then, Eduard is the image of *disfigurement*, which is, for Levinas, precisely a condition for any ethical relation (at a distance) with the Other.

For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to elaborate upon the ways in which, therefore, this Eduard Kohn's *survival* as otherness within the novel can be productively understood in relation to Levinas's and Blanchot's accounts of the *impossibility* of death, as well as Blanchot's two slopes of literature. Since, as I mentioned earlier, Kiš is interested in the affective power of the visceral, conveyed in part by the 'materiality of language', as Blanchot defines this, rather than the narrative's capacity to represent directly the Shoah, Andi Scham's relation to death and to the absence of his father can be understood in the novel as a catalyst for narrative's 'impossibility' of achieving any full comprehension of the horror of the Shoah. Already at the beginning of the novel, the seven year old protagonist Andi is introduced by his mother to the word 'death', and to the ineluctability of dying, in telling him of his uncle's passing:

The word 'death', the divine seed that my mother sowed in my curiosity that morning, began to soak up all the fluids coursing through my consciousness. The consequences of this premature gestation turned palpable all too fast: dizziness and nausea. My mother's words, while entirely obscure, suggested to me that some dangerous idea lurked behind them.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *Garden, ashes* (1985), p.10. In Serbian: 'Reč smrt, to božansko seme što ga je moja majka tog jutro posejala u moju radoznalost, počelo je odjednom da ispija sve sokove moje svesti, a da u prvi mah nisam ni bio svestan tog bujanja. Posledice te prerane bremenitosti osetile su se suviše brzo: vrtoglavica i želja za



Here Andi's 'dizziness and nausea', when faced with this newly found relation between thinking and the 'idea' of death becomes, in turn, a confrontation with his own mortal being. What immediately follows is what I read, then, as *the* 'scene' of the *il y a* in the novel:

I looked at the sky through the bare branches of the wild chestnut tree. The day was ordinary, routine. And then, all of a sudden, I sensed some strange anxiety in my intestines, some torment and agitation hitherto unknown to me, as though castor oil were rampaging around my stomach. I was looking through half-open eyes at the sky, like the first man, and thinking about how – there you are – my uncle had died, about how they would be burying him, about how I would never meet him. I stood petrified, thinking that one day I too would die. At the same time I was horror-stricken to realise that my mother would also die. All of this came rushing upon me in a flash of a peculiar violet colour, in a twinkling, and the sudden activity in my intestines and in my heart told me that what seemed at first just a foreboding was indeed the truth.<sup>108</sup>

In this passage, a seven-year-old Andi experiences disaster, a Blanchotian 'vertiginous knowledge of finitude',<sup>109</sup> which, as *primal scene*, gives rise to grown up Andi's desire to reconstruct his childhood. As an account of childhood's 'loss of innocence', this in fact resembles Blanchot's own 'primal scene', a passage from *The Writing of the Disaster* in which a seven or eight year old child<sup>110</sup> experiences the image of finitude as an 'absolutely black' absence:

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povraćanjem. Iako sasvim nerazumljive, majčine su mi reči dale do znanja da se iza njih krije neka opasna, suluda misao.<sup>1</sup> In Kiš, Danilo, *Bašta, pepeo* (1992), peto izdanje, Bigz, Beograd, p.17.

<sup>108</sup> *Garden, ashes*, pp.10-11. In Serbian: 'Gledao sam u nebo kroz ogolelo granje divljeg kestena. Dan je bio običan, svakodnevan. I tada, odjednom, osetih neki čudan strah, neku dotle nepoznatu muku i komešanje u crevima, kao da mi je u stomaku harao ricinus. Gledao sam kroz poluotvorene trepavice u nebo, kao prvi čovek, i mislio o tome kako je, eto, umro moj ujak, kako će ga sada zakopati i kako ga nikada neću upoznati. Stajao sam kao skamenjen i mislio o tome kako ću i ja morati jednoga dana da umrem. Istovremeno s tom mišlju, koja me u prvi mah i nije suviše porazila, jer mi se učinila neverovatnom, shvatih sa užasom da će i moja majka jednoga dana da umre. Sve se to odjednom svalilo na mene i blesnulo nekim ljubičastim sjajem, samo na trenutak, i po iznenadnoj aktivnosti creva i svog srca, ja shvatih da je istina sve to što mi se u prvi mah učinilo kao slutnja.' In *Bašta, pepeo*, pp.17-8.

<sup>109</sup> Critchley, p.65

<sup>110</sup> Cixous questions the age and the gender of the child in Blanchot's primal scene and argues that it is a boy.

See Cixous, Hélène, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva* (1991), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p.22.

(A primal scene?) *You who live later, close to a heart that beats no more, suppose, suppose this: the child – is he seven years old, or eight perhaps? – standing by the window, drawing the curtain and, through pane, looking. What he sees: the garden, the wintry trees, the wall of a house. Though he sees, no doubt in a child's way, his play space, he grows weary and slowly looks up toward the ordinary sky, with clouds, grey light – pallid daylight without depth.*

*What happens then: the sky, the same sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein – so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness that straightaway submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears, an endless flood of tears. He is thought to suffer a childish sorrow; attempts are made to console him. He says nothing. He will live henceforth in the secret. He will weep no more.<sup>111</sup>*

The absence here, as in *Garden, ashes*, is the absence of death as complete understanding and/or absence of the subject's ability to grasp nothingness as 'what there is'. In these terms, what guarantees or legitimises – as it were – the space of literature is what Blanchot terms 'pure Discourse',<sup>112</sup> as a kind of guardian of the 'secret' of being and, thereby, what always escapes the incorporating movement of any totalizing dialectic. The moment Andi becomes aware of this 'secret' of finitude is the moment he realises his irreducible singularity of being – a singularity which manifests itself in the form of a mirror-staged vertigo or dizzy absence (of thought): 'Astonished and frightened, I had suddenly come to understand that I was a boy by the name of Andreas Scham', 'the only one in the world whose uncle had died of tuberculosis the previous day', 'the only boy who had a sister named Anna and a father named Eduard Scham', 'the only one in the world who was thinking at that particular moment that he was the only boy named Andreas Scham'.<sup>113</sup> At the same time, this very instant of

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<sup>111</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.72.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73

<sup>113</sup> *Garden, ashes*, p.11. In Serbian: 'Začuđen i prestravljen, shvatih tada da sam ja jedan dečak po imenu Andreas Sam... jedini na svetu kome je juče umro ujak od tuberkuloze i jedini dečak koji ima sestru Anu i oca

Andi's realisation of finitude is also the beginning of Andi's confrontation with the *impossibility* of thought in relation to death (here manifested by dizziness and repetition). For instance: 'The flow of my thoughts reminded me of a tube of toothpaste that my sister had bought a few days earlier, on which there was a picture of a young lady smiling and holding a tube'; and, furthermore, 'The mirror game tormented and exhausted me, because it did not let my thoughts come to a halt on their own – on the contrary, it crumbled them still more, turning them into a fine powder that hung in the air, in which there was a picture of a young lady smiling and holding in her hand a tube on which...'<sup>114</sup> Juxtaposing all the details that make Andi's being unique and irreplaceable with the contrasting, repetitive images of 'a picture of a young lady smiling and holding in her hand a tube', Kiš accentuates even further the singularity of Andi's being, as well as expressing an infinite deferral with regard to an understanding and thinking of death.

In fact, these instances of narration by young Andi (a child of seven or eight years) are precisely the moments of an *unworking* of the text as a possible completion of any full image of the Shoah. In this they overlap and/or contrast with the narrative of grown up Andi's desire to comprehend his father's disappearance. In other words, the narrator of *Garden, ashes* is a grown up Andi whose remembrance of his always long past other (young Andi) opens a horizon of two *infinitely separated* singularities, and of two infinitely separated instances of time. My use of the phrase 'infinitely separated' singularities is derived here from its role in Levinas's account of subjectivity. For Levinas, the subject's structure is found not in cognition of the self but in one's sensibility as 'vulnerability'. The relation the self can then have with the *other* is never of an epistemological nature, hence the other being radically *Other* by way of a *trace*. In addition, the subject is the subject of becoming, not a fixed entity and, thus, it is a never finished project. In those terms, memory, functioning as a relation one can have with the self from the past, can only transcend the other as alterity (which is, for Levinas, infinity or *infinite*

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Edvarda Sama, jedini na svetu koji misli sada baš o tome da je on jedini dečak Andreas Sam'. In *Bašta, pepeo*, pp.18-19.

<sup>114</sup>*Garden, ashes*, p.11. In Serbian: 'Tok mojih misli podsetio me na onu kutiju sa pastom za zube koju je pre neki dan kupila moja sestra i na kojoj je bila nacrtana jedna gospođica koja se smeši a u ruci drži jednu kutiju na kojoj se nalazi jedna gospođica koja se smeši a u ruci drži kutiju...igra ogledala koja me mučila i iscrpljivala, jer nije davala mojim mislima da se zaustave po sopstvenoj želji, nego ih je još mrvila, pretvarajući ih u sitnu prašinu koja lebdi, a na kojoj je naslikana jedna gospođica koja se smeška i koja drži u ruci kutiju na kojoj...' In *Bašta, pepeo*, pp.18-9.

*effacement* as presence of the absence of death). In Levinas's terms then, in the example between young and grown up Andi, whether memory is voluntary or involuntary - in a Proustian sense - is of little initial relevance. This is due to the fact that what opens in the horizon of thinking of the other (young Andi), in Levinas's sense, is *an-archic* time, or a *diachrony* of time which is beyond the present, beyond essence and being; that is, it is always already *otherwise* than being. Levinas, for instance, claims: 'Temporalisation as lapse, the loss of time, is neither an initiative of an ego, nor a movement toward some telos of action.' And, furthermore, 'this diachrony of time is not due to the length of the interval ... it is a *disjunction of identity* where the same does not rejoin the same: there is non-synthesis, lassitude.'<sup>115</sup>

This means that adult Andi's *work* of remembrance - as a form of reconstruction (albeit in vain) - is also his desire to comprehend, within the realm of being, that which is always beyond being or otherwise to it. In other words, Andi wishes to comprehend many aspects of his childhood which are, the novel tells us, fundamentally impossible to comprehend (most obviously, the war itself). Accordingly, 'ashes' – from the title of the novel – is the only remnant of that life: growing up in Hungary, in the midst of a war, which Andi cannot comprehend, the world as he knows it, and everything that is a part of that world – his father, his extended family – disintegrates into ashes (death). The instances of time narrated by grown up Andi - consequent upon mourning - is then the first 'slope' of the text: the desire to comprehend the disappearance of his father and family.

As I have already mentioned in the analysis of *Hourglass*, Kiš frequently deploys list-making as a device directed against, paradoxically, any representation of the totality of the world. In *Garden, ashes*, such list-making operates on two levels. Firstly, it is a form of protestation against the forms of instrumentalised rationality which led, on this account, to fascism and his father's death. Eduard Scham, Andi's father, is an 'unauthentic Jew'.<sup>116</sup> In the world he finds himself in, where values deteriorate, nothing has certitude. For that reason, Eduard, whose

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<sup>115</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (2011), translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, pp.51-52. (my emphasis).

<sup>116</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, p.217, Kiš claims the following: 'My father was an "unauthentic Jew", a Jew only in so far as others saw him as such, by the will of others, as Sartre put it.'

madness steadily progresses, embarks on an encyclopaedic project to complete the third edition of his *Bus, Ship, Rail, and Air Travel Guide*. This 'masterpiece' would, the narrator suggests, be an antithesis to and a direct negation of the world of injustice; in other words, Eduard Scham takes up the role of a revolutionary writer to rectify all the injustice of the world in his exhaustive timetable. This is how, in the novel, Andi perceives his father's timetable:

This was an apocryphal, sacral bible in which the miracle of genesis was repeated, yet in which all divine injustices and the impotence of man were rectified. In this Pentateuch, distances between worlds – divided so cruelly by divine will and original sin – had been cut back to human scale once more. With the blind rage of a Prometheus and a demiurge, my father refused to acknowledge the distance between earth and heaven. In this anarchical and esoteric new testament, the seeds of a new brotherhood and a new religion had been sown, the theory of a universal revolution against God and all His restrictions. It was a marvellous – I should even say sick – mixture of Spinozist pantheism, Rousseauism, Bakuninism, Trotskyism, and an entirely modern unanimism, an unhealthy amalgam of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism.<sup>117</sup>

Thus, as the first slope of literature, in a world where God is dead, writing, for Eduard, takes on a sadistic form where everything is permitted; hence the refusal to 'acknowledge the distance between earth and heaven'. In addition, this desire to rectify all injustice in the world *through* writing constitutes the father's aspiration towards the absolute; i.e. a kind of writer-demiurge moment of identification as the only sense of freedom that Eduard, through writing, may momentarily have. Soon, however, the reader of his timetable (in this case both the reader of the novel and the narrator, adult Andi) realises that Eduard's timetable is incomplete and that the writing as such renders the very futility of any idea of grasping the totality of the

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<sup>117</sup> *Garden, ashes*, pp.34-5. In Serbian: 'To je bila jedna apokrifna, sakralna biblija u kojoj se ponovilo čudo postanja, no u kojoj su ispravljene sve božje nepravde i nemoć čovekova. U tom petoknjižju, daljine između svetova, tako okrutno podvojene Božjom voljom i prvobitnim grehom, ponovo su svedene na ljudsku meru. Sa slepim besom Prometeja i demijurga, moj otac nije priznavao daljinu između zemlje i neba. U tom anarhičnom i ezoteričnom novom zavetu bilo je posejano seme novog bratstva i nove religije, ispisana teorija jedne univerzalne revolucije protiv Boga i svih njegovih ograničenja. To je bio čudesan, rekao bih čak bolestan spoj spinozijskog panteizma, rusooovštine, bakunjinizma, trockizma i sasvim modernog unanizma, nezdravi amalgam antropocentrizma i antropomorfizma...' In *Bašta, pepeo*, p.50.

world. This belongs, then, to the realm of Blanchot's second 'slope' of literature. Given that the incomplete list is too long to quote here in full, I shall only quote a brief passage from it:

the questions to which he sought answers began to carry him afield both in depth and in breath, and he assembled an enormous listing of literature in the most diverse disciplines, in almost all European languages, and the lexicons came to be replaced by alchemical studies, anthropological studies, anthroposophical studies, archaeological studies, studies in the doctrine of art for art's sake, astrological studies, astronomical studies, studies in autobiography, cabalistic studies, Cartesian studies, cartographic, cataleptic, cataplectic, causalistic, causistic, characterological studies, studies in chiromancy, comedic studies, comparativistic, Confucian, constitutionalistic, cosmic, cosmogonic, cosmographic, cosmological, cynological, Darwinistic, deistic, dialectical studies, studies in dichotomy, diathetic studies, diluvial...<sup>118</sup>

If Eduard's timetable represents one form of list-making in the novel, enumeration and detailing of the ephemeral (as in the adult Andi's narration) also functions in the novel as a form of preservation or guardianship of a *garden* of the perished world of East European Jewry which no longer exists,<sup>119</sup> and whose rapid decline happened as a result of the violence directed towards this Jewish population. Consider, for instance, this passage: 'his white shirts, starched and shabby, and next to them, like their ornament and their crown, a bunch of high celluloid collars tied together with a rubber band, shiny and stiff collars yellowed by nicotine; a hunch of black ties, elongated like water-lily stalks; a pair of imitation-silver cuff links, like a ruler's rings, with initials.'<sup>120</sup> It could be said that this is also adult

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<sup>118</sup> *Garden, ashes*, pp.37-8. In Serbian: 'pitanja na koja je tražio odgovore počela su da ga odvlače jednako u dubinu i u širinu, pa je onda nakupio ogroman spisak literature iz najrazličitijih oblasti, na skoro svim evropskim jezicima, a leksikone su zamenile alhemijske, antropološke, antropozofske, arheološke, astrološke, astronomske, bogoslovske, cionističke, daosističke, darvinističke, deističke, dijalektičke, dihotomijske, dijetetičke, diluvijalne.' In *Bašta, pepeo*, pp.53-4.

<sup>119</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, p.216, Kiš claims the following: 'East European Jewry is no more. (Jews in Eastern Europe today live completely different lives.) It is a story of almost fantastic realism, dealing as it does with real things that no longer exist and are therefore enveloped in a kind of unreal mist, yet maintain their reality.'

<sup>120</sup> *Garden, ashes*, p.108. In Serbian: 'njegove bele košulje, uštirkane i okopnele od upotrebe, a kraj njih, kao njihov cvet i njihova kruna, svežanj visokih okovratnika od kaučuka, stegnutih gumicom, sjajni i tvrdi okovratnici već požuteli od nikotina; svežanj crnih kravata, dugih kao strukovi vodenih lokvanja; jedan par dugmadi za manžete od lažnog srebra, sličan vladarskom prstenju s inicijalima.' In *Bašta, pepeo*, pp.154-5.

Andi's first slope of literature (a result of the primal scene of *il y a* discussed earlier). Adult Andi's narration-as-detailing wishes, then, to re-witness the infinitely separated young Andi's witnessing of his father's departure to death. What I have described as a leitmotif of Kiš's prose - an ambivalence concerning the futility of writing combined, nonetheless, with the need to bear witness - is most emblematically *achieved* as failure towards the end of the novel. What was the vehicle of narration, the father's 'refusal to die', etched on Andi's (survival) conscience, all of a sudden crumbles in the text as a profound loss of meaning in relation to both writing and remembering:

Rummaging through these old, yellowing picture postcards, I find that everything has suddenly become confused, everything is in chaos. Ever since my father vanished from the story, from the novel, everything has come loose, fallen apart. *His mighty figure, his authority, even his very name, were sufficient to hold the plot within fixed limits, the story that ferments like grapes in barrels*, the story in which fruit slowly rots, trampled underfoot, crushed by the press of memories, weighted down by its own juices and by the sun. And now that the barrel has burst, the wine of the story has spilled out, the soul of the grape, and no divine skill can put it back inside the wineskin, compress it into a short tale, mould it into a glass of crystal. Oh, golden-pink liquid, oh, fairy tale, oh, alcoholic vapour, oh, fate! I don't want to curse God, I don't want to complain about life. So I'll gather together all those picture postcards in a heap, this era full of old-fashioned splendour and romanticism, I'll shuffle my cards, deal with them out in a game of solitaire for readers who are fond of solitaire and intoxicating fragrances, of bright colours and vertigo.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> *Garden, ashes*, p.147. (my emphasis). In Serbian: 'U ovom preturanju po starim, požutelim razglednicama, ovom današnjem - shvatite me dobro – sve se odjednom pobrkalo, sve se poremetilo. Otkako je genijalna figura mog oca nestala iz ove priče, iz ovog romana –sve se rastočilo, razuzdalo.Njegova moćna pojava, njegov autoritet, pa čak i njegovo ime, njegovi rekviziti, bili su dovoljni da drže potku priče u čvrstim okvirima, tu priču koja vri kao grožđe u bačvama, tu priču u kojoj voće polako gnjije, izgaženo nogama, smrvljeno presom uspomena, opterećeno svojim sokovima i suncem. Sada su pak naprsli obruči, istočilo se vino priče, duša voća, i nema tog boga koji će vratiti u mešinu, koji će ga sabiti u priču, saliti u kristalnu čašu. O, ta zlatnorumena tečnost, ta bajka, to alkoholno isparenje, o, sudbino! Neću da hulim na boga, neću da se tužim na život. Sakupiću dakle na gomilu sve te razglednice, tu epohu punu starinskog sjaja i romantičnosti, pomešaću svoje karte, zatim ću ih razviti u pasijansu za čitaoce koji vole pasijans i opoj, koji vole žarke boje i vrtoglavicu.' In *Bašta, pepeo*, pp.210-1.

This scene constitutes adult Andi's second slope of literature. With a rather poetic tone, almost a homage to Baudelaire,<sup>122</sup> he (and Kiš) acknowledges both the failure of writing as a desire for the absolute, which is the first slope of literature (for 'no divine skill can put it back inside the wineskin, compress it into a short tale, mould it into a glass of crystal') and the failure of his desire to 'reconstruct' fully the memory of his father. The quoted fragment not only indirectly acknowledges the impossibility of grasping his father's being but it also underlines the 'law' of the literary text: that there is a limit in terms of how much the reader can access the 'meaning' of the text itself. All that remains is both the writer's (adult Andi's) and the reader's games of 'solitaire' and 'vertigo' that constitute the literary text as, again, the space of dying itself: 'the story in which fruit slowly rots'.

The structure of *Garden, ashes* is then an oscillation of two languages: on the one hand, it is a work of Andi's memory and his need to remember and, on the other, it is a failure to fully grasp the horror of war; in ontological terms, the structure of the novel shifts between sense and nonsense. It is, perhaps, not surprising therefore that the last scene in *Garden, ashes* is left to a young Andi. The scene in which he goes to the woods before the storm and dark, with his mother and sister, is the scene that, I think, most deliberately manifests Kiš's own scepticism towards both writing and a modernity that reduces everything to an object of generalizable knowledge/certainty. Not only does the father's 'ghost' 'hover' in the midst of the woods, as a kind of permanently etched *trace* of an absent victim but, in addition, Andi's innocent bewildered gaze into the darkness cancels, or, at least, defers, any redeeming character the novel might have wanted to achieve in relation to the Shoah. In so doing, Kiš deliberately leaves the Shoah beyond comprehension where the father's *ghost* cements the novel as the narration of the impossibility of death.

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<sup>122</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, p.80, for instance, Kiš quotes Baudelaire: 'I sincerely believe that the best criticism is the criticism that is entertaining and poetic; not a cold analytical type of criticism, which, claiming to explain everything, is devoid of hatred and love, and deliberately rids itself of any trace of feeling, but since a fine painting is nature reflected by an artist, the best critical study, I repeat, will be the one that is that painting reflected by an intelligent and sensitive mind. Thus the best accounts of a picture may well be a sonnet or an elegy.'



### c. *Early Sorrows*

Having considered the notion of the *il y a* as what 'constitutes' the very (indirect) witnessing of the Shoah in Kiš's two novels *Hourglass* and *Garden, ashes*, I want now, then, to address this in relation to the third work that belongs to what Kiš called, following Heine, his 'family misfortune'.<sup>123</sup> Although published in 1969 (and thus after the publication of *Garden, ashes*), *Early Sorrows* was the first book written as part of Kiš's 'trilogy'.<sup>124</sup> It is a collection of nineteen short stories, or, as Kiš claimed, 'sketches' of Andi Scham's childhood during World War II in Hungary.<sup>125</sup> Since the stories are about a boy who is unable to comprehend the horrific events that impact upon his everyday life, all of them place emphasis on the child's naiveté in relation to war (even though, for instance, the stories 'Pages from a Velvet Album' and 'The Aeolian Harp' preserve the retrospective element perhaps more than others). In these stories, given here in no particular chronological order, Andi's narrated experiences include: embarrassment at wetting the bed (in 'A Story that Will Make you Blush'), his first falling in love (in 'Engaged to be Married'), the relationship with his dog Dingo and the profound impact that this relationship has on him (in 'The Boy and the Dog'), euthanizing newly born orphaned kittens (in 'The Cats'), visiting a doctor for scabies medication (in 'The Meadow'), and so on. As Edmund White claims, these stories are a 'presentation of sensuous experiences with a minimum of interpretation and a maximum of incomprehension'.<sup>126</sup> In this manner, Kiš here addresses the question of the (un)representability of the Shoah by giving primacy to forms of sensibility rather than cognition: the world of horror is seen and experienced

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<sup>123</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp.36-7.

<sup>124</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Early Sorrows: For Children and Sensitive Readers* (1998), translation Michael Henry Heim, New Directions, New York; in Serbian, *Rani Jadi* (2000), šesto izdanje, Bigz, Beograd. For the argument that Kiš's trilogy's order of publishing is the order in which the three books were written, see, for instance, the work of Ivana Vuletić, *The Prose Fiction of Danilo Kiš, Serbian Jewish Writer: Childhood and The Holocaust*, (2003), The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston – Queenston - Lampeter. In this book she argues that *Early Sorrows* was, in fact, written after *Garden, ashes*.

<sup>125</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, p.262, Kiš claims the following: 'Early Sorrows is written from the point of view of a child. *Garden, ashes* brings the child's point of view together with the commentary of the narrator, a man of thirty, the two of them occasionally coexisting in the same sentence. In *Hourglass* I describe the same world from an objective, external point of view, the view of an author-God, omniscient and omnipresent, and the child appears only once, briefly, in the father's letter that ends the novel. It's as if we began with a sketch, moved on to a drawing, and came finally to the painting itself.' See also p.254.

<sup>126</sup> White, Edmund, 'Danilo Kiš: Obligations of Form', p.365.

completely from a child's point of view. In fact, it is precisely the child's naiveté that, as it were, preserves the absurdity of the horrific situation: the greater the curiosity and/or naiveté of the child's own witnessing, the greater the impression of horror left upon the reader through the images created in its absence. For this reason, I argue that the vignettes of childhood in *Early Sorrows* temporalize the horror of the *il y a* - as nonsense overflowing sense - that thereby opens up a passage toward the ethical relation (consequent upon the image created *outside* of the 'content' of the stories themselves). Before coming to this argument, however, it is necessary, first, to elaborate a little further upon Levinas's understanding of sensibility - since I will draw fairly extensively upon it in what follows - and the function it has in the structure of what he terms a subjectivity-for-the-other which is the condition of the ethical relation itself.

When Levinas speaks of sensibility in *Totality and Infinity*, he does not refer to it as a possibility of representation of thought.<sup>127</sup> Similarly to the phenomenology of Heidegger and Sartre, at least to some degree, Levinas's phenomenology describes the activity of everydayness and 'translates' it (so to speak) into the realm of theory without giving primacy to the intellectual aspect of life as such.<sup>128</sup> Instead, for him, sensibility is primarily a mode of enjoyment in/of the world, the enjoyment of life itself: 'one does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset'.<sup>129</sup> Levinas speaks, in this vein, of 'carefreeness with regard to existence' and of enjoyment as 'sinking one's teeth fully into the nutriments of the world'. For Levinas, only a sentient subject has the possibility to become an ethical subject.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, what grounds my subjectivity is an ego whose needs must be satisfied first *before* the possibility for a relation with being can take place. In other words, to paraphrase Critchley's account of this, man as a sentient subject precedes man as a conscious subject. Man enjoys life, despite his finitude, in his self-preservation and satisfaction of his needs, of

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<sup>127</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.135

<sup>128</sup> See, for instance, 'Introduction' by Simon Critchley in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, (2004), edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.40

<sup>129</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p.135

<sup>130</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, p.63. Critchley claims that [for Levinas] 'the ethical subject is a sensible subject, not a conscious subject'.

nutrients of life. When these needs stop being just mere animal ‘inconvenience’,<sup>131</sup> as Stella Sandford claims, when these ‘instincts of nutrition’<sup>132</sup> have lost ‘biological finality’,<sup>133</sup> the ‘disinterestedness’, according to Levinas, of a man occurs: ‘the disinterested joy of play’, ‘to live is to play’, ‘Egoist without reference to the Other’.<sup>134</sup> Thus, it is precisely a sensible subject who is, as Levinas claims in *Otherwise Than Being*, open to ‘vulnerability’, to ‘wounding’, and who is able to defeat his or her ego’s identity by ‘substituting’ himself for/with others in what he names ‘expiation’.

Subjectivity is formed on the non-cognitive level, as a struggle between ego and subject faced with welcoming the other (the neighbour). The sensible subject becomes both host and hostage in this welcoming of the other. This immediacy of the gaze of the other is where ethics (or, as Levinas later claims, transcendence) takes place by way of *questioning*. What follows from this is that, for Levinas, the ethical movement from the ‘I’ to the other is a *metaphysical* movement as transcendence.<sup>135</sup> Understood in this way, ethics is not a traditional, universal moral structure that must be obeyed and which is the same for all; rather, it is a constant movement of becoming (as a metaphysical Desire toward the other) that challenges one’s subjectivity in terms of rupturing the ego’s *disinterestedness* towards the other as responsibility.

It is important in this context that Levinas thus also radically rejects a traditional metaphysics (and its conceptions of God, morality and reason) in making his response to nihilism and the Shoah. For Levinas, transcendence must not be considered in a traditional way that relates it with theodicy.<sup>136</sup> Theodicy would ineluctably offer the possibility for a redemption and/or justification for suffering inflicted in Auschwitz, which, as we have seen, Levinas, akin to Adorno, finds ‘odious’ and ‘impossible’ in the face of ‘suffering for nothing.’ Therefore, for

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<sup>131</sup> Sandford, Stella, *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* (2000), the Athlone Press, London and New Brunswick, New Jersey, p.82

<sup>132</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p.134

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p.134.

<sup>135</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p.35.

<sup>136</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Entre Nous* (1998), translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Continuum, London and New York, pp.81-86 ‘[pain] renders impossible and odious every proposal and every thought that would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead.’

Levinas, after the Shoah, the notion of a 'metaphysical movement' governed by transcendence, is nothing but an ethical demand by the other who, in their irreducible difference, puts *me* in question. Parallel to the infinite temporality of the *il y a*, from which there is no escape and by which one is always threatened, this relation with the other as *transcendence* is a relation of *infinity*. For Levinas, one is never finished in or with his/her responsibility for the other.

In *Early Sorrows*, where the Shoah is only 'present' as what could be perceived as an absence, in so far as there is no representation *per se* of the Shoah in the book, the specifically biographical elements that the novel takes from Kiš's own life are integrated into a universal paradigm of suffering and loss by way of this kind of Levinasian notion of subjectivity as infinitely put in question by the other. As Gabriel Motola claims, in Kiš's prose there is 'the union of the specific, synaesthetic and surrealistic'.<sup>137</sup> As I suggested in the introduction to this thesis, Kiš's poetics deals with the specific but in such a manner that it has precisely to integrate this into human destiny as a whole (in terms of every singular human's finitude). Writing, then, for Kiš, never aims towards the fulfilment of an absolute consciousness or knowledge (since for Kiš writing begins with the doubt of everything and with a certain decay of the will), but, instead, seeks to register a suffering for human destiny as a whole. In order to integrate human destiny as a whole by means of the specific, the specific (e.g. individual, biographical details) must thus undergo itself a process of 'reductionism'. In Kiš's own words:

every biography, especially of a writer, involves a certain reductionism unless it has had the fortune to have been given artistic form: it is the unique and inimitable story of a unique and inimitable person in a unique and inimitable time. The ideal biography would encompass all people in all times, and the only way of providing such an illusion, especially when the subject is childhood, is through 'poetic', literary form.<sup>138</sup>

*Early Sorrows* is described in its subtitle as a book for 'children and sensitive readers'. It is not, consequently, presented as a collection of stories about a

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<sup>137</sup> Gabriel Motola, 'Danilo Kiš: Death and the Mirror', in *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 51, Number 4, (Autumn 1993), pp.605-621, p. 610.

<sup>138</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.232

Jewish boy only; it is, first and foremost, also a collection of stories about (a) childhood and about the suffering of growing up in general. The specific circumstances that Andi Scham finds himself in and the details that make him a unique being are still present in the text but they are placed in juxtaposition with his relation with the world through his sensibility. In the story 'The Man Who Came from Afar',<sup>139</sup> for example, Kiš's neutrality (or detachment) manifested in his quasi-surrealist narration subtly juxtaposes Andi's naiveté with the images of the marching of the Hungarian fascist soldiers. Paradoxically, the repetition of the images of soldiers together with the repetition of the child's questioning gradually build up an image of both the irreplaceability and singularity of his father (which, as we have seen, Kiš would insist upon calling his 'metaphysical dimension'). As in the previously analysed example in *Garden, ashes*, where Andi is both incapable of comprehending his father's death and the horrors of war, in this story, Andi's sensibility enables him to look at the Hungarian fascists as human beings:

For three days and three nights soldiers filed past our house. Can you imagine how many soldiers it makes when they file past your house for three days and three nights non stop! They came on foot and in carts, on horseback and in trucks. Three days and three nights. And all that time I watched them from my hiding place in the lilac bush. The last shoulder passed on the afternoon of the third day, having fallen far behind the others. He had a bandage around his head and a parrot on his shoulder.

I was a little sorry that there would be no more soldiers coming through the village. When soldiers file past your house for three days and three nights, you start getting used to them, and then life seems empty without them: no one prancing on horseback, no one playing the harmonica.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> *Early Sorrows*, p.79; in Serbian, 'Čovek koji je dolazio izdaleka', p.83. In addition, in *Garden, ashes*, after the war Andreas sees his own father, ironically, in a German tourist. See *Garden, ashes*, p.118; in Serbian, *Bašta, pepeo*, p. 169.

<sup>140</sup> *Early Sorrows*, pp.79-80. In Serbian: 'Tri dana i tri noći su prolazili vojnici ispred naše kuće. Možete li da zamislite koliko je to vojnika kada tri dana i tri noći prolaze ispred vaše kuće bez prestanka! Išli su peške i na kolima, na konjima i kamionima. Tri dana i tri noći. A ja sam celo to vreme stajao u zaklonu od jorgovana. Trećeg dana posle podne prošao je i poslednji vojnik. Bio je zastao daleko iza svih. Glava mu je bila zavijena, a na ramenu je nosio papagaja...Pomalo mi je već bilo krivo što nema nijednog vojnika da prođe kroz selo. Kada vam tri dana i tri noći prolaze vojnici ispred kuće, već počinjete da se privikavate na njih. Posle vam se sve čini tako pusto. Niko ne jaše konje, niko ne svira u harmoniku.' *Rani Jadi*, pp.83-4.

What is noticeable about this paragraph is that, as in *Garden, ashes*, the union of the 'specific, synaesthetic and surrealistic' (to borrow Motola's phrase) has the purpose of underlining the absurdity of evil (in this case, war) which both the writer and the reader must confront. In addition, something like a 'Levinasian' notion of humanity, as both universal and yet not cognitively categorised – in so far as it is in encountering the face of the other that it emerges – is clear in Andi's sensibility which allows him to respond to the soldiers as human beings. In fact, this becomes even more prominent when one of the soldiers asks Andi something 'in a foreign language' which he does not understand, but his reaction to this ends with him offering some water: 'all I knew was that when a man and a woman come from a long way off in a funny little cart they must need water.'<sup>141</sup> Again following Levinas's argument, this is precisely what ethics as transcendence *is*: in the immediacy of the encounter with the soldier, the sentient subject (Andi) is shattered as both host and hostage in so far as his ego stops being disinterested and welcomes the other (soldier). The surplus of good is there (as the act of a good deed) within the intersubjective space, and without God as necessary mediator:

Meanwhile I ran inside to tell my mother we'd be having a visit from a man who'd come from afar and who spoke in a strange way but we could understand him even though he was a foreigner. Then I got a bucket and fetched some water from the well. Our cousins hadn't come back from the camp yet, and I was in charge of the courtyard and the stable, so I told the man to unharness his mules.<sup>142</sup>

The absurdity of this situation - in that 'we could understand him even though he was a foreigner' - is both present and absent (or rather, instantaneously cancelled) in such a way as to underline the universal language of shared humanity between people. The language Andi speaks with the soldier is precisely the shared language of humanity. The scene is contrasted with 'our cousins [who] hadn't

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<sup>141</sup> *Early Sorrows*, p.80.

<sup>142</sup> *Early Sorrows*, p.81. In Serbian: 'Ja utrčah u kuću i rekoh majci da je svratio k nama jedan čovek koji dolazi iz daleka i koji govori tako da se čovek može s njim lepo sporazumeti, mada je stranac. Onda uzeh kantu i donesoh vode s bunara, koji je bio na uglu. Kako se naši rođaci nisu bili vratili iz logora, to sam ja raspolagao dvorištem i štalom. Rekoh, dakle, čoveku da može ispregnuti mazge.' *Rani jadi*, p.85.

come back from the camp yet', but only in a detached manner that seeks to avoid pathos.

In this same story, Kiš also again deploys a device of enumeration<sup>143</sup> which I have previously analysed in both *Hourglass* and *Garden, ashes*. In this particular story its purpose is more explicitly to highlight differently Kiš's perpetual leitmotif, as I have identified it: the irreducible dimension of every human being, here specifically in regard to the father. The scene begins when Andi asks the soldier whether he had met his father on his travels 'because when you come from afar, you always meet a lot of people along the way'. Andi lists a few details that made his father a unique being: 'he walked a little funny', '[he] wore a stiff black hat'. The response he receives is the following:

"Oh yes," said the man, laughing. (He must have thought I was a liar or a clown.) "I did once meet a man answering to that description. He wore a black stiff-brimmed hat and metal-rimmed glasses and carried a cane and all that. He had rather a strange walk and sported a frock coat, dark trousers with white stripes, and a shirt with a detachable collar. I saw him exactly four years ago in Bucharest, my boy," the man said. "He was the Japanese Minister of Heavy Industry!"<sup>144</sup>

Ending the story in this manner, Kiš highlights two things: on the one hand, the singularity of every human being (for there are many people who could fit the description of Andi's father that, nonetheless, are not his father) but, in addition, the tragic humour consequent upon finitude that accompanies the child's refusal to accept his father's disappearance.

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<sup>143</sup> His main influence for this device was Rabelais. In addition, regarding the surrealistic aspects of his prose, Kiš claims the following: 'The trash can, like the cemetery, is a great repository of the world, its very essence. Random juxtaposition makes for strange and wonderful combinations. As in Lautréamont's formula.' *Homo Poeticus*, pp.208-9

<sup>144</sup> *Early Sorrows*, p.82. In Serbian: "'O", nasmeja se čovek- pomislivši valjda da sam neki veliki lažov ili šaljivčina – "zbilja sam sreo jednog takvog čoveka. Nosio je crni šešir sa tvrdim obodom, naočari sa gvozdenim okvirom, štap i sve ostalo. Imao je smešan hod i nosio je crni gerok i pantalone sa svetlim štraftama. Imao je visok okovratnik od kaučuka. Bilo je to", reče, "pre ravno četiri godine u Bukureštu. Taj je čovek bio, mladiću, japanski ministar teške industrije!" In *Rani Jadi*, p.86.

In the very short story 'Pears', Andi's sense of smell is compared by a Hungarian woman, Mrs. Molnár, with that of dogs: 'we'll have to take him hunting with us. We're short of dogs ...'<sup>145</sup> In Kiš's prose, dogs are often presented as metaphors for inhumanity or the advent of disaster. This is, for instance, the case in *Hourglass*, when E.S. dreams of turning into a dog (an obviously Kafkaesque metamorphosis) in order to save himself from brutal death, as well as in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, which I will analyse in my second chapter. However, in the last story that I will mention in this section, 'The Boy and the Dog',<sup>146</sup> the relation is reversed, as it were. Rather than a human being rendered as an animal, the deployment of an anthropomorphic aspect of the story, by way of a dog being humanised, has a function here of addressing the transcendent aspect of the notion of 'human' as both the limit and limitlessness of intersubjective space. The dog's name is Dingo and it could be argued that he, like Levinas's Bobby in his essay 'The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights',<sup>147</sup> is an example of what Levinas calls 'the last Kantian in Nazi Germany'. Levinas in his essay claims 'for him [Bobby] there was no doubt that we were men', but 'without the brain needed to universalise maxims and drives'. What Levinas suggests is that the ethical relation is thus not an obligation governed by universal maxims but, rather, it is an *individual sensuous* experience consequent upon the other and guided by sensibility as vulnerability. In Kiš's trilogy, Dingo is present in all three books; he is the one who is 'accompanying' E.S. in his departure, as if he were able to sense that it is the final farewell: 'Look, there is no one to accompany Eduard Scham to the grave, to Golgotha. Except for a single wretched dog. A wretched, wise dog'.<sup>148</sup> In 'The Boy and the Dog', Dingo is Andi's best friend and when Andi's departure from Hungary becomes certain, Dingo dies.

Levinas and Kiš both deploy a dog as a metaphor, mirroring the Nazi animalising of humans, on the one hand, yet also functioning precisely as an agent of a refusal

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<sup>145</sup> *Early Sorrows*, p.72.

<sup>146</sup> *Early Sorrows*, p.97; in Serbian, 'Dečak i Pas', p.103.

<sup>147</sup> *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (2012), translation Séan Hand, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, in interview after 'The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights', pp.151-3.

<sup>148</sup> *Garden, ashes*, p.144.



of any reductionism of human *signification*, on the other.<sup>149</sup> In this respect, they both underline the most paradoxical aspect of the fragile condition of being human: man as a fragile, disappearing act is resilient in the face of its disappearing, despite the violence inflicted upon him or her.

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<sup>149</sup> According to Levinas, one can lose one's signification and thus, his or her subjectivity, by being reduced to a mere animal as 'signifier without a signified': 'the incarnate ego, the ego of flesh and blood, can lose its signification, be affirmed as an animal in its *conatus* and its joy', and this is precisely where the ambiguous condition of subjectivity as vulnerability is given. See *Otherwise Than Being*, pp. 79-80.

## Chapter Two – Kiš and the Question of Responsibility

In the first chapter I approached Kiš's 'trilogy' of early novels in relation to the experience of what Levinas and Blanchot term the *il y a* and argued that it is the *il y a* that *witnesses*, as it were, the unthinkable (specifically, the Shoah) in such works. In this chapter I argue that Kiš's sense of the writer's responsibility, which he closely relates to the idea of justice, may, again, be understood in direct relation to the encounter with the *il y a*. The aim of this chapter is, first, then, to consider the relationship between Kiš's understanding of literature and the writer's responsibility, on the one hand, and Levinas's conceptions of ethics and subjectivity, on the other. From this, I go on to examine Kiš's apparently pessimistic view of history and relate it to a post-Nietzschean notion of the 'eternal return of the same' which, I argue, underlies both the ethical and aesthetic aspects of his poetics. Third, I shall analyse his two collections of stories, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) and *Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1983) as writings of mourning and of a kind of Blanchotian *ceaseless* eschatology, where a constant leitmotif of Kiš's writing (his own 'metaphysical desire') is both the (im)possible desire for totality – as a work of grieving and desire for justice – and a simultaneous warning against such a desire. Lastly, I want to propose that in these two collections of stories, Kiš's critique of ideologies (both religious and political) affirms the countervailing possibility of what Critchley terms an '*atheist transcendence*' that is presented in Kiš's work as a result, above all, of an encounter with the *il y a*.

### 1. Literature as Apparitional Counter-Companion to History

*I am convinced that history is the history of misfortune, that its worst aspects recur endlessly, over and over.*<sup>1</sup> – Danilo Kiš

In 1980, whilst accepting the Grand Aigle d'Or prize from the city of Nice, Kiš delivered his speech known as 'Between Hope and Hopelessness' (in Serbian

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<sup>1</sup> From the interview titled 'I Don't Believe in a Writer's Fantasy' (1989) in *Homo Poeticus: essays and Interviews* (1995), edited and with an introduction by Susan Sontag, translations: Ralph Manheim, Michael Henry Heim, Francis Jones; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, p. 280.

'Između Nade i Beznađa').<sup>2</sup> In this speech he underlines, as he did many times throughout his life, that what could be considered 'quintessential' for his writing is the way in which it negotiates what he describes as two 'contradictory positions' - the position of the 'yogi' and that of the 'commissar':

At the basis of human experience lie, in essence, two contradictory positions (here I refer to Koestler, one of my teachers): the position of the 'yogi' and that of the 'commissar.' The position of the 'yogi' is metaphysical and ontological, the occupation with final questions (of life or death), while the other position concerns the social being, the man who reduces metaphysics to sociology, giving the totality of existence a social status. There are two struggles, therefore, two ways of looking at things, at existence. If I refer now to my own 'work' (a word which I put in quotation marks following the example of Borges), I then see that these two positions interweave dialectically in my seven or eight books...<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, Kiš views literature, across his oeuvre, as a space for *testimony*, then, concerning the intertwined relation between these two conflicting ways of looking at 'existence' in the 'work', between metaphysics and ontology on the one hand (the position of the yogi), and a reduction of metaphysics to the social (or socio-historical) field on the other (the position of the commissar). As Kiš puts it: 'these two positions interweave dialectically in my seven or eight books'.

As we will see, both of these 'positions', as he calls them – the 'yogi' and the 'commissar' - are closely related to the question of how the literary work engages human finitude. In this sense, comparable to the ways in which Levinas, as a phenomenologist, offers an account of ethics as a *critique* of ontology and

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<sup>2</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.142-145, Translated by Paul Milan Foster for The Review of Contemporary Fiction. XIV: 1 (Spring 1994). Translation of this essay (which is one of the three essays translated by Paul Milan Foster) can be found here: <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Three+essays.-a015074220>. Last visited September 8, 2016. See also: <http://www.danilokis.org/en.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Kiš, *Eseji autopoetike*, 'Između Nade i Beznađa', p.142, in Serbian: 'U osnovi ljudskog iskustva leže dve u suštini kontradiktorne pozicije (i tu se pozivam na Kestlera, jednog od mojih učitelja): pozicija 'jogija' i pozicija 'komesara'. Pozicija 'jogija' jeste metafizički i ontološki status, obuzetost poslednjim pitanjima (života i smrti), a ona druga jeste pozicija društvenog bića, čoveka koji metafiziku svodi na sociologiju, nalazeći u društvenom statusu totalitet bića. Dve borbe, dakle, dva načina gledanja na stvari, na egzistenciju. Ako se osvrnem sada na svoje sopstveno 'delo' (reč koju stavljam pod navodnike, sledeći Borhesov primer), onda vidim da se te dve pozicije dijalektički prepliću u tih mojih sedam-osam knjiga...'

theoreticism in general, by trying to bring theory back to everyday life through a *face-to-face* relation to the other,<sup>4</sup> so does Kiš view literature as always taking, at some level, the form of a *critique* of violence of history. Literature, for Kiš, is, first a medium whose ambition and purpose is, albeit in vain, to offer some meaning and hope to the horror of existence, even if this can only be temporary; and second, to invoke a kind of never-ending questioning that provides no final answers and, through this, an exposure to the horror of history itself. As he claims in the same speech:

All of my texts, as I said before, *testify* to that duality [those two 'positions'], of that *tearing struggle*, of that changing of the angle of view. And what could literature be other than that: a cry and a question - always new and always without an answer - of a man gazing at the terrifying Pascalian spaces; but, on the other hand, it also means to consider one's own epoch and one's own time from a historical perspective, through both social and sociological aspects, in order to try to *recognise/acknowledge*, through the very act of writing, a *man* in the slaughterhouse of history, which is never any kind of 'teacher of life' but rather a scream, rage, and muttering of an idiot. And, of course, writing is nothing other than an attempt, always ineffectual and hopeless, to touch upon all of these vast problems, to devise by literary means in order to allow some meaning and some hope momentarily into the general chaos of history and of human existence. For literature is a form of hope, and as Marcel Raymond said, literature conceals, as it should, the abyss it created. But literature is something more: the passionate designation and struggle of the 'commissar' for social *justice* and for the plotting of history and its currents. Of course, the writer knows, as he should know, that everything he does in this respect is hardly more effective than his 'struggle with death', but he nonetheless enters into that already lost struggle since *he wagers equally on eternity and on the present*, although he knows every wager is lost in advance. Thus he lives and writes between hope and hopelessness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity (An Essay on Exteriority)* (2005), translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, p.28: 'What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a *forgotten experience from which it lives.*' (my emphasis)

<sup>5</sup> 'Between Hope and Hopelessness'. Translation modified. In Serbian, *Eseji autopoetike*, pp.143-4: 'Svi moji tekstovi, dakle, kao što rekoh, svedoče o toj dvojnosti, o tom razdiranju, o tom menjanju ugla gledanja. A šta bi literatura i mogla biti drugo do to: krik i pitanje, uvek novo i uvek bez odgovora, čoveka zagledanog u paskalovske užasavajuće prostore a, s druge strane, sagledavanje svoje sopstvene epohe i svog vremena iz neke moguće istorijske perspektive, hoću da kažem iz nekog mogućeg socijalnog i sociološkog aspekta, kako

From this rather long citation, a few important points emerge: first, Kiš's 'way of looking' at existence is, as I have already argued, strikingly similar to both Levinas's and Blanchot's notion of the *il y a*, understood as something horrific and anonymous, encapsulated here in what he calls 'the terrifying Pascalian (infinite) spaces'; secondly, history, for Kiš, is not a 'teacher of life' but rather a 'slaughterhouse' in the midst of which it is difficult to recognise a man's presence; and thirdly, a desire for social justice permeates historical generality and the barbaric repetition of violence where knowledge is often rendered useless.

For Kiš, then, writing (as literature) is profoundly affected by the ethical relation. This does not mean that a work of art is reduced to serving either moral conventions or any ideological-political programme. (If it were, it would lose its force as 'a cry and a question – always new and always without an answer.')

Rather, Kiš perceives an ethics of literature, or the ethical relation, as a more personal or singular (and thus, less universally dogmatic) response and exposure to the dying of other men, in particular when their death is marked by violence. For that reason, the denial or justification of the existence of camps (*both* Hitler's and Stalin's, he insists) by any writer is, for Kiš, the criterion according to which he or she will be 'judged', both ethically and aesthetically:

first and foremost on his [writer's] attitude, on his positions toward the two most crucial phenomena of this century (as if they were not one and the same phenomenon): toward the extermination camps, both Hitler's and Stalin's. Any attempt, even the most indirect, to justify the existence of camps, due to whatever ideological orientation - in the name of so-called 'historical necessity', 'class struggle', 'racial cleansing', 'the new man', and so on - will

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bi se kroz pisanje i samim aktom pisanja čovek pokušao razabrati u klanici istorije, koja nije nikakva 'učiteljica života', nego krik i bes i mrmljanje jednog idiota. I, naravno, pisanje i nije ništa drugo do pokušaj, uvek uzaludan i beznadan, da se svi ovi golemi problemi dodirnu, da se na trenutak osmisle sredstvima književnim, da se tom sveopštem haosu istorije i ljudskog postojanja dâ, trenutno, neki smisao i ostvari neka nada. Jer književnost jeste oblik nade, književnost zatrpava, treba da zatrpava, ponore koje je sama stvorila, kako to govoraše Marsel Rejmon. No književnost jeste i to: strasno opredeljenje i borba 'komesara' za socijalnu pravdu, za osmišljanje istorije i njenih tokova. Naravno, pisac zna, mora znati, da sve što čini i na tom planu jedva da je efikasnije od njegove 'borbe sa smrću', da se tako izrazim, no on ipak ulazi u tu unapred izgubljenu bitku, jer se on kladi jednako na večnost kao in a sadašnjost, mada zna da je svaka oplada unapred izgubljena. Tako on živi i piše između nade i beznađa...'

discredit every work and every writer, at once, forever, and unmercifully. I dare say that in the near future, if everything doesn't go to hell first, the *responsibility* of the writer will be measured foremost in relation to his position toward the reality of the camps. The reality of both [Hitler's and Stalin's] camps *equally*.<sup>6</sup>

As this passage demonstrates, for Kiš, the relation between aesthetics and ethics in the twentieth century is rigorously conditioned by the position one might take in regards to the extermination camps.

As I argued in the previous chapter, Kiš approaches the question of Auschwitz as a historical rupture, an event where a certain 'absolute' of dehumanisation was reached, which no concept can be applied to justify. The existence of Soviet camps is, for Kiš, another form of the same 'evil' yet to be acknowledged:<sup>7</sup> that of the annihilation of men for the sake of a 'historical necessity'. It is evident that in this speech, Kiš indirectly refers to Sartre's (and de Beauvoir's) denial of the existence of the Gulag in the fifties, in order to highlight the danger posed by any form of political messianism that a writer might be driven to pursue in his or her engagement through writing.<sup>8</sup> Literature, for Kiš, is therefore always confronted with a paradox insofar as writing should serve human *conscience* but in such a way that no recourse to any ideology should be its source, 'since *he wagers equally on eternity and on the present*, although he knows every wager is lost in advance'.<sup>9</sup> What follows from this is the claim that Kiš's 'pessimistic conception of

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<sup>6</sup> 'Between Hope and Hopelessness'. Translation modified. (my emphasis)

<sup>7</sup> Kiš claims: '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 even to read it, considering it an act of ideological sabotage and right-wing conspiracy.' In *Homo Poeticus*, p.187. In Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki Talog Iskustva* (1991), Beogradski Izdavačko-grafički zavod, Beograd, pp.110-1.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Kiš's short essay 'Sveta Simona' [Saint Simone] (1979), where he firmly opposes De Beauvoir's justification (including Sartre's) for her initial denial of the existence of gulags and later justification for such denial. In addition, see 'Rukovati oprezno: angažovana literatura' ['Handle with Care: Engaged Literature'] (1981). Both essays, currently only in Serbian, in Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoeitike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.96-7, 102-4.

<sup>9</sup> 'Between Hope and Hopelessness'. In the final paragraph of his speech, Kiš claims: 'As much as this text is written *pro domo mea*, I dare express my own hope and belief that the books which this jury generously honoured *do not allow the reader to soothe his conscience* in relation to the camps, Auschwitz and Kolyma equally, with some comforting theory of 'historical necessity' and 'a brighter future' whereby massacres are

literature', as he puts it, with all of its lyrical aestheticism, reflects his own ethical quest in relation to human finitude thus reinforcing his stance toward the (violent) death of the other man and, in addition, the argument that writing itself as an ethical act is in fact mirrored by the manner in which the theme is approached aesthetically, thus granting it (both the writing and the theme) 'po-ethic' validity. Thus, from his trilogy (*Early Sorrows, Garden, ashes and Hourglass*), whose *decentred centre* is Auschwitz, to *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976), whose centre is the Gulag, and lastly to his final collection of stories *Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1983) – both of which I will analyse later in this chapter - one can observe that, for Kiš, writing means consistently, and obsessively, to address the (violent) death of the other and, consequently, to desire justice for the victims of the 'slaughterhouse' of history. It is at this point, then, that I want to trace what I will suggest is a possible conjunction between Kiš's *ethics as aesthetics* and Levinas's notion of the ethical relation (in particular, at this stage, as it relates to his notion of the *diachrony* of time) as well as Blanchot's notions of the *neuter* and of *surviving-on*.

In particular, one concern of the present chapter (as, in some sense, of the thesis as a whole) is how the fact that ethical language, in Levinas's sense, *requires* aesthetics corresponds to Kiš's understanding of an aesthetics which is itself rigorously conditioned by ethics. Although Derrida, then, rightly demonstrates, in 'Violence and Metaphysics',<sup>10</sup> that Levinas's idea of an ethical language is always

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justified by history. And, at the same time, that these books have not contributed hatred, either class or racial. That is all. Perhaps insufficiently for one conscience and for one "work". But I wished to *justify* this award *before my own conscience* and to bring a glimmer of optimism to *my own pessimistic conception of literature*. Literature, nonetheless, serves some purpose: the *human conscience*.' (translation modified) In Serbian, 'Između Nade i Beznađa', in *Eseji autopoetike*, p.145 (my emphasis).

<sup>10</sup> See Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference* (2005), Routledge, London, pp.97-192. In 'Violence and Metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas', Derrida argues that Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, in its attempt to introduce the notion of infinity and to be a critique of Western philosophy as a philosophy of totality, failed precisely because it is written with the language that still belongs to such tradition: the concepts which Levinas criticises - for instance, Heidegger's ontology - are still embedded in Levinas's own philosophy. For instance, Derrida claims: 'By refusing, in *Totality and Infinity*, to accord any dignity to the ontico-ontological difference, by seeing in it only a ruse of war, and by calling the intra-ontic movement of ethical transcendence (the movement respectful of one existent toward another) *metaphysics*, Levinas confirms Heidegger in his discourse...', p.177. Many critics have acknowledged that Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* is not only his response to Derrida's criticism of *Totality and Infinity* but also his real attempt to leave ontological concepts behind in developing further his idea of 'Saying'. In his 'Introduction' to Levinas Critchley, for instance, claims: 'Whereas *Totality and Infinity* writes about ethics, *Otherwise Than Being* is the performative enactment of an ethical writing which endlessly runs up against

inevitably betrayed in philosophical discourse by way of being necessarily conceptualised (as Derrida suggests is true of *Totality and Infinity*), the attempt here is to show that Kiš's *literary* language testifies to a responsibility for the other without such necessary betrayal. Instead, Kiš's prose deliberately forms a pseudo-dialectical relation between possibility and impossibility – akin to what, as we have seen, Blanchot describes as the 'two slopes of literature' - which, as such, preserves a tension of language with regard to both the ethical demand and text's autonomy.

In an interview, 'I Don't Believe in a Writer's Fantasy', from 1989 (one of the last interviews Kiš gave before his death), when asked whether he believed in 'human progress', Kiš responded by suggesting that 'humanity has progressed in a technical and scientific sense, but not in terms of putting specific humanist concepts into practice'.<sup>11</sup> Kiš relates history's 'misfortune' here to a quasi-Nietzschean doctrine of the eternal return - what was, for Nietzsche himself, arguably the highest form of nihilism, in which events are not unique but rather repetitive,<sup>12</sup> mainly, according to Kiš, in their 'worst aspects'.<sup>13</sup> This idea of an 'eternal return' relates closely to an affirmation of the absurdity of existence, or of what Nietzsche calls 'amor fati'. Famously, for Nietzsche, it is the experience of nihilism that means that 'the highest values devalue themselves' as the consequence of a collapse of meaning in the world of 'becoming' that constitutes modernity. Accordingly, what he terms the idea of an 'eternal return' is defined as that form of nihilism that would be most difficult to endure, since it designates the ways in which any *new* value that might be seen to offer a possibility of renewed meaning ineluctably returns to the same form of devaluation and negation of itself. In other words, an unbearable world of becoming is, in fact, that which has neither meaning nor aim: 'the nothing ("the meaningless") eternally!' What this means, for Nietzsche, is that man's struggle to find a meaning to human finitude needs a *will*

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the limits of language.' In Levinas, Emmanuel, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (2004), edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.280.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1968), translation Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, New York, p.9, pp.12-14, pp.35-6; see also, Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, (1993), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, translation Susan Hanson, pp.148-9. See also Critchley's chapter 'Preamble: Travels in Nihilon' in *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, pp.1-28.

<sup>13</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.280.



to overcome the void of existence. Thus, whether willing 'untruth' for centuries in the form of Christianity, or willing science in denaturing nature - to paraphrase Blanchot's own reading of Nietzsche - and replacing the Christian God with the concept of the Overman, each are but forms of dealing with the nothingness and absurdity at the heart of existence.

The question of whether or not to reaffirm the endurance of existence as something absurd always anew becomes then, arguably, an ethically constrained question, at least where Kiš is concerned. This is something evident throughout his prose. At the same time, Kiš also asserts a kind of Nietzschean stance with regard to the power of tragic aspects of art as perhaps that which most truly questions who we are in an absurd world.<sup>14</sup> Kiš, for instance, claims (with a reference to Kant) that:

The only people still filled with wonderment at the equation and the mystery of the starry firmament are the poets among us. Only they inject anxiety and doubt into the general confidence; only they look beyond heart transplants and bodies frozen for eternity to the problem of life and death. That's more or less what I meant when I remarked ironically that I was seeking a place under the sun for doubt; that is, literature and art; that is, poets. Science and history cannot take the place of poetry.<sup>15</sup>

If twentieth-century literature has then lost its innocence and epic unity, according to Kiš, and hence can no longer be either 'romantic' or 'fantastic',<sup>16</sup> so literary language *must* correspond to an ethical demand generated as a result of the destructive events of the twentieth century. For that reason, for Kiš, literary language should testify to that which is *lost* in general historical narrative (man himself) in order to, albeit momentarily, interrupt the instrumentalised structures of social life. One could thus argue that, for Kiš, literary language must become, in

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Kiš's interview 'Seeking a Place under the Sun for Doubt' (1984) in *Homo Poeticus*, pp.182-203.

<sup>15</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.191.

<sup>16</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.271 Kiš claims: 'I don't believe a writer has a right to give in to fantasy. I don't believe in a writer's fantasy. Twentieth-century literature has undergone a sea-change: literature is no longer romantic, it can no longer be romantic in the historical sense of the word. For romanticism, fantasy was the driving force of literature. After everything the history of this century has dealt us, it is clear that fantasy, and hence romanticism, has lost all its meaning.'

this sense, an *ethical* response to destructive historical events in the form of a permanent scepticism and questioning with regard to literature itself. Kiš is, in this sense, in agreement with Blanchot's view that modern literature and art precisely become 'legitimised', as Kiš puts it - i.e. autonomous - when they begin to question their *own* existence in a time of social and political crisis.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, however, Kiš is also in agreement with Adorno that politics has 'penetrated' every aspect of our existence, literature and art included. In the essay 'Commitment', Adorno, for instance, claims: 'This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead.'<sup>18</sup> Such a sentiment can no doubt be seen at work in Kiš's own assertion:

I am well aware that poetry (=literature) is – and is becoming more and more – the description and impassioned condemnation of social justice (much as it was in Dickens's day), the description and condemnation of labour camps, punitive psychiatric clinics, and every variety of oppression aimed at reducing human beings to a single dimension, the dimension of a *zoon politikon*, a political animal. Yet, by so doing, it robs them of their wealth, metaphysical thought, and poetic sensibility; it destroys their non-animal substance, their neocortex, and turns them into militant beasts, naked, blind *engages enrages*, raving ideologues. The triumph of *engagement*, of commitment – to which, we must admit, we adhere only too often and which stipulates that literature which is not committed is not literature – shows to what extent politics has penetrated the very pores of our beings, flooded life like a swamp, made man unidimensional and poor in spirit, to what extent poetry has been defeated...<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See for instance, 'Peščanik je Savršena Pukotina' [*Hourglass is a Perfect Rupture*], an interview with Kiš from 1973 (currently only in Serbian) in Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, pp.32-39; See also Blanchot's essay 'Literature and the Right to Death' in Blanchot, Maurice, *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, p. 359.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Adorno's essay 'Commitment' in *Aesthetics and Politics: the key texts of the classic debate with German Marxism* (Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Brecht, Lukács), translation editor Ronald Taylor, afterword by Frederic Jameson, Verso, London and New York, p.194.

<sup>19</sup> In essay 'Homo Poeticus, Regardless' (1980), p.78.

This, however, does not entail that literature's autonomy is compromised, as Adorno rightly argues,<sup>20</sup> by such political contamination. Instead, the question that 'modern' literature needs to ask is *how* to preserve its autonomy as a form of resistance to political instrumentalization. In Kiš's case, the deployment of *defamiliarisation*, on the one hand, and, on the other, an obscuring of the border separating 'facts' from 'fiction' (or, in a Nietzschean sense, 'truth' from non-truth', where the latter is certainly given value) are, arguably, two dimensions of his work that seek, continually, to renew autonomy as a 'depoliticizing condition for politicization', to paraphrase Critchley's reading of Blanchot.<sup>21</sup> In other words, Kiš's novels give what I will argue is *a condition for politicization* in that they confront the reader's pre-existing notions about historical truths by showing how, in their ambivalence, historical truths are open to interpretations; but also, in exposing the reader to the repetition of violence of history as *an other* side of history (by way of a non-linear form of narration).

It is here that Kiš's approach to historical generality is, as I have suggested, comparable to Levinas's critical account of totality. And, as I have already mentioned in the introduction, following Pantić, Kiš may, in this light, be read as an eschatological writer of sorts. Before I elaborate further on this, however, it is necessary to make a little clearer what precisely is meant by the concept of 'eschatology' itself, specifically as it might be understood in relation to Levinas's treatment of history. Consider, for instance, this passage from Kiš's 1985 interview 'Naming Is Creating':

I believe that literature must *correct* History: History is general, literature concrete; History is manifold, literature individual. History shows no concern for passion, crime or numbers. What is the meaning of 'six million dead' (!) if you don't see an individual *face* or body – if you don't hear an individual story? Literature corrects the *indifference* of historical data by replacing History's lack of specificity with a specific individual. And how can I correct History through

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<sup>20</sup> 'As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, including literary one, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life. This mediation is not a compromise between commitment and autonomy, nor a sort of mixture of advanced formal elements with an intellectual content inspired by genuinely or supposedly progressive politics. The content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything, it is the opposite.' Adorno's essay 'Commitment' in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p.194.

<sup>21</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, p. 65.

literature, how can I make up for History's indifference if not by using authentic documents, letters, and objects bearing the *traces* of real beings.

Literature is the concretization of abstract History. Documents are indispensable because if we rely exclusively on the imagination we run the risk of slipping back into abstraction.<sup>22</sup>

Although it may appear, at least from this quote, that Kiš here inverts Aristotle's account of the distinction between history and literature (where, for Aristotle, poetry is universal and history is specific or particular), in fact, Kiš's prose precisely reinforces Aristotle's defence of poetry. Most importantly, his deployment of historical documents and his historiographical style (at least in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*) allow the possibility for a reader to experience historical realities precisely as specific, whilst opposing any kinds of literary ghettos that exclude 'human destiny as a whole'. In the above passage, as I read it, literature, for Kiš, is, in this sense, a form of *eschatology* par excellence in so far as it 'corrects the indifference of historical data'. In other words, literature is, on this account, an *ethical* exposure to that which is *absent* from or *outside* of historical generality (that is, 'totality'), for example 'an individual *face*'. This means that neither Kiš nor Levinas refer to the term 'eschatology' in a teleological sense as a mode of futurity, or even in a theological sense as such. As Levinas puts it: '[Eschatology] does not introduce a teleological system into the totality; it does not consist in teaching the orientation of history.'<sup>23</sup> For both of them a theological reference to the experience of eschatology would imply a 'reductionism' that could only efface the religiosity of the radical *strangeness* between people and the infinity that this relation presupposes.<sup>24</sup> Instead, 'eschatology' names an ethical relation to 'exteriority' (the face), to borrow Levinas's term, which institutes a relation with 'being *beyond the totality* or beyond history, and not with being beyond the past and the present'<sup>25</sup> insofar as it is a relation to the past (and/or the dead victims of

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<sup>22</sup> My emphasis. In Kiš, in 'Naming is Creating' interview from 1985, in *Homo Poeticus*, p. 206.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, 'Preface' to *Totality and Infinity* in Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity (An Essay on Exteriority)* (2005), translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, p.22. In 'Despite Oneself', Levinas claims: 'Temporalization as lapse, the loss of time, is neither an initiative of an ego, nor a movement toward some telos of action'. In *Otherwise Than Being*, p.51. (My emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p.168; footnote p.197. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas also claims: 'We propose to call "religion" the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality.' In *Totality and Infinity*, p.40.

<sup>25</sup> 'Preface' to *Totality and Infinity*, p.22.

the past) whose futurity is still *unfinished* in the present (as history). Understood this way, eschatology is therefore, for both Levinas and Kiš, an experience of 'judgment' of recorded (epic) history that, nevertheless, still occurs *within* history: 'It is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience', in the former's words.'<sup>26</sup>

For Kiš himself, the eschatological 'moment' in literature would imply, then, an almost obsessive demand (as he often phrased it) to create texts for those who are otherwise *without* historical record and whose *absence*, as it were, is still present within history: thus, for instance, the central character of his trilogy is, as we have seen, Eduard Scham in *Garden, ashes* (1969) or *E.S.* in *Hourglass* (1973), based on Kiš's own father who died in Auschwitz; the protagonists of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) are revolutionaries who perished in Stalin's gulag; and the story 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead' (the title story of his last published collection from 1983) centres around the idea of an archive whose goal is to record the lives of unknown people, thereby opposing the other Aristotelian rule that only the lives of the 'great' are worth recording. For Kiš, in other words, writing is rigorously conditioned by a responsibility for the *other* human and by a sense of doing *justice* to the other whom historical (epic) narrative excludes.

Kiš's writing as a form of eschatology opens up, in this way, an experience of alterity or difference within the text in order to approach the question of mortality itself. Bearing this in mind, as I read it, eschatology for Kiš has a dual function: not only is his aesthetics an experience of a kind of Levinasian 'diachrony of time'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> 'Preface' to *Totality and Infinity*, p.23.

<sup>27</sup> For Levinas, the 'diachrony of time' is precisely an experience of being responsible for the other which happens as an 'instant falling out of phase with itself' within the present and remains 'foreign to every present'. Thus, *contra* Heidegger's conception of the temporalisation of time (where Dasein's projection in the world, as being-toward-death, unifies or conjoins past and future in the actual present), for Levinas, in my responsibility for the other my subjectivity 'disengages from its essence'. Diachrony of time is precisely for Levinas 'Saying' as immemorial, anarchical and non-representable *to the present* that still happens *within* the present. See for instance, Levinas, Emmanuel, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (2011), translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, pp. 9, 10, 11; see also Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, p.155. It might be worth mentioning that in this text Critchley links Levinas's notion of a 'diachrony of time' with both Benjamin's 'messianic time' of *Jetztzeit* and Derrida's time of justice as 'maintaining-now without presence'. Coincidentally, Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) could be considered as a narrative of Derridean *hauntology* in so far as the question of justice - for the victims of

(which is, for Levinas, precisely *ethical* time), in terms of instantiating a responsibility for the dead by way of generating an affective response on the part of the reader, but it also has the function of ‘subverting’ our everyday utilitarian modes of existence. For Kiš, these aspects of his aesthetics are important in resisting what he considers to be the consequent ideological relation between modernity’s hegemonic conceptions of rationality (a kind of *scientism*) and the historical ‘slaughterhouse(s)’ of the twentieth century (as manifested in the totalitarianisms of both right and left.)<sup>28</sup> Kiš’s juxtaposition of real documents and fiction – in what came to be known, more broadly, as a literary genre of *faction* – in this sense functions in all of his texts, as I suggested in my opening chapter, both to tease the reader’s need for authentic truth (or certain knowledge) and to present something like an encounter with the limit of thought with regard to death. In that respect, it could be argued that ‘faction’ is, unusually, for Kiš, the permanent rupture within his texts of a *de-totalising*, Levinasian *Saying*<sup>29</sup> that exposes the reader to his/her powerlessness, and that, in doing so, opens up a possibility of thinking ‘beyond identity’.

This is a possibility upon which I will elaborate further in my final chapter. In advance of this, however, it is worth, at this point, considering in more detail the implications, as I read it, of Levinasian ‘Saying’ as a form of eschatology with regard to Kiš’s singular deployment of real documents in his prose. As I have already established in chapter one, Levinas’s account of ethics is understood primarily as a critique of the ontology that dominates Western philosophy, in so far as the latter’s primary aim is to *reduce* being *qua* being by enclosing it within the concept of ‘*totality*’. For that reason, for Levinas, ontology is always, finally, a

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Stalinism – which Kiš addresses in this collection - represents the haunting remnant of a *betrayed* socialist ideal of democracy.

<sup>28</sup> In an interview ‘Seeking a Place under the Sun for Doubt (1984) in *Homo Poeticus*, Kiš claims the following: ‘With the coming of the twentieth century all metaphysical questions were swept away by a universal wave of materialism and Marxism, and the philistine and the intellectual along with the peasant from television’s “global village” are equally convinced that there is no more mystery, that science, history and progress have solved all our problems. All but one: the problem of human immortality. But now that a pig’s heart or a baboon’s heart has been transplanted into a human chest, immortality is just around the corner! Now we know the reason for historical evolution from the low to the high. The great equation has been solved scientifically and comes out even. Hence no more mysteries, no more doubt.’ p. 191. In an interview ‘I Don’t Believe in a Writer’s Fantasy’, Kiš correspondingly juxtaposes different totalitarian explanations of the world throughout history. See *Homo Poeticus*, p. 273.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Saying’, for Levinas, is precisely the transcendence of an ‘*otherwise than being*’ that extends the distance between the subject and the other as the language itself.

philosophy of 'power' and 'injustice'.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, ethics is not only a critique of a modernity that tends towards scientism as truth, knowledge and totality - and, hence, a domination of the same over the other - but is also a revival of, for Levinas, the most important relation with the other. Ethics, or rather the ethical relation of the 'face-to-face', is thus, above all, a kind of *unworking* of power<sup>31</sup> (which also implies a break with history, to the extent that history is a history of totality). Instead, being comes to be understood in terms of a relation with *infinity* (as in the 'face' of the other), as that which always escapes the possibility of being fully or adequately grasped. Levinas, for instance, states: 'To manifest oneself as a face is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation.'<sup>32</sup> And furthermore, 'The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp.'<sup>33</sup> It is this that correlates then, I am suggesting, with Kiš's claim that literature is becoming more and more the description of

every variety of oppression aimed at *reducing human beings to a single dimension*, the dimension of a *zoon politikon*, a political animal. Yet, by so doing, it *robs them of their wealth, metaphysical thought, and poetic sensibility; it destroys their non-animal substance*, their neocortex, and turns them into militant beasts, naked, blind *engages enrages*, raving ideologues.<sup>34</sup>

What then is the relationship between 'ethics' and history in literature? According to Levinas, one is faced with a paradoxical situation at this point primarily because ethics is not something that '*is*' but rather something that '*is occurring*' within discourse; in other words, ethics can never be established as a universal maxim per se nor can it be subordinated to morality in a traditional sense. Instead, ethics is fundamentally non-conceptual; it occurs 'diachronically' within discourse as an interruption of the subject's power to comprehend, as the 'trace' of an 'immemorial' past from within an instant of possibility of thought, and therefore, simultaneously,

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<sup>30</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp.46, 21.

<sup>31</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p.24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.200.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.197.

<sup>34</sup> Essay 'Homo Poeticus, Regardless' (1980) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.78. (my emphasis)

as both the limit and limitlessness of thought itself. To put it crudely, the paradox lies in the fact that Levinas's phenomenological project attempts (in particular, in *Otherwise Than Being*) to represent within a text precisely that which escapes representation, the 'Saying' within the 'Said':

Ethical language, which phenomenology resorts to in order to mark its own interruption, does not come from an ethical intervention laid out over descriptions. It is the very meaning of approach, which contrasts with knowing. *No language other than ethics could be equal to the paradox which phenomenological description enters when, starting with the disclosure, the appearing of a neighbour, it reads it in its trace, which orders the face according to a diachrony which cannot be synchronized in representation.*<sup>35</sup>

Ethical language then, as a 'diachrony of time', is an experience of the subject's traumatic opening towards alterity which is manifested as a pluralism within being. As such, for Levinas, it can only be experienced as *testimony* or rather as an *effacement* of testimony<sup>36</sup> which he closely relates to responsibility for the other and to an acknowledgment of mortality of the other (human being). Since responsibility for the other, in Levinasian terms, occurs 'anarchically' (i.e. beyond the power of the self) as vulnerability and trauma of the self, testimony is always already an infinite effacement as *presence of absence* of death of the other human being.

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<sup>35</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (2011), translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, p.193, footnote for p.94: 'In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying. The thematization of a face undoes the face and undoes the approach. The mode in which a face indicates its own absence in my responsibility requires a description that can be formed only in ethical language.' See also 'The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis' in Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, p.184. Critchley, for instance, claims: 'The *paradox* here is that what this ethical language seeks to thematize is by definition unthematazible, it is a conception of the subject constituted in a relation to alterity irreducible to ontology, that is to say, irreducible to thematization or conceptuality. Levinas's work is a *phenomenology of the unphenomenologizable*, or what he calls the order of the enigma as distinct from that of the phenomenon.'

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, 'Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony' (1972) in Levinas, Emmanuel, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, (1996), translated by I. MacDonald, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, pp.97-107, p.102. See also, Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, p. 156.



This is, I would suggest, precisely how Kiš approaches writing and the question of responsibility to the other through writing also. The deployment of documents which are 'indispensable', as he claims, in his prose could be said, then, to incorporate this paradoxical moment in such prose itself: that is to say, what interests Kiš are precisely those gaps or interruptions between words in a document, that very *presence of absence*, as it were, beneath the document's representation, the very singularity (of a man) which the historical document excludes. As he puts it:

An eyewitness report is the best document. For its naked power, for what it says and, even more, for what it fails to say, the spaces between words and sentences. The father's letter in *Hourglass* and Karlo Štajner's *testimonies* in some of the stories in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* give the works the seal of truth and set limits to the imagination without fettering it. On the contrary. They turn literature into what Claude Lanzmann calls 'a fiction of reality'.<sup>37</sup>

Viewed in this way, it could be argued that Kiš's sense of responsibility for the dead as a judgment of (epic) history is reflected in his writing as a double movement of 'reductionism' as he calls it, of the intertwined relation of the particular (i.e. the alterity of man) within the general (document). To return to a passage I already cited in my introduction, Kiš claims:

Literature uses the specific, of course, to get at the general, but without literary transposition every specific, biographical detail, everything that sets you apart from others, everything that's private to the nth degree, the distinguishing features on your identity card, seems like a facial growth or a physical defect. Literature feeds on the specific, the individual, and is at pains to integrate it – short of losing track of it – into the general. That's why I so oppose reducing a work of literature to a life and object to literary biography that overemphasises the particular and fails to integrate the subject's 'distinguishing features' into *human destiny as a whole*; that's why I reject all 'minority' literature and literary ghettos.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, as I mentioned earlier, although Kiš places history on the side of the general (thereby inverting, as it were, Aristotle's primacy of poetry), his prose however –

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<sup>37</sup> From the interview 'Naming Is Creating' (1985), in *Homo Poeticus*, p. 206. (my emphasis)

<sup>38</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp.232-3. (my emphasis).

as this double movement between the particular and the general – in a sense reinforces this Aristotelian defence of poetry in so far as its aim is 'human destiny as a whole'. Arguably, then, for Kiš, writing (poetry) must constantly preserve the '*incarnation*'<sup>39</sup> of this double movement whilst also being an ongoing *unworking* of the intertwined relation between truth (history) and untruth (fiction):

I see no value whatsoever in authentic documents ... unless they are *testimonies*, such as those of Solzhenitsyn, say, or Karlo Štajner, the author of the shattering *Seven Thousand days in Siberia*. Here the authenticity is so tangible that their books are of genuine historical value. I have always found this period of history, crucial as it is to man's great betrayal, particularly interesting, which is why I undertook to document certain twentieth-century events in my own way; that is, to introduce false documents into my books and transform them, through the process of writing, through the imagination, into 'real' ones. Had I used historical documents, I'd have been unlikely to have attained the degree of literary authenticity which – judging by their reviews – they convey in their present form.<sup>40</sup>

In this respect, in order for justice to be experienced within the text (and, in particular, a justice for the dead), writing, for Kiš, must maintain a permanent scepticism in the form of an apocryphal *palimpsest*,<sup>41</sup> as he calls it, drawing on Eliot and Borges, in order to infinitely interrupt, through the form of 'faction', the possibility of absolute truth as knowledge. In this sense, both Levinas and Kiš approach the question of truth by way of what might be described a quasi-Nietzschean 'negative' (but not necessarily anti-) epistemology.

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<sup>39</sup> This is perhaps akin to Critchley's reading of the solution which, he suggests, Derrida found with regard to the problematic relation between Levinas's ethics and (Levinas's) politics. According to Critchley, the 'hiatus' - as Derrida describes Levinas's problematic - can be solved, in the name of justice, in such a way that 'what has to be continually deconstructed is the guarantee of a full *incarnation* of the universal in the particular, or the privileging of a specific particularity because it *embodies* the universal.'<sup>39</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, p.278.

<sup>40</sup> From the interview 'I Don't Believe in a Writer's Fantasy' (1989), in *Homo Poeticus*, p.272.

<sup>41</sup> Kiš often used the word 'palimpsest' as a synonym for literary tradition, following both Borges and T.S. Eliot, in order to address the ways in which any writer is always in relation to other writers, the fact that writing never occurs *ex-nihilo* so to speak, but rather as a correspondence to other writers and other literary traditions. In this respect, for Kiš, a writer must create his own literary 'kinship' or 'mythical family (literary) tree' as he called it. See, for instance, *Homo Poeticus*, pp.67, 72.

Kiš, for instance, conceives of his entire 'opus' in this regard, I want to argue, in terms of its manifestation of a struggle of infinite nature with the finite limits of any text<sup>42</sup> (a struggle akin to Blanchot's understanding of the relation between writing and the book), not only in terms of the suspect referentiality of the 'real' texts he deploys in his prose – whereby he 'frees' them, so to speak, from their origin by juxtaposing them with false documents - but also in terms of his relation to his own protagonists. For example, both E.S. (*Hourglass*) and Novsky (*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*) are also present in a third text, in the story 'The Book of Kings and Fools' (*Encyclopaedia of the Dead*), which I will discuss in the second part of this chapter. In addressing 'mysterious links', as he puts it, between his protagonists 'E.S.' in *Hourglass* and 'Novsky' in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, not only does Kiš emphasise that 'both works deal with people whose only compass is doubt – if doubt can be a compass',<sup>43</sup> but he also claims that they 'cancel each other':

B.D. Novsky and E.S. are involved in the same personal revolt, but the former is a commissar, the latter a yogi. In the end the two poles cancel each other, the yogi turning commissar, the commissar yogi. Yet their phases are distinct and separate and *they are never in dialectic unity* –whence the misunderstandings.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, they are in a kind of dialectical relation whereby one deals with metaphysics (E.S.) - that is, his anger and loss of faith in God – whilst the other is an existentialist (Novsky) and a revolutionary who wants to change the world.

## 2. A Language of Scepticism

I shall discuss Kiš's idea of the two poles – the yogi and the commissar - that cancel each other out, but which, nonetheless, are 'distinct and separate', further in the following section of this chapter. Before doing so, however, it is worth engaging at this point what might seem an obvious objection to my claim that Kiš's conception of aesthetics as ethics is comparable to key aspects of Levinas's

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<sup>42</sup> This, of course, is akin to the nineteenth century German Romanticism. Metonymy would be the manifestation of this infinity of relation in Kiš's prose.

<sup>43</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.46.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, my emphasis

thought – that is, the widespread view that Levinas’s account of ethics is, as it were ‘incommensurable’ with the aims of art and literary criticism in general.<sup>45</sup> After all, according to Critchley, that the *il y a* is ‘the origin of the artwork’ in Blanchot is precisely what Levinas wishes to *overcome* in order to give primacy to ethics as first philosophy through the hypostasis of a subject.<sup>46</sup> Yet, it is important to note here that what Levinas in fact wished to highlight was, not an objection to aesthetics or literary criticism per se, but the extent to which the desire for absolute knowledge has also penetrated the realm of literary criticism itself. In his rather difficult essay ‘Reality and Its Shadow’ (1948), Levinas thus claims:

Criticism too professes this dogma. It enters into the artist’s game with all the seriousness of science. In artworks it studies psychology, characters, environments, and landscapes - as though in an aesthetic event an object were by the microscope or telescope of artistic vision exposed for the curiosity of an investigator. But, alongside of difficult art, criticism seems to lead a parasitic existence. A depth of *reality inaccessible to conceptual intelligence becomes its prey*. Or else criticism substitutes itself for art. Is not to interpret Mallarmé to betray him? Is not to interpret his work faithfully to suppress it? To say clearly what he says obscurely is to reveal the vanity of his obscure speech.<sup>47</sup>

What becomes apparent in this passage is that Levinas’s claim that Mallarmé’s ‘obscure speech’ is betrayed by the critic is directed specifically against the ‘scientific’ manner through which criticism approaches the literary work (i.e. through concepts). This is akin to Kiš’s own understanding of literary criticism, which he relates to what he terms ‘the error of positivism’:

The presence of the ‘metaphysical’ is precisely what sets literature apart from the bulk of other written records and brings it close to music (no mean feat). At the same time it represents its most elusive aspect, its ‘musical soul’ – invisible, irreducible, inexplicable, an unknown creating a third element out of

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<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Robbins, Jill, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999), Chicago University Press, Chicago

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, pp. 63, 76.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Reality and Its Shadow’ (1948) in Levinas, Emmanuel, *The Levinas Reader* (1989), edited by Seán Hand, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, p.130, my emphasis.

two knowns, the Kirlianov Effect. Something that goes beyond the senses and has more in common with parapsychology than psychology, though it can be recorded: David Faust (that's his real name!) has recently photographed 'finger radiation.' The 'metaphysical radiation' or illumination of literature stumps all literary theory, whether it favours the biographical or social approach or (conscious of the Kirlianov Effect in literature) structuralist, formalist, and phenomenological approaches, which attempt to analyze the work, break it down into its atomic particles, reduce it to itself, its 'essence'.<sup>48</sup>

In this respect it could be argued that both Levinas and Kiš perceive in dominant forms the tendencies of literary criticism to reflect a drive towards an accomplishment of philosophy itself,<sup>49</sup> which would thereby abolish the very need for artistic creation. Literary criticism, in this sense, like philosophy in Hegel, in 'substituting itself for art', as Levinas claims, wants to 'grasp' the irreducible aspects of literary work for the sake of absolute knowledge, which in Hegel is the self-realisation of Geist itself (as the unity of logic and metaphysics). Although Levinas in the same essay 'Reality and Its Shadow' criticises both classical art and aestheticism (or art for art's sake) for being *disengaged* from reality and, thus, for Levinas, being irresponsible and not committed to the world, he also accords a value to this disengagement by asking whether this engagement itself means necessarily always trying 'to go beyond': 'Can one not speak of disengagement on the hither side – of an *interruption* of time by a movement going on on the hither side of time, in its "*interstices*"?'<sup>50</sup> It is possible to read Levinas here, then, as actually describing, and simultaneously defending, the very obscurity of (modern) art at this point, in so far as this 'disengagement' is precisely *foreign* to communication and comprehension which, consequently, means that it is foreign

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<sup>48</sup> From the interview 'Banality, Like a Plastic Bottle, Is Forever' (1976), in *Homo Poeticus*, p.178; in addition, Kiš claims: 'Criticism has fallen into the hands of people stranded halfway between art and theories of perception and convinced that by discovering a certain regularity and order in the domain of art they have discovered exact parameters for assessing it, thus committing *the error positivism* has committed in the fields of philosophy and anthropology.', my emphasis, p.179. It should be pointed out, up to a point at least, that Blanchot's own account of literary criticism corresponds to both Levinas and Kiš also in this respect (although he differs from Levinas with regard to literature and the question of the *il y a*); hence his 'theory' of literature as a kind of anti-theory which entails that the critic, in analysing a literary work, must ineluctably demonstrate that he also failed.

<sup>49</sup> In Kiš's terms, this is also 'the destruction of philosophy in the name of science, of the philosophy that didn't claim to be a science but only a reflection on the human condition...' In *Homo Poeticus*, p.190.

<sup>50</sup> 'Reality and Its Shadow', p.131, my emphasis

to a dialectics of this 'going beyond'. In introducing the term '*entre temps*' (literally 'meanwhile' or 'between times') - as the 'tragic' and '*inhuman*' time of the modern novel (and a perpetual time of dying as such), which is tragic precisely because literary language ineluctably *fails* to represent what it wishes to represent - Levinas reiterates the description of his own understanding of an ethical language, as a relation between 'Saying' and 'Said'.

Notably, Levinas's description of this 'meanwhile' time more or less precisely corresponds to a Nietzschean doctrine of 'eternal return of the same' insofar as it is a time within an *instant* (of thought) that indefinitely defers a possibility of final redemption.<sup>51</sup> Failure to redeem the past then most certainly guarantees its repetition in the future infinitely devoid of presence (as accomplished truth and knowledge). Thus, *contra* Heidegger's conception of actualisation of unity of time in *Dasein's* projection in the world, where a close relation to death is the ultimate 'possibility of impossibility',<sup>52</sup> for Levinas such a possibility is never guaranteed; instead, this time within an instant is a reversed 'impossibility of possibility', as infinite dying, which I discussed in chapter one.

This aesthetic 'meanwhile' time of the novel, which corresponds to the 'eternal return of the same', must be viewed then diachronically, in Levinas's sense, and, hence, *ethically*. Consequently, when Levinas claims that images 'impose themselves on us without us assuming them', and that 'the subject is caught up and carried away by it',<sup>53</sup> does he not describe his very own ethics when speaking of aesthetics? Levinas's account of ethics as *subjectivity-for-the-other* is precisely an *excess* of alterity within the self, as a movement between being both a 'host' and a 'hostage' in relation to the other. Would it not be then possible to suggest, as for instance both Critchley and McDonald do, that Levinasian ethics *requires* aesthetics, as a work of sublimation of 'phenomenological paradox' to represent

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<sup>51</sup> 'Reality and Its Shadow', pp.138-9; In Nietzschean terms, in order to endure the 'false' world of becoming, one must redeem. See, for instance, Henry McDonald, 'Aesthetics as First Ethics: Levinas and the Alterity of Literary Discourse', in *diacritics*, Volume 38, Number 4 (Winter 2008), pp.15-41. In this article McDonald links Levinas's 'meanwhile' time with Nietzsche's doctrine of 'eternal return of the same'.

<sup>52</sup> Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, (2002), translation John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, p. 306, p.307. Heidegger terms it 'the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all.'

<sup>53</sup> 'Reality and Its Shadow', p.132.

within discourse the 'unrepresentable'?<sup>54</sup> Or, to put it another way, is it not the case that Levinasian ethical language must itself be *defamiliarised* as *ostranenie* (to deploy Shklovsky's term) in order to *affect* and *introduce* within the subject the haunting demand of the other in the first place? I would like to develop this argument in the next section of this chapter, through my analysis of Kiš's two collection of stories in conjunction with Blanchot's notion of the *neuter*.

Before I proceed onto my more concrete analysis of Kiš's prose texts, however, it is also important to say a little more here, briefly, about how this relates to Levinas's notion of the '*impossibility of death*' (considered in chapter one) and of the work of mourning, and the 'eternal return of the same', as viewed from a perspective of the *il y a*. As I have already mentioned, for Levinas, death is radically other, and is, as such, something that denies the subject of, in Heidegger's sense, authentic existence. Therefore, for Levinas, it is only in relation to the death of the other (human), as the 'first death', as he claims, that there can be some meaning and an acknowledgement of mortality (as vulnerability, senescence, wounding). Since, for Levinas, ethical language conditioned by the experience of the *il y a* is 'inaccessible'/unrepresentable as such - it can only occur within discourse as a Saying within the Said, mourning as a movement of desire towards meaning of death of the other is, paradoxically, a movement towards totality and a simultaneous disjunction of it as (non-totalizable) *infinity*. In this sense, one might argue, as Critchley does, that 'the aesthetic intimates the excess of the ethical over the aesthetic'.<sup>55</sup> With regards to Kiš, and, for instance, his novel *Hourglass*, the father's letter becomes, in this light, the starting point of a movement towards the desire for totality. In *Po-etika, knjiga druga* (1974), Kiš, for example, claims:

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<sup>54</sup> On the issue of sublimation in Levinas, see, for instance, 'Das Ding: Lacan and Levinas' in Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, pp.198-213, p.205; see also Henry McDonald, 'Aesthetics as First Ethics: Levinas and the Alterity of Literary Discourse', in *Diacritics*, Volume 38, Number 4 (Winter 2008), pp.15-41. In this article, McDonald demonstrates the reasons why Levinas's view of literature cannot be overlooked and finds a necessary symbiotic relation between ethics and aesthetics in Levinas thereby proposing it as 'aesthetics as first ethics'.

<sup>55</sup> 'Das Ding: Lacan and Levinas' in Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, p. 203.

I am writing an anthropological novel which has one human bone for its basis, as if it were a bone of some Dinosaur or Tyrannosaurus. I am trying to reconstruct the look of this entire animal, to place each bone back in its place, to cover it with flesh, to make blood flow through the flesh, to summon its voice, its cry, to examine the regions through which that animal, Tyrannosaurus or Homo Sapiens, had moved, what it ate, what it drank, whom it was meeting, what and whom it spoke to, where and who with it slept, what it dreamt, what was the climate at the time of its existence. That bone is a letter with a date 5.4.1942 on it.<sup>56</sup>

The letter as a kind of 'human bone', from which an 'entirety' might apparently be reconstructed, is, thus, to refer back to my earlier discussion, understandable as *eschatological* in a broadly Levinasian sense: a breaking up both of history - as instantiated in the event of Auschwitz - and of being – the subject's alterity as responsibility for the other (that is, Kiš's responsibility, both as a son and a writer). In this respect, the letter constitutes an (im)possible desire to reconstruct the memory of the father and its simultaneous destruction through the work of sublimation. Arguably, then, an ethical relation here, as it is 'manifested' through a diachronic aesthetics, readdresses the immemorial past (the relation to a father) from the future (*Hourglass*) only as an infinite *interruption* of true knowledge, memory, presence.

In *Entre Nous* (1998), Levinas writes:<sup>57</sup>

This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag,

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<sup>56</sup> My translation. In Kiš, Danilo, *Po-etika*, knjiga druga (1974), Konferencija Saveza studenata Jugoslavije (Mala edicija ideje), Beograd, pp.36-7. In Serbian: 'Pišem jednu antropološku knjigu: na osnovu jedne ljudske kosti, kao da je u pitanju kost kakvog Dinosaurusa ili Tiranosaurusa, pokušavam da rekonstruišem izgled cele te životinje, da svaku kost stavim na svoje mesto, da kosti obložim mesom, da učinim da kroz meso počne kolati krv, da dozovem njen glas (te životinje), njen urlik, da ispitam predele kroz koje se ta životinja, Tiranosaurus ili Homo sapiens, kretala, šta je jela, šta pila, s kim se sretala, šta je s kime govorila, gde je i s kim je spavala, šta je sanjala, kakvi su bili klimatski uslovi u vreme njenog postojanja. Ta kost je jedno pismo koje nosi datum 5.4.1942. godine.'

<sup>57</sup> Compare Kiš: 'Take the postwar period, for instance. We have been confronted with the countless human victims of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the horrors of the Vietnam War, the mass murders committed by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, a mad religious conflict in Northern Ireland, a brutal war in Afghanistan and no less brutal war between Iran and Iraq, the bloody insanity of fundamentalism, and so on', in 'I Don't Believe in a Writer's Fantasy' in *Homo Poeticus*, p.280.



and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.<sup>58</sup>

Not only does Levinas (like Adorno, perhaps more famously) find any attempt to justify suffering in the twentieth century ‘barbaric’ in this respect, but, in addition, suggests that such a need for a comprehension of suffering is precisely what generates the possibility for a repetition of barbaric events. Thus, for both Levinas and Kiš, what is essential is to acknowledge the necessary evil that accompanies the void of existence but in such a manner that redemption is *not* guaranteed. Such an impossible demand can only attempt to halt the possibility of future destructive events through a defamiliarised language of the ethical (that is, what I am terming an ‘ethics as aesthetics’), in order to expose the subject to dying and challenge the subject’s preoccupation with its own being. It is in these terms, I think, that one might understand Kiš broader response to what he present as that everlasting ‘void’ of existence with which we are confronted in modernity:

We don’t know where we come from, where we are going, or why we exist. Religion, philosophy, and poetry (when I say poetry, I mean literature as a whole) attempt to supply us with answers to these questions. But neither religion nor philosophy nor poetry has the power to convince us with their answers: in all three cases we are dealing merely with the poetic metamorphoses of our quest for answers to such existential questions. Let’s leave science aside for the moment – though even science, which many still think will sooner or later solve our basic problems, is in the end only another poetic attempt to understand people and things.

We live in the unknown, as at the beginning of the world or at the beginning of human existence. Ideologies emerged as an attempt to fill this void: they are the simplest way for man to make himself believe that all the problems of

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<sup>58</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Entre Nous* (1998), translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Continuum, London and New York, p.97.

existence have been overcome. This is the basis of their success – or rather, it was. Because nowadays, as I've said, we are turning back to religion, to myth.<sup>59</sup>

If the *il y a* is 'the continual "presence" of the murdered awaiting justice',<sup>60</sup> as Caygill suggests in his book *Levinas and the Political* (2002), then it could be argued that Kiš's prose resurrects, in this sense, the dead for the sake of *impossible*<sup>61</sup> justice, in order to address the issue of nihilism and its destructive power as a work of mourning, albeit momentarily.

### **3. Kiš's 'Disappointing' Apocalypse: *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and *Encyclopaedia of the Dead* as narratives of the impossible**

*An imperfect remembrance? An absolute lie? A staggering truth? A silent desire?*  
– Maurice Blanchot<sup>62</sup>

*Ma rage d'aimer donne sur la mort comme une fenêtre sur la cour.*  
– Georges Bataille<sup>63</sup>

In this section I want to focus on a concrete analysis of Kiš's two collections of stories, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) and *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1983), in order to demonstrate the extent to which they could be said to manifest a kind of infinite eschatology of writing itself.<sup>64</sup> Keeping in mind the argument of the previous section, in particular the notion of justice as Levinasian eschatology, at the same time I precisely wish to demonstrate through, in this case, a deployment of Blanchot that the experience of reading these two Kiš's works entails an aesthetic *affectivity* of defamiliarised ethical language found in Levinas himself. In other words, my argument will be that Kiš addresses poetically the question of

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<sup>59</sup> From the interview 'I Don't Believe in a Writer's Fantasy' (1989), in *Homo Poeticus*, p.276.

<sup>60</sup> Caygill, Howard, *Levinas and the Political* (2002), Routledge, London, p.52.

<sup>61</sup> With his undercutting *fiction*, Kiš's work wishes to transcend the border of the body of fiction in order to address life/existence itself and so it serves to question the very aim of history's goal, hence impossible (akin to Levinas, Blanchot and Derrida).

<sup>62</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *The Step Not Beyond* (1992), translated by Lycette Nelson, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, p.9.

<sup>63</sup> Kiš uses this quote by Georges Bataille in French before the beginning of his collection of stories *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead*

<sup>64</sup> Blanchot, for instance, terms this 'measureless end'. See 'Slow Obsequies' in Blanchot, Maurice, *Friendship* (1997), translation Elisabeth Rottenberg, edited by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, Stanford University Press, California, pp.83-92, p.92.

justice for the victims of (past) ideology in order to open a possibility of (ethical) response from the reader for the sake of a future beyond identity thinking.

*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, written whilst Kiš was working at the University of Bordeaux as a lecturer in Serbo-Croat, is a collection of short stories - which, since the stories are connected by the theme of Stalinism, may also be said to function as a 'novel' - that seeks, I argue, to challenge the reader to think of history not as self-evident truth and as a totality of the given world but, rather, as a realm within which what escapes comprehension as absolute transcendence of alterity is man himself. At the same time, in more concrete political terms, with this book Kiš wished to challenge, in particular, those French leftist movements that chose, in the name of a communist Idea, to ignore the existence of Soviet camps.

Regarding the experience of reading *A Tomb*, Joseph Brodsky claims that: 'it is not that the thought is felt but, rather, that the feeling is thought'.<sup>65</sup> I think that Brodsky means here that it is through the affective charge generated by the book that the reader can envisage the horror of the Gulag. I want to argue, in this vein, that Kiš's approach to history, as an eternal repetition of destruction, points to an experience of the 'diachrony of time' (or of ethical time) as both responsibility and as an omnipresent exposure to dying (here, in the specific historical context of Stalinism). In addition, I shall try to show that Levinas's notion of metaphysics<sup>66</sup> - according, at any rate, to his rather unorthodox conception of metaphysics as

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<sup>65</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (2001), introduction Joseph Brodsky, afterward William T. Vollmann, translation Duška Mikić-Mitchell, Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois, xvi

<sup>66</sup> Levinas's doctrine could be said to have the following trajectory: he approaches ethics with phenomenology in order to get to metaphysics which, for him, is the transcendence of alterity as infinity (infinity as subject's exceeding the idea of both the other in itself and of itself, infinity as impossibility of death and infinity as fraternity). Stella Sandford, for instance, claims: 'The latter is "experienced" in the face-to-face encounter, which is the phenomenological attestation of the metaphysical idea of infinity. The interplay between metaphysics and phenomenology finds expression in the (formal) asymmetry of the (actual) ethical relation', p.26 in Sandford, Stella, *The Metaphysics of Love* (2000), The Athlone Press, London and New Brunswick, New Jersey; in addition, it is worth mentioning here that Critchley, in *Very Little...Almost Nothing* (1997), argues that Levinas's project is 'to smuggle a metaphysical presupposition into a quasi-phenomenological description' (p.80) and thus, he perceives Levinas's idea of alterity - which, for Levinas is an experience of a relation to the Other - as God; Critchley's argument changes, however, a few years later. In his introduction to Levinas, in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Critchley, for instance, claims: 'nor is he [Levinas] claiming that the other is God, as some readers mistakenly continue to believe' in Levinas, Emmanuel, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (2004), edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 14.

going *beyond* but *within* this world, as an infinite 'religious'<sup>67</sup> relation to the other man, and as a sacredness of the other man - corresponds, in key respects, to Kiš's own understanding of 'humanism', despite the specifically 'atheist transcendence', as Critchley terms it, that I have already suggested is ultimately at stake within his work.<sup>68</sup> Blanchot's own understanding of the 'eternal return of the same' as a fragmentary and thus detotalising aspect of *writing* will be crucial in this respect, not least in the ways in which it diverges from certain aspects of Levinas's thought.

The influence Levinas's doctrine had on Blanchot is too enormous to be elaborated in any adequate detail here. (As has been seen, one would find it, for example, impossible to grasp the Blanchotian understanding of the *il y a* and the radical otherness of the other without understanding the presence of Levinas's influence in Blanchot's own work). At this point, however, I do want to consider Blanchot's own reading of Levinas, since it will be central to my reading of Kiš's poetics and, in particular, to my reading of his two collection of stories in this chapter. For Blanchot, the other (*autrui*) is, as it is for Levinas, a 'transcendent' being, with whom, however, the relation is radicalised as an absolute relation within writing.<sup>69</sup> Blanchot names this relation between humans a '*neutral relation that is not neutral*' in order to, as it were, preserve a kind of Levinasian 'strangeness' between men. In so doing, according to Leslie Hill, Blanchot

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<sup>67</sup> In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas claims: 'This relationship is religion, exceeding the psychology of faith and of the loss of faith. It orders me in an anarchic way, without ever becoming or being made into a presence or a disclosure of a principle', p.168. In the footnote of the same book, Levinas claims that 'theological language destroys the religious situation of transcendence. The infinite "presents" itself anarchically, but thematization loses the anarchy which alone can accredit it.', p.197. It could be, thus, argued that Levinas understands religion, as a relation between people in an anarchic, non-thematized, phenomenological experience of transcendence of alterity. In this respect, theology would, in turn, be just another form of thematization that would, as it were, reduce the anarchic experience itself to a system of thought, norm, etc. Levinas's discourse had undergone a 'semantic transformation', as Derrida says, and so the discourse on Levinas should bear this in mind.

<sup>68</sup> This is a consistent argument with which Critchley approaches Levinas throughout his work. Since my reading of Kiš corresponds to Critchley's account, it is hovering over this project throughout.

<sup>69</sup> In *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot claims: 'For the moment, we shall have to make two remarks, and say first of all that this redoubling of irreprocity – the reversal that makes me apparently the other of the other – cannot, at the level at which we are situating our analysis, be taken over by the dialectic, for it does not tend to reestablish any equality whatsoever; on the contrary, it signifies a *double dissymmetry*, a double discontinuity, as though the empty space between the one and the other were not homogeneous but polarized: as though this space constituted a non-isomorphic field bearing a double distortion at once infinitely negative and infinitely positive, and such that one should call it *neutral* if it is well understood that the *neutral does not annul, does not neutralize this double-signed infinity*, but bears in it the way of an enigma', pp.70-1. (my emphasis)

'salvages' or reworks the concept of the absolutely Other (Autrui) in Levinas's thought that has led many critics of Levinas to argue that his doctrine is, despite his own intentions, in the end another form of conceptual representation of 'being'.<sup>70</sup> (Derrida's 'Violence and Metaphysics', mentioned earlier, would no doubt be the most sophisticated version of such a criticism). Essentially, the argument against Levinas's *transcendence* of the intersubjective space is that the language through which he addresses the demand of the other (as the absolutely other) as an ethical relation is still conceptually ontological. For Blanchot, therefore, radical alterity, as 'double dissymmetry' between the self and the other, occurs within the text not as a relation itself *to* the Other but as the very *otherness* within the text (to which both the self and the other are exposed whilst continuing to be radically other to each other). In addition, such a *neutral relation without neutrality* is, for Blanchot, the key to preserving the permanent *detotalising* condition of a relation, the very 'curvature of intersubjective space' of which Levinas speaks in one of the last sections of *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>71</sup> As Levinas states:

The truth of being is not the *image* of being, the *idea* of its nature; it is the being situated in a subjective field which *deforms* vision, but precisely thus allows exteriority to state itself, entirely command and authority: entirely superiority. This curvature of the intersubjective space inflects distance into elevation; it does not falsify being, but makes its truth first possible.

Such an intersubjective relation, for Blanchot, is necessary to maintain the other as *otherwise* than being, and, in doing so, to keep it as a relation of infinity.

Kiš's own obsessive wish to respond to the ethical question of justice in order to preserve responsibility, through writing, for the dead can be best understood, I think, in this way also. In this sense, there is a double movement within his texts. First, for Kiš, what enables the possibility for narration in his prose is precisely the

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<sup>70</sup> Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p.175. 'From Blanchot's perspective, it seems that God in Levinas is both impossible to accept for reasons of Blanchot's atheism, and yet, because of its importance in singularising Levinas's whole conceptuality, impossible to refuse.'

<sup>71</sup> In *Totality and Infinity*, p.291; see also, Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p.176; Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, p. 81 ('For Blanchot, the absolute relation offers a *non-dialectical account of intersubjectivity*'); see also, Mole, D. Gary, *Levinas, Blanchot, Jabes: Figures of Estrangement* (1997), University press of Florida, Gainesville, p.15.

absence as presence of the dead insofar as writing becomes an *eschatological* critique of destructive historical events and a reinterpretation of historical realities. At the same time, through the permanent scepticism that it displays, Kiš's writing doesn't aim to achieve an absolute aesthetic consciousness (regarding those historical events in question). Instead, his narration, through its voids and gaps, shows the very pluralism of language itself - a kind of Blanchotian *disjunction* of language - and the impossibility of ever achieving totality (in terms of absolute knowledge, truth and presence) in the literary work as elsewhere. It is in such terms that I want to approach Kiš's two collections of stories, insofar as not only do they intertwine the concept of totality with its destruction but they also connect to each other in a metonymic manner, such that, for instance, the story 'The Book of Kings and Fools' from *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* is the intertextual 'other' to both *Hourglass* and the story 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich'.

Generically, both collections of stories deal with biographies<sup>72</sup> - what, in the introduction to the English translation of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Joseph Brodsky describes as 'the last bastions of realism'.<sup>73</sup> Hence, the narration in this particular novel purposely struggles with its own identity in terms of genre - it oscillates between a short story and a *Bildungsroman*, while the theme that seemingly connects together these 'biographical' stories is the powerlessness of individuals during the Soviet camps.<sup>74</sup> What suggests this kind of narrative *identity crisis* is precisely an ethical understanding that Kiš's writing is self-consciously constrained by: namely, that in 'garnering a mass of documents and facts', as he claims in the essay 'Schizopsychology', Kiš approaches both the paranoid behaviour of modern man and the question of finitude in encyclopaedic fashion, as a quasi-totally or impossibility of totality. For that reason, the encyclopaedic device has a multiple function. Not only is the encyclopaedia for Kiš his 'literary ideal' in Mallarméan fashion, 'the ability to fashion the minutiae of life into a mythical, eternal book, to reveal immense, hidden reality beneath a scant number

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<sup>72</sup> *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* more prominently than *Encyclopaedia of the Dead*

<sup>73</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (2001), introduction Joseph Brodsky, afterward William T. Vollmann, translation Duška Mikić-Mitchell, Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Brodsky, for instance, claims: 'each of his vignettes sounds like a miniaturized Bildungsroman accomplished by a movie-like montage of shrewdly chosen details that allude both to the actual and to the literary experiences of his reader.' (XIV)

of words';<sup>75</sup> the encyclopaedic entries also serve to blur the boundaries separating fact from fiction (for example, fake footnotes vs. real ones), so as to allow the reader to follow the trajectory of the protagonist's life – from birth to death – and, in addition, to enable a critique of the desire *for* any absolute knowledge on the part of either writer or reader. (This is perhaps clearest in the story 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead'.) Furthermore, it could be argued that these two collections of stories *mirror* one another – if *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* constitutes Kiš's attempt to erect a tomb (a text) for dead revolutionaries whom history had erased for ideological ends, the story 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead', by contrast, is a critique precisely of attempts to gather information about the dead. In other words, if the former novel is a resurrection of the dead for the sake of justice, the title story of the last novel is a critique directed against the (impossible) idea of complete resurrection of the dead itself that would eventually, through a gathering of every single ephemeral detail about the dead, encompass an ultimate knowledge of both the living and the dead. Therefore, although there are many intertextual parallels between the two (some of which I will elaborate upon further below), the crucial aspect of these would be an oscillating movement between the desire for impossible totality (in the former), as the work of mourning in gathering the incomplete archival documents of dead revolutionaries, and the destruction of the very possibility of any such totality (in the latter) precisely out of a respect for the dead.

*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) is a collection of seven thematically connected stories. The English translation omits the subtitle of the original text in Serbian: 'sedam poglavlja jedne zajedničke povesti' which, if translated into English, would be 'seven chapters of a linked tale'. This, as we will see, is crucial in my analysis regarding the ways in which Kiš's work engages, formally, an 'eternal return of the same' since, crucially in this respect, one of the stories is set not in the twentieth century but in fourteenth-century France during a pogrom. Apart from the latter story, 'Dogs and Books', the other six stories are in fact set in thirties Europe during Stalin's purges. All of the book's protagonists happen to be Jewish, which is arguably one of the reasons why the novel's reception in former

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<sup>75</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.265.

Yugoslavia was not sympathetic on the part of several critics. Some, however, like Predrag Matvejević, acknowledged this 'Jewish' aspect to Kiš's *Tomb* precisely not in terms of some kind of sympathy or false pathos for the Jewish intelligentsia of Stalin's thirties, but rather, as a hardly explored subject within literary realm, at least up until *Tomb's* publication.<sup>76</sup> Kiš himself rightly pointed out that the Jewish intelligentsia played a crucial role in the Russian Revolution and thus, for him, could function as a starting point in approaching this particular subject more generally.<sup>77</sup> My argument is that in the same manner in which Levinas universalises the Jewish people in his dedication in *Otherwise Than Being*,<sup>78</sup> in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* Jewish characters are precisely *universalised* as the victims of the 'same hate' (be it that instantiated by Hitlerism, Stalinism or French pogroms) in Kiš's book.

What interests Kiš, above all, as many critics have acknowledged,<sup>79</sup> is precisely everyday phenomena as a proper domain of *ethics* in terms of addressing the

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<sup>76</sup> See, for instance, Predrag Matvejević's 'Historija, Fikcija, Intriga' in collection of essays *Treba li spaliti Kiša? [Should We Burn Kiš?]* (1980), edited by Boro Krivokapić, Globus, Zagreb, p. 22. Being on the side of Kiš during a long campaign against him, Matvejević does not view *Tomb*, in terms of the Jewish protagonists/revolutionaries, to be Kiš's 'apologia' for the brutalities of revolution, and so it should be considered figuratively.

<sup>77</sup> Kiš claims: 'It is a well-known fact that the Jewish intelligentsia and intellectuals of Central Europe played a leading role in the Russian Revolution. I see that as a great error on their part. They were obsessed with the illusion that it was possible – using Marx, of course, to build a just Communist society, more powerful than all national and nationalist leanings: put simply: an international society...Afterwards, under Stalin, the majority of the Russian Jewish revolutionaries were either shot or sent to rot their lives away in the gulag while the Jewish revolutionaries of Central Europe, unless they slipped out of Hitler's grasp in time, were consigned to the Nazi death camps. In this sense, I see little difference between the fate of Jewish intellectuals under Stalin and under Hitler. The Jewish characters in my book are there to document the similarity of the two systems.' in *Homo Poeticus*, p.275. In addition, he claims: 'In my works the Jew is the symbol of all the pariahs of History. To name is to diminish.' *Ibid*, p.207; see also *Ibid*, p.37.

<sup>78</sup> Levinas dedicates *Otherwise Than Being* to 'the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.'

<sup>79</sup> Joseph Brodsky, for instance, claims: 'the metaphysical impact of the last lines that gape, along with their reader's mind, into pure *chronos* – which is presumably a formula for equating art to human reality.' In Introduction to *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, xvi; Similarly, Gordana P. Crnković, in her essay 'Literature against the Closures of Language' claims that 'the works of Danilo Kiš and John Cage attempt to abolish themselves as 'beautiful forms separated from life' and thus realise their 'life' potential, in Crnković, Gordana P., 'Literature against the Closures of Language: A Tomb for Boris Davidovich by Danilo Kiš and Silence by John Cage', p.20 in *Imagined Dialogues: Eastern European Literature in Conversation with American and English Literature* (2000), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois. Svetlana Boym describes everyday phenomena in Kiš in the following terms: 'The ethical in Kiš is connected with the aesthetic; Kiš's stories present a peculiar dialectical, or rather ethical, montage of multilayered literary allusions and aesthetic palimpsests disrupted by violence. Realist or pragmatist ethics are unavailable to him, as are rational, positivist solutions' in Boym, Svetlana, 'Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics:



singularity of an individual life over and against any totalizing ideology (whether political or religious). While I agree, then, with Branko Gorjup's claims that while, for example, 'Borges's fiction heavily extends its references to life's extraordinary manifestations, involving metaphysical elements, that of Kiš gravitates towards more ordinary phenomena, defined by temporal references,' my argument is that Kiš is, at the same time, interested in phenomenology in order precisely to respect the 'metaphysical' (in a Levinasian sense) dimension of human beings. Documents in his *Tomb* function not only as an attempt to reconstruct the past event of totalitarianism (the Soviet camps), but also to transcend the margins of the fictitious text itself and address the absurdity of existence in general.<sup>80</sup>

Apart from Baruch David Neumann, the protagonist of 'Dogs and Books' ('Psi i Knjige'), a French Jew who is forced to convert to Christianity, all the other protagonists in the book are revolutionaries from across Europe with different class backgrounds. In 'The Knife with the Rosewood Handle' ('Nož sa Drškom od Ružinog Drveta') a Romanian Jewish tailor's apprentice, Miksha, becomes a revolutionary and is ordered to commit a gruesome murder to prove his loyalty to the revolutionary cause; in 'The Sow That Eats Her Farrow' ('Kрмаča koja proždire svoj okot'), Verschoyle, an Irish Republican volunteer in the Spanish Civil War, is sent to a gulag as a punishment for criticising Soviet power; in 'The Mechanical Lions' ('Mehanički Lavovi'), Ukrainian Chelyustinkov is ordered to transform a brewery (previously Saint Sophia church) back into its previous function in order to organise a religious ceremony for a French delegate, Édouard Herriot; in 'The Magic Card Dealing' ('Magijsko kruženje karata'), Dr Karl Taube, a Hungarian revolutionary, is murdered because of a card game between two gulag prisoners; the title story 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich' ('Grobnica za Borisa Davidovicha') focuses on the arrest of a Russian Jew, Boris Davidovich Novsky, and his struggle to sign a false confession forced on him by a brutal interrogator, Fedukin; and, lastly, the final story 'The Short Biography of A.A. Darmolatov' ('Kratka Biografija A.A. Darmolatova'), deals with the rather tragicomic ending of a Russian

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Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and *The Protocols of Zion*, in *Comparative Literature*, Vol.51, Number 2 (Spring 1999), pp.97-122, p.119.

<sup>80</sup> In Gorjup, Branko, 'From 'Enchantment' to 'Documentation', in *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol.29, No.4 (December 1987), pp.387-394, p.392.

revolutionary poet who ends up being known in historical records for all the wrong reasons – not for his poetry but for his rather unfortunate medical condition.

If the subject matter of a novel is the violence of history, then history is the *other* within the narrative itself as a kind of Levinasian ‘meanwhile’ time. In *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, this ‘meanwhile’ time of the novel corresponds to what I have called a *diachrony* of time quite directly, in so far as the (impossible) immemorial is already a vehicle of narration. In this way, Kiš’s approach to writing *A Tomb* apparently presents itself as akin to that of a historian, assuming a detached, objective tone that does not impose or force itself directly on the reader.<sup>81</sup> Yet, for that same reason, the ‘historiographical’ mode of narration opens up a rupture in relation to history’s epic narrative. Kiš himself claimed that *A Tomb* was ‘a poetic, literary work about familiar political facts.’<sup>82</sup> In the story ‘A Tomb for Boris Davidovich’, Kiš writes:

The ancient Greeks had an admirable custom: for anyone who perished by fire, was swallowed by a volcano, buried by lava, torn to pieces by beasts, devoured by sharks, or whose corpse was scattered by vultures in the desert, they built so-called cenotaphs, or empty tombs, in their homelands; for the body is only fire, water, or earth, whereas the soul is the Alpha and the Omega, to which a shrine should be erected.<sup>83</sup>

This passage, as I read it, addresses in metaphorical fashion Kiš’s entire poetic stimulus. That is to say, Kiš here suggests that, just as the ancient Greeks had a custom to acknowledge the mortality of those fellow men whose violent deaths erased any (physical) trace of them, so does he (Kiš), as a modern writer, have a duty to ‘erect’ an empty tomb (or a text) for a victim of ideology and power whom

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<sup>81</sup> For a very good reading of relation between historiography and fictional truth see, for instance, Oja, Matt F., ‘Fictional History and Historical Fiction: Solzhenitsyn and Kiš as Exemplars, in *History and Theory*, Vol.27, No.2 (May 1998), pp.111-124.

<sup>82</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.273

<sup>83</sup> Kiš, Danilo, ‘A Tomb for Boris Davidovich’ in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (2001), introduction Joseph Brodsky, afterward William T. Vollmann, translation Duška Mikić-Mitchell, Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois, p.74; in Serbian: ‘Stari su Grci imali jedan poštovanja dostojan običaj: onima koji su izgoreli, koje su progutali vulkanski krateri, koje je zatrpala lava, onima koje su rastrgle divlje zveri ili proždrlili morski psi, onima koje su razneli lešinari u pustinji, gradili su u njihovoj otadžbini takozvane *kenotafe*, prazne grobnice, jer telo je vatra, voda ili zemlja, a duša je alfa i omega, njoj treba podići svetilište.’, p.85 in Kiš, Danilo, *Grobnica za Borisa Davidovicha* (2000), urednik Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad

historical generality has excluded. In a Levinasian sense, *A Tomb* is thus readable as an eschatological opening to the experience of an ethical time within history.

Before proceeding, there are a few important points that need to be stressed with regard to the question of responsibility in Kiš and the experience of reading. First, since the idea of 'eternal return of the same' is, as it is 'inherited' from Nietzsche, closely related to the question of nihilism, I want to show how ideology (both religious and political) interweaves within Kiš's stories as the intertextual otherness of another text, which is experienced as powerlessness by protagonists and the reader alike. Second, I want to show how the idea of responsibility consequent upon the *il y a*, as a displacement of the self, corresponds to Kiš's own narrating subject in some of these stories so as to try to bridge the gap between fact and fiction, hauntingly bringing closer, as it were, art and life. Third, I want to show that although Kiš uses the specific in terms of resurrecting (albeit impossibly) the victims of the past and, thereby, as it were, 'thematizing' them in his stories, Kiš preserves their 'metaphysical dimension' through a deployment of irony whereby Kiš negates the very possibility of what was 'thematized' to achieve a complete aesthetic consciousness. Lastly, all of these aspects of Kiš's work are, I want to note, directly related to the question of justice, and, in this respect, to the experience of ethical time. What Levinas, Blanchot, and even Derrida, conceive of as the *eskhaton* can only be experienced from the *impossible* point of an erasure of what is being given: as a vanishing interruption of the subject's autonomy, and, hence, as trauma.<sup>84</sup>

If, for Blanchot, the very basis of communication is the exposure to someone else's death, and the fact that 'it is in life itself that that absence of someone else

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<sup>84</sup> In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida, for instance, claims: 'Is there not a messianic extremity, an *eskhaton* whose ultimate event (immediate rupture, unheard-of-interruption, untimeliness of the infinite surprise, heterogeneity without accomplishment) can exceed, *at each moment*, the final term of a phusis, such as work, the production, and the telos of any history?' p. 45 in Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994), translation Peggy Kamuf, introduction Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, Routledge, New York and London; see also, 'The Messianic' in Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, pp.151-161; in addition, regarding Derrida's own commentary on Blanchot and disjunction in *Spectres of Marx*, see Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p.210.

has to be met,<sup>85</sup> 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich' exposes the reader to precisely this 'absence'. The story turns around the absence of the biography of a prominent revolutionary, Novsky, from existing historical records – only scattered archival documentation is available – meaning that Kiš's narrator is faced with an ethical need to reconstruct and resurrect Novsky's life whilst all the time reminding the reader that many necessary documents for such a reconstruction are missing. As Gordana Crnković's reading of this story rightly suggests, Novsky's life could be said to undergo what appears at first sight to be a kind of quasi-Hegelian dialectical progression:<sup>86</sup> we see him exist through language (the books he reads) taking the world as a complete known; through the reading of those very books and exposure to human injustice (via historical materialism), Novsky's life turns to an opposition to this 'completion' – he becomes a revolutionary in order to change the world for the better – before, finally, his lack of belief in revolution's actual goal leads to his consequent arrest; the very *absence* of his own (real) revolutionary biography - Novsky is forced to sign a false confession - becomes the final 'missing' unity. Novsky gets arrested on 23 of December 1930 in Kazakhstan and the whole possibility of his biography surviving for future generations rests, in this story, on whether he will sign a false confession that he worked against the state; a confession forced upon him by the interrogator Fedukin.<sup>87</sup> The narration of the story revolves around this 'absent synthesis' (Novsky's true biography): Novsky's desire to leave some trace of himself after his death for future generations rests on his need to insert *between* his words of false confession a sign that would indicate that his confession is a lie:

trying to incorporate into the confession – probably the only document of his that would remain after his death – a certain wording that would not only cushion his final downfall but also *whisper to a future investigator*, through the skilfully woven contradictions and exaggerations, that the whole structure of this confession rested on a lie squeezed out of him by torture.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *The Unavowable Community* (1988), translation Pierre Joris, Station Hill Press, Barrytown, p.25.

<sup>86</sup> Crnković, Gordana P., 'Literature against the Closures of Language: A Tomb for Boris Davidovich by Danilo Kiš and Silence by John Cage', in *Imagined Dialogues: Eastern European Literature in Conversation with American and English Literature* (2000), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, p.37.

<sup>87</sup> 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich', p.89.

<sup>88</sup> 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich', p.98, my emphasis

It could thus be argued that the immemorial past (the singular person and life of Novsky) both informs and haunts the 'future investigator' - Kiš as a writer and the reader reading this story - in the form of a permanent scepticism<sup>89</sup> with respect to history as totality and the truth of historical documents themselves. (In the story, Novsky's false confession is, after all, caused by torture). The very absence of Novsky's 'true' biography (i.e. that he fought against the injustice of the world) within the false confession forced by Fedukin - for whom 'it was better that so-called truth of a single man, one tiny organism, be destroyed than that higher interests and principles be questioned'<sup>90</sup> - makes Novsky's life the *detotalising* aspect within the totalitarian system that destroys the idea of the world as available to absolute knowledge. Kiš then, I am arguing, resurrects Novsky's life *within* a totality (the representation of history as ideology) as a Levinasian Saying within 'the skilfully woven contradictions and exaggerations' of the Said; all the while erasing the possibility of a reduction of the trace that enabled the narration (Novsky) in the first place, and, in doing so, leaving Novsky's 'metaphysical' dimension, the sacredness of the other as the stranger, intact - 'he left a few cigarettes and a toothbrush':

As the guard approached him, Novsky leaped into the boiling mass. The guards saw him disappear before their very eyes; he rose like a wisp of smoke, deaf to their commands, defiant, free from German shepherds, from cold, from heat, from punishment, and from remorse.

This brave man died on November 21, 1937, at four a clock in the afternoon.

*He left a few cigarettes and a toothbrush.*

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<sup>89</sup> Regarding scepticism, Blanchot, for instance, claims: 'Skepticism, a noun that has crossed out its etymology and all etymology, is not indubitable doubt; it is not simply nihilist negation; rather, irony. Skepticism is in relation with the refutation of skepticism. We refute it, if only by living, but death does not confirm it. Skepticism is indeed the return of the refuted, that which erupts anarchically, capriciously, and irregularly each time (and at the same time not each time) that authority and the sovereignty of reason, indeed of unreason, impose their order upon us or organise themselves definitely in a system. Skepticism does not destroy the system; it destroys nothing; it is a sort of gaiety without laughter, in any case without mocking, which suddenly makes us uninterested in affirmation, in negation: thus it is neutral like all language. The disaster would be that portion of skeptical gaiety, never at anyone's disposal, that makes seriousness (the seriousness of death, for example) pass beyond all seriousness, just as it lightens the theoretical by not letting us trust it. I recall Levinas: "*Language is in itself already scepticism*".' In Blanchot, Maurice, *The Writing of the Disaster*, (1986), new edition, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, pp.76-7.

<sup>90</sup> 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich', p.99.

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 recognised by his steel dentures. This news was carried by the entire Western bourgeois press, eager for intrigue and sensation.<sup>91</sup>

Ending the story with an apocryphal document - a report from *The Times* about Novsky's *ghostly* appearance in Moscow - Kiš reaffirms the haunting of the *il y a*, as provoking a sense of justice for the dead, exceeding the border of the material body of the text (fiction), as an interruption of sublimation, and addressing the nature of existence itself. In this way, Kiš, as mentioned earlier, re-establishes the symbiotic relation between literary ethics and everyday ethics, exposing the reader not only to the horror of a totalitarian system (in this case, Stalinism), but also - through the symbiotic relation between fact and fiction - challenging the possibility of any absolute knowing as power. This is, the narrative's frame suggests, the only way to interrupt the future's repetition of the past.

The story 'Dogs and Books' finds a parallel in 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich' as the text's other - as the past that repeated itself in the future - and so serves as a reminder that history is, as Kiš claims, a history of 'misfortune', in which the 'same hate' can find itself repeated in the future for the same, albeit different, ideological reasons. Whilst Novsky's final powerlessness is due to the betrayal or failure of Marxist ideas in Stalinism, six centuries before that, a French Jew, Baruch David Neumann, is represented as similarly powerless in the face of a forced conversion to Christianity. In 'Dogs and Books', the notion of the 'eternal return of the same' functions, then, as both the idea of a cyclical history and as a 'simulacrum of ethical speech', as Blanchot claims,<sup>92</sup> i.e. as the detotalising work of the *neuter*

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<sup>91</sup> 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich', p.108, my emphasis; in Serbian: 'Kad mu se ovaj približi, begunac skoči u ključalu tekuću masu i stražari videše kako nestade pred njihovim očima, kako se izvi kao pramen dima, gluv na zapovesti, nepokoran, slobodan od vučjaka, od hladnoće, od vrućine, od kazne i od kajanja. Taj hrabri čovek umro je 21.novembra 1937, u četiri sata posle podne. Ostavio je za sobom nekoliko cigareta i četkicu za zube. Krajem juna 1956, londonski *Tajms*, koji po staroj dobroj engleskoj tradiciji izgleda još uvek veruje u duhove, objavio je da je Novski viđen u Moskvi, u blizini kremaljskih zidina. Očevici su ga prepoznali po čeličnim zubima. Ovu vest je prenela sva zapadna buržoaska štampa, željna spletki i senzacija.' In Kiš, Danilo, *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča* (2000), urednik Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, p.125.

<sup>92</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *The Infinite Conversation*, (1993), translation Susan Hanson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, p.277.

where past and future are difference and repetition of the same.<sup>93</sup> In the story, after being persecuted for his faith (which for him 'was born of doubt'),<sup>94</sup> Neumann is forcefully (and thus, illegitimately) converted to Christianity at least a couple of times - the first time on the 23 December 1330, exactly six centuries before Novsky's own arrest. Neumann, like Novsky, dies under torture on the 20 November 1337. Kiš appends a note immediately following the story, in which he acknowledges his 'sources' and claims that the story that the reader has just read is in fact a translation 'of the third chapter of the *Registers of the Inquisition (Confessio Baruc olim iudei modo baptizati et post modum reversi ad iudaismum)*'.<sup>95</sup> He writes:

The consistency of moral beliefs; the spilling of the sacrificial blood; the similarity in names (Boris Davidovich Novsky; Baruch David Neumann); the coincidence in dates of the arrests of Novsky and Neumann (on the same day of the fatal month of December, but with a span of six centuries: 1330-1930) – all this suddenly appeared in my consciousness as an enlarged metaphor of the classical doctrine of the cyclic movement of time: "He who has seen the present has seen everything, that which happened in the most distant past and that which will happen in the future" (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book VI, 37). Polemicizing with the Stoics (and even more so with Nietzsche), J.L. Borges formulates their teachings as follows: "From time to time the world is destroyed by the flame that created it, and then is born again to experience the same history. Again the same molecular particles fuse, again they give form to stones, trees, people – even to virtues and days, because for the

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<sup>93</sup> Blanchot's *The Step Not Beyond* elaborates on the idea of a 'eternal return of the same' precisely as impossibility, in which if future repeats the past it is never identical, even if the same, but rather as difference and repetition of the 'same' as infinity that excludes presence.

<sup>94</sup> 'Dogs and Books', p.120.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p.122. This story itself, even with the acknowledgment of the source, was one of the reasons Kiš was accused of plagiarism. For the full debate on this, see Kiš's *Čas anatomije (The Anatomy Lesson)*, (1978), Nolit, Beograd, in particular pp.218-223. In her Introduction to *Homo Poeticus*, Susan Sontag claims that one of the reasons why these parts of *The Anatomy Lesson* were not translated into English is precisely the fact that Kiš openly discussed those sources. For a reader in English, it would, as it were, reveal too much of his prose work without even allowing the work to be 'heard' in its own voice of autonomy, so to speak. See also, Kiš's essay 'La Part de Dieu' where Kiš explains how he found this text in one of the bookshops in Paris, in Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.80-1. For contra argument, i.e. that no such text exists in historic records, see Oja, Matt F., 'Fictional History and Historical Fiction: Solzhenitsyn and Kiš as Exemplars', in *History and Theory*, Vol.27, No.2 (May 1998), pp.111-124.

Greeks there is no noun without substance. Again each sword and each hero,  
again each trivial sleepless night.”<sup>96</sup>

Whether the discovery of Baruch David Neumann’s ‘real’ story reported here is authentic or false becomes, however, absolutely irrelevant for the effect it achieves in relation to the previous story about Novsky. For what is most important here is the way in which Kiš thus enables Neumann’s story to become the *other* to Novsky’s story, as the manifestation of a cyclic repetition between one ideology (Christianity) and another (Stalinism), both of which are, in turn, presented as nothing but a destructive response to the ineliminable question of nihilism. Resurrecting these two individuals who were both reduced to a ‘dimension of *zoon politicon*’, as he claims in the interview ‘I Don’t Believe in a Writer’s Fantasy’, Kiš thereby reaffirms that history is not a ‘teacher of life’ and that knowledge is rendered useless since the future repeats the past, albeit always *differently*.

Citing Borges’s own description of a ‘eternal return of the same’ in relation to the *il y a* - ‘again each trivial sleepless night’ - it could be argued that Kiš’s understanding of the eternal return of the same is akin to Blanchot’s in this sense: as an infinite rupture of past and future that interrupts the possibility of presence (as ultimate truth) that mirrors the very horror of existence and powerlessness of the ‘I’. In this respect, these two stories - whose protagonists were destroyed by ideology - ‘disappoint’, in Blanchot’s sense,<sup>97</sup> since there is no end to a destruction of humanity and yet that which it wishes to destroy (man’s ‘metaphysical’ dimension) remains ultimately intact. It is, therefore, precisely in relation to the reader, who is exposed to such horror and the death of other men (Novsky and

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<sup>96</sup> ‘Dogs and Books’, p.125; in Serbian, ‘Postojanost moralnih uverenja, prolivanje žrtvene krvi, sličnost u imenima (Boris Davidovič Novski – Baruh David Nojman), podudarnost u datumima hapšenja Novskog i Nojmana (u isti dan kobnog meseca decembra a u razmaku od šest vekova, 1330...1930), sve se to odjednom pojavilo u mojoj svesti kao razvijena metafora klasične doktrine o cikličnom kretanju vremena: ‘Ko je video sadašnjost, video je sve: ono što se dogodilo u najdavnijoj prošlosti i ono što će se zbiti u budućnosti’ (Mark-Aurelije, *Misli*, knj. VI, 37). Polemišući sa stoičarima (a još više sa Ničeom), H.L.Borhes ovako formuliše njihovo učenje: ‘Svet biva povremeno razoren plamenom koji ga je saznao a zatim se ponovo rađa da bi proživio istu povest. Ponovo se spajaju različite semene čestice, ponovo daju formu kamenu, drveću, ljudima – pa čak i vrlinama i danima, jer za Grke nema imenice bez suštine. Ponovo svaki mač i svaki heroj, ponovo svaka sitničarska besana noć.’ In *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča*, p.144.

<sup>97</sup> See ‘The Apocalypse Is Disappointing’ in Blanchot, Maurice, *Friendship* (1997), translation Elizabeth Rottenberg, edited by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, p.107.



Neumann), that the possibility for an ethical relation can take place, *diachronically*, as vulnerability and exposure to plurality within the self.

In the last story in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 'The Short Biography of A.A. Darmolatov' ('Kratka Biografija A.A. Darmolatova (1892-1968)'), Kiš authenticates the narration of the previous stories in this collection with his own personal testimony, as a fractured 'I' from the past: Andreas Scham from *Garden, ashes*, which, as seen in the previous chapter, incorporates traces of Kiš's own life as a survivor of fascism. To cite from *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*:

In the summer of 1947, he arrived at Cetinje, in Montenegro, for the jubilee of *The Mountain Wreath*, fragments of which, it seems, he was translating. Although well on in years, ungainly and clumsy, he stepped lightly over the red silk ribbon separating Njegoš's gigantic chair, which looked like the throne of a god, from the poets and mortals. I who am telling this story stood to one side and watched the uninvited poet squirming in Njegoš's high austere chair; taking advantage of the applause, I slipped out of the portrait gallery in order not to witness the scandal that the intervention of my uncle, the museum curator, would cause. But I distinctly remember that between the poet's spread legs, under his threadbare pants, the horrible swelling was already visible.

In both *Garden, ashes* and *Early Sorrows* Andreas Scham mentions leaving Hungary with his mother and sister. In terms of the biographical information, Kiš moved to Cetinje, Montenegro, with his mother and sister after the war so this narrator's 'I' corresponds to an idea of personal testimony.<sup>98</sup>

In such intertextual relations, intertwining faction and fiction, again, Kiš treats his work as an unfinished *eschatology* as such – in terms of the relation to death of the victims of totalitarianism - but, in addition, he reaffirms that the extermination camps of both the fascist and Stalinist regimes are but formally the *same*

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<sup>98</sup> In *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, p.134-5. In addition, there is another example in the novel where Kiš equates fascism with Stalinism. In the story 'The Magic Card Dealing', Dr. Taube, a Hungarian revolutionary, delivers his speech in Geneva in 1935, warning the world of the horrors of Dachau and the danger of fascism: 'A phantom stalks through Europe, the phantom of fascism.' (p.58) Considering that Dr. Taube dies a horrific death in Tumen, this echoing phrase of Communist manifesto precisely functions as the *other* within the text, thus, equating fascism with Stalinism.

phenomenon – the annihilation of people for the sake of ideology in the service of power. In this respect, his narrator's 'I' as the fractured self from an immemorial past (Kiš's own past during fascism as well as the past of the narrator of *Garden, ashes*) also responds as the other within the collection of stories that deal with Stalinism. Regarding the narration of the novel as a whole, Kiš writes:

[The European Chalk Circle] Having described a 'European chalk circle' (Bukovina – Poland – Ireland – Spain – France – Hungary – Russia) in space and constructed a time line of some six centuries, the objective Spirit of Narration makes a sudden appearance in the final pages as the Spirit of the Narrator, an obvious alter ego of the narrator.<sup>99</sup>

Although the narration of the story of Darmolatov's life also exhibits an archival approach, the specific narrator of this story is not interested so much in the aesthetic aspects of this revolutionary poet's work: 'it is not my intention here to concern myself closely with the poetic qualities of Darmolatov, or to enter into the complex mechanism of literary fame'.<sup>100</sup> What interests the narrator, instead, is the tragicomic circumstance of Darmolatov's life: that history recorded him, or, rather, remembers him, not for his poetry but for his medical condition, elephantiasis:

*Postscript*

*He remains a medical phenomenon in Russian literature: Darmolatov's case was entered in all the latest pathology textbooks. A photograph of his scrotum, the size of the biggest collective farm pumpkin, is also reprinted in foreign medical books, wherever elephantiasis (elephantiasis nostras) is mentioned, and as a moral for writers that to write one must have more than big balls.*<sup>101</sup>

Kiš himself claims, 'the tale of the misfortunate Darmolatov is a fable and as such the moral of the entire work.'<sup>102</sup> If so, this seems to follow from the sense in which, he argued, writing corresponds to the relation to dying and the horror of existence, and, as such, must exclude political or religious ideology, which, as he put in

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<sup>99</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, p.49.

<sup>100</sup> *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, p.129.

<sup>101</sup> *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, p.135 (italics in the original text)

<sup>102</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.49.

*Homo Poeticus*, 'is by definition outside poetry, outside literature'.<sup>103</sup> For that reason, it could be argued that, for Kiš, writing is here, nonetheless, an act of revolt in its own right directed against utilitarianism or instrumentalization: an act which instead instantiates openness towards communication and exposure to otherness for the sake of some *true* 'humanism' to come.<sup>104</sup> This is why it is necessary that the haunting landscape of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* does not leave the reader indifferent: with a somewhat detached gesture it silently *demand*s trauma in order to address the future beyond identity thinking. In this respect, I disagree with Brodsky's claim that the novel 'achieves aesthetic comprehension where ethics fail'.<sup>105</sup> Rather, as my earlier argument concerning Levinas's notion of ethics suggests, it is, I would claim, precisely a defamiliarised language of ethics as aesthetics that enables us to confront the alterity of death and radical otherness of a human being without recourse to a traditional notion of metaphysics (as a beyond of this world).

The collection of nine stories, *Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1983) is the last book Kiš published before his death in 1989.<sup>106</sup> All of the stories, including, to some extent, 'The Book of Kings and Fools', focus on a '*metaphysics of love*' as the only meaningful element in our relation to death and to the absurdity of existence. As Kiš states: 'I wanted to show how, through very different epochs, there is an unmoving constant [an eternity that does not move]. The omnipresence of love

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<sup>103</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.273 'As for ideology, it is by definition outside poetry, outside literature...When *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* appeared, it was hailed far and wide as an eminently political book. But I claim that it is not a political book. My desire – and I thought that after Solzhenitsyn and everything else that has been written about the Soviet gulag and the history of the Russian Revolution it would be obvious – was to write a *poetic*, a *literary* work about familiar political facts. Nothing could have been further from the 'political message' that many critics and readers think they found in the book.'

<sup>104</sup> See Kiš's essays 'Šarl Bodler' ['Charles Baudelaire'] (1968) and 'Za Pluralizam' ['For Pluralism'] (1972), both currently only in Serbian. In Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.66-79 and pp.112-117, respectively.

<sup>105</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (2001), introduction Joseph Brodsky, afterward William T. Vollmann, translation Duška Mikić-Mitchell, Dalkey Archive Press, Illinois, p. xvii; Consequently, I am in agreement with William T. Vollmann who, in his afterward, claims: 'it is precisely in such situations as Kiš's characters find themselves that ethics is most desperately needed.' *Ibid*, p.144.

<sup>106</sup> I do not include the collection of stories published posthumously, such as the publication of *The Lute and The Scars* (2012) (in Serbian *Lauta i Ožiljci* (2011)), written between 1980 and 1986. The stories making up *Encyclopaedia of the Dead* are: 'Simon Magus' ['Simon Čudotvorac'], 'Last Respects' ['Posmrtno Počasti'], 'The Encyclopaedia of the Dead' ['Enciklopedija Mrtvih'], 'The Legend of the Sleepers' ['Legenda o Spavačima'], 'The Mirror of the Unknown' ['Ogledalo Nepoznatog'], 'The Story of the Master and the Disciple' ['Priča o Majstoru i Učeniku'], 'To Die for One's Country is Glorious' ['Slavno je za Otadžbinu Mreti'], 'The Book of Kings and Fools' ['Knjiga Kraljeva i Budala'] and 'Red Stamps with Lenin's Picture' ['Crvene marke s likom Lenjina'].

and death.<sup>107</sup> A 'Post Scriptum' is also included where Kiš elaborates on his 'sources' (apocryphal and true) and on what inspired him to write the nine stories making up the collection in the first place. In what follows I will focus briefly only on three.

The story 'Simon Magus' ['Simon Čudotvorac'] follows a similar kind of trajectory to the first two stories from *A Tomb* I discussed earlier (those concerning Novsky and Neumann), in so far as Kiš juxtaposes Christian ideology with the political ideology of Stalinist communism that he writes about in 'Post Scriptum'. As Kiš himself claimed, the story can be read as an allegory of the writing process.<sup>108</sup> More specifically, however, my argument is that this may be related to Blanchot's understanding of the ways in which writing, as a poetic desire for truth in thinking death only ultimately re-inscribes death as impossibility and emphasises our powerlessness in the 'face' of it. As Blanchot puts it in *The Step Beyond* (1973):

Death being that to which we are not accustomed, we approach it either as the unaccustomed that astonishes or as the unfamiliar that horrifies. The thought of death does not help us to think death, does not give us death as something to think. Dying, thinking, so close to one another that thinking, we die, if, dying, we dispense with thinking: each thought might be termed thought; each thought a final thought.<sup>109</sup>

The story 'Simon Magus' is, in these terms, an allegory of both the power and powerlessness of literature in relation to death. In the story, Simon Magus blasphemously rejects the Christian God and names him a tyrant. In his impotent attempt to show the people that their God is a fiction and that belief in him has caused even more misery on earth, Simon, ironically, decides to show the people 'a miracle', telling them that he could reach 'up to the seventh heaven', knowing already in advance the deadly consequences of doing so - his own death. In this

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<sup>107</sup> My translation. In Serbian: 'Hteo sam da pokažem kako, u vrlo različitim epohama, postoji nepokretna konstanta. Sveprisutnost ljubavi i smrti.' In Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Residue of Sediment] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, the interview 'Između Politike i Poetike' [Between Politics and Poetics] (1986), p.209.

<sup>108</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.265.

<sup>109</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *The Step Not Beyond* (1992), translation and introduction Lycette Nelson, State university of New York Press, Albany, p.1.

respect, the story can certainly be read as reinforcing a teaching that the cause of all 'evil' is *any* ideology that destroys individuals for the sake of some 'higher' values:

And all that John and Paul, James and Peter tell you about him and his kingdom – hear, O people of Samaria! – is a lie. Their chosen land is a lie, their God is a lie, their miracles false. They lie, because their God, to whom they swear allegiance, is false...<sup>110</sup>

In the explanation for this given in the book's *Post Scriptum*, Kiš claims, interestingly, that this story is a 'variation on the theme of one of the Gnostic legends' and that 'a well-intentioned and highly erudite individual has brought to my attention the similarity between Simon's schism, depicted in the story, and a passage written by Boris Souvarine in 1938!'. He then provides a full quotation of the relevant passage from Souvarine's work:

Stalin and his subjects are always lying, at every opportunity, every minute, but because they never stop they no longer even realise they are lying. And when everyone lies, no one lies ... The lie is a natural element of pseudo-Soviet society ... The meetings, the congresses: theatricals, histrionics. The dictatorship of the proletariat: a patent fraud. The spontaneity of the masses: meticulous organization. The right, the left: lies. Stakhanov: a liar. The shockworker movement: a lie. The joyous life: a dismal farce. The new man: a grizzled gorilla. Culture: non-culture. The brilliant leader: a dull-witted tyrant...<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> 'Simon Magus', p.10; in Serbian: 'I sve što vam govore o njemu i njegovoj vladavini Jovan i Pavle, Jakov i Petar, sve je to laž, o počuj, narode samarijski! Njihova izabrana zemlja je laž, njihov je Bog laž, njihova su čudesa lažna. Oni lažu jer im je lažan i njihov Bog u koga se kunu.' In Kiš, Danilo, *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (1997), predgovor Mihajlo Pantić, Knjiga-komerc, Beograd, p.34.

<sup>111</sup> 'Post Scriptum', p.192; in Serbian: 'Staljin i njegovi podanici uvek lažu, u svakom trenutku, u svakoj prilici; i kako uvek lažu, više i ne znaju da lažu. A kada svako laže, niko više, lažući ne laže...Laž je prirodni element pseudo-sovjetskog društva...Skupštine, kongresi: pozorište, mizanscen. Diktatura proletarijata: golema podvala. Spontanost masa: brižljiva organizacija. Desno, levo: laž. Stahanov: laž. Stahanovizam: laž. Radost života: žalosna farsa. Novi čovek: drevna gorila. Kultura: nekultura. Genijalni vođ: tupi tiranin...' in 'Post Scriptum', p.155.

In juxtaposing the story of Simon - set 'seventeen years after the death and miraculous resurrection of Jesus the Nazarene'<sup>112</sup> – whose individual powerlessness in the midst of Christian masses is still a form of ethical teaching, with Souvarine's text from 1938, Kiš again underlines the ways in which the eternal return of the same is closely related to an encounter with the very void of existence, and with nihilism as the symptom of this void. In this way, moreover, the text on Stalinism in the Post Scriptum, as the referent *other* to the story of Simon Magus, is set free from its original reference and becomes a kind of *encyclopaedic* metaphor for the history of violence *tout court*. As such, Kiš's story allegorically points to the evil that permanently accompanies the history of totalizing ideology (both religious and political) in relation to the *il y a*. In this way, it manifests an implicit desire to interrupt the future repetition of the past, in terms of our relation to finitude, by way of ethically exposing the reader to absurdity of all closure of ideology per se.

The stories from *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* stem, as I have argued, from an *eschatological* demand to create texts for those who are without them (as is the case, for example, in Novsky's story), and hence articulate a sense of responsibility and justice for the dead. In this way, they attempt, albeit in view of its essential impossibility, to resurrect the lives of those individuals they narrate as a work of mourning and, ultimately, to capture the 'totality' (of their lives) which is simultaneously destroyed in the process of narration itself. At the beginning of 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead',<sup>113</sup> the female narrator 'M' informs the reader of her recent visit to Sweden 'to escape [her] grief',<sup>114</sup> following the death of her father two months prior to the trip. Her guide and mentor, Mrs. Johansson, takes her to the Royal Library some time before midnight, gets her a pass from a man at the door, and tells her she will call her the next morning. Unlike the doorkeeper from Kafka's parable 'Before the Law', who doesn't let a man enter the doorway to the

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<sup>112</sup> 'Simon Magus', p.3.

<sup>113</sup> For a good and elaborate reading of 'The Encyclopaedia of the Dead', see Creet, Julia, 'The Archive and the Uncanny: Danilo Kiš's 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead' and the Fantasy of Hypermnesia', edited Rebecca Comay, in *Lost in the Archives: Alphabet City*, Vol. 8 (2002), pp.265-276. Creet approaches Kiš's story through Pierre Nora's and Derrida's notion of the archive being hypomnesic in relation to the death drive, in that the archive records always less than a memory and, in so doing, destroys the memory itself.

<sup>114</sup> 'The Encyclopaedia of the Dead', p.41.

law, 'this Cerberus'<sup>115</sup> lets the narrator 'M' in and locks the door behind. There she finds 'the celebrated *Encyclopaedia of the Dead*'.<sup>116</sup>

As we have seen, for both Levinas and Blanchot, the *il y a* is the 'impossibility of possibility' in our relation to death, as a powerlessness and horror of no escape from existence. Consequently, the only relation to death we can have is, on this account, the relation to the (beloved) dead. In 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead', the law of writing dread appears in the form of the death of the narrator's father, insofar as it is this which allows the possibility of narration to take place. Through this law of writing, the reader learns many details of the narrator's father's life since, being a work of mourning, 'the facts I have recorded here, in this notebook, are', M tells us, 'ordinary, encyclopaedia facts, unimportant to anyone but my mother and me: names, places, dates.'<sup>117</sup>

As Julia Creet argues, in her 2002 essay 'The Archive and the Uncanny: Danilo Kiš's "Encyclopaedia of the Dead" and the Fantasy of Hypermnesia', what we are reading is thus essentially a 'condensation of a condensation' of the narrator's selection of details of her father's life, the kind of details that matter to her only.<sup>118</sup> The 'central message' of the 'compilers' of the *Encyclopaedia of the Dead*, the narrator informs us, is that:

Nothing in the history of mankind is ever repeated, things that at first glance seem the same are scarcely even similar; each individual is a star unto himself, everything happens always and never, all things repeat themselves ad infinitum yet are unique. (That is why the authors of the majestic monument to diversity that is *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* stress the particular; that is why every human being is sacred to them.)<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> 'The Encyclopaedia of the Dead', p.40.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> 'The Encyclopaedia of the Dead', p.42.

<sup>118</sup> Creet, Julia, 'The Archive and the Uncanny: Danilo Kiš's 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead' and the Fantasy of Hypermnesia', edited Rebecca Comay, in *Lost in the Archives: Alphabet City*, Vol. 8 (2002), p.268.

<sup>119</sup> 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead', p.51. In Serbian: 'Nikad se ništa ne ponavlja u istoriji ljudskih bića, sve što se na prvi pogled čini da je isto jedva da je slično; svaki je čovek zvezda za sebe, sve se događa uvek i nikad, sve se ponavlja beskrajno i neponovljivo.' In *Enciklopedija Mrtvih*, p.61. It is worth mentioning here that the 2015 Penguin publication of *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* has a slightly modified translation. For instance, in the cited passage, arguably the most crucial aspect to Kiš's poetics (with an obvious Nietzschean

Yet, paradoxically, the very project of recording an ultimate *diversity*, as Kiš terms it here, the very uniqueness that the compilers of this book wish to record, without omitting a single detail from a person's life, is precisely the most destructive practice of them all. It is what excludes the singularity of the dead, precisely by trying to resurrect the dead and, in the words of the story, 'set them off on the eternal [life]'.<sup>120</sup> Akin to Levinas's argument in 'Reality and Its Shadow',<sup>121</sup> where he speaks of 'plastic images' of art as the 'meanwhile' time of dying, in which, 'eternally, the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden' - an 'eternally suspended future' as something 'inhuman' and 'monstrous' - Kiš's story inscribes the imprisonment of the dead, of the narrator M's father whose life both the narrator and the reader, through the 'positivist' project of compilation, seek to almost perversely exhibit without his choice. Although we learn, then, through the snippets of his life, something about the larger history of Yugoslavia from 1910 – 1979, in the ways in which the story must establish some kind of micro-macrocosmic relation between a man and the society he lived in, Kiš's story mainly focuses on the ethically problematic idea of bringing the dead back to 'life' forever, in implicitly more universal terms.

As 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead' progresses, we learn that the story the narrator told was, in fact, a dream: Freud's haunting *Heimlichkeit* as much as Levinas's the *il y a*. Viewed in this way, the story is a sublimation of an inaccessible ethical language or the very *affectivity* of an ethical relation to the other within the *psyche* of the subject. The fact that Kiš's story is a remnant of a horrific dream (though caused by mourning and a love of the father) is, thus, not only philosophically, but also literally, the *absence of the book* of the dead. What authenticates the horror of such a dream for the reader, thereby exceeding the border of fiction (or dream), is the father's flower drawing before his death that the narrator speaks of in her dream. Awake, she explains that when she took the drawing, which she remembered from her dream, to her father's doctor, he confirmed it looked exactly

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reference) 'all things repeat themselves ad infinitum yet are unique' is translated as 'all things repeat themselves endlessly and unrepeatably.' See 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead', Penguin edition (2015), p.41.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p.43.

<sup>121</sup> 'Reality and Its Shadow' (1948) in Levinas, Emmanuel, *The Levinas Reader* (1989), edited by Seán Hand, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, pp.129-143; p.138, p.141.



like 'the sarcoma in my father's intestine'.<sup>122</sup> Again, Kiš's story works here, I think, wants to blur the distinction between truth (the doctor's medical document) and untruth (the drawing from a dream) or, rather, to point out that there is a danger of knowing *too much* in order to preserve, as it were, the sacredness of both the dead and the living.

In his Post Scriptum, Kiš explains that the story was published first in May-June 1981, around the same time that a Yugoslav magazine published an article 'Archive' on the genealogy of Mormons.<sup>123</sup> In so doing, Kiš again authenticates his own story (as fiction) by placing it in conjunction with the real document, giving emphasis to both our desire for love – the Mormons book of the dead - and to the limit of knowing too much imposed upon us by death. As such, it could be said that this story is the very *step not beyond* of which Blanchot speaks, where death is the line that cannot be crossed, as presence, and the only way of acknowledging mortality is, perhaps, through forgetting, like one forgets the dream itself.

The last story I want to discuss here is 'The Book of Kings and Fools'. In 'Post Scriptum' Kiš explains that he initially wanted it to be an essay on the origin of the 'unbelievably fantastic' story of '*how The Protocols of the Elders of Zion came into existence*'.<sup>124</sup> As he continues, '*as a parable of evil, it has intrigued me for years (as is evident from certain passages in my novel Hourglass). I wanted to use a historically documented and more or less familiar case to cast doubt on the commonly accepted notion that books serve only good causes.*'<sup>125</sup> Throughout the story, there is a symbiotic relation between both the apocryphal and true in order to attempt (impossibly) to reconstruct, the origin of not one, but two books in fact: 'A Dialogue in Hell Between Montesquieu and Machiavelli, or Machiavelli's Politics' by Maurice Joly's, which is, in turn, the very *source* for the existence of 'The Conspiracy or The Roots of the Disintegration of European Society' (as Kiš

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<sup>122</sup> 'Encyclopaedia of the Dead', p.65.

<sup>123</sup> 'Post Scriptum', pp.193-4.

<sup>124</sup> 'Post Scriptum', pp.196-7. (Italics in the original text).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. (Italics in the original text). As I have already mentioned earlier, Svetlana Boym offers a brief juxtaposition of Levinas and Kiš (the only one I came across in this project). She elaborates her argument about Kiš's story, in particular about our relation to the very process of reading of texts, from Levinas's quote 'a book is an interrupted discourse catching up with its breaks. But books have their fate; they belong to a world they do not include...' (*Otherwise Than Being*, p.171).

'pseudonymously' calls, in his story, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion'). The entire narration of the story traces also the impact that the process of reading 'The Conspiracy' has on people, its geo-political genesis and its freedom from its *original* referent, the ghostly *other* that was born out of a desire to depict the cause of the destruction of 'political freedom on every level,'<sup>126</sup> that is, Joly's 'Dialogue'. Consider, for instance, this passage:

Two books – Nilus's, which served to recruit hordes of fanatics and exacted the bloodiest of sacrifices, and another, itself a sacrifice, anonymous, one of a kind, an orphan among books – two contradictory products of the human mind, so similar and so different, lay for almost sixty years separated by the cabalistic distance (and I tremble as I write the word 'cabalistic') of four letters of the alphabet. And whereas the former would leave the long, dark rows of shelves (its poisonous breath mingling with the breath of its readers, its margins bearing the traces of their encounters, of revelations – when a reader discovered in the thought of another reflection of his own suspicions, his own secret thought), the latter lay covered with dust, a dead, unwanted object, kept there not for its thought or spirit but simply as a *book*, the kind that makes the reader who runs across it wonder whether anyone has ever opened it before him and whether anyone will ever, to the end of time, reach for it again, the kind that falls into a reader's warm hands only by chance, by mistake...<sup>127</sup>

This paragraph recalls Blanchot's claim, in his essay 'Reading', that the book that no one reads is a book that has 'not yet been written'.<sup>128</sup> For Kiš, as for Blanchot and Levinas, the work (or the book) is, ineradicably, a form of violence in so far as it promises to accommodate our desire for a total explanation of the world. As

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<sup>126</sup> 'The Book of Kings and Fools', p.160.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, pp.157-8. In Serbian: 'Te dve knjige – Nilusova, koja je regrutovala čete fanatika i kojoj su prinošene krvne žrtve, i ona druga, žrtvovana, anonimna, unikatna, siročić među knjigama – te dve protivurečne tvorevine ljudskog duha, tako slične a tako različite, ležale su tokom skoro šezdeset godina na odstojanju od četiri slova jedna od druge, u nekoj kabalističkoj distanci (i reč *kabalističkoj* pišem sa strahom). I dok je ona prva napuštala duge mračne aleje polica, njen otrovni dah dolazio u dodir sa dahom čitaoca, a na njenim marginama ostajali znaci tih susreta, tih ozarenja (kad čitalac otkrije u tuđoj misli refleks svojih sopstvenih sumnji, svoju tajnu misao), dotle je ona druga ležala tu prekrivena prašinom, čuvana ne kao misao, kao duh, nego samo kao mrtav nepotreban predmet, tek kao *knjiga*, za koju se čitalac pita, kada mu slučajno dođe u ruke, da li ju je ikad iko pre njega otvorio i da li će još ikad iko dok je sveta i veka posegnuti za njom; kao jedna od onih knjiga, dakle, koje dospevaju u tople ruke čitaoca tek slučajno, zabunom...' In *Enciklopedija Mrtvih*, p.131.

<sup>128</sup> 'Reading', in Blanchot, Maurice, *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, Barrytown Ltd., p.430.

such, the very process of writing must be ethically constrained in such a manner that the question of responsibility for the other (human) is already embodied within writing. At the same time, the permanent scepticism, of which I spoke earlier, provides, in this light, the only possibility for an ethical relation to take place *within* discourse: a Saying within the Said. 'The Book of Kings and Fools' is thus an example of how any text, as a form of violence, always has a political potential or, more precisely, as Critchley claims, how every literary book is 'a depoliticizing condition for politicization'.<sup>129</sup> In the case of this story, it is precisely Kiš's protagonist 'X's scepticism in reading the 'The Conspiracy' that enables him to trace back its *original* other only to find that the latter was written for the most noble of reasons. Towards the end of the story, Kiš claims, ironically, that The Conspiracy's *biblical teaching*, 'owing to its mysterious origins and the need people have to give history a meaning in our godless world',<sup>130</sup> insists that a 'dark, and dangerous force' is the cause of all 'evil', whose 'irresponsible and occult organisation' includes (to name a few): Voltaire, Tolstoy, Rousseau, *Eduard Scham* (from *Hourglass*), Marx, B.D. Novsky (from 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich') and Maurice Joly himself.<sup>131</sup> In so doing, Kiš not only emphasises the absurdity of evil where victims (like Eduard Scham or Novsky) are perceived as victimizers but also, as I mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, he treats his own work as a struggle between possibility and impossibility in relation to death across his works: 'The Book of Kings and Fools' mirrors both *Hourglass* and 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich' as their (intertextual) *other* for the fact that both Novsky and Eduard Scham are on this list.

It is here that the question of the responsibility of the writer – or of the responsibility always at stake 'in' writing – comes to the fore. Although, in this sense, Kiš firmly accepted the theories of Russian Formalism concerning defamiliarization as a problem of 'form' itself, I should like to argue here that problems of representation and form in his work should be considered primarily in relation to Kiš's approach to the alterity of death of the other, as well as the question of *how* language can bear witness in confronting evil. In his essay 'We

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<sup>129</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, p. 65.

<sup>130</sup> 'The Book of Kings and Fools', p.169.

<sup>131</sup> 'The Book of Kings and Fools', p.169.

Are Singing in the Desert' (a reference to Sartre), regarding what he terms 'the eternal problem of Form', Kiš claims:<sup>132</sup>

My attention is engaged by the eternal problem of Form, which could perhaps do something to make that fateful and fatal defeat less painful and less meaningless; Form which could perhaps give a new subject matter to our vanity; Form which could do the impossible: take Work out of reach of darkness and vanity and throw it across the Lethe. For that reason, in my future books I would like - if the very idea of Work is not rusted by the realization of vanity - to express (I do not like the expression from your survey) the dimension of the human defeat, with which the writer tries to contrast his own personal myth, his own personal Form, his own individual voice, secluded, perhaps without reaction or echo, but painful and recognized.

Here, as I read it, Kiš explicitly addresses the ways in which the problem of literary form is always conditioned by the writer's desire to express, 'impossibly' anew, 'the dimension of the human defeat'. In this respect, for Kiš, the question of form is always conditioned by an essentially ethical demand, not to express a new 'content' as such, following Shklovsky, but to address differently the question of mortality and of what true 'humanism' might be. Consequently, then, it is as if, to paraphrase Blanchot, for Kiš, writing as 'measureless' eschatology *never begins*.

Levinas claims that 'justice requires contemporaneousness of representation' and that 'the saying [which] is fixed in a said, is written, becomes a book, law, science.'<sup>133</sup> In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate that for Kiš the question of the writer's responsibility is closely related to a question of justice for the dead that must exclude or exceed the grasp of any totalizing political and/or religious

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<sup>132</sup> In Serbian 'Mi pevamo o Pustinji' (1971) in Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.105-111; p.107. A translation of this essay (which is one of the three essays translated by Paul Milan Foster) can be found here: <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Three+essays.-a015074220>. See also: <http://www.danilokis.org/en.htm>; See also, Kiš's essay 'Doba Sumnje' (1973) [Age of Doubt] in Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Residue of Sediment] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, pp.40-68; p.54. Kiš, in his own defence against one of the critics who read his claim about the form-content relation in conventional terms, noted: 'and so my entire talk about Form was reduced to the trivial form and content scheme, as if that were the case, reducing it to a trivial antinomy ...' (My translation). In Serbian: 'i tako je celu ovu moju priču oko Forme sveo na banalnu shemu forma-sadržina, kao da je ovde reč o tome, sveo je dakle stvar na jednu budalastu antinomiju ...'

<sup>133</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (2011), p.159.

ideology. As I have argued, his approach to writing could be said, in this sense, to be akin to both a Levinasian and a Blanchotian understanding of 'eschatology'. As an ethical experience that interrupts from *within* totality (or history), Kiš's 'fictional history' *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* works through the *other* side of history. At the same time, Kiš treats all of his works as engaging a relation between the unattainable absolute (an aesthetic consciousness) and the finite limits of a text: his texts mirror one another in order to demonstrate that literary language must testify to its *own* impossibility. In this way, all of Kiš's works oscillate between two languages, between the language that seeks an achievement of a quasi-totality (as a work of mourning) and a language that simultaneously destroys the possibility of a totality in a form of scepticism that speaks in the name of justice. As such, his texts, in their hauntings and their interruptions, address the possibility of a future that will, in turn, not repeat the past.

### Chapter Three – Kiš and the Question of Freedom

In the previous chapter I discussed Kiš's understanding of the writer's responsibility, juxtaposing it with Levinas's conceptions of ethical experience and eschatology, on the one hand, and with Blanchot's notion of an endless eschatology *in* writing, on the other. In this chapter I discuss Kiš's poetics in relation to the question of *freedom* (both the freedom of the artwork and the subject's freedom) in order to extend further my argument regarding the intertwined relation between ethics and aesthetics in Kiš's prose.

In the first part of the chapter I discuss the problems attendant upon the 'freedom' of the modern artwork. Considering the aesthetic theories of Adorno, Blanchot and Rancière, alongside Kiš's own pronouncements, I argue that, for Kiš, the condition of the modern literary work is essentially ambivalent: on the one hand, literature should be free to question its own existence, apparently independent of any 'non-literary' criteria, but, on the other, as a *critical* art, it is not (or cannot be) devoid of ethics. Following discussion of Rancière's recent critique of the 'ethical turn' in both aesthetics and politics, in which I will argue that a conception of ethics as aesthetics (in particular, as regards what Rancière calls 'sublime art') remains a necessary condition for any possibility of transforming society, the second section of this chapter focuses on the specifically ethical implications of the freedom of the modern artwork, as these are understood by both Levinas and Blanchot. I argue here that Kiš's prose belongs to the realm of what Gerald L. Bruns terms an 'art of proximity', as opposed to an 'art of visibility', in which it is an experience of the excess of alterity within subjectivity that defines the ethical significance of the modern artwork. The third part of this chapter returns to a discussion of the novel *Hourglass* (1972), whose excess of 'meaninglessness' (or what I describe as its parody of positivism/scientism and Enlightenment rationality) suggests that humour is perhaps the only bearable mechanism through which to deal with human finitude and the horror of existence. Taking into account Critchley's work on what he calls a 'comic-antiheroic paradigm' (as opposed to the 'tragic-heroic'), and which he places alongside Levinas's and Blanchot's conceptions of the impossibility of death, the aim of this last section is to consider the need to

'impossibly' remember the past (most emblematically, for Kiš, Auschwitz) not as marking out a collapse of the artwork's aesthetic and political potential (as Rancière, for one, implies), but precisely as what is an *a priori* condition for a future politics: namely, the possibility of an *ethical* relation to dying.

## 1. Unreconciled world: the freedom of artwork and the question of commitment

*I think that literature is, actually, something else; literature is freedom for itself, freedom in itself, the category of spirit which, as part of civilisation and culture, has a primary role in precisely being a categorical imperative of freedom. [This is] for literature quite sufficient, but not enough for an individual who seeks in a literary work a greater impact and impression. In order to write, one must have illusions. I believe quia absurdum est.<sup>1</sup> – Danilo Kiš*

Throughout his published interviews and various critical works, Kiš consistently rejects the idea that literary writers 'do good' through their work.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, he apparently rejects any idea that some form of political praxis might be pursued through the literary work itself. Indeed, he often indicates that he considers the 'practical' effects of literature to be almost non-existent and argues that, if there are any, they are essentially 'ethical' and, thus, 'invisible' in their nature.<sup>3</sup> As Kiš elaborates upon this in one interview from 1976:

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<sup>1</sup> My translation. In Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Remnant of Experience] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, the interview 'Doba Sumnje' [The Age of Doubt] (1973), p.41. In Serbian: 'Literatura je, pak, čini mi se, nešto drugo; ona je sloboda za sebe, sloboda po sebi, kategorija duha koji u kompleksu civilizacije i kulture ima prvorazrednu ulogu, upravo kao kategorički imperativ slobode. Za literaturu sasvim dovoljno, za pojedinca, koji traži učinak, i lovi neposredni utisak literarnog dela, sasvim nedovoljno. Da bi se pisalo treba živeti od iluzija. Verujem *quia absurdum est*.'

<sup>2</sup> Kiš, in the interview 'Baroque and Truth' (1988), for instance, claims: 'Also highly problematic is the theory that writers "do good" through their books. What "good" do they do? Poets and writers have repeatedly set forth humanistic ideas and ideals in their poems and novels – in Germany, in Russia, and elsewhere. They have written lies born of a revolutionary romanticism that fanned the flames of their imagination and enabled them to present them as truth.' In *Homo Poeticus*, p.278.

<sup>3</sup> From the interview 'Banality, Like a Plastic Bottle, Is Forever' (1976), in *Homo Poeticus*, p.171. (my emphasis)

I mean several things when I call the effects of literature 'invisible'. First, literature tries to make sense of an imperfect world and imperfect people. Like music, it yearns for perfection, it yearns to give meaning to life and to death. Cold comfort for us mortals, perhaps, but comfort all the same. The *invisible* effects of literature are *ethical* in nature or at least attempt to be so. The next thing I meant was that writers are wrong to expect a direct result from literature in terms of morals or ideology. Literature is only a secondary manifestation of Hegel's world spirit, *Weltgeist*, and as subject to psychoschizoid behaviour as any aspect of the human mind. Writing literature, even good literature, does not necessarily link you to the absolute or mean you're right. Not in the least. Over the last fifty years, literature has been manipulated every bit as much as other areas of the human spirit. And finally, if you want to bring literacy to the people, the best thing to do is become a village schoolmaster and write primers and textbooks; they're much more effective than novels and poems, a bona fide 'direct influence'. Like philosophy and ideology, literature as a field of knowledge cannot escape ambiguity, nor is it uniquely privileged. It may raise consciousness; then again, it may not. All ideologies know this just as they know how easily it can be bought or crushed. Totalitarian ideologies always want to reduce literature to a single dimension, channel it in a single direction, turn it into propaganda. 'Greetings, comrade engineers of the soul' (Stalin).<sup>4</sup>

If 'literature as a field of knowledge cannot escape ambiguity', and thus ever *totally* resist its reduction 'to a single dimension' in the service of external ideologies, it *is*, nonetheless, the case that, for Kiš, as a 'negative category of Spirit',<sup>5</sup> literature does at least always have the freedom to question its *own* existence and, in this regard, always holds open the possibility of a space of writing 'beyond the sphere of utilitarian and pragmatic aspects that could be applicable to current issues (of the world)'.<sup>6</sup> And yet, for Kiš, as the previous chapter demonstrates, if literature is thereby 'free', it is not exempt from responsibility. As his critical writings suggest,

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<sup>4</sup> From the interview 'Banality, Like a Plastic Bottle, Is Forever' (1976) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.171. (my emphasis)

<sup>5</sup> 'Peščanik je Savršena Pukotina' [*Hourglass is the Perfect Rupture*], an interview with Kiš from 1973 (currently only in Serbian) in Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, p.32.

<sup>6</sup> My translation. From the interview 'Panonija, panonija' [Pannonia, Pannonia], in Kiš, Danilo, *Po-etika, knjiga druga* (1974), Konferencija Saveza studenata Jugoslavije (Mala edicija ideje), Beograd, p.108. In Serbian: '[domen književnosti kao takve, umetnosti kao takve, zapravo, hteli to ili ne hteli] izvan sfere utilitarnog, praktičnog i primenjivog na aktuelne probleme.'



Kiš is therefore not only aware of a certain aporetic or contradictory condition of the modern literary work, as regards its relations to social or political reality, he also seeks to consciously embody this aporetic struggle within his own work.

In the first part of this chapter, I want to consider Kiš's suggestions regarding the relationship between freedom and responsibility to be found in the literary work by placing it, initially, alongside certain arguments concerning the nature of literature's freedom made by other post-war philosophical authors whose work I find to be most relevant to juxtapose with Kiš's own conceptions here: in particular, Adorno, Blanchot and Jacques Rancière.

In his response to Lukács's notorious critique of modernism in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* Adorno ends his essay 'Reconciliation under Duress'<sup>7</sup> with the following assertion:

The supreme criterion of his [Lukács's] aesthetics, the postulate of a reality which must be depicted as an unbroken continuum joining subject and object, a reality which, to employ the term Lukács stubbornly adheres to, must be 'reflected' – all this rests on the assumption that *the reconciliation has been accomplished, that all is well with society, that the individual has come into his own and feels at home in the world.*<sup>8</sup>

For Adorno, what Lukács fails to appreciate is that modernist works derive their (negative) critical potential precisely from the fact that they do not (or, at least, do not directly) 'reflect' the reality from which they originate, and so resist that appearance of 'reconciliation' falsely produced by socialist realism. Because, in modernist art, there is no simple harmony between content and form, such works are able, according to Adorno, to be free in their essence. However, this does not imply that modernism cannot therefore be committed to a kind of revolutionary praxis, i.e. to the (utopian) potential to transform the world. On the contrary, for Adorno, the freedom of modernist art presupposes its responsibility and

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<sup>7</sup> Adorno, Theodor, 'Reconciliation under Duress', in *Aesthetics and Politics: the key texts of the classic debate with German Marxism* (Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Brecht, Lukács), (2002), translation editor Ronald Taylor, afterword by Frederic Jameson, Verso, London and New York, p.156.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.176. (my emphasis)

commitment. In their critical refusal to conform to reality, their refusal to be commodified, these works are, paradoxically, all the more subversive and political insofar as they resist any reconciled relation with a 'false' society. Hence, in *Aesthetic Theory*, for instance, Adorno claims: 'Art is true insofar as what speaks out of it – indeed, it itself – is conflicting and *unreconciled*, but this truth only becomes art's own when it synthesizes what is fractured and thus makes its *irreconcilability determinate*.'<sup>9</sup> Viewed in this way, for Adorno, modern art – if it truly is 'art' - is always political, always in a relation with the world, but in such a way that shifts its political significance from 'content', crudely speaking, to the terrain of 'form'. As he argues in the essay 'Commitment', from this perspective it is precisely a certain so-called 'formalism' that, unlike socialist realism, refuses to betray suffering: 'The uncompromising radicalism of their works, the very features defamed as *formalism*, give them a terrifying power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time.' As such, Adorno continues, 'The moment of true volition, however, is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be.'<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, if freedom is thus a condition for art's criticality, Adorno, at the same time argues that 'if a work is merely itself and no other thing [i.e. *purely* 'autonomous'] ... it becomes bad art – literally pre-artistic.'<sup>11</sup> Such 'ornamental' art has no critical function with regard to society;<sup>12</sup> instead, it becomes a mere aestheticisation of itself and for itself in its absolute freedom.

By contrast, what is 'noble' about *critical* artworks is, according to Adorno, that 'they are knowledge as *non-conceptual* objects'.<sup>13</sup> This is crucial for Adorno's entire theoretical enterprise, which, in offering a critique of the consequences of

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<sup>9</sup> Adorno, Theodor, *Aesthetic Theory* (2002), edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, introduction by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London and New York, p.168. (my emphasis)

<sup>10</sup> Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp.188-9, p.194. (my emphasis)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.194.

<sup>12</sup> It is in this vein that, in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno, for instance, claims: 'The dream of an existence without shame, which the passion for language clings to even though forbidden to depict its content, is to be maliciously strangled. The writer ought not acknowledge any distinction between beautiful and adequate expression. He should neither suppose such a distinction in the solicitous mind of the critic, nor tolerate it in his own. If he succeeds in saying entirely what he means, it is beautiful. *Beauty of expression for its own sake is not at all 'too beautiful', but ornamental, arty-crafty, ugly.*' (My emphasis). In Adorno, Theodor, *Minima Moralia (Reflections from Damaged Life)* (2000), translated by E.F.N.Jephcott, Verso, London and New York, p.86.

<sup>13</sup> *Minima Moralia*, p.193. (my emphasis)

instrumental reason - as a part of which 'western' culture not only failed to prevent Auschwitz from happening but even, in some sense, anticipated such an event<sup>14</sup> - presents the 'non-conceptual objects' of *critical* art as perhaps the *only* realm of a true (and ethical) thinking that resists the barbarism of society after Auschwitz. True art is, in this sense, 'the social antithesis of society', at least as far as that society is one of 'total administration', rather than something 'deducible from it'.<sup>15</sup> For Adorno, the only way thus to resist the falseness of the whole that dominates society (given the unavoidability of conceptualisation) is a kind of thinking that permits some element of 'irresponsibility' *within* the process of conceptualization: an 'unbarbaric side of philosophy' that allows the object being judged to remain ungraspable, and thus, free.<sup>16</sup>

Form in modernist art has then, for Adorno, a dual function: it is fundamentally critical and ethical insofar as it disallows the subject from violently grasping the object, which, consequently, interrupts the closure of instrumental reason; but, second, in its alienation and detachment from reality, the formed object of the artwork, through mimetic 'semblance' of itself, allegorically presents the very dominating nature of the society from which it alienates itself. One consequence of this is that, Adorno claims: 'The more ruthlessly artworks draw the consequences from the contemporary condition of consciousness, the more closely they themselves approximate meaninglessness.'<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, for Adorno, writers like Beckett and Kafka are more 'realistic', in a sense, than those realists promoted by the likes of Lukács<sup>18</sup> precisely because, in their 'meaninglessness',

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<sup>14</sup> Adorno, Theodor, *Negative Dialectics* (2004), translated by E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York. Adorno claims: 'That this could happen in the midst of the traditions of philosophy, of art, and of the enlightening sciences says more than that these traditions and their spirit lacked the power to take hold of men and work a change in them.', pp.366-7. Kiš shares a similar sentiment. In the interview 'I Don't Believe in a Writer's Fantasy' (1989), he claims: 'But there is a problem if we look at the overall effect of literature on a person. Take the Germans: history tells us they're among the most cultured of peoples. They have world-famous writers, they are a nation of readers. But Goethe, Schiller, Herder, Lessing, Heine, and Kant notwithstanding, Germany was the birthplace of Nazism, the death camps, the extermination of Jews and other 'inferior races'. The fact that they read these authors, that they were educated in a spirit of humanism, was no obstacle to their descent into barbarity.' In *Homo Poeticus*, pp., 276-277.

<sup>15</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p.8.

<sup>16</sup> *Minima Moralia*, fragment 'Keeping one's distance', pp.126-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p.340.

<sup>18</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p.322; on 'meaninglessness' as a *task* of a modernity, see, for instance, Critchley's work on Beckett, 'Lecture 3: Know happiness – on Beckett'. The first parts of the chapter are dedicated in

their works depict the real horror and terror of reality without the kind of direct reflection of such reality that would appear to give it 'meaning' (and, hence, a kind of legitimacy). Form 'as a sedimentation of content'<sup>19</sup> is, for Adorno, precisely that which 'awaken[s] the content' but only as a paradoxical 'countermovement'; that is to say, the greater the distance the artworks establish from society, the more their artistic purpose and progress becomes dependent on this negation.<sup>20</sup> Such is the aporetic condition of modern art for Adorno. Furthermore, modern literature must incorporate a recognition not only of the decline of 'culture' (post-Auschwitz specifically), but also the loss of any quest for its own meaning, in order to resist becoming merely an ideological reification of that very reality that is responsible for such a loss.<sup>21</sup> Thus, akin to Blanchot, for Adorno, modern art, in its freedom to pursue its own meaning, must also be committed to addressing the (social and artistic) 'meaning' of its own crisis and emptiness.<sup>22</sup> As he puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*:

Art can only be reconciled with its existence by exposing its own semblance, its internal emptiness. Its most binding criterion today is that in terms of its own complexion, *unreconciled with all realistic deception*, it no longer tolerates anything harmless. In all art that is still possible, *social critique must be raised to the level of form*, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content (*Inhalt*).<sup>23</sup>

Thus, for Adorno, the aporetic condition of modern art is that it is both free and unfree from the world. The mimetic dimension of art, as an exposure of 'its own semblance', is precisely what frees the artwork from the world, preserving its ungraspable nature insofar as it does not 'resemble' the world. On the other hand, art can never fully free itself from the world, however, since 'the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to

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particular to the analysis of Adorno's defence of modernism and to his reading of Beckett. In Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing (Death, Philosophy, Literature)* (1997), Routledge, London, pp.141-180.

<sup>19</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p.139.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, pp.139-140.

<sup>21</sup> See Critchley's 'Hope against hope- the elevation of social criticism to the level of form (Adorno II)' in *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, pp.154-156.

<sup>22</sup> *Aesthetic Theory*, p.320. Adorno claims: 'Art must incorporate its own decline, as the critique of the spirit of domination it is the spirit that is able to turn against itself.'

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.250. (My emphasis).

be.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, the now famous dictum that *to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric* should be viewed in relation to this aporetic condition of the modern artwork in general: art must speak about barbarity and, at the same time, suffering is precisely that which prohibits art from speaking and from continuing to exist.<sup>25</sup> This paradoxical situation of modern art accords it a responsibility that goes beyond the apparently limited realm of 'art' itself, for, Adorno argues, 'it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice'.<sup>26</sup> The question is, therefore, *how* to speak about barbarity whilst preserving the unreconciled relation between the subject (as the site of an ineluctable conceptualization) and the object represented or judged (for example, Auschwitz). Later on in this chapter I shall argue that Kiš's novel *Hourglass* (1972) suggests that Kiš is keenly aware of this kind of 'Adornian' aporetic condition.

Before turning more directly to Kiš himself, however, it is worth, first, placing alongside Adorno's work Blanchot's own arguments regarding literary commitment, already partly considered in chapter one, which similarly suggest that it is in something like a 'politics of form' (rather than a direct 'reflection' of reality) that literature's most 'revolutionary' aspect is to be located. In the essay 'Reflections on Surrealism',<sup>27</sup> Blanchot thus argues, for example, that:

the most uncommitted literature is at the same time the most committed, because it knows that to claim to be free in a society that is not free is to accept responsibility for the constraints of that society and especially to accept the mystifications of the word 'freedom' by which society hides its intentions. In summation, literature must have an efficacy and meaning that are extraliterary, that is, it must not renounce its literary means, and literature must be free, that is, committed. Perhaps, considering the force of these paradoxes, we will understand why surrealism is always of our time.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p.367.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Adorno's essay 'Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p.188. Similarly to Adorno's sentiment, Blanchot himself responds to Wittgenstein's dictum ('Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent') with the following sentiment: 'One has to talk in order to remain silent.' In *Unavowable Community* (1988), translation Pierre Joris, Station Hill Press, Barrytown, New York, p.56.

<sup>26</sup> *Commitment*, p.188.

<sup>27</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, 'Reflections on Surrealism' in *The Work of Fire* (1995), translation by Charlotte Mandell, editors Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellberry, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California

<sup>28</sup> 'Reflections on Surrealism', pp.96-97.

Blanchot, in this way, insists, too, on the paradox of a kind of Adornian *unreconciled* relation<sup>29</sup> that the artwork has with the (unfree) world: the seemingly abstract and uncommitted surrealist texts are more subversive and committed to transforming the world precisely because they belong to a realm *outside* of the world, that is, beyond the sphere of utilitarianism. In addition, literature's freedom to be *other* than the world, to be a question addressed to itself, is what actually legitimises its right to exist, since the moment it begins to be 'a domain of coherence and a common realm'<sup>30</sup> it no longer exists as literature.

Blanchot insists that the demand for literature to be something other than itself, to be an active and politically engaging aspect of the world, originates precisely from the world, i.e. from 'political and social reality'.<sup>31</sup> However, 'the literature of action'<sup>32</sup> fails to appreciate the very ambivalence and instability of literary language, its 'disintegrating force'.<sup>33</sup> Literary language can never be the language of 'command', for what it presents – in its negation of meaning and/or infinite excess of meaning – is the *absence* of the world rather than, as in conventional 'realism', its ontological stability and presence. This does not imply that literature is exempt from responsibility, but, instead, that its utmost responsibility is precisely its 'irresponsibility', i.e. its freedom from the demand to be useful or to make sense. As Blanchot claims: 'To write is to engage oneself; but to write is also to disengage oneself, to commit oneself irresponsibly.'<sup>34</sup> Such 'power'<sup>35</sup> of literary language is what allows the possibility for what Blanchot describes as a 'non dialectical

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<sup>29</sup> Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, for instance, claims: 'The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfil the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics. Art requires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form: it exists only in relation to its other, it is the process that transpires with its other', p.3.

<sup>30</sup> Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p.204.

<sup>31</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, 'Disappearance of Literature' in *The Book to Come* (2003), edited Werner Hamacher, translation Charlotte Mandell, Stanford University Press, Stanford California, p.197. Blanchot claims: 'Crisis and criticism seem to come from the world, from political and social reality, and seem to submit literature to a judgment that humiliates it in the name of history: it is history that criticizes literature and that pushes the poet aside, replacing the poet with the publicist, whose task is at the service of current events.'

<sup>32</sup> Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', in *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, Barrytown Ltd., p.374.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.397.

<sup>34</sup> Blanchot, 'Kafka and Literature' in *Work of Fire*, p.26.

<sup>35</sup> This is, as Blanchot puts it, 'a power capable of changing everything about it without changing anything.' In 'Literature and the Right to Death', p.397.

experience of speech’;<sup>36</sup> an experience which is, for Blanchot, as much ethical as ‘aesthetic’ in its significance. As I mentioned in previous chapters, the work of the *neuter* - as an overlapping movement between the ‘two slopes of literature’ – is, in this way, what permits things to be free, on Blanchot’s account, from the realm of ‘grasping’ characteristic of instrumental reason, or what Adorno termed ‘identity’ thinking.

It is, therefore, through the ‘modernism’ of, for example, the surrealist realm of ‘writing’ that the ethical experience, as responsibility for the other, can be truly addressed by the literary work: opening up a realm of non-identity or radical otherness within subjectivity. In this sense, what interests Blanchot is not the political potential of literary writing as such (as was the case for Sartre, say), but the very *abolition* of a politics of identity that is generated through writing/reading, as Leslie Hill, in his book *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*, rightly argues.<sup>37</sup> Such a tendency towards the collapse of any explicit politics within the artwork precisely radicalises differences through an exposure to the excess of alterity and, consequently, an exposure to *impossibility* (of death) which, for Blanchot, is *transcendence* itself.<sup>38</sup> (As will be seen in a moment, it is in his antipathy to this conception that someone like Rancière’s more recent objection to the ‘ethical’ claims of a so-called ‘sublime’ art resides more generally.) In other words, for Blanchot, writing, as a ‘limit-experience’ putting radically into question the human itself,<sup>39</sup> is not a speech of power (knowledge, comprehension) but a speech of powerlessness where, as a result, radical differences between men are preserved.<sup>40</sup> It is in this vein that Blanchot claims:

To speak the unknown, to receive it through speech while leaving it unknown, is precisely not to take hold of it, not to comprehend it; it is rather to refuse to identify it even by sight, that ‘objective’ hold that seizes, albeit at a distance.

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<sup>36</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (1993), translation Susan Hanson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, p.63.

<sup>37</sup> Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p.196, p.218.

<sup>38</sup> Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond* (1992), translation and introduction Lycette Nelson, State University of New York Press, Albany, p.50: ‘Writing is not destined to leave traces, but to erase, by traces, all traces, to disappear in the fragmentary space of writing’.

<sup>39</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p.203.

<sup>40</sup> Blanchot claims: ‘There may therefore be a region – an experience – where the essence of man is the impossible’, in *Infinite Conversation*, p.183.

To live with the unknown before one (which also means: to live before the unknown, and before oneself as unknown) is to enter into the responsibility of a speech that speaks without exercising any form of power.<sup>41</sup>

If there is, therefore, any politics *in* literature, for Blanchot, it is always conditioned by what is first and foremost, on my account, an *ethical* interruption, and, consequently, by a questioning of the very 'nature' of human existence governed by our relation to dying.

### 1.1 Rancière's 'politics of aesthetics' vs. 'ethical turn'

Despite the very different intellectual traditions from which each emerged, there are, then, a number of notable convergences between those accounts of the 'politics' of art and of its freedom to be found in the work of Adorno and Blanchot. Before returning again to Kiš himself, it is, however, worth briefly contrasting these with a body of writing on aesthetics that has received much acclaim in recent years, and which apparently articulates a very different, even opposed, position from that outlined so far. Jacques Rancière's work is relevant here for two main reasons. First, Rancière establishes an essential relationship between the terms 'aesthetics' and 'politics', where the latter is understood as a *reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible*<sup>42</sup> that disrupts the existing space of domination within a society insofar as it enables a visibility of representation of, to paraphrase Rancière, *what was not presented before*, or gives voice to *those that were not heard before*.<sup>43</sup> Such an understanding of politics designates, for Rancière, a possibility of a (specifically egalitarian) emancipation from existing hierarchies and, hence, of radical democracy. Second, although Rancière places much emphasis on the role played by the *sensible* in modern artistic works themselves, the so-called 'distribution of the sensible' always also has political implications for him. In this regard, Rancière's account of the 'politics of aesthetics' (or, indeed, 'aesthetics of politics') is often explicitly opposed to the predominantly 'ethical' significance that modern art has for the likes of Kiš, Blanchot and Levinas. Indeed, not only

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<sup>41</sup> *Infinite Conversation*, p.302.

<sup>42</sup> Rancière, Jacques *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (2009), translation by Steven Corcoran, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden, p.25.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*



does Rancière's aesthetic theory vigorously subordinate the 'ethical dimension' in the arts to their 'political' dimension, but, furthermore, his work argues that the 'ethical turn' in art and politics over the past few decades has, in fact, more broadly, enabled the furthering of 'new forms of dominations' in the world.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Rancière writes: 'It is tempting to say that contemporary ethical discourse is merely the crowning moment of the new forms of domination.'

What Rancière objects to here, I think, is best understood as a kind of *false humanism*, which he finds disguised under the name of 'infinite justice', and which he sees as manifest within dominant contemporary understandings of realm of both art and politics.<sup>45</sup> Historically, what Rancière describes as this 'ethical turn' is often said by him to originate specifically in the wake of the Holocaust, or, rather, in the ways in which, more recently, the 'memorialisation' of the Holocaust has come to be mobilised in a contemporary 'ethical discourse'. According to him, the Shoah has been radically 'transfigured' and (mis)used in this way, so acting, perversely as a *reinforcement* of the stagnant contemporary situation of both art and politics.<sup>46</sup> As he puts it in a typically tricky passage in *Dissensus* (2010):

history becomes ordered according to a cut in time made by a radical event that is no longer in front of us but already behind us. If the Nazi genocide lodged itself at the core of philosophical, aesthetic and political thinking some four or five decades after the discovery of the camps, the reason is not only that the first generation of survivors remained silent. Around 1989, when the last remaining vestiges of this revolution were collapsing, the events until then had linked political and aesthetic radicality to a cut in historical time. This cut, however, required that the radicality, could be replaced only by genocide at the cost of inverting its meaning, of

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<sup>44</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010), edited and translation by Steven Corcoran, Continuum, London and New York, p. 200. Badiou, on the other hand, in his book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), arrives at a similar conclusion but for different reasons. For Badiou, an ethics (of alterity) has a sole purpose to represent a 'contemporary culturalism' of differences wherein 'man' is perceived as passive. For Badiou, there is no ethics as such but rather the subject's fidelity to the truth of event. See Badiou, Alain, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), translation and introduction Peter Hallward Verso, London and New York, in particular his chapter on Levinas 'Does the Other Exist?', pp.18-29.

<sup>45</sup> In part, this is reflected, for instance, in relation to recent politics, where, according to Rancière, the apparently ethical call for an 'infinite justice' in the so-called 'war on terror', while seemingly pitching itself above 'politics' in a narrower sense, only in fact serves to legitimise the precisely political dominance of the world's hegemonic powers.

<sup>46</sup> In *Dissensus*, p.201.

transforming it into the already endured catastrophe from which only a god could save us.

In resisting the effacement of 'politics' by such a quasi-theological conception of 'catastrophe', Rancière insists that it is necessary, then, to leave the contemporary 'ethical turn' behind in order both to revive the distinction (and relation) between aesthetics and politics, as well as to abandon any idea of the unsullied autonomy of either.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the aim is to re-establish the very *pluralism* of their sensible power whilst keeping their differences intact. This entails, he argues (in what might be perceived as an implicit critique of Levinas), 'divorcing them from every theology of time, from every thought of a primordial trauma or a salvation to come'.<sup>48</sup>

Since one of the main aims of this thesis is to argue that at the core of Kiš's poetics is precisely an understanding of ethics as aesthetics,<sup>49</sup> I would, of course, hope to demonstrate in what follows that many of Rancière's arguments can actually be shown to be a good deal closer to those 'ethical' thinkers that he sets himself against than they at first sight appear. So, for instance, his conception of the 'sentence-image' in *The Future of the Image* (2007),<sup>50</sup> as a kind of pseudo-dialectical tension present within the modern artwork, can be shown to be rather closer, I believe, to Levinas's notion of the Saying within the Said, or to Blanchot's notions of the neuter and the two 'slopes' of literature, than Rancière would either acknowledge or allow – even if, as we will see, whilst for both Levinas and Blanchot such a tension within the artwork, consequent upon the experience of the image, signifies the *ethical* excess of non-cognition within subjectivity, for Rancière the 'sentence-image' is always fundamentally aesthetic-political in character. Here, I want, specifically, to focus on two important points in Rancière's conception of a 'politics of aesthetics': Rancière's definition of what he terms an 'ideal artwork' (at

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<sup>47</sup> *Dissensus*, p.202.

<sup>48</sup> *Dissensus*, p.202.

<sup>49</sup> To be clear: the phrase 'ethics as aesthetics' does not refer to anything like a servitude or subordination on the part of art or aesthetics to moral authority, but precisely designates an intertwined relation of both ethics and aesthetics with regard to the question of dying as transcendence (in both a Levinasian and Blanchotian sense).

<sup>50</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *The Future of the Image* (2007), translation by Gregory Elliott, Verso, London and New York

least as far as modernity is concerned) and his firm rejection of that representation of 'unrepresentability' which he understands an 'ethical turn' to have attributed to a so-called 'sublime art'.

In elaborating upon these points, Rancière frames each in relation the hegemonic status of what he calls an 'aesthetic regime of the arts',<sup>51</sup> which has, he suggests, existed for the last two centuries, and in which a previous hierarchical order of representation governing artworks is replaced with an aesthetic 'equality of indifference' (Rancière here refers to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*) whereby everything and everyone becomes equally relevant to, and representable in, art or literature. Although, then, the aesthetic regime of the arts is, for Rancière, to be contrasted with an earlier representative regime, in terms of the former's abandonment of the specifically mimetic *hierarchical* order that organised the latter (under the influence, above all, of Aristotelianism), it is, nevertheless, still a regime of resemblances in a more basic sense. As he argues, for example, in *The Future of the Image*: 'The opposite of the representative regime in art is thus not a regime of non-representation, in the sense of non-figuration.' And, furthermore, 'the break with representation in art is not emancipation from resemblance, but the emancipation of resemblance' from the 'constraints' imposed by earlier regimes.<sup>52</sup>

In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Rancière argues that in the 'aesthetic regime', by contrast to previous understandings of the arts:

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<sup>51</sup> Within this regime, the former structure of artistic practice that belongs to what he terms the 'representative regime of the arts' is abolished: the relation between a way of making (poiesis) and a way of being affected (aisthesis) is no longer governed by mimesis (resemblance). In other words, whilst in this former regime of the arts visibility was closely constrained by speech in representation, in the new regime resemblance becomes *dissemblance*, that is, the speech no longer presupposes only visibility. In this way the 'distribution of the sensible' which, given that it is simultaneously both aesthetic and political, opens up the possibility of an equality of representation whilst changing our perspective in relation to the existence of a 'common' space. Among the consequences of this for Rancière are both that artistic modes of representation can no longer be straightforwardly aligned with social hierarchies of class and that the lines separating artistic production from everyday phenomena tend to become blurred. As such, paradoxically, the 'aesthetic regime of the arts' simultaneously guarantees art's 'autonomy' whilst destroying 'any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity' from life. See, for instance, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p.7, p.25; see also *The Future of The Image*, (2007), translation by Gregory Elliott, Verso, London and New York, p.127 and *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible* (2004), translation and introduction Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London and New York, p.23.

<sup>52</sup> Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (2007), p.119, p.120.

Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between *the readability of the message* that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and *the radical uncanniness* that threatens to destroy all political meaning.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, for Rancière, the 'new' 'democratic' manner of resemblances characteristic of the 'aesthetic regime' precisely preserves the tension between two 'antinomies', as a kind of simultaneous double movement: on the one hand, the *political* readability and, on the other, the shock of the *uncanny*. This is, for Rancière something like a definition of the 'ideal [modern] artwork'. Accordingly, this kind of *pseudo-dialectic* of an 'ideal artwork' should remain open and should never identify itself with only one or the other aspect of its power, as aestheticism or 'committed' art are, from opposing perspectives, always tempted to do. To close down such a 'dialectic' would either lead towards the abolition of art - by equating art with life or its political 'message' and thereby negating its sensible significance (as in the historical avant-gardes and more recent forms of 'relational art') - or, conversely, a complete loss of political meaning through an insistence on art's purely uncanny (ungraspable) dimension. Crucially, for Rancière, it is precisely this 'double effect' then which makes art *political* in terms of its own 'distribution of the sensible' and not (as he suggests it is for Adorno) its 'autonomous' purity and/or whether it pursues a politicization per se.

Yet, in fact, as we have seen, this is rather closer to the positions held by both Adorno and Blanchot at this point than Rancière implies. The claim, for instance, that 'there is no conflict between purity of art and its politicization' due to the fact that the artwork, in its 'solitude' and singularity, 'carries a promise of emancipation', strongly echoes various formulations in Adorno's and Blanchot's defence of 'modernism'.<sup>54</sup> Thus, if art is political precisely for being singular, this is a stance that is not quite so distant from Adorno, say, as Rancière suggests. It is

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<sup>53</sup> *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p.63. (my emphasis).

<sup>54</sup> *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, (2009), translation by Steven Corcoran, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden p.36.

the contingent aspects of the artwork that carry a promise of reconfiguration of reality that would, as it were, eventually eliminate the singularity of art altogether where (as in certain variant of the avant-garde demand to overcome the division between art and life) art would no longer be distinguished from reality.<sup>55</sup> For this reason, Rancière suggests that both the 'modernist' ideal of an art separated from social reality, on the one hand, and the (avant-garde or 'postmodern') 'becoming-life of art', on the other, remain firmly within the *aesthetic regime of the arts* established at the end of the eighteenth century that negotiates a reconfiguration of the 'distribution of the sensible'.

Arguably it is due to his insistence on this simultaneous *double* movement between 'political readability' and the 'radical uncanniness' of an 'ideal' artwork that Rancière so firmly rejects the idea that there is any *impossibility* of representation. The argument is made here in particular with regard to Lyotard's theory of an art of sublime, although the point could easily be extended to Blanchot also. More generally, it is posed in opposition to a supposed 'ethical turn' in accounts of modern art *per se*,<sup>56</sup> whereby, as Rancière articulates it, an 'aesthetics of the sublime places art under the sign of an immemorial debt towards an absolute Other' through a specifically ethical demand to remember 'catastrophe'.<sup>57</sup> Crucial here (and an obvious point of comparison with both Kiš's and Blanchot's work) is Lyotard's own 'ethical' conception of the artwork as a kind of 'witness'. It is that Lyotard identifies, in turn, with the *sublime* as a form of (avant-garde) art that is able to preserve a radical rupture between the perceptible and the intelligible. It is in this vein that in, for instance, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991), Lyotard argues that, with the advancement of technology, it is the task of both thinking and writing to bear witness to dehumanisation. For him, the

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<sup>55</sup> *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p.32, p.36. Peter Bürger, in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), underlines the contradictory nature of the avant-garde movement. On the one hand, the avant-garde art was an attack on art as an institution and the demand to overcome the division between art and praxis of life was not on the level of content but, instead, as a desire to offer a new function of art from praxis of life. However, according to Bürger, the avant-garde art failed in its attempt and, paradoxically, art as an institution continues to exist separated from praxis of life. In Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), *Theory and History of Literature, Volume 4.*, translation Michael Show, foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, pp.49-50, p.57.

<sup>56</sup> In Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991), translation Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Polity Press, Cambridge, p.142, p.203.

<sup>57</sup> *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p.21.

sublime in art is what enables the 'maintenance' of questioning (the (in)human condition) open without the possibility for a dialectical closure:

The paradox of art 'after the sublime' is that it turns towards a thing which does not turn towards the mind, that it wants a thing, or *has it in for* a thing which wants nothing of it ... It is our destiny or destination of the mind to question (as I have just done). And to question is to attempt to establish the relation of something with something. Matter does not question the mind, it has no need of it, it exists, or rather, *insists*, it 'sists' 'before' questioning and answer 'outside' them. It is presence as unrepresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp. It does not offer itself to dialogue and dialectic.

As Lyotard summarises the claims made for such a 'sublime art' of the *unrepresentable*: 'Let us at least bear witness, and again, and for no-one, to thinking as disaster, nomadism, difference and redundancy.'<sup>58</sup>

It is against this conception of the artwork as 'bearing witness' to the unrepresentable that, for example, in 'The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics'<sup>59</sup> Rancière argues that the contemporary ethical turn within both art and politics does not question 'the validity of their principles and the consequences of their practices' but precisely *dissolves* their differences into an 'indistinct sphere' that 'gives way to unprecedented dramaturgy of infinite evil, justice and reparation'.<sup>60</sup> Rancière here, on the one hand, argues that the 'ethical' dimension of a so-called 'infinite justice' in the world becomes a new form of justification for dominating political or 'police' powers (or, as he terms it, 'consensus'), while suggesting, on the other hand, that avant-garde art becomes in this way merely an art of 'bearing witness to the irremediable catastrophe' in which a *passivity* and aesthetic 'purity' become the only manner for dealing with the 'evils' of the world, so negating the transformative potential of genuine politics to actually change the world.

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<sup>58</sup> In Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991), translation Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Polity Press, Cambridge, p.142, p.203.

<sup>59</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010) pp.184-202.

<sup>60</sup> *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, pp.184-5.

In the essay 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' Rancière offers a critique of any such theory of an art of sublime in order to show therefore that, in fact, by contrast to Lyotard's (or Blanchot's) emphasis on the impossibility of representation as it is manifested in modern art, everything *can* be represented<sup>61</sup> within the aesthetic regime of the arts precisely because this regime democratically abolishes the hierarchical mimetic structure of the previous regime. What is important, then, is that the subject of representation is no longer thought from the perspective of an opposition between the representable and unrepresentable, which, according to Rancière, is still to think in the terms set out by an earlier 'representative' regime.<sup>62</sup> For Lyotard, the Kantian notion of the sublime becomes both the condition for (post)modern or avant-garde artistic production and, at the same time, determines the ethical role played by art in preserving a radical rupture/disjunction between the perceptible and the intelligible. Contrary to this, Rancière argues that not only does such artistic practice lead to a new form of domination in the world, but, in addition, instead of interrupting the totalizing movement of Hegelian dialectics, as Lyotard claims, becomes instead the very vehicle of both the Hegelian concept of the sublime (as bad infinity)<sup>63</sup> and a 'complete rationalization' of its 'unrepresentability'.<sup>64</sup> As Rancière puts it:

The unrepresentable paradoxically becomes the ultimate form in which three speculative postulates are preserved: the idea of a correspondence between the form and the content of art; the idea of a total intelligibility of the forms of human experience, including the most extreme; and, finally, the idea of a correspondence between the explanatory reason of events and the formative reason of art.

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<sup>61</sup> Apart from death, of course. For the relation to death through an image and representation is, paradoxically, also a misrepresentation. See, for instance, Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, p.73.

<sup>62</sup> Rancière, Jacques, 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' in *The Future of the Image* (2007), translation by Gregory Elliott, Verso, London and New York, p.123.

<sup>63</sup> For Hegel, Jewish poetry is sublime insofar as the relation between the subject (as a finite, unfree being) and Jewish God (as an infinite and free spirit) remains unreconciled for the subject's consciousness. The subject worships God without it ever being represented through images which, consequently, prohibits the possibility of freedom of the subject in relation to God. In this respect, 'bad infinity' would be this permanent, unresolved relation between the finite subject and infinite God. See 'The Art of Sublime' in *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume I* (1975), translation T.M. Knox, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.371-377.

<sup>64</sup> 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', pp.134-6.

By contrast, juxtaposing the language in Robert Antelme's (non-fictional) *The Human Race* about his experiences in Buchenwald and Dachau with the language in Flaubert's (fictional) *Madame Bovary*, Rancière argues that there is, in fact, no *specific* language that can be used to convey dehumanisation: everything becomes a question of, in Rancière's words, the 'choice'<sup>65</sup> made concerning the mode of representation that each work deploys, since the mimetic hierarchy that governed the 'representative regime' of arts is abolished. The problem, Rancière argues, is not that the Holocaust is 'unrepresentable', but, rather, that there is no longer a 'stable relationship between exhibition and signification'<sup>66</sup> consequent upon an absence of (constrained) *measure* to determine what artistic means can be deployed and what cannot.<sup>67</sup> In other words, since the distinction between empirical reality and fiction is blurred or lost, this can only mean 'more' representation.<sup>68</sup> As such, far from representing the unrepresentable, a film like Lanzmann's *Shoah* successfully represents the disappearance of the victims of the Holocaust by way of reconfiguration of the different techniques deployed in the film: camera, place, speech. In this way, according to Rancière, *Shoah* juxtaposes the 'dramatic action' of the present with a reality (the Shoah) which is both 'materially present and absent'.<sup>69</sup> Such newly created 'fiction' represents the double elimination: 'the elimination of the Jews and the elimination of the traces of

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<sup>65</sup> 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', p.129. Rancière states: 'There are simply choices. The choice of the present as against historicization'.

<sup>66</sup> 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', p.137.

<sup>67</sup> Rancière, Jacques, 'Sentence, Image, History', p.45 in *The Future of the Image*.

<sup>68</sup> Akin to Kiš at this point, what Rancière appears to suggest is that the literature of the aesthetic regime has changed the perception of how we relate to history itself. As he argues, for example, in the interview 'Is History a Form of Fiction?': 'It is a matter of stating that the fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction. Moreover, these models were taken up by historians and analysts of social reality. Writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth. This has nothing whatsoever to do with a thesis on the reality or unreality of things. On the contrary, it is clear that a model for the fabrication of stories is linked to a certain idea of history as common destiny, with an idea of those who "make history", and that this interpenetration of the logic of facts and the logic of stories is specific to an age when anyone and everyone is considered to be participating in the task of "making" history. Thus, it is not a matter of claiming that 'History' is only made up of stories that we tell ourselves, but simply that the "logic of stories" and the ability to act as historical agents go together. Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct "fictions", that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done.' From the interview with Rancière 'Is History a Form of Fiction?' in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp.38-39.

<sup>69</sup> 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', in *The Future of The Image*, p.127.



their elimination'. Most importantly, the film successfully represents the '*impossibility* of adequate correspondence between the place and the speech.'<sup>70</sup>

In the essay 'Sentence, Image, History', Rancière introduces the notion of the 'sentence-image' which, with the collapse of the fiction/reality distinction that defines the aesthetic regime, becomes then exemplary of this regime: a sentence which can function as an image and an image which can take on the function of a sentence. For it is the 'sentence-image' that preserves the *pluralism* of the power of the sensible, thus keeping open a kind of pseudo-dialectic between aesthetics and politics on which Rancière insists. As Rancière puts it: 'The sentence is not the sayable and the image is not the visible. By sentence-image I intend the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically, that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image.'<sup>71</sup> While, then, 'the sentence-function' still preserves the role of 'linking' within the text, and the image takes on a role of a 'disruptive power of the leap',<sup>72</sup> together these apparently conflicting aesthetic functions form a 'unit' of the 'sentence-image' as a kind of 'phrasal power of *continuity* and imaging power of *rupture*'.<sup>73</sup> In other words, the distribution of the sensible within the aesthetic regime is reconfigured as an oscillation (and tension) of both *continuation* and *rupture* induced by the 'sentence-image'. As such, it is that which guarantees art's survival and vitality: art exists 'as long as it moves on a stage of visibility which is always a stage of *disfiguration*'.<sup>74</sup>

There are two points that I would like to address here as concerns my reading of Kiš, and the parallels with Blanchot's and Levinas's thought which I have so far drawn: first, the relation of this to the notion of the 'sentence-image' which, apparently *visibly disfigures*, in Rancière's terms, and, second, the idea of preserving a kind of *pluralism* of power of the sensible that Rancière's account of an 'ideal political artwork' implies. If art exists whilst visibly 'disfiguring', such movement necessarily indicates a (radical) passivity in relation to cognition. It is

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<sup>70</sup> 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', p.128. (my emphasis).

<sup>71</sup> 'Sentence, Image, History', in *The Future of the Image*, p.46.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, my emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> 'Painting in the text', in *The Future of the Image*, p.89.

this which, consequently, has an ethical significance for Levinas, Blanchot and Kiš. Equally, the pluralism of the sensible within the (modern) artwork, at least where Kiš and Blanchot are concerned, cannot be devoid of ethical significance in relation to subjectivity either. In this respect, Blanchot's notion of the 'two slopes of literature' (which I discussed in chapter one) is, arguably, a good deal closer to Rancière's pseudo-dialectic of the sensible than it is opposed to it, in so far as, for Blanchot, there is both a readable (i.e. comprehensible) side of the text itself and, also, a radically ungraspable dimension. Indeed, for Kiš, Blanchot and Levinas, as we have seen, this kind of pseudo-dialectic between continuation and rupture present within the modern artwork is precisely the experience of an ethical excess within the text - the very relation between the Saying and the Said which I have discussed (via Levinas) throughout this thesis. In this sense, for both Levinas and Blanchot, the *image* is not only an *a priori* condition of perceiving the world, it is also that which *founds* the (im)possibility of language.

Considering that, in both Levinas and Blanchot, a 'saying' within the 'said' points to a non-dialectical speech of (ethical) excess of subjectivity beyond cognition and being, the question therefore remains why Rancière insists on so forcefully denying the ethical character of an artwork (in terms of bearing witness to the other) that might already, as it were, preserve the (political) pseudo-dialectic in itself on which his own doctrine insists. Even if one is, therefore, to concur with Rancière's understanding of *politics* within the artwork precisely as the tension of the power of 'sentence-image' (and Kiš's prose, I would argue, embodies this very tension), it is hard to see, as much as Rancière may want to insist on this, how any 'politics of aesthetics' can be completely divorced from ethics, understood as an excess of the quasi-dialectic within the text, that is, as that which always exceeds 'conceptual' thought itself.

This not to deny that there are several aspects of Rancière's aesthetic theory that could be said to correspond well with Kiš's poetics, such as the relation between historical facts and fiction, the pseudo-dialectic of the artwork, the blurred relationship between the autonomy of the artwork and reality. In these terms, set out by Rancière's theory, Kiš's prose successfully preserves the tension of the 'heterogeneous' power of the sensible, to use Rancière's own term. Understood in

this way, the 'readable' *political signification* of his work could no doubt be identified in that dimension of Kiš's texts that addresses the consequences of totalitarian ideologies and the reduction of a man to a mere 'animal', as well as the insistence of such texts upon a 'democratic' attempt to write on behalf those unknown people which history excludes and/or forgets. On the other hand, his 'condensed' prose forms and use of montage techniques never permits the full subliminal completion of such a 'readability', leaving the experience of the terror to reside more in the 'uncanny' affect of Kiš's writings (if we can use Rancière's own words here) than in the 'content' of his prose. However, if these oscillations are, as such, 'political' for Rancière, in so far as they reconfigure the distribution of the sensible, they are, in addition, also primarily 'ethical' for Kiš in so far as their 'function' in his prose is one of enabling the *eschatological* experience of history as a judgement of the present, in a way that necessarily goes beyond the 'here and now' of a certain political or artistic regime. Writing for Kiš must, above all, deal with the theme of dying of the other man in order to - in addressing the past - address the destruction of historical events so that they are not repeated in the future.

## **1.2 Kiš: *Homo Poeticus, Regardless***

Having considered the theories of art, politics and the ethical that I have mentioned above, it is now necessary to address the position of Kiš's work and his own critical positions with regard to them. Certainly Kiš firmly rejects the subordination of literature to any demand for an active engagement with political issues. At the same time, 'dehumanisation' is evidently one crucial focal point of his prose. In this respect, he is arguably closer to Camus than to Beckett, insofar as the absurd, and the problem of 'dehumanisation', as well as the fragmentary 'images' through which these are conveyed are still situated from the point of view of an individual subject.<sup>75</sup> In an interview 'Naming Is Creating' (1985) Kiš remarks:

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<sup>75</sup> In an interview 'All the Genes of My Reading' (1973), Kiš remarks: 'I was referring primarily to the French *nouveau roman* and the novelistic stutterings of Beckett's Molloy and trying to resist the temptation of "dehumanisation". Here is what I said: "As an admirer of experiments and suffering and a supporter of revolt against convention, I draw the line at stammering, even if I am obliged to start my novel with the sentence: 'This morning I found human footprints in the sand'." Don't forget that at that time I hadn't published a single book and was gearing up to write a novel. I'd like to think that the footprints I spoke of

How can I speak objectively about suffering? How can I use irony, the basic weapon against pathos, without sounding cynical? Poetry and pathos are too often confused and prose demands the opposite of pathos: the effect must reside less in the text than in the reader's mind, in images ... All I mean by images is the concrete as opposed to conceptual. Rhetorical figures serve only to transform the author's poetic or lyrical feeling into a dense text with none of the feeling that inspired it, to achieve what the Russian formalists call 'defamiliarization' and 'weighted form'.<sup>76</sup>

In these terms, what Kiš insists upon is the capacity of writing to testify to two positions: on the one hand, in the Adornian sense, that 'man' is crushed by the necessities of history, with 'E.S.' and Novsky as quintessential 'examples' of this. However, on the other hand, Kiš also emphasises that 'man' precisely cannot be reduced to 'a single dimension' and that, if there is any *testimony* in his books, as he claims, it is that attesting to the 'richness of man': his 'metaphysical' dimension, as he often calls it.<sup>77</sup>

Expressed through a language of materiality - his obsession with the ephemeral aspects of everyday life, like the only (documentary) remnants of the dead, such as the mother's tray and Singer's sewing machine in *Garden, ashes*, the photographs in *Hourglass*, and so on - Kiš's implicit nostalgia for the past and his obsessive, albeit self-consciously impossible, reconstruction of that past, emphasise the ethical or 'meta-ethical' (as he sometimes called it) aspects of his own sensibility: the judgement of the violence of history at stake in his works. In this sense, Kiš maintains what I have termed an eschatological approach to history that suggests that one can never be free from responsibility for or to the dead and that, consequently, if there is any possibility for redemption, it is to be found in an *ethical* relation to the other man. In the next sections I will elaborate upon this

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then appear now in *Hourglass* and that from today's perspective the sentence they came from is almost magically present: the words *sand* and *human footprints* form the underlying metaphor, the very core and quintessence of *Hourglass*'. In *Homo Poeticus*, p.162.

<sup>76</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, pp.207-8.

<sup>77</sup> My translation. In Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Remnant of Experience] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, the interview 'Između Politike i Poetike' [1986] [Between Politics and Poetics], p.201. In Serbian: 'Nije moguće da se čovek svede, čak i u težim situacijama, samo na jednu dimenziju...Ako u mojim knjigama ima svedočenja, to je svedočenje o bogatstvu čoveka.'

further, in particular regarding Nietzsche and Blanchot's paradigm of 'active forgetting'.

In Kiš's prose there is a kind of pseudo-dialectic between the need to testify, instantiated in relation to the question of justice for the dead, and the text's conscious deployment of the impossibility of testimony, or the erasure of testimony. Thus, his prose, as a quasi-dialectical movement between the Blanchotian 'two slopes of literature' testifies to that tension, through its distinctive form of fragmentary writing, as a contrasting relation between finite/infinite, possible/impossible and absence/presence. For Kiš, this has a crucial function in being both ethical and aesthetic in nature. In this sense we might say that Kiš's own idea of a true humanism is founded on a kind of tragic Pascalian premise - something, for example, his 1980 talk, 'Between Hope and Hopelessness' underlines - that we must confront human finitude, but without any theological<sup>78</sup> aspirations and without being free from a responsibility for the other. Like Levinas, who in Critchley's view does not 'glorify' the death of the subject and instead reaffirms the need for the 'destroyed' subject to maintain responsibility for the other, so does Kiš view literary ethics with such a burden of responsibility.<sup>79</sup>

In these terms, Kiš is not only, as we have seen, in agreement with both Adorno and Blanchot that literature is both free and unfree within modernity, but he also thinks that literature's freedom must be defended from it being reduced to serving politics in any narrow sense. Thus, for example, in one of his interviews from the 1970s, Kiš, rather sarcastically, offers a defence of modernism in the following terms:

[Apparently] we are, the so-called middle generation writers, "modernists", "hermetic", "aesthetes" (which is to say "we write well"), we are far removed from "reality" etc. Such search for analogies on a horizontal level is completely meaningless, however it gives the critics an illusion of the absolute. It is as

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<sup>78</sup> This, of course, does not imply that there is no religiosity in Kiš's prose. Here, he is akin to Levinas who argues that the (non-thematizable) relation to the other is precisely a realm of religiosity without theology and/or theodicy. Theology is, for Levinas, the thematisation of that which is *anterior* to any theme: an infinite (ethical) relation to the Other.

<sup>79</sup> On the relation between anti-humanism and subjectivity as responsibility in Levinas, see, for instance, Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, pp.66-70, p.70.

*though* a critic observes things from a distant historical aspect. Ostensibly *already now* he has an insight into a literary-historical fact, he *already now* writes in fact not a critique, but a literary history, he has already classified the living as if they were dead, as if they had lived long ago, and only him, a literary critic, writes as the Almighty God, for him there are no secrets.<sup>80</sup>

Late modernism is, therefore, defined by the degree to which, as he puts in one interview:

All of us modernists have not come out from Joyce's overcoat, but from a Joycean nightmare, from Joycean magnificent failure! Modern European and American novel doesn't do anything other than trying to turn Joyce's magnificent failure into little individual victories. We all stop before a Joycean abyss of ambiguities and linguistic nightmares, cautiously leaning over a chasm of dizzying possibilities into which our great Teacher leaped headfirst! We know the way from which one cannot go any further.<sup>81</sup>

As such, for Kiš, the difference between high modernism and late modernism is not so much politically framed (in terms of a different relationship to political engagement) but, instead, is an intensified question of the limit-experience of language itself and, thus, primarily 'aesthetic' in nature. Accordingly, not only must the literary work remain free, but, in addition, the writer is responsible for literature's (continued) freedom. For Kiš, the artwork, judged in relation to its political and social reality, oscillate and/or is determined according to such reality:

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<sup>80</sup> My translation. In Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Remnant of Experience] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, the interview 'Doba Sumnje' [The Age of Doubt] (1973), p.44. In Serbian: 'Tako smo mi, tzv. srednja generacija, 'modernisti', 'hermetični', 'estete' (što će reći 'lepo pišemo'), daleko smo od 'stvarnosti' itd, itd. To i takvo traženje analogija po horizontali potpuno je besmisleno, međutim to kritici daje privid apsoluta, kritičar *kao* da posmatra stvari iz dalekog istorijskog aspekta, tobože on ima uvid već *sada* u jednu književnoistorijsku činjenicu, on *već sada* piše zapravo ne kritiku nego književnu istoriju, on je već žive razvrstao kao da su mrtvi, kao da su davno živeli, a on jedini, književni kritičar, piše kao svedeći i sveznajući Bog, za njega nema tajne.'

<sup>81</sup> My translation. In Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Remnant of Experience] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, the interview 'Doba Sumnje' [The Age of Doubt] (1973), p.47. In Serbian: 'Svi smo mi moderni izašli ne iz Džojsovog šinjela, nego iz Džojsovskog košmara, iz Džojsovskog veličanstvenog poraza! Moderni evropski i američki roman zapravo i ne čini ništa drugo nego pokušava da Džojsov veličanstveni poraz pretvori u male pojedinačne pobjede. Svi mi zastajemo pred džojsovskim ambisom ambiguiteta i jezičkih košmara, oprezno se naginjući nad ponorom vrtoglavih mogućnosti u koji se strmoglavio naš veliki Učitelj! Mi znamo kuda se dalje ne može.'

A literary work lives in space and time; it is limited and determined by space and time so that one cannot speak about a literary work (any artistic work) beyond the spatial-temporal context, for as much as the work itself has an influence on space and time, they have a correspondingly reverse effect on the work: space and time determine it and give it a particular, and occasionally, a very different meaning. Viewed in this way, in this dimension, a literary work, a literary word, belles lettres, sometimes possesses an autonomous aesthetic meaning (the Renaissance, for example), or sometimes work-producing social power, but sometimes, as I think is the case with contemporary literature, it possesses neither one nor the other; rather, it lives and vegetates as some monstrous product of human existence, discarded, unnecessary, and powerless to achieve through Form its autonomous and autochthonous, aesthetic and ethical meaning as a work in itself, since even the writer himself demands that his work be something else, something that it isn't and cannot be. Or the work itself wishes to intervene as an immediate social function, like power, only then to become meaningless, inadequate, deficient, and ineffective. For a dying child, Sartre states, *Nausea* has neither weight nor meaning; but Yves Berger, a writer who supported, as opposed to Sartre, that famous autonomous aesthetic work, comes to the identical pessimistic conclusion: literature cannot do anything with or in the world; it cannot achieve anything in a field limited by reality.<sup>82</sup>

Although, in Rancière's terms, Kiš's prose could then be said to oscillate between an 'art of sublime' and the 'becoming-life of art', most obviously, as far as the latter is concerned, in the deployment of documents - which is, in a sense, for Kiš, his own definition of what is 'modern' in the post-Auschwitz era - Kiš's insistence on 'defamiliarisation' and on form as a 'sedimentation of content' is more akin to, for instance, that understanding of modernism articulated by Adorno. While then, as Branko Gorjup argues, Kiš's prose is not founded on pure mimesis,<sup>83</sup> Adornian

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<sup>82</sup> Essay 'Mi pevamo U Pustinji' [We are Singing in the Desert] (1971) in Kiš, Danilo, *Eseji autopoetike* (2000), priredio Jovan Zivlak, Svetovi, Novi Sad, pp.105-111; pp.108-9. Translated by Paul Milan Foster for The Review of Contemporary Fiction. XIV: 1 (Spring 1994). Translation of this essay (which is one of the three essays translated by Paul Milan Foster) can be found here: <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Three+essays.-a015074220>.

<sup>83</sup> See Gorjup, Branko, 'From 'Enchantment' to 'Documentation'', in *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol.29, No.4 (December 1987), pp.387-394, pp.387-8. Gorjup goes on to claim that Kiš's early novels belong to a realm of realism (e.g. *Garden, ashes*). However, if one considers that the novel *Garden, ashes* (1965) focuses on nostalgia for the (lost) childhood and thus, on mythologisation of

irreconcilability permeates his work in terms of the problematic relation between subject (conceptualisation) and object (e.g. Auschwitz). In this respect, 'defamiliarisation' is, as I have already argued in the previous chapter, precisely a *de-totalising* aspect of his work that preserves the unreconciled reality of narration itself. 'Defamiliarisation' takes the form here of a kind of aesthetic tragedy, which appears, at the same time, as the very limit-experience of tragedy itself in so far as it seeks to be devoid of pathos, a point that is crucial to Kiš's poetics. As such, Kiš's uncompromising prose does not betray suffering (in Adorno's sense), but, in a necessarily paradoxical form, both preserves the aesthetic freedom of his prose and ethically *engages* the reader through the depiction of (historical) trauma. To put it in another way, akin in some ways to both Adorno and Blanchot, for Kiš, literature can only be considered engaged in terms of ethics and, consequently, *pure art* is never a merely an 'aesthetic' art. As I have cited Kiš already in the Introduction to this thesis:

My literary work within the realm of *belles lettres* is a clearly construed attitude (approach) and escape, because I believe in the primordial aspects of art as such and literature as such. Because I believe that art, that literature, is not only a realm of aesthetics but also a realm of ethics. And thus, the so-called pure art, which is today mentioned only pejoratively, is also a form of engagement; it is not only a school of aesthetics but also a school of ethics.<sup>84</sup>

## 2. Kiš's 'art of proximity': the freedom of artwork as ethical excess

In this section I want to focus on the ethical significance that the freedom of Kiš's prose as a work of art presupposes. I argue that Kiš's insistence on the language of materiality, as the language of 'poetry', opens up an ethical relation of responsibility in so far as it is construed as a relation of 'proximity' and not of cognition. Kiš's demand to impossibly bear witness to the Shoah is materialised

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childhood itself - as 'defamiliarisation' from the core of the novel (Auschwitz), one might conclude that Kiš is as much a realist writer as Proust and/or Kafka (which Adorno's defence of modernism seems to suggest).

<sup>84</sup> My translation. In Serbian: 'Moje književno stvaralaštvo u okviru i u zagrljaju Beletre jeste jasno koncipiran stav i bekstvo, jer verujem u primordijalne kvalifikative umetnosti kao takve, književnosti kao takve, jer verujem da umetnost, da književnost, jeste etičko, a ne samo estetičko opredeljenje i da je tzv. danas u pejorativnom smislu pominjana, čista umetnost takođe svojevrstan angažman, to je ne samo škola estetike, nego i škola etike.' In Kiš, Danilo, *Po-etika, knjiga druga* (1974), Konferencija Saveza studenata Jugoslavije (Mala edicija ideje), Beograd, pp. 31-2.



through literary language, leaving all the while the relation to the Shoah unreconciled. It is in this sense, I want to suggest, that something akin to a Levinasian or Blanchotian understanding of alterity permeates Kiš's aesthetics.

In his essay 'The Concepts of art and poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's writings',<sup>85</sup> Gerald L. Bruns claims that '[Levinas's] account of the materiality of the work of art is an important contribution to modernist aesthetics for the way it articulates the ontological significance of modern art and its break with the aesthetics of form and beauty that comes down to us from classical tradition and from Kant.'<sup>86</sup> In this regard, Bruns goes on to argue that the ethical and poetic are aspects of a Levinasian 'Saying', as opposed to what he terms 'Said'. Even though the ethical and poetic, in a Levinasian sense, are 'not translatable into one another',<sup>87</sup> they both signify, in this way, a relation of exposure 'to regions of subjectivity or existence on the hither side of cognition and being'.<sup>88</sup> In other words, ethics and modern poetry as 'Saying' are, according to Bruns, important precisely in so far as they expose the subject to regions of non-cognition as a realm of *otherwise than being* (that is, in Levinas's terms, otherwise than power).

It is in this vein that Bruns distinguishes between two 'conceptions of [the] aesthetic' in Levinas's work: 'an aesthetic of materiality' and 'an aesthetic of visibility'.<sup>89</sup> Neither of these two conceptions is ever fully elaborated by Levinas – although an 'aesthetics of visibility' would seem to relate most clearly to 'classical' art and its role to represent (in such a way that, although belonging to a realm of beauty, it has what Levinas regards as an ultimately servile function in the world). What is, however, crucial, is the notion of 'proximity' that, according to Bruns, modern aesthetics presupposes or, perhaps, founds itself upon on Levinas's

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<sup>85</sup> Bruns, L. Gerald, 'The Concepts of art and poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's writings' in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (2004), edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.206-233. In 'Reality and Its Shadow', Levinas, for instance, claims: 'the Mona Lisa will smile eternally'. For Levinas, not only is this 'eternal' duration of a representative image 'monstrous' and 'inhumane' but, in addition, it belongs to a realm of cognition/comprehension, which is, for him, ultimately unethical. See 'Reality and Its Shadow' (1948) in Levinas, Emmanuel, *The Levinas Reader* (1989), edited by Seán Hand, Basil Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, p.138.

<sup>86</sup> Bruns, 'The Concepts of art and poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's writings', p.207.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p.206.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>89</sup> 'The Concepts of art and poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's writings', p.207.

account. That is to say, by contrast to the classical task of representation presumed by an aesthetics of visibility, in the very dense *materiality* of language, and in the obscurity of modern texts in particular, the subject is no longer, as it were, able *to be able* – to borrow Critchley’s expression - to comprehend and act upon the text from a position of superiority. Thus, the relation between the subject and modern art is one of ‘proximity’ – a form of relationality which has, for Levinas, a more general ethical significance, in particular in *Otherwise Than Being*. In the latter Levinas argues that ‘proximity’ is the very experience of a justice toward the other (which is infinity) where the subject *diachronically* ‘forgets the self’ in a time of the now ‘without present’.<sup>90</sup> This diachrony of time is *within* an instantaneous phase of the subject falling out with the self. In other words, in the relation as proximity between the subject and the other, the subject uproots itself from the present as *forgetting* (of its ego).

I will elaborate further upon this in a moment, in particular with regard to certain arguments of Nietzsche and Blanchot, on the one hand, and Kiš’s account of the problem of testimony, on the other. For now, it is important to mention that, consequent upon such a relation between the subject and modern art, the latter is indeed, in Bruns’ and Levinas’ terms, a kind of art of the sublime, as Rancière, to some extent, also defines it: that is, an art that *evokes* trauma precisely because such trauma can never be fully grasped or represented. In its freedom from being grasped, and in its incompleteness, it becomes also, in this way, a critique of subjectivity (understood as completed consciousness) in so far as it interrupts the very essence of being as power or knowledge. As such, it finds itself as ‘the language prior to language’; what McCaffery terms in Levinas a ‘primordial signification [which is] radically nonepistemological’.<sup>91</sup> As I have already discussed in the previous chapter, Levinas’s ‘meanwhile’ time of the novel is something ‘monstrous’ in this respect, for it introduces a radical passivity of dying: the *il y a*.

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<sup>90</sup> In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas, for instance, claims: ‘The forgetting of self moves justice’ (p.159) and ‘the face of the other in proximity, which is more than representation, is an unrepresentable trace, the way of the infinite’ (p.116).

<sup>91</sup> McCaffery, Steve, ‘The Scandal of Sincerity: Toward a Levinasian Poetics’, p.209, pp.204-229, in *Prior to Meaning: The Protosemantic and Poetics* (2001), Northwestern University Press, Evanston Illinois

As we have seen, for Blanchot, the *il y a* is a space of literature that preserves the radical strangeness of things and, thus, their freedom from the world. How, in this light, might one understand the relation of Kiš's prose as 'proximity' to what he understands to be the impossibility of testimony, and the impossibility of testimony to the Shoah in particular? For both Kiš and Blanchot surrealism is, up to a point at least, exemplary of a true literary commitment in relation to the world of domination in so far as it addresses subversively the condition of modern man through a radical break from and/or negation of the utilitarianism of everyday speech. Surrealism, in this way, through the very 'disintegrating force' of words, exposes the subject to the 'effacement' of presence – of power, absolute knowledge, or ontological stability – in the literary work. Most importantly, as far as Kiš is concerned, such writing opens up a possibility for a genealogical approach to history in the Nietzschean sense, as opposed to a merely chronological presentation of events, in that it re-establishes the relation with the past in the present as a radical otherness of time and history through the form of active forgetting or a *non*-presence of the self. For both Blanchot and Kiš, this is crucial in relation to the question of how art or literature may engage Auschwitz and the (im)possibility of testimony: Auschwitz, as the unthinkable event is 'represented' in writing, as an unworking/undoing of knowledge through the language of materiality. Literary language can only testify to the event of the Shoah not through a language of comprehension – which would render the incomprehensible comprehensible and, hence, give it a 'meaning' in those ways that Adorno precisely finds obscene - but as a poetic language of exteriority that does not reduce the singularity of that event to any stable context. For that reason, arguably, the kinship to surrealism in Kiš's prose (in particular, in *Garden, ashes* (1965)) enables both the freedom of literary prose itself from the world and an ethical exposure to the alterity of an unthinkable event (i.e. Auschwitz).

In his 1874 essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life',<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche famously argues that history burdens man by placing an individual's life in the

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<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', pp.55-123, in *Untimely Meditations* (2007), Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, edited by Daniel Breazeale, translation R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; see also, Ramadanovic, Petar, 'From Haunting to Trauma: Nietzsche's Active Forgetting and Blanchot's Writing of the Disaster' (2001) in *Postmodern Culture* 11, No. 2.

service of accumulated knowledge, and, through this, 'to the man of deeds and power', as opposed to placing it in the service of life itself. Unlike the cattle, who, according to Nietzsche, live 'a life neither bored nor painful'<sup>93</sup> because they 'forget' and, thus, every moment of their existence is truly dead and gone, man is 'a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance'.<sup>94</sup> History's recuperation of the past reduces man to 'mere *abstractions* and shadows'<sup>95</sup> in which his relation to the past is realised in three 'species of history': monumental, antiquarian and critical.<sup>96</sup> Accordingly, there are three modes of relation to the past: unhistorical, historical and suprahistorical. The unhistorical is a mode of being that forgets (like the cattle), the historical is a mode of being that is haunted by the past, and the suprahistorical would be a mode of being that would, as it were, be able to overcome the burden of the past. Nietzsche considers that the only way to overcome the burden of history is to *actualise* the experience of the past in the present as *forgetting*. Not only is forgetting necessary for the quality of life but, in addition, it is almost impossible to live life without it: it is, paradoxically, what founds memory (a notion that Blanchot directly derives from Nietzsche).

The 'suprahistorical' mode of being in relation to the past is closely related to the notion of the eternal return of the same, which I have already partly discussed in Nietzsche's work, whereby every past moment actualised in the present (as thought) is within such an instant both unhistorical (a form of forgetting) and historical. In the very impossibility of fully recalling the past in the present of thought, time is experienced as a *de-totalisation* of being, as a kind of '*uprooting*' from history – or, in other words, what is addressed by Levinas as a form of temporal 'diachrony'. For Blanchot, this is significant not only in terms of the necessary ambivalence of historical interpretation that it suggests, but also a

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<sup>93</sup> 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', p.67, p.60.

<sup>94</sup> 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', p.67.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p.84.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p.67. According to Nietzsche, the 'monumental' mode of a relation to past belongs to the man of action, who, in the service of a continuity of happiness of 'mankind as a whole', rejects 'resignation' and subordinates the struggles of individuals' lives for the sake of this greater cause: humanity. An 'antiquarian' mode of a relation to past belongs to the man who 'preserves' and sees worth only in the old and ancient, thereby rejecting anything innovative. And, a 'critical' mode of a relation to past is defined by a man's ability to have the strength to break with some aspects of the past, to put it, as it were, on trial, in order to 'condemn' it and overcome it for the 'service of life'.

specifically *ethical* significance as regards the question of how to bear witness to an 'event' like the Shoah. Literary language testifies to the unthinkable as the very impossibility of testimony in so far as what is present in both writing and reading is the radically *non-present* within the instant of thought. As I have already argued in chapter one, Blanchot closely relates this to dying, or rather, the *impossibility of dying*. What, accordingly, permeates both writing and reading is the experience of non-identity as *affliction* and suffering for the death of the other human (the 'surviving-on') whereby (a part of) the text is made *free* from the subject and the subject's sense of freedom is itself put into question.

In Kiš's prose – and, perhaps in *Garden, ashes* (1965) in particular, poetic writing as a form of bearing witness to the event of Auschwitz is founded upon a premise of the fundamental *inability* to bear witness: the impossibility of adequately testifying enables the creation of a poetic artwork which, as such, testifies to this impossibility of bearing witness itself.<sup>97</sup> In his 'surrealist' approach to literature, Kiš thus preserves a kind of Adornian 'unbarbaric' side of thinking insofar as *Garden, ashes* presents an experience of 'proximity' in which the object of narration (Auschwitz) remains radically ungraspable, i.e. it is 'present' in the novel *only* as a *non-presence*. The 'surface' of the novel depicts a kind of nostalgia for a (lost) childhood and is organised around the narrator's reminiscing for a by-gone era. Kiš's focus is, then, on everyday phenomena but in such a way that, for instance, the technical device of enumeration (which I have already discussed in Chapter two), has a function of both foregrounding the impossibility of totality, as a collapse

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<sup>97</sup> This is comparable to Agamben's understanding of the notion of testimony in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*: 'Neither the poem nor the song can intervene to save impossible testimony; on the contrary, it is testimony, if anything, that founds the possibility of the poem. Testimony is disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness'. Agamben, whose primary influence regarding the question of Auschwitz is, arguably, Blanchot, responds here to Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. In Agamben, Giorgio, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999), Zone Books, New York, p.36. It is important to mention, however, that, although Agamben draws a parallel between his own argument and Blanchot's understanding of testimony and concept of death, they differ in terms of how they understand the notion of sovereignty. Whilst for Blanchot, the supreme sovereignty is dying itself, which is, as I have discussed throughout this thesis, both impossibility and possibility, for Agamben, by contrast, the question of sovereignty is more directly political, and related to his notion of the 'state of exception' where the difference between the law and violence is lost. For a thorough analysis of difference between Blanchot and Agamben, and the subsequent defence of Blanchot's thought, see Leslie Hill's essay 'Not in Our Name: Blanchot, Politics, the Neuter' in *Paragraph*, Volume 30, No.3, Blanchot's Epoch (November 2007), pp.141-159, Edinburgh University Press.

of memory, and yet, at the same time, of actualising the past in the present as a judgement on the present. Thus, although Kiš invokes a kind of Nietzschean genealogical experience of the past in the present (most obviously, through the representation of a subjective memory of childhood), the effect of this is, primarily, to *obliterate* that which enabled the very experience of the past as presence.

Kiš's insistence on a language of materiality, therefore, has an ethical function, for it re-establishes the relation with both past and present in the form of an active forgetting, on the one hand, and as a poetic space of Blanchotian exteriority devoid of world, or an 'artificial paradise',<sup>98</sup> as Kiš calls it, on the other. In this sense, in speaking of a language of *materiality* I have in mind two different (even, apparently, opposing) conceptions. First, in Mallarméan fashion (and evidently closest to both Bruns's and Blanchot's conceptions), an emphasis on language as itself a material and sensuous (poetic) experience, where the subject's relation to the modern artwork is that of proximity. Second, however, a language of materiality may also be taken to a language of material things themselves. In this second sense, clearly, a language of materiality might be understood as closer to something like the descriptive mode associated with naturalism,<sup>99</sup> and, hence, arguably, nearer to a notion of the artwork as an aesthetics of visibility. Nonetheless, a crucial part of my argument is that in Kiš's prose such a focus on the material 'thing' is itself accorded an ethical significance. That is to say, and as I have tried to demonstrate here, not only does Kiš insist on the details of objects, as the (only) remnants of the dead, but he understands the effect of this 'materialism' as precisely foregrounding the impossibility of any absolute *consciousness* regarding, for instance, the Shoah, Stalin's gulag or even the artwork itself. Therefore, although these objects and/or ephemeral detailing are visible in his prose, they also *visibly disfigure* the central aspects of his novels, as the basis for a kind of 'sentence-image' (to use Rancière's own term).

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<sup>98</sup> In an interview 'Moć i Nemoć Angažovanosti' [Power and Powerlessness of Engagement], p.35.

<sup>99</sup> Lukács, for one, sees continuing this naturalist approach through to the likes of Joyce or Dos Passos. See Lukács's essay 'Narrate or Describe?'. He argues against the 'description' of 'lifeless' objects as opposed to 'realist' 'narration'. In Lukács, Georg, *Writer and Critic and other essays* (1978), edited and translated by Professor Arthur Kahn, Merlin Press, London, 'Narrate or Describe?', pp.110-148.

It is in this materialist sense that Kiš's 'surrealist' writing, as a work of poetry in prose, could be said to bring Auschwitz to thought itself not as a concept of completed knowledge but as an experience of affliction and wounding. In Levinasian terms, it presents the Saying, as signification, *within* the Said. Here, too, Kiš's characteristic deployment of irony is also crucial, since it acts as a kind of *unworking* of any possibility for a purely 'lyrical' experience of reading. In Kiš's own words, 'so that lyricism in prose doesn't become lyrical in the everyday sense – sugary – it must be intellectual'.<sup>100</sup> In this regard, a documentary approach to writing – and the language of material things upon which this itself insists – also functions as an 'anti-romantic' element in Kiš's prose, which culminates in the novel *Hourglass* (1972). Kiš's aesthetics of 'proximity', and the language of materiality through which it is presented, is, in other words, also an 'aesthetics of ugliness' that resists, in Adorno's terms, the danger of turning genocide into 'art' for the sake of the 'cultural heritage',<sup>101</sup> by giving it visible 'meaning', and through which, as Adorno puts it, 'something of its horror is removed'.<sup>102</sup> This is, perhaps, one of the main reasons why, in Kiš's view, his pessimism is always felt and unavoidable in his works: 'despite their ironic tone, the reader often senses fear. This echo of pessimism, which frightens the weak, may be the reason my works are not as popular as those of certain other authors.'<sup>103</sup>

For Kiš, questions of literature's freedom and responsibility are therefore always intertwined. Similar to Blanchot's understanding of the freedom of writing,<sup>104</sup> Kiš equates the work of prose *with* poetry precisely as the contamination of language's instrumentalisation in everyday speech. As Kiš puts it:

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<sup>100</sup> Regarding the term 'intellectualised lyricism' in *Garden, ashes*, see *Homo Poeticus*, p.252.

<sup>101</sup> Adorno claims: 'When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder.' In 'Commitment', p.189.

<sup>102</sup> Adorno, Theodor, 'Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p.189. Adorno claims: 'There is one nearly invariable characteristic of such literature. It is that implies, purposely or not, that even in so-called extreme situations, indeed in them most of all, humanity flourishes'.

<sup>103</sup> From the interview 'I don't Believe in a Writer's Fantasy' (1989) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.278.

<sup>104</sup> Kiš often quoted Barthes in regards to literature's quest for freedom and 'writing degree zero'. In Blanchot's own essay 'The Search for Point Zero' where he also analyses Barthes's 'writing degree zero', he, for instance, claims: 'Undoubtedly, the feeling of a limited freedom seems today to animate the hand that sets to write: one thinks one can say everything and say it every way; nothing holds us back, everything is available to us. Everything – isn't that a lot? But everything is finally very little, and the one who begins to write, in the insouciance that makes him master of the infinite, perceives, in the end, that he has at best devoted all of his strength to searching for only one single point.' In *The Book to Come*, pp.204-5.

I am always aware of the ambivalent meaning of words and sentences. I do not feel responsibility towards words themselves, but precisely a kind of fear of possibility that I could, as it were, strangle the word, within a sentence, and therefore, strangle the space that surrounds it. Precisely for that reason there is a certain 'poetic' aspect to my prose because of the need to leave enough space around words, where they could be dying of their own illnesses without poisoning the sentence. Or (a space) where they could be living and developing in between commas, in their own monstrosity, where different misfortune could happen to them, an unhealthy flourish, a malign tumour, which so often grows without my control.<sup>105</sup>

Literature, therefore, as the *disintegrating process par excellence*, is concerned with its own demise, with, as Blanchot claims, the 'moment that precedes literature',<sup>106</sup> which is precisely, on this account, the freedom of things from comprehension. In Kiš's terms, this movement from the search for meaning through writing (for example, the 'meaning' of the father's 'disappearance' in *Garden, ashes*) to the moment of a 'senseless' sense manifested in the materialism of his prose, stems precisely from those past things that were preserved in his memory: 'I tried to destroy the lyrical spell by putting big pieces of scrap metal, like that *sewing machine*, into the garden. Or the long list of nouns from a lexicon that should *obliterate* the perfume of plants in one section.'<sup>107</sup> There are many examples of this kind of materialist detailing throughout *Garden, ashes*, and so I will only briefly mention a few here.

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<sup>105</sup> My translation. In Serbian: 'Ja sam uvek svestan dvojnosti pojmova reči i rečenica. Ne osećam odgovornost pred rečima, nego upravo strah od mogućnosti da bih reč, u okviru rečenice, mogao da pridavim i ugušim prostor oko nje. Odatle izvesna 'poetičnost' moje proze, upravo iz te potrebe da se oko reči ostavi dovoljno prostora gde one mogu umirati od svojih sopstvenih bolesti, a da pritom ne zatruju rečenicu. Ili gde mogu živeti i razvijati se, među zarezima, po svojoj sopstvenoj monstroznosti, gde im se mogu dogoditi razne nedaće, nezdravo bujanje, maligni tumor, koji tako često narasta izvan moje kontrole.' From the interview 'Sve manje, sve ređe, sve opreznije' [(Now I write) less, less frequently, more cautiously], in Kiš, Danilo, *Po-etika, knjiga druga* (1974), Konferencija Saveza studenata Jugoslavije (Mala edicija ideje), Beograd, p. 128.

<sup>106</sup> 'Literature and the Right to Death', p.383.

<sup>107</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, pp.252-3. (my emphasis)



As Aleksandar Hemon rightly notes,<sup>108</sup> Kiš opens the novel not in the style of ‘the godlike point of view of the “great novel” openings’ but rather modestly, with his mother’s old tray. Here, then, is the opening passage:

Late in the morning on summer days, my mother would come into the room softly, carrying that tray of hers. The tray was beginning to lose its thin nickelized glaze. Along the edges where the level surface bent upward slightly to form a raised rim, traces of its former splendour were still present in flaky patches of nickel that looked like tin foil pressed out under the fingernails ... Anyone holding the tray (usually my mother) was bound to feel at least three or four of these semicylindrical protuberances, like Braille letters, under the flesh of the thumb. Right there, around those grapes, ringlike layers of grease had collected, *barely visible*, like shadows cast by little cupolas ... On her tray, with her jar of honey and her bottle of cod-liver oil, my mother carried to us the amber hues of sunny days, thick concentrates full of intoxicating aromas. The little jars and glasses were just samples, specimens of the new lands at which the foolish barge of our days would be putting ashore on those summer mornings.<sup>109</sup>

What becomes apparent from the quoted passage is that not only is Kiš interested in the ‘barely visible’ ephemeral objects that make up a life, but also in the very *materiality of touch* itself: getting into the details of his mother’s tray, the reader enters the world of the novel almost feeling the touches of the hand that carried this tray: ‘anyone holding the tray (usually my mother) was bound to feel at least three or four of these semicylindrical protuberances, like Braille letters, under the flesh of the thumb’. At the same time, ‘the little jars and glasses’ as ‘specimens of

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<sup>108</sup> See Hemon, Aleksandar, ‘Words that transcend the evil of the Holocaust’ which can be read here: <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/oct/19/books/bk-hemon19>. Last time visited: September 2016.

<sup>109</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Garden, ashes* (1985), translation Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, pp.3-4. (My emphasis). In Serbian: ‘U kasna letnja jutra majka je ulazila bešumno u sobu, noseći poslužavnik. Taj je poslužavnik već počeo da gubi tanku niklovanu glazuru kojom je nekad bio prevučen. Po ivicama, gde se plosnata površina izvija u malo uzdignutiji obod, još su se videli tragovi negdašnjeg sjaja – u ljuspastim plohama nikla, sličnog staniolu istanjenom pod nohtima...Onaj ko bi držao poslužavnik (a to je bila najčešće moja majka) morao je da oseti pod jagodicama priljubljenih palaca bar tri-četiri poluloptasta ispupčenja, slična slovima azbuke za slepe. Tu, oko tih okaca, nahvatao se prstenasto sloj masnoće, *jedva vidljiv* i sličan senci tih malih kupola...Majka je na svom poslužavniku, u tegli s medom, u flašici s ribljim zejtinom, donosila ćilibarske boje sunčanih dana, guste koncentrate pune opojnih mirisa. Te su teglice i čaše bile samo uzorci, specimeni onih zemalja pri kojima bi izjutra pristao ludi šlep naših dana.’ Kiš, Danilo, *Bašta, pepeo* (1992), peto izdanje, Bigz, Beograd, pp.7-8. (My emphasis).

the new lands at which the foolish barge of our days would be putting ashore' may be read as Kiš's distinctive approach to allegorically obliterating the fact that the family, hiding from persecution, moved frequently. Similar to the tray, Kiš goes into details describing the father's cigarettes 'Symphonia' and mother's sewing machine 'Singer': 'three transverse incisions on which cigarettes rested divided the ashtray's wide rim into three arcs of equal size. Each arc had the word "Symphonia" printed in large black letters three times, *like an echo*.'; 'a mechanical shuttle – magnified a hundredfold – with a spool from which the thread unwinds, as thick as a cord, *magnified and therefore difficult to recognise*, like the letter S, giving the illusion of spider legs. The emblem is painted a golden yellow, like a nobleman's coat of arms ...'<sup>110</sup>

The almost too 'fantastic reality' of Auschwitz, as he puts it in his essay 'Schizopsychology' (1978), is, then, approached here by Kiš - within the space of literary work – through a kind of *magnifying* process: the objects magnified function within the novel not only as an 'echo' and/or trace of the lost childhood, but also, paradoxically, work to obfuscate any possibility of ever grasping the event of the Shoah: 'magnified and therefore difficult to recognise.' As Kiš himself claims: 'the remains of any object conceal a story, and more often than not I prefer naming objects to telling their story: the trash can has its archaeological layers.'<sup>111</sup> Similarly, through the allegory of writing, the idea of death itself has to be *materialised* - in Blanchot's manner - as both possibility and (simultaneous) impossibility of thought. An example of this would be the list of flowers that are used by Fräulein Weiss in her attempt – romantic and albeit unsuccessful, to commit suicide:

Imitating some famous actress, she had filled up her hotel room with roses. All day the bellhops and elevator boys were delivering bouquets of the most fragrant flowers, like cherubs. The elevators that day turned into great hanging

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<sup>110</sup> *Garden, ashes*, p.24; p.25. In Serbian: 'Sa tri poprečna kanala, koji su služili kao ležište za cigarete, njen je široki obod bio podeljen na tri lûka jednake veličine. Na tim segmentima između žlebova pisalo je krupnim crnim slovima, tri puta ponovljeno *kao eho*: Symphonia.', *Bašta, pepeo*, pp.36-7., (my emphasis); 'stostruko uveličan mašinski čunak sa mehaničkim kalemom iz kojeg se izvija konac (koji je *uveličavanjem* postao debeo kao uže, i *stoga teško prepoznatljiv*) i koji, oponašajući slovo S, stvara iluziju paukovih nogu. Taj je amblem, kao na plemićkim grbovima...', *Bašta, pepeo*, p.38., (my emphasis).

<sup>111</sup> From the interview 'Naming is Creating' (1985) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.208.

gardens, into greenhouses that carried the burden of their fragrances up into heaven and then came back down again at a dizzying pace, their orientation all gone. Thousands of pink carnations, hyacinths, lilacs, irises, hundreds of white lilies, all had to be sacrificed. But her soul, lulled by the fragrances and intermixed with them, would soar up somewhere, *hovering above*, relieved of one life, on into the rose gardens of paradise, or would turn into a flower, into an iris ...The next day, she was found unconscious amidst the murderous flowers.<sup>112</sup>

As allegory, this cited fragment also evokes the necessary distance from the haunting centre of the novel - Auschwitz itself - that is implicitly insisted upon by Kiš: 'thousands of pink carnations ... hundreds of white lilies, all had to be sacrificed' ... 'her soul ... hovering above ... would turn into a flower'. Kiš here approaches the theme of death in terms of proximity, through the use of allegory and a process of enumeration of different flowers.<sup>113</sup> Here, even though the materiality of objects themselves (the flowers) are visible; they in fact visibly *disfigure* the reality they represent.

For Kiš, in this sense, both existence and writing after Auschwitz must pass by way of an impersonal *affliction* in his prose, as the experience of a self without ego and a kind of 'immemorial debt for an absolutely other'. This modern 'art of the sublime', however, does not imply a collapse of the aesthetic and political transformative potential of modern art (as Rancière appears to suggest), but instead, it is precisely what provides a condition of possibility for true politics, by generating an ethical demand in relation to dying. Eschatology as an ethical experience of the other - the experience of an exposure to the outside of one's

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<sup>112</sup> *Garden, ashes*, pp.5-6. (my emphasis). In Serbian: 'Poučena primerom neke slavne glumice, ispunila je svoju sobu u hotelu ružama i cvećem. Ceo dan su joj mali hotelski momci i liftboji, poput kakvih anđelčiča, donosili bukete najmirisnijih cvetova, a liftovi hotela pretvorili su se bili tog dana u velike viseće vrtove, u staklene bašte koje su nosile na nebo teret svojih mirisa, a vraćali se nadole vrtoglavo, izgubivši sasvim smisao za orijentaciju. Hiljade ružičastih karanfila, zumbula, jorgovana i perunika, stotine belih ljiljana trebalo je da padnu kao žrtva. A njena će duša, uspavana mirisima i pomešana s njima, vinuti, lebdeći, olakšana za jedan život, u rajске ružičnjake, ili će se pretvoriti u cvet, u peruniku...Našli su je sutradan u besvesti među ubilačkim cvećem.' *Bašta, pepeo*, p.11.

<sup>113</sup> Kiš often claimed that 'naming' – though a creative process – would also mean to 'diminish'. From the interview 'Naming is Creating' (1985) in *Homo Poeticus*, pp.207-8.

being, as a kind of separation of the subject through sensibility as vulnerability - and eschatology as aesthetics in Kiš's prose, are, from this perspective, always only a condition for a future politics to-come. Literature's freedom from the world, and its necessary ambivalence, is precisely what, paradoxically, keeps such potential alive.

### **3. *Hourglass* and the comic-antiheroic paradigm in relation to dying**

*Too luminous to be shadows, too diffuse to be light*<sup>114</sup> – from *Hourglass*

*Do you know what art is, in a definition brought to me by my walk along the seafront. Art is, first and foremost, a selection of associations, a courage of destroying a thought on the outset.* – Danilo Kiš<sup>115</sup>

In the last part of this chapter I want to focus on the novel *Hourglass* (1972), which I read here as Kiš's formal parody of Enlightenment rationality, in order to address the role of (tragic) humour in the novel's approach to both human finitude and the ethical demand consequent upon human finitude. I argue that time in the novel is an experience of dying itself, as a kind of impossibility of conceptualisation. Drawing upon Critchley's account of the 'comic-antiheroic' paradigm, which he relates to Levinas's and Blanchot's conception of the impossibility of death, as opposed to the tragic-heroic paradigm in Heidegger's conception of Dasein as a being-towards-death, I argue that not only is the protagonist of the novel, 'E.S.', a quintessential example of a comic, anti-heroic relation to finitude but, in addition, that precisely for this reason his fate appears as all the more tragic.

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<sup>114</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Hourglass* (1992), translation Ralph Manheim, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, p. 6; in Serbian: 'suviše svetle da bi bile senke, suviše nejasne da bi bile svetlost', in *Peščanik* (1992), peto izdanje, Bigz, Beograd, p.14

<sup>115</sup> My translation. From Kiš's essay on Joyce, 'Jedna šetnja Gospodina Maka' [Mr. Poppy Goes for a Walk] (1959), in *Varia*: Danilo Kiš, priredila Mirjana Miočinović (2007), Prosveta, Beograd i Budućnost, Novi Sad, p.33. In Serbian: 'Znate li šta je umetnost, u definiciji koju mi je donela ova šetnja obalom mora. Umetnost je pre svega selekcija asocijacija, smelost uništenja misli još u zametku.'

Considering that *Hourglass* is, in several respects, evidently framed by a need to impossibly testify to the event of Auschwitz, the humour in this novel functions to make the ethical demand, consequent upon this event, all the more 'bearable' for the reader, while, at the same time, leaving the relation to Auschwitz *unreconciled* (or ungraspable) in Adorno's sense. In other words, humour is what ontologically *destabilises* the full completion of any sublimation of the *real* (in this case Auschwitz) in order to, as it were, save us from the unbearable, whilst still *ethically* putting our subjectivity in question in relation to the death of the other human. In this manner, *Hourglass*, arguably, addresses the question of a future politics only in terms of what it presents as an *a priori* ethical relation.

As I have already mentioned, for Adorno, form as a 'sedimentation of content' is the only possible way in which modern art truly offers a form of social critique insofar as it opens up a kind of thinking that interrupts instrumental reason and modes of violent conceptualisation. In *Negative Dialectics*, in the section titled 'Meditations on Metaphysics' and in particular 'After Auschwitz', Adorno argues that after Auschwitz any claim about 'the positivity of existence' cannot but be 'sanctimonious' given the fact that any such sentiment would be 'wronging the victims' of the Shoah.<sup>116</sup> Even though, then, Adorno claims that 'it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems', because 'perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream', the question remains whether 'after Auschwitz you can go on living'.<sup>117</sup> For Adorno, therefore, it is not a question of negating art after Auschwitz but rather, refusing instead - *through* art - the restoration of metaphysical aspirations that 'a shabby culture'<sup>118</sup> would desire to preserve. After Auschwitz, for Adorno, what permeates the 'living on' itself is 'the guilt' which 'does not cease to produce itself'.<sup>119</sup> Accordingly, if there could be true art or thinking after Auschwitz, it would have to be such that it does not soothe the conscience of the living.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> 'After Auschwitz', p.361.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p.363.

<sup>118</sup> 'Metaphysics and Culture', p.367.

<sup>119</sup> 'After Auschwitz', p.364.

<sup>120</sup> In his 1980 talk 'Between Hope and Hopelessness', Kiš himself addresses that his books '*do not allow the reader to soothe his conscience* in relation to the camps, Auschwitz and Kolyma equally...'

Akin to Levinas and Blanchot, Adorno offers here a critique of Heidegger's separation of death as a concept from dying as ageing because Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death is always *my* relation to *my own* death, which, as such, excludes the relation to dying of others.<sup>121</sup> As such, Heidegger's doctrine appears, Adorno argues, ultimately devoid of ethics and social context: the fear of (abstract) death is nothing in comparison to the fate 'worse than death' i.e. dying, and the event of Auschwitz is precisely an example of such fate 'worse than death'. It is this, I want to suggest, that could be said to correspond to Kiš's own aesthetics as ethics in its engagement with the 'everyday' death of the other in *Hourglass*.

For Kiš, as I already mentioned in the first section, the influence of Joyce on late modernist writers is enormous.<sup>122</sup> Writing on Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kiš, for instance, claims that there is in the novel:

A parody of everything. Of a novel (without a novel), of *Ulysses*, of life, of death, of art, of philosophy, metempsychosis, a process of writing, Daedalus, Dublin, the Aryans, the Jewish, the Irish, the English, of Conscience, of sub-conscience, of sex, of the text, of polyglotism, of the Babylonian Tower, of the land, of the sea, of a man, of a woman, of the Church, of myself, yourself, him, us, them, a parody of All and of Nothing. A parody of a parody. That's what holds the whole thing together.<sup>123</sup>

Implicit in Kiš's argument is a sense that literature's deployment of parody allegorically corresponds to the conditions and sensibilities of modern man who, constrained by a world in which instrumental thinking dominates, is being further

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<sup>121</sup> Rather sarcastically, Adorno, for instance, claims: 'while the fascists raged against destructive cultural bolshevism, Heidegger was making destruction respectable as a means to penetrate Being'. And furthermore: 'The idol of pure original experience is no less a hoax than that which has been culturally processed, the obsolete categorical stock of what is.' In 'Dying Today', p.368.

<sup>122</sup> There are many 'direct' influences of Joyce on Kiš. For example, in the uses of mythopoesis, metonymy, encyclopaedic narrative, etc.

<sup>123</sup> My translation. From Kiš's essay on Joyce, 'Gospodin Mak se Zabavlja' [Mr. Poppy is Having Fun] (1959), in *Varia*, p.42. In Serbian: 'Parodija na sve. Na roman (bez romana), na *Uliksa*, na život, na smrt, na umetnost, na filozofiju, metempsihozu, proces pisanja, Dedalusa, Dablin, arijevece, Jevreje, Irce, Engleze, na Svest, na Podsvest, na seks, na tekst, na poliglotiju, na kulu vavilonsku, na kopno, na more, na čoveka, na ženu, na Kirku, na mene, tebe, njega, nas, vas, parodija na Sve i na Ništa. Parodija na parodiju. Na tome se drži cela stvar.'

alienated from that world. Parody, in this way, functions as a radical interruption of instrumental thinking, as an exposure to that dimension of existence that is not governed by reason and, as a literary device, is what permits the necessary presence of scepticism. As Kiš argues:

I think that literature has always been coming closer to philosophy whenever it could not find any other solution: *roman* (novel) is precisely a kind of folk and parodic philosophy. The examples of *Don Quixote*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Mann, demonstrate this. Only the relation to parodic elements has changed: since the writer believes less in philosophemes than before, he deploys his own philosophemes, in which he also does not believe or at least he doubts them, as real and only available. In that way, this becomes more part of *prose*, in both meanings of that word: the life prose and prose as genre.<sup>124</sup>

Unlike the first two novels (*Early Sorrows* (1968) and *Garden, ashes* (1965)) in Kiš's 'family cycle' (his kind of quasi-trilogy on Auschwitz), where lyricism in the former and 'intellectual lyricism' in the latter permeate the narration, Kiš approaches the writing of the last novel, *Hourglass*, devoid of such narration. In *Hourglass* the change of form is not only necessary for Kiš to approach the *uncanny* character of Auschwitz – to borrow Ranciére's term - differently than in the previous two novels, but also because the entire novel is, in fact, an apocryphal deconstruction of the father's single letter. As a 'historical fiction', in *Hourglass*, the entire world of one epoch is deconstructed through a parody of Enlightenment thought and, consequently, the novel offers a critique of history as totality where one individual life, as a 'nonidentity' in Adorno's sense, disintegrates into nothingness due to the advent of the Shoah.

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<sup>124</sup> My translation. In Serbian: 'Proza se, po mom mišljenju, uvek približavala filosofiji kad god nije imala drugog izlaza: roman i jeste neka vrsta pučke i parodijske filosofije. Pogledajte 'Don Kihota', pogledajte 'Gargantuu', pogledajte Dostojevskog, Tolstoja, Mana. U suštini se, mislim, promenio samo odnos prema parodijskom elementu: kako pisac sve manje veruje filosofemama, on svoje sopstvene filosofeme, u koje takođe ne veruje, ili bar sumnja u njih, podmeće kao stvarne i jedine. Na taj način to postaje sve više i više elemenat *proze*, u oba značenja te reči: životne proze i proze kao žanra.' From the interview 'Pisanje kao terapija' [Writing as Therapy] (1973), in Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Residue of Sediment] (1990), p.30.

As I have already discussed in chapter one, there are four different narratives within the novel: 'Travel Scenes', 'Notes of a Madman', 'A Witness Interrogated' and 'Criminal Investigation'. These four different accounts of the same reality enable Kiš to approach the question of Auschwitz without permitting the idea that the event of the Shoah is actually graspable: what allows the subject of narration (i.e. the deconstruction of the father's letter) to take place, leaves the relation to the object of narration (i.e. Auschwitz) radically ungraspable. Form, as 'weighted' or 'sedimented' content, functions in the novel as a delay in the possibility for interpretation, so as to push the reader to fully experience the narration as a kind of aesthetic tragedy.<sup>125</sup> In Agamben's terms, we might say, the father's letter, as a document, is the impossible testimony itself which precisely founds the possibility for the creation of poetry (in this case the novel), and not vice versa; whether such a document is apocryphal or real becomes absolutely irrelevant for the sublimation within the novel.

Similarly to Beckett, who, according to Critchley, 'returns us to the condition of particular objects, to their materiality, their extraordinary ordinariness',<sup>126</sup> Kiš returns in his own language of materiality to the everyday phenomena of objects in order to both address the issue of meaninglessness and, in addition, to testify to the impossibility of totality. The materiality of objects that interests Kiš, at least where *Hourglass* is concerned (although this is a leitmotif of his prose more generally), are those that belong to the world of the protagonist 'E.S.'<sup>127</sup> The focus on the materiality of objects, for Kiš, has, in this sense, a multiple function: in Nietzschean terms, it means to actualise the experience of the past in the present not chronologically but genealogically, even though the 'bone' (as he calls the father's letter) of the novel suggests a 'clear chronological' order; 'the bone' metaphorically reconstructs the father's life.<sup>128</sup> Since this chronological order of the

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<sup>125</sup> Gorjup, for instance, claims: 'While the participation of the narrator was reduced, that of the reader was increased because he was expected to fill in the empty spaces and make the necessary corrections.' In Gorjup, Branko, 'From 'Enchantment' to 'Documentation'', in *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol.29, No.4 (December 1987), pp.387-394, p.389.

<sup>126</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, (1997), Routledge, London and New York, p. 149.

<sup>127</sup> The father's letter is most emblematic of this. Kiš's sentiment in relation to the letter is cited in chapter two of this thesis. In Serbian, in Kiš, Danilo, *Po-etika, knjiga druga* (1974), Konferencija Saveza studenata Jugoslavije (Mala edicija ideje), Beograd, pp.36-7.

<sup>128</sup> In *Homo Poeticus*, Kiš claims: '*Hourglass* has a very clear chronological line to it, a precise order of items and events: everything in the novel occurs in the course of a single night', p.161.



letter is non-existent as such, i.e. it is deconstructed through four different realities, the reader experiences the past as present in the novel not as part of chronological time but as the impossibility of comprehension of (that) time. In so doing, Kiš narrates the impossibility of narration itself as a kind of Blanchotian disaster. In addition, the materiality of these objects that belong to the by-gone era of Jewry of central Europe serve to return the novel to a phenomenology of everyday life. In this manner, the absurdity of existence is still represented from the point of view of the subject. That is, the reader witnesses the disintegration of the subject, in this case the protagonist 'E.S.', precisely as decided by historical event, whose fate is 'determined by historical processes and trials'.<sup>129</sup> Such 'processes and trials' have a clear chronological structure in the novel, but they are not presented in the novel as chronology but, instead, as four different narrative voices relating to 'E.S.' As Gorjup, for instance, thus argues:

Scham [E.S.]'s immensely complex personality, bursting out of four separate textual segments, suggested the protagonist's psychological disintegration. As the segments revealed, there were at least four different Schams [E.S.] with four separate personalities. Formed on the basis of apocryphal documentation, each unique Scham was determined by the author's technique of spotlighting one predominant feature in the protagonist's psychological make-up.<sup>130</sup>

For Kiš, therefore, the concept of the 'death of the subject' does not exempt one from responsibility for the other and/or the death of the other; on the contrary, the reader experiences the novel as an encounter with vulnerability in relation to the protagonist 'E.S.'

Finally, a return to the materiality of objects works, as I have already mentioned, in such a way order as to testify here to the impossibility of any totality of 'being' *tout court*: as Gorjup argues, these four narrations of four different E.S.s are an 'unfinished portrait, suggesting the impossibility of completion as well as [the] many-sided nature of reality'.<sup>131</sup> In other words, through these four different

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<sup>129</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.46.

<sup>130</sup> In Gorjup, 'From 'Enchantment' to 'Documentation', p.390.

<sup>131</sup> 'From 'Enchantment' to 'Documentation', p.390.

personalities of 'E.S.' the reader is exposed to an experience of a history of dehumanisation (in the form, here, of fascism) through this particular protagonist 'E.S.', leaving all the while the relation to E.S. as absolutely other *incomplete*.

As Adorno argues, true art always resembles its own 'meaninglessness', which is consequent upon art's allegorical relation to the world; that is, to 'the contemporary condition of consciousness'. In these terms, one might argue that parody in *Hourglass* - as a novel 'about' Auschwitz - has the function precisely of maintaining such meaninglessness as an 'achievement'<sup>132</sup> in its mimetic relation to the other (the consciousness of Nazi Germany). Consequently, *Hourglass's* 'achievement' of meaninglessness has a double function: first, to interrupt instrumental reason (as false totality), and, second, to enable the experience of active forgetting, as a powerlessness and impossibility of death (which is, in Levinas's and Blanchot's sense, the impossibility of power and knowledge). The novel, therefore, is not an expression of *non*-knowledge (if there could be such a thing) but knowledge *otherwise* than knowledge insofar it exposes the reader to a non-dialectical realm of subjectivity. As such, it offers a kind of *ethical* 'teaching' in its opening up of a relation to the dying of the other man. In *Hourglass*, Kiš goes to great lengths rationally to deconstruct knowledge, albeit with parodic intent, through a kind of *unworking* of knowledge. At the same time, parody in this novel also functions to remove any possibility of pathos. For instance, in the first parts of the novel (in 'Notes of a Madman I and II') the fragments are enumerated with a parody of dehumanising rationalism in the examples of the fragment concerning milk (15), the 'treatise on the potato' in fragment 21, and fragment 22 regarding pigs and 'paella valenciana' (fragment 20); all of which serve to speak of 'E.S.'s hunger in a fashion devoid of pathos. In this manner, then, the materialism of his prose still functions as a relation of proximity (and/or visible disfigurement) with regard to the Shoah, even as it explicitly avoids representing, or rendering visible, the latter as such. I shall quote here a few brief passages from the novel. For instance, fragment 15, on milk, begins:

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<sup>132</sup> See Critchley's reading of Beckett's meaninglessness in *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, p.152; p.179.

When you come right down to it, milk is food. Mother's milk, for instance. Mammals' milk. Jesus sucked the teat of a cow. Or a ewe. Or a she-camel. Instead of the lily-white breast of the Virgin Mary. Mary is a mammal, too. Her breasts, too, once secreted white milky juice. For Jehovah in His wisdom have a thought to children, to the young of man and beast. Let there be glands, and there were glands. Let milk flow, and the milk flowed through the pimply little mouth of the breast. Mouth to mouth resuscitation. A kind of field ration, enriched by a special process, with all the ingredients necessary to the organism (thus facilitating transportation and alleviating the problem of nutrition).<sup>133</sup>

What differs here from, for instance, the 'intellectual lyricism' of *Garden, ashes* is that parody disallows the too lyrical tone to be felt in *Hourglass* (in the latter, it is only sporadically present considering that there is at least four different forms in the novel). The quoted passage on milk (which is in the first part of the novel), is, of course, a parody of religious discourse and its absurdity; I mean here both forms of monotheism, Christianity, in the image of Virgin Mary, and also Judaism, since it is the feminine principle that is foundational to Jewish fate. At the same time, as a mode of defamiliarisation, it is also Kiš's way of addressing the issue that E.S.'s children have only cold milk to drink or eat; something we learn in the letter at the end of the novel. Similar to this, fragment 21, 'Treatise on the Potato', where Kiš offers the historicity of the origin of the potato, becomes a kind of metaphor through which to address the persecution of the Jewish people:

The time has come when we must think about ourselves from the standpoint of life and death, not as self-seeking individuals, but as representatives of our entire race, that divine weed scattered over all continents of the earth, just like the lowly potato (*Solanum tuberosum*), whose origins, like our own, reach back to the dark depths of history and the earth, but whose existence will not, like ours, be called into question as long as the earth endures and there are

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<sup>133</sup> *Hourglass*, p.30. In Serbian: 'Na kraju krajeva, mleko jeste hrana. Majčino mleko, na primer. Mleko sisara. Isus, koji drži u ustima vime krave. Ili ovce. Ili deve. Umesto prebele dojke presvete deve. Marija je takođe sisar. I njene su dojke nekad lučile beli mlečni sok. Jer se Jehova u svojoj mudrosti pobrinuo za decu, za mladunčad. Neka bude žlezda, i žlezda bi. Neka poteče mleko, i mleko poteče na bubuljičava usta dojke. Spasavanje života sistemom usta-na-usta. Neka vrsta vojničkog obroka koji je naročitim postupkom obogaćen svim za organizam nužnim sastojcima (time se olakšava transport i uprošćuje problem ishrane), in *Peščanik*, pp.46-7.

hungry mouths to feed. This humble potato, *Kartoffel*, *pomme de terre*, this bread of the poor which, slightly disguised, mashed, with gravy, moistened with milk, cream, or meat sauce, also graces the tables of the rich, this vulgar potato, this earthly-heavenly manna, this subterreanean growth, this earthly tumour, this hard hernia, this lumpy tuber, has never in all its long history attained the perfect roundness of the apple or the tomato (*Paradiesapfel*, that other heavenly fruit), but has remained imperfect and assymetrical like man, covered with knots and bumps, bulges and excrescences, holes and cracks, without kernel, center, or anything else that might bear witness to the presence of the Creator and His wisdom.<sup>134</sup>

From this rather long passage it becomes apparent that, for Kiš, the cause of human tragedy is, after all, all-too-human, devoid of God, without 'anything else that might bear witness to the presence of the Creator and His wisdom'. In this respect, the tragic human condition paralleled with the 'humble potato', 'imperfect and assymetrical like man', 'whose origins, like our own, reach back to the dark depths of history and the earth', can neither be understood by recourse to religion nor science.

It is also worth quoting a passage here from fragment 23 (also from 'Notes of a Madman II') in this respect, the focus of which is Newton's law of gravity:

I am inclined to believe that Newton owed his discovery of the law of gravity to shit. One evening, as the first stars were coming out, he squatted down in the grass under an apple tree, secure from discreet eyes, for the darkness was dense enough to hide him, the stars were not bright enough to highlight him, and the moon was still behind horizon. In that moment of silence, when the first frogs begin to croak and lazy bowels respond to the lyrical emotion

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<sup>134</sup> *Hourglass*, pp.49-50. In Serbian: 'Došla su vremena kada moramo misliti o sebi iz aspekta života i smrti, ne kao sebične individue, nego iz aspekta čitave svoje rase, tog božanskog korova zemlje, raseljene po svetu, raširene po svim kontinentima, baš kao i taj nesrećni krompir (*solanum tuberosum*) koji je potekao, kao i mi, iz dalekog mraka istorije i zemlje, no čiji se opstanak ne dovodi više u pitanje, kao naš, sve dok na svetu bude bilo gladnih usta i dok bude zemlje. Taj se dakle bedni krompir, *Kartofel*, *patate*, taj sirotinjski hleb koji ne silazi ni s trpeze bogatih, serviran nekako prurušen, u vidu pirea i umaka, preliiven mlekom i pavlakom i sosom divljači, taj vulgarni krompir, ta zemaljsko'nebeska m̀ana, taj podzemni izraštaj, zemaljska škrofula, tvrda kila, grumuljičasti gomolj, nikad se nije izvio tokom svoje duge istorije u idealan krug jabuke ili rajčice (tog drugog božanskog ploda), nego je ostao nesavršen kao čovek, samo prividno simetričan, pun kvrga i guka, pun izraslina, izraštaja, rupa i poseklina, bez središta i bez semena, bez ičeg što bi nagoveštavalo u njemu prisustvo Tvorca i njegove mudrosti...!', in *Peščanik*, pp.69-70.

aroused by the beauty of nature and of God's creation – because the sympathetic nervous system conveys intellectual impulses to the intestines and influences the metabolism – in that seat of all the emotions, Newton sensed the oncoming of his discovery, so simple yet fundamental for the future science.<sup>135</sup>

And furthermore,

That realisation undoubtedly made him blush for shame and led him to wonder whether it was advisable to divulge this essentially humiliating discovery, in which the devil surely had a hand, to mankind. But then, still squatting under the apple tree of knowledge, now once more constipated, Newton thought up his great historical lie and substituted an apple for his shit, so that mankind would never learn the whole truth.<sup>136</sup>

There are many other similar examples in the novel that point to a kind of unworking of knowledge intended to permeate the novel as a whole with a sense of meaninglessness and a dynamic of scepticism. To give one further example, the fragments that are part of 'A Witness Interrogated' and 'Criminal Investigation' are written in the form of a Russian catechism in order to underline the absurdity of the power that such discourse claims over an individual; in the former, the narration is in the form of a dialogue, in the latter, the same 'question-answer' reality places 'E.S.' in the third person.

In each of these passages one can observe the close relation posited between humour and death in the novel. 'E.S.', whose fate is determined not by his own free will but by a historical event, cannot achieve his authentic existence and make

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<sup>135</sup> *Hourglass*, p.53. In Serbian: 'Sklon sam da poverujem da je Njutn svoj zakon o Zemljinoj teži otkrio pomoću izmeta: čučeci u travi, pod jabukom, pred večer, kada su zasjale prve zvezde, skriven tamom od indiskretnih očiju, jer je tama bila dovoljno gusta da ga sakrije, zvezde nedovoljno sjajne da ga osvetle, a mesec još iza horizonta; dakle, u tom trenutku tišine, kad zakreću prve žabe, a lenja se creva pokrenu od nekog lirskog uzbuđenja pred lepotom prirode i Božjeg stvaranja, jer simpatikus prenosi intelektualna uzbuđenja na creva i utiče na rad metabolizma, u tom središtu svih uzbuđenja, pošto je počeo da sluti otkriće tog tako jednostavnog no za budućnost nauke fundamentalnog zakona...', in *Peščanik*, pp.73-74.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, p.54. In Serbian: 'To mu je saznanje, nema sumnje, uteralo crvenilo u lice, i nateralo ga je da zamisli nad tim da li da uopšte saopštava čovečanstvu svoje u biti ponižavajuće otkriće u koje je, izgleda, sam đavo umešao svoje prste. Ali, još jednako čučeci pod jabukovim drvetom saznanja, sad ponovo konstipiran, Njutn se doseti svoje velike istorijske laži i svoje govno zameni jabukom, a da se čovečanstvo nije nikad dosetilo prave istine...', in *Peščanik*, pp.74-75.

death his possibility, as Heidegger's conception of Dasein's being-towards-death suggests he should. In fact, for 'E.S.', as I argued in chapter two, death is in many ways desirable. However, in the midst of the fate worse than death, it becomes radically ungraspable. *Hourglass*, as such, is a *double* absence of death. On the one hand, it is so in terms of 'E.S.'s own 'comic-antiheroic' relation to dying, which is, according to Critchley, the very experience of the impossibility of death. At the same time, on the other hand, death in the novel is radically denied in relation to both power and knowledge. In his reading of Beckett in *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, Critchley argues that 'laughter is the sound of language trying to commit suicide but being unable to do so, which is what is so tragically comic.'<sup>137</sup> As he continues: 'Laughter is an acknowledgement of finitude ... as an affirmation that finitude cannot be affirmed because it cannot be grasped.'<sup>138</sup> In a similar sense, Kiš suggests:

That relation between humour and death, which was formulated by Hesse, and not only by him, is, I think, simultaneously the only possible relation one can have towards life; everything else is lyric layering, or the attempt to finding ideological formulae in order to solve as painlessly as possible certain so-called "metaphysical dilemmas". One poet once said: "When man is left with nothing, then humour begins." I think that is the case.<sup>139</sup>

If, as both Levinas and Blanchot argue, death is radically impossible, meaning that, contra Heidegger, no individuation takes place, then one could argue that humour is, in this context, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of an affirmation of death, leaving all the while our relation to existence slightly more bearable. As Critchley proposes, regarding the relation between humour and

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<sup>137</sup> Critchley's reading on Beckett's meaninglessness in *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, p.157.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.159.

<sup>139</sup> My translation. In Serbian: 'Ta veza između humora i smrti koju je formulisao Hese, i ne samo on, jeste istovremeno, čini mi se, i jedini mogući odnos prema životu; sve ostalo je lirsko naklapanje, ili pokušaj traženja ideoloških obrazaca da se neke tzv. 'metafizičke dileme' reše na što bezbolniji način. Jedan pesnik je rekao: 'Kad čoveku ne ostaje ništa drugo, onda počinje humor.' Mislim, to je to.' From the interview 'Sve manje, sve ređe, sve opreznije' [(Now I write) less, less frequently, more cautiously], in Kiš, Danilo, *Po-etika*, knjiga druga (1974), Konferencija Saveza studenata Jugoslavije (Mala edicija ideje), Beograd, p.130.

Levinas's ethical demand: 'Humour gives a form of sublimation which allows us to bear the ethical demand without it destroying us'.<sup>140</sup>

In *Hourglass*, 'E.S.' is a quintessential anti-hero. In the interview 'Life, Literature', Kiš says:

The father who appears in my works under the name of Eduard Scham [*Garden, ashes*], or E.S. [*Hourglass*], is an idealised projection unencumbered by the solid, homogeneous mass of realities and memories. He is therefore a doubly negative character, negative by his absence and negative as a literary hero. He is an invalid, an alcoholic, a neurasthenic, and a Jew – in a word, ideal material for a literary character.<sup>141</sup>

For Kiš, therefore, not only is parody and, consequently, humour, the most appropriate way to bring Auschwitz to thinking here – as that which acknowledges the impossibility of redemption, humour here also has a function of *reparation*, understood specifically, in Levinasian terms, as a relation to trauma. If, for Levinas, trauma is understood as a 'separation' within subjectivity, whereby the subject is split, humour is, in this sense, a work of 'reparation' of that 'separation'. As Critchley's reading of Levinas argues: 'might one not imagine the rhythm of Levinas's discourse as a movement between the tear and repair, between the traumatic wound and the healing sublimation, between the subject and consciousness, between ethics and ontology?'<sup>142</sup> In *Hourglass*, even 'E.S.'s Jewishness is depicted as the ability to laugh at oneself, as both a parody of maternal heritage (Jewishness) and a radical passivity and weakness in relation to death. In fragments 25 and 27 of 'Notes of a Madman II', for instance, 'E.S.' speaks of his menstrual pain and pregnancy: 'I admit: my heart menstruates. The late, painful menstruation of my Jewishness ... A biological deviation, a manifestation of the Jewish, feminine principle.' And, furthermore: 'Strange as it may sound, the man who has written you this letter (madame) is pregnant ... The

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<sup>140</sup> Critchley's interview with Anders M. Gullestad. In *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 3, No.2, Summer 2010. [www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n2/gullestad.php](http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n2/gullestad.php)

<sup>141</sup> From the interview 'Life, Literature' (1986) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.239.

<sup>142</sup> Critchley, Simon, *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (2009), Verso, London, p.206.

seed of death is in him.<sup>143</sup> Although the humour in the novel oscillates between a kind of sardonic, neurotic Nietzschean comedy,<sup>144</sup> as these examples demonstrate, and a kind of Beckettian humour (as in the passage on Newton's law of gravity), what is effectively universalized is humour's capacity to confront the tragedy of human finitude without, as Critchley claims, destroying us. The novel, as such, opens up our relation to dying as that of a proximity of sensing, as something that is beyond cognition but which, nevertheless, we are affected by.

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<sup>143</sup> *Hourglass*, pp.55-6. In Serbian: 'Ja hrabro priznajem: moje srce menstruirá. Zakasnela, bolesna menstruacija mog judejstva...Biološka devijacija kao oličenje jevrejskog, ženskog principa.'; 'Što se tiče ovog pisma (gospođo), gospodin koji vam ga je pisao (znamo, to zvuči čudno), taj gospodin je u drugom stanju!...U njemu je seme smrti.', in *Peščanik*, pp.76-77.

<sup>144</sup> See Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, p.159.



## Chapter Four – Kiš and Suffering

Throughout this thesis I have argued that there are perhaps four major issues at stake in Kiš's poetics – issues concerning how literature engages, respectively, with death, responsibility, freedom and suffering, as well as with their ineluctably intertwined relation. In this last chapter I discuss the question of suffering. In doing so the thesis comes full circle, for not only is the relation between death – explored in my first chapter - and suffering a close one, as Kiš presents it, but, in addition, such a relation opens onto several important concerns that run throughout his work: the condition of homelessness/homesickness, and of the stranger or (Kiš's preferred term) 'outsider', as well as issues concerning inauthenticity, human fallibility and frailty, debt and community. Ultimately, as we will see, it is through his engagement with these concerns that Kiš addresses the problem of nihilism and its (im)possible delineation within the modern literary space.

In considering Kiš's representation of homelessness and homesickness, it is important to consider here the role played by a certain geocultural imaginary of Central Europe in the ethical, aesthetical and political concerns that are central to Kiš poetics. For, it is in his depictions of a fragmenting Central European world that questions of exile and a loss of identity are most clearly foregrounded in his prose. In what follows, I will attempt to juxtapose this with Blanchot's *The Idyll* (1936) and with Blanchot's own notion of what he terms an 'unavowable' community (constituted around death and love) in order to make the argument that it is through the literary figure of the stranger, and the suffering and death of the other man, that Kiš most powerfully addresses a question of the possibility for a future responsibility towards the other free from national identities; one which would be open to an experience of alterity within the literary space. This will be followed in the subsequent section by an exploration of the idea of debt, which is not only the 'essential' aspect of a community in 'dying', as Levinas defines this, but which also plays a profoundly emblematic role in Kiš's own story 'Dug' ('The Debt'), written in 1986, posthumously published in 1994 and translated for the first time into English in 2012. This story should be read not only as a condensed vignette of a biography of the Yugoslav Nobel prize winner for literature Ivo Andrić (1892-1975), but also

as setting out Kiš's own relation to literature as a realm of community that exposes the idea of a pluralism of the self and which underlines the ways in which any subject is always bound to another in a kind of unrequited debt and responsibility in dying. Finally, continuing to engage with the Levinasian notion of subjectivity as a 'bankruptcy' of being, or what he terms in *Otherwise than Being* an unfinished 'emptying [of] oneself' in responsibility and suffering *for* the other, I address the depiction of homelessness in Kiš's prose not only as a thematic leitmotif running throughout his writing but also as the ineluctable condition for the exigency of the ethical relation that is at stake in writing in general. In this light, Kiš's posthumously published story 'A and B' (written in 1986) is analysed in the final section of this chapter in both symbolic and metonymical terms. According to Adam Thirlwell, in his preface to the English publication of the very last collection of Kiš's stories titled *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), Kiš's 'A and B' is 'the smallest novel possible: the universal history of loss'. 'A and B' thus represents the condensed trajectory of Kiš's own prose and a movement from the Central European *topos* in point 'A' to a desolate, homeless space and void in point 'B'. Bearing this in mind, the metonymic connections apparent in Kiš's work between the notions addressed in the earlier part of this chapter (the stranger, exile and 'unavowable' community) will be read through Levinas's notion of an unrequited 'debt' in order to articulate the ways in which in an idea of homelessness appears as a condition for the ethical relation in Kiš's poetics. I will argue that, paradoxically, it is homelessness which *reinforces* the infinite question of identity (understood as being, home, security) in Kiš's work.

## 1. Unavowable Community and the Question of Future Democracy

*[Modern man's] modernity breaks up as an impossibility to remain at home – Levinas<sup>1</sup>*

*I think of literature as my country of origin – Danilo Kiš<sup>2</sup>*

*When you no longer feel like a stranger, then there will be no problem in becoming a stranger again – The Idyll, Blanchot<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Levinas, Emmanuel, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (2011), translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, p.184.

<sup>2</sup> From an interview 'The Conscience of an Unknown Europe', (1986), in *Homo Poeticus*, p.216.

<sup>3</sup>*The Idyll*, in *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, Barrytown Ltd., p. 19.

From the publication of Kiš's short novel *Psalm 44* in 1962 (published in the same year as his first novel *The Attic (Mansarda)*) to his very final works, the depiction of suffering permeates Kiš's oeuvre. Indeed, considering that the 1962 novella gets its title from psalm 44, which is about the *communal* suffering of a people who feel abandoned and betrayed by God, what such a choice arguably prefigures is the close relation between literature and suffering that will be apparent in all Kiš's subsequent writings. Here, two major concerns emerge: first, for Kiš, it is in literature and art alone that suffering becomes acknowledged and saved from oblivion, but in which redemption is only ever felt or experienced as a promise and a silent gesture; second, since, as Kiš himself claims, 'the source of our misery was all too human',<sup>4</sup> the question of (infinite) responsibility belongs to humanity alone, without recourse to any theodicy that would, as it were, justify misery or suffering as the work of God. At the same time, these texts suggest the degree to which some form of suffering is, for Kiš, necessary in order that there can be an ethical relation in the first place; that is to say, it is in the suffering *for* the other, or for mankind's suffering as a whole, that any one is individuated or singled out in his or her uniqueness. This ultimately affirms, I will suggest, a kind of paradoxical Nietzschean conception of suffering for the sake of a reaffirmation and re-evaluation of life itself.

All of Kiš's texts have a tendency to function as a kind of centrifugal space (or a *vanishing point*) that desires the impossible: the need to commemorate collective, communal suffering by integrating it *through* the specific that, however, always already exceeds the limits of the text itself, as the text's outside. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Early Sorrows* (1969) - the first collection of semi-autobiographical stories and the first part of his family 'trilogy' concerning the event of Auschwitz – should be given this title. For although it 'sketches' out the singular predicament of a child living during World War II, it also aims to universalise (or gather as a whole) the sorrows of growing up in general.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview 'Naming is Creating' (1985) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.205.

Kiš's critically acclaimed television drama *A Wooden Trunk for Thomas Wolfe* (*Drveni Sanduk Tomasa Vulfa*) (1973) emphasises a similarly paradoxical idea that a work of art is always de facto insufficient in preserving from oblivion the memory of suffering, and yet, that it is precisely the task of art to give voice to those who have perished. Initially approached to write a drama on one of the seven deadly sins, Kiš chose laziness which was, he suggested, the most forgiving sin. The play centres on a difficult relationship between two concentration camp survivors and their need for remembrance of what had happened and of the victims of the camps: Dr Solomon Singer, an elderly, frail man, and a young, would-be-writer and an orphan, Jakov, who waits for a miracle or an inspiration that would enable him to write. The play breaks the taboo of literary 'miracles', with Jakov's failure to write a novel instantiating, instead, at the centre of the play, a long idleness whilst awaiting inspiration. What both binds Solomon and Jakov and, simultaneously, divides them also is precisely the suffering itself caused by trauma. Recalling an anecdote mentioned in the play about Thomas Wolfe's trunk where he kept his manuscripts as discarded and, as it were, imperfect, Jakov's own wooden trunk, a gift from Solomon, becomes a metaphor for an ultimate idleness and even uselessness of writing in the face of the repetitive violence of history. That is, the wooden trunk itself, where towards the end of the play Jakov keeps the only piece of paper he has written (a short homage to the memory of Solomon after his death), becomes a metaphor for both oblivion and an empty tomb for the victim(s), a sign that there can be no form that would, as it were, achieve a form of absolute consciousness regarding the Shoah. It is in this way that the play is readable as seeking to represent a kind of Blanchotian 'absence' of the book. Here, literature, then, for Kiš, is a space for revaluation (and/or constant re-writing) of the need to address human conscience by way of affectivity – manifested through a suffering for the other - and, as such, something always singular for everyone.

Before I begin to consider how Blanchot's notion of community (which was hugely influenced by Bataille) and the notion of the stranger could be said to correspond to the forms in which Kiš engages the problematic aspects of the Central European 'theme', in particular, in his prose, it is important to mention here, briefly, some of the aspects of what is signified by the idea of Central Europe itself. For

Kiš, the notion of Central Europe, as a *'unique heterogeneous space'*, both culturally and geopolitically, had in the latter stages of the twentieth century, lost its significance and meaning. In his essay from 1986, 'Variations on Central European Themes', Kiš acknowledges that not only had this European 'twilight zone' become a 'thing of the past',<sup>5</sup> but, in addition, that the sudden interest in this part of Europe had more to do with politics (the East-West divide and the consequent 'disappearance' of the central part during the Cold War) than with anything distinctive about that culture itself.<sup>6</sup> Yet, it was precisely the specific character of Central European (literary) culture that had, by his own admission, a huge influence on Kiš's own poetics. Kiš was born in Subotica (in Hungarian Szabadka), a Yugoslav border-town with Hungary, where multi-ethnicity had been a part of both historical and cultural heritage for centuries. This town is geographically situated at the edge of the Pannonian basin, which becomes, as we have seen, the central metaphor for the disappearance of the Central-European Jewry in Kiš's trilogy. His own father Eduard, born in the western part of Hungary during the Austro-Hungarian empire, 'Hungarianized' their family name Kohn (Kohen, Cohen) into *Kiš* at the age of thirteen in order to assimilate.<sup>7</sup>

Crucial, in this sense, to the understanding of what might be distinctive about this specific region of Europe would be, Kiš argues in 'Variations on Central European Theme', the apparently *common* desire of all these 'small peoples' and their cultures to be accepted, acknowledged and included *in* the greater European family and tradition. As Kiš puts it: there is 'a legitimate desire to see a common heritage acknowledged in spite of or, rather, because of differences. Indeed, the differences are what make it unique and give it an identity of its own within the European whole.'<sup>8</sup> This does not, however, imply that this part of Europe was immune to hostile, nationalistic impulses (quite the opposite) nor that the desire for inclusion into a European identity as a whole escapes forms of nationalism (or, of course, equally identitarian forms of eurocentrism). Kiš himself was aware of this: 'Nationalism does not necessarily terminate the European connection. On the

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<sup>5</sup> 'Variations on Central European Themes' in *Homo Poeticus*, p.104.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.103.

<sup>7</sup> 'Life, Literature' in *Homo Poeticus*, pp.244-45. Kiš's father's family settled in Hungary after they were 'expelled', as Kiš himself puts it, from Alsace.

<sup>8</sup> 'Variations on Central European Themes' in *Homo Poeticus*, p.104

contrary. A desire for European culture often takes the form of national pride ('We are Europe') and antagonism ('And you aren't'), which is ultimately no more than a form of resistance to uniformity and Bolshevization.<sup>9</sup> In fact, one might say that what, most quintessentially, determines the Central European literary *nexus* is, arguably, a kind of paradoxical modality of existence – namely, Central European writers, in their search for identity and their desire to belong and/or be assimilated, paradoxically preserve their ambivalence (through exile, language, tradition and culture) as the very *difference*, as Kiš terms it, that permanently marks their works with a profound sense of homelessness.<sup>10</sup> (Kafka would be the most obvious example of this.<sup>11</sup>) It is perhaps, then, not surprising that in his essay (or, rather, collection of fragments) 'Variations on Central European Themes', Kiš includes (together with Kafka, Kundera, Endre Ady, Krleža, etc.) the two writers whose works could be said to most clearly inform aspects of his own defence of an individual life over ideology: Arthur Koestler and Karl Popper. According to Kiš, Koestler's biography, as 'the most radical realization' of Central European-ism, could be said, in fact, to represent 'the potential biography of every Central European intellectual',<sup>12</sup> precisely because Koestler's search for identity and an intellectual 'family tree' engaged him with various (theoretical) traditions. To paraphrase Kiš's own reading, from Judaism to Marxism, to the rejection of Soviet Communism (the novel *Darkness at Noon* being the famous example of this<sup>13</sup>), to, eventually, his suicide, what Koestler's life emblematically represents is a kind of Central European 'theme' of a permanent exile set against any form of total and/or totalitarian system. Similarly to Koestler, Popper's notion of the 'open society'

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<sup>9</sup> 'Variations on Central European Themes', p.106.

<sup>10</sup> On the difficulties of defining the Central European, see, for example, Tyrus Miller, 'Rethinking Central Europe: The Symbolic Geography of the Avant-Garde' (2003), *Modernism/Modernity* 10, 3, pp. 559-567.

<sup>11</sup> This is of course one of the central concerns of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> 'Variations on Central European Themes' in *Homo Poeticus*, p.110.

<sup>13</sup> *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) is widely considered by critics, and acknowledged by Kiš himself, as a polemic with Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, in particular the titled story of Novsky. To put it briefly, for Koestler, signing a confession under a torture in the gulag would be an ultimate symbol of devotion to the socialist cause (i.e. dying for one's ideals), even though the martyrdom inflicted is by those who betray that movement itself. In Novsky's story, the Aesopian language used for the outsider, i.e. the reader as the 'future investigator' has an important function to show that most of the confessions that were signed during the Soviet camps were precisely false and criminal as official historical documents (or in Benjamin's terms 'barbaric') because they were made under severe forms of torture. In addition, as already discussed in Chapter two, Kiš accepts Koestler's dividing notions of 'yogi' and 'commisar' as the basis of human experience and also, as a way of looking at his own entire oeuvre as an oscillation between those two positions. His talk 'Between Hope and Hopelessness' underlines this, which I discussed in Chapter two.

aims, according to Kiš, to criticise and reflect upon the Western tradition - from Plato to modern times – as being essentially the unbroken tradition of a valorisation of totality that can lead to totalitarian regimes such as fascism or the Soviet Union under Stalin. It is in this respect that Central Europeanism can be perceived as occupying a metonymic relation to a continuation of the European geopolitical tradition as a whole – namely, the way in which all these small peoples, with their strong national identities, have a (similar) desire to assimilate and integrate within their own identity anyone who is outside of it. By contrast, both Koestler and Popper gesture towards an idea of a (future) democracy that would take the form precisely of a refusal of closed systems of thought and, consequently, a refusal of assimilation as a logic of identity negating the existence of the stranger as stranger.

As a writer on the destructive impacts of totalitarianism, on both right and left, for Kiš the fate of a Central European Jewry that no longer exists is emblematic not only because of his own biographical background but also because their fate represents a figure of alienation that is internal to the (European) space of literature itself. In fact, it is through literature alone that, for Kiš, the quest for homeland and community is to be sought. The relation between a logic of assimilation and a radical otherness that continually interrupts it, as this is manifested within narration itself is, perhaps best represented in Kiš's trilogy, in particular in *Garden, ashes* (1965) and *Hourglass* (1973). As G. J. A. Snel observes in his PhD thesis 'Fictionalised Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe' (2003), in *Garden, ashes* what is permitted to be experienced as a (false) and *unreliable* testimony is Andy (Andreas) Scham's distance and detachment from the father, Eduard Scham, whereby, effectively, 'Andreas not just conceals the holocaust, he denies the family history before assimilation.'<sup>14</sup> Here, Snel thus follows a trajectory that separates the narration of *Garden, ashes* between the time of narration before assimilation, i.e. the world of Eduard *Kohn* (the real family

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<sup>14</sup> Snel, G.J.A., 'Fictionalised Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe' (2003), a PhD thesis awarded by Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, p.86. G.J.A. Snel dedicates Chapter three of his thesis to discussion of imaginary historical spaces in both Kiš and the Croat writer Krleža. The thesis can be found here: <http://dare.uva.nl/record/1/220521> (Last time visited 13, December 2015). I will refer back to Snel's reading of Kiš's story 'A and B' in the last section of this chapter.

surname) and Pannonia, and the time of narration after assimilation, that is, Andy Scham's own biography.

Viewed in this way then, as I have argued throughout this thesis, Kiš leaves the Shoah as a radically ungraspable event in *Garden, ashes*. What is essentially achieved instead is a presentation of affectivity as a suffering for the other in proximity. *Pannonia* in his novels remains a distant place, 'like an echo' that only sporadically emerges on the surface of narration as a phantom haunting the story. According to Snel, in Kiš's prose, Central Europe represents a shared experience of common history and a kind of utopian project, whilst, by contrast, Pannonia represents an individual experience of horrific events and a dystopian 'homeless' space.<sup>15</sup> This is perhaps clearest in Kiš's story 'The Stateless One', initially titled 'Apatride/Man Without a Country'.

The story 'The Stateless One' ('Apatride') was published posthumously in Serbian in the collection of stories *Lauta i Ožiljci*<sup>16</sup> (1994) and for the first time in English as *The Lute and the Scars* (2012).<sup>17</sup> It is important to mention here that this collection contains several stories that were originally intended to be included in *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (1983) (apart from 'A and B' and 'The Debt'); stories which are 'unfinished and incomplete, like all things human', as E.S. in *Hourglass* proclaims in fragment 66. Considering that at the core of Kiš's poetics is precisely an emphasis on the value of the unfinished and the imperfect - as if the search for a permanent questioning regarding the human condition should be first sought in human *frailty* – these stories, apart from their tangible beauty, testify to frailty in a particularly poignant double manner. With Kiš's death, their 'final' versions never realised, these stories were brought to light in an almost collective labour of love by those who were closest to Kiš. It is due to their incomplete character that the editors provided footnotes to accompany them, offering a glimpse into their genesis and into Kiš's own process of writing itself. According to his former wife

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<sup>15</sup> Snel here refers to Central European intellectuals precisely due to the entire geo-political condition of that region (nationalism, wars, etc.). For a thorough overview on the influence of a Central European elements in Kiš's prose, see also the account of Kiš's English translator, John K. Cox. In 'Pannonia Imperilled: Why Danilo Kiš Still Matters' in *History*, October 2012, Volume 97, Issue 328, pp.591-608.

<sup>16</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *Lauta i Ožiljci* (2011), priredila Mirjana Miočinović, Arhipelag, Beograd

<sup>17</sup> Kiš, Danilo, *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), preface Adam Thirlwell, translation John K. Cox, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, Dublin, London



Mirjana Miočinović,<sup>18</sup> 'The Stateless One' was probably written in 1980 in Paris, a year after the beginning of Kiš's self-proclaimed 'Joycean exile' that lasted until his untimely death in 1989. In addition, Miočinović claims that the story had a specific 'Central European fate' in mind and was, in particular, inspired by the life of Ödön von Horváth, as well as by Endre Ady who had a huge influence on both Horváth and Kiš.<sup>19</sup> Considering that Horváth's own life ended tragically in Paris in 1938 (he was hit by a tree outside the Théâtre Marigny<sup>20</sup>), after he left Austria due to the Anschluss, it is perhaps not surprising that Kiš had a keen interest in the biography of this Austro-Hungarian playwright. Apart from the almost too fantastic circumstances surrounding his death, Horváth was outspoken against fascism and by the early thirties was already a persona non grata in Germany. What interested Kiš in particular is, however, the idea that the 'ill-fate' Horváth wished to avoid from the Nazis awaited him nevertheless in Paris; it was due to the rise of fascism that he decided, of course, to move to Paris.

Regarding the geopolitical aspects that underline and/or determine a notion of Central Europeanism, in respect to the idea of a fluid sense of identity and (open) community, Horváth was emblematic for Kiš in part because of his openness towards cosmopolitanism. As he famously stated:

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<sup>18</sup> See Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), written by Mirjana Miočinović, translation John K. Cox p.117. Apart from the fact that Mirjana Miočinović was married to Danilo Kiš from 1962 until 1981, her work and dedication to Kiš's literary legacy is of tremendous importance for literary scholarship. She has edited several collections of essays and interviews, including *Gorki Talog Iskustva* and *Varia*, along this 'The Lute and the Scars' collection.

<sup>19</sup> Miočinović, Mirjana, Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.115. It is worth perhaps mentioning here that Kiš had given up the idea of becoming a poet after he had encountered the poetry of Endre Ady. Hence his obsessive and vast work of translations of Hungarian, French and Russian poetry, since he always considered himself to be a failed poet. See 'Ironic Lyricism' (1986) in *Homo Poeticus*. See also Kiš's essay 'Izlet u Pariz' (1959) [Excursion to Paris] in *Varia*: Danilo Kiš, priredila Mirjana Miočinović (2007), Prosveta, Beograd i Budućnost, Novi Sad, pp.519-550. This essay, written in Paris, is the only one in *Varia* that does not follow chronological order, as Miočinović points out in the afterward of that edition. The reason behind this can be found in both the symbolic and metonymical significance that this essay now has, in that it was written in September in 1959 - exactly thirty years prior to Kiš's death in Paris in October 1989 - during one of Kiš's first visits to Paris, and addresses many of his early poetical impulses and influences, including Endre Ady. In fact, Kiš emphasises that it was Ady, a foreigner, who managed best to express a permanent Baudelairean Parisian spleen and nostalgia of an Ahasperian flee into the modern. See, also, 'Politizirao sam celog života' [I had politicized my whole life] (1989), in *Gorki talog iskustva*, p.251.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Miočinović claims: 'A heavy branch took Ödön von Horváth's life, right in front of the doors to the Théâtre Marigny. He had arrived in Paris after an encounter with a "premium fortune-teller" in Amsterdam, who had prophesised that an event awaited him in the French capital that would fundamentally alter his life!'

‘If you ask me what is my native country, I answer: I was born in Fiume, grew up in Belgrade, Budapest, Pressburg, Vienna and Munich, and I have a Hungarian passport, but I have no fatherland. I am a very typical mix of old Austria-Hungary: at once Magyar, Croatian, German and Czech; my country is Hungary; my mother tongue is German.’<sup>21</sup>

Implied in Horváth’s sentiment here is an aporetic idea of the *necessary* relationship between a stranger and the community. That is, Horváth’s understanding of Central Europeanism entails a paradoxical phenomenon that one is, *at once*, both without fatherland, and, at the same time, one who has a community because of this very absence of fatherland, or, in other words, *because* one is a stranger.

Before I discuss how this might be related to Blanchot’s own conception of a community of *those who have not got community*, and to its ineluctable relation to death, it is first important to consider this aporetic idea in relation to Kiš’s own sense of community and its presentation in the story ‘The Stateless One’ in particular. It is the language of those in exile (which, according to Kiš is ‘merely a collective name for all forms of alienation’<sup>22</sup>) that acknowledges or determines the fact that they are in exile, constituting a remnant of a previous ‘home’ that signifies their foreignness. For this reason language is both the ‘destiny’ of the writer and something that one should not ‘tamper with’ (i.e. abandon), as Kiš claims, because the writer writes not only with words but with his or her ‘entire being.’<sup>23</sup> Bearing in mind that Central European intellectuals often experienced both dominant forms of mid-twentieth-century totalitarianism, fascist and communist,<sup>24</sup> and the ‘temptation’ of what Kiš terms ‘ideological and nationalistic’ reductionism,<sup>25</sup> it is precisely in literature that they sought to find a sense of shared experience, validity and even homeland. In this, literature instantiates something like an ontological instability (a kind of ‘knowledge liberated of all ideology’, in which ‘totality is not total’, to quote

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<sup>21</sup> See, in English, the Wikipedia entry at:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%96d%C3%B6n\\_von\\_Horv%C3%A1th](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%96d%C3%B6n_von_Horv%C3%A1th)

<sup>22</sup> ‘Variations on Central European Themes’, p.113.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.109.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.113.

Levinas's reading of Blanchot<sup>26</sup>), where an aporetic modality of literary experience introduces into the subject that writes/reads a radical alterity and community of absence, both of which are closely related to the experience of dying (of the other man). For Kiš, the Central European fate then becomes a metaphor for this *ethical* demand of a literary community more generally, where the aporetic condition of the outside must be respected and preserved in order to address the possibility of a future beyond national identities and totalities.

Apart from the fact that all of Kiš's prose texts testify in some way to this demand posed by 'the outside', Kiš's own 'fate' and sense of 'identity' is, on his own account, that of a Central European writer:

I have nothing against the notion of Central Europe – on the contrary, I think that I am a Central European writer, according to my origins, especially my literary origins. It's very hard to define what Central European means, but in my case there were three components. There's the fact that I'm half-Jewish, or Jewish, if you prefer; that I lived in both Hungary and Yugoslavia and that, growing up, I read in two languages and literatures; and that I encountered Western, Russian, and Jewish literature in this central area between Budapest, Vienna, Zagreb, Belgrade, etc. In terms of my education, I'm from this territory. If there's a different style and sensibility that sets me apart from Serbian or Yugoslav literature, one might call it this Central European complex. I find that I am a Central European writer to the core, but it's hard to define, beyond what I've said, what that means to me and where it comes from.<sup>27</sup>

It is perhaps in this sense, more than any other, that one would need to question the notion that the notorious plagiarism accusations that were directed at Kiš following the publication of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) - and which still continue to frame his work in one form or another nearly three decades after his death (at least in Serbia) – can be understood to have a purely literary rationale; what continues to underpin such criticism is, rather, a specifically political

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<sup>26</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, On Maurice Blanchot, 'A Conversation with André Dalmas' (1971) in *Proper Names*, (1996), translation Michael B. Smith, The Athlone Press, London, p.154.

<sup>27</sup> From the interview 'Ironic Lyricism' (1986) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.257. See also in *Homo Poeticus*, 'I Don't Believe in a Writer's Fantasy', p.269.

dimension, from the perspective of which Kiš's Central European-*ism*, and his openness towards a more cosmopolitan society, is perceived as deeply problematic (even today).<sup>28</sup> In the story 'The Stateless One', the depiction of a relation between the outsider and literature - as the space of a community of those without community (as Blanchot famously put it) - becomes not only a homage to his 'hero' Horváth but also a cenotaph to his life, whereby the narration itself allegorically houses the fragments of his biography as both a place of belonging but, also, a kind of point of homelessness. As the last fragment of the story, 26, testifies:

You, dear sirs, would like for me to show you the house in which I was born? But my mother gave birth in the hospital at Fiume, and that building has been destroyed. And you won't manage to put up a memorial plaque on my house, because it has probably been torn down, too. Alternately, you'd have to hang three or four plaques with my name on them: in various cities and various countries, but in this I could not be of assistance to you either, because I don't know in which house I grew up; I no longer recall where I lived during my childhood; I barely even know anymore what language I spoke. What I do remember are images: swaying palms and oleander somewhere by the sea, the Danube flowing along, dark green, next to pastureland, and a counting rhyme: *eeny, meeny, miny, moe...*<sup>29</sup>

This passage highlights a quintessential aspect of Kiš's poetics, which he himself considered to be *de facto* Central European: 'a consciousness of the work that does not destroy its spontaneity, a careful balance between ironic pathos and

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<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Kiš's interview from 1989, 'Dobro Nameštene Zamke' in Kiš, Danilo, *Gorki talog iskustva* [Bitter Remnant of Experience] (1990), Bigz, Skz, Narodna Knjiga, Beograd, p.270. John K. Cox, for instance, points out that one should not ignore the overlapping phenomenon of both nationalistic and communist groups in late Yugoslavia that, as such, among critics, encountered Kiš's work with suspicion. See, for instance, 'Pannonia Imperilled: Why Danilo Kiš Still Matters' in *History*, October 2012, Volume 97, Issue 328, pp.591-608; p.599.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Stateless One' in *The Lute and the Scars*, p.21. In Serbian: 'Vi biste hteli, gospodo, da vam pokažem svoju rodnu kuću? Ali moja se majka porodila u bolnici u Fijumi, i ta je bolnica već srušena. Nećete uspeti da stavite ploču na moj dom, jer je i on valjda srušen. Ili biste morali staviti tri-četiri ploče sa mojim imenom: u raznim gradovima i raznim državama, ali ni tu vam ne bih mogao pomoći, jer ne znam koja je bila moja rodna kuća, ne sećam se više gde sam živio u detinjstvu, jedva znam na kojem sam jeziku govorio. To što pamtim, jesu slike: zaljuljana palma i oleandri negde kraj nekog mora, Dunav koji teče mutnozelen pored livada, jednu brojanicu: enden-dina, ti-raka, tina...', in *Lauta I Ožiljci*, p.19.

lyrical flight. *Not much. Everything.*<sup>30</sup> Apart from preserving a sense of literary space as precisely a realm of radical pluralism - an unknown speech that addresses the other as the other (radicalising, as it were, the otherness of the other through poetry) - what emerges again in this passage is a specific fascination with childhood ('*eeny, meeny, miny, moe*') as a period in one's life when differences are erased and/or blurred. These images of movement, from different houses and different places, as metaphors for migration, for the condition of being an outsider and for pluralism itself, down to the river and a memory of the innocence of childhood, also open up a metonymic connection in Kiš's oeuvre to the 'shortest novel' 'A and B' that I will discuss in the last section of this chapter.<sup>31</sup> In 'Life, Literature' (1986), Kiš claims: 'Childhood is the time of life when we have the strongest common denominator regardless of race, surroundings, or historical period, when we come closest to the hypothetical biography of all people at all times. Later the common denominator begins to fade, differences make themselves felt, and the specific gains ground over the general.'<sup>32</sup> Viewed in this way then, one may read the last stanza of the fragment cited above, with its allusion to nursery rhyme, as one passage in which Kiš effectively universalises the experience of the stranger.<sup>33</sup> That is to say, taking a biography of the quintessentially Central European intellectual (whose name is changed in the story from Ödön von Horváth, which Miočinović emphasises is the surname that signifies Hungarians living along the border with Croatia, to Egon von Németh, a surname signifying Hungarians living along the border with Germany),<sup>34</sup> and undercutting it with a typical Kišian montage-like, fragmentary style of writing, this short story takes the form, arguably, of a 'novel' about the universality of homelessness itself, and about literature as the only abode (or, rather, absence of the abode) in which the stranger can feel paradoxically 'at home', i.e. the only place where 'the spectral analysis of blood'<sup>35</sup> is abolished.

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<sup>30</sup> 'Variations on Central European Themes', p.111. (My emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> Kiš here also relates childhood to Koestler's and Freud's notion of an 'oceanic feeling', as a feeling of religiosity *without* God.

<sup>32</sup> 'Life, Literature' (1986) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.233.

<sup>33</sup> Both Critchley and Leslie Hill claim in their work, respectively, that being Jewish is universalised in Levinas and Blanchot.

<sup>34</sup> Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.118.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Stateless One', fragment 14, p.12.

It is this I want to propose that suggests a comparison with Blanchot's story *The Idyll* (1936), which similarly underlines the *doubled* aspect of the notion of the stranger within the narration, not only in regard to the relation between the protagonist Aleksander Akim and the city, but also insofar as the reader remains a stranger in relation to the narration itself.<sup>36</sup> In *The Idyll*, the story gradually stages what it presents as the paradoxical condition of freedom for Akim: in order to gain more sense of freedom in the Home he must become less of a stranger/more familiar, accepting the rules and customs of the Home; on the other hand, the more he wishes to comply the less free he feels. In addition, his gradual refusal to comply with the rules of the Home result in violence towards him and, eventually death. Apart from the obvious allegory of writing whereby the stranger is the reader unable to grasp the story - which has an ethical significance for Blanchot's entire theoretical work, although Blanchot refuses, as we have seen, to term this an 'ethics' as such<sup>37</sup> - *The Idyll* addresses a political concern regarding the nature of democracy. That is to say, what Blanchot radically maintains within the story is a kind of permanent disjuncture between the figure of the stranger and the idea of community: only a community that accepts the stranger as a stranger can be a truly democratic community. The condition of exile for Blanchot is, therefore, both negative and affirmative; first, it is negative because the outsider is not permitted to remain an outsider in a community, but second, paradoxically, the outsider does not have a choice but to be an outsider,<sup>38</sup> which instantiates a kind of permanent appeal for any (future) democracy. It is for this reason that the space of literature, for Blanchot, also constitutes an unusual space of democracy in the relation it establishes to the figure of the stranger, in particular as the exposure to the alterity of dying. (Significantly, towards the end of Blanchot's story Akim dies, or rather, his exile is radicalised even more by reducing him to a pair of gazing eyes). The 'idyll' of a society represented in the story thus takes on an ironic tone - considering that the stranger dies - at least on my reading.

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<sup>36</sup> In addition, the story itself remains 'a stranger to itself'. See 'After the Fact', p.493.

<sup>37</sup> As Leslie Hill elaborates on this, Blanchot's refusal of the term 'ethics' is not necessary from Levinas's position, considering that, for Levinas, 'ethics' is precisely related to *untrue*, as it were, since 'true' is related to being. See Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p. 162.

<sup>38</sup> In 'After the Fact', regarding *The Idyll* and the exile, Blanchot claims: 'Exile is neither psychological nor ontological. The exile cannot accommodate himself to his condition, nor to renouncing it, nor to turning exile into a mode of residence'. In *Maurice Blanchot: The Station Hill Reader* (1999), translated Lydia Davis, edited George Quasha, Station Hill Press, Station Hill, Barrytown Ltd., p.492.

In 'After the Fact', published in 1983 in English,<sup>39</sup> in which Blanchot identifies an almost prophetic aspect to *The Idyll*, written *before* the advent of the Shoah, he also re-addresses the idea that both history and literature are open to interpretations and ambivalence.<sup>40</sup> However, bearing in mind that Blanchot, whilst addressing the figure of the stranger from *The Idyll*, also announces that 'no matter when it is written, every story from now on will be from *before* Auschwitz',<sup>41</sup> he simultaneously re-invokes the urgency of his plea for a writing to enact a responsibility for the other and to register the *absence* of death of the other as the (only) community: 'It is the dying which, though unsharable I have in *common* with all.'<sup>42</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that in 'After the Fact' Blanchot also mentions the Gulag along with Auschwitz, because, like Levinas, and most importantly for this thesis, Kiš himself, his work critically interrogates not only any form of totalitarianism but also any form of totality (understood as a form of power).<sup>43</sup>

Blanchot's work places the suffering of the other as a priority in relation to the suffering of the self, creating thereby a strong kinship with Levinas's doctrine on ethics, as I have already noted. Responding to the ethical exigency within writing (literature), in particular after events such as the Shoah, the Gulag and Hiroshima, Blanchot's 'theory' of literature and/or writing is closely related to the question of responsibility in writing and the demand posed by the death of the other 'as the only death that concerns me' which, accordingly, opens up within the self 'an openness of a community' or rather of a community formed around the *impossibility* of a community.<sup>44</sup> The question of responsibility, for Blanchot, as that without which there is no community, is (by contrast to Levinas) profoundly permeated by his own atheism, on the one hand, and a kind of *dis*-individuation or

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<sup>39</sup> In French in 1983.

<sup>40</sup> 'After the Fact', p.493.

<sup>41</sup> 'After the Fact', p.495. Alluding to Adorno's much-cited dictum on poetry after Auschwitz, Blanchot here asserts that writing is ineluctably necessary testimony of that event by way of forgetting. Thus, for both Adorno and Blanchot, Auschwitz opens a crisis of narration.

<sup>42</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *The Writing of the Disaster*, new edition, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, p.23. (My emphasis).

<sup>43</sup> Although recent works on Kiš - for instance Tatjana Jukić and John K. Cox - do acknowledge that Kiš's equation of fascism and Stalinism stems from his personal ethics, there is a sentiment, at least on my reading, that such an equation is perhaps radical. I have addressed their concerns in the introduction.

<sup>44</sup> Blanchot, Maurice, *The Unavowable Community* (1988), translation Pierre Joris, Station Hill Press, Barrytown, New York, p.9.

anonymity consequent upon suffering, on the other, which Blanchot terms 'affliction' and 'anthropomorphism' respectively.<sup>45</sup> What this means for Blanchot is that, akin to Kiš, the Nietzschean 'death of God' places the subject in the position of being the sole carrier of a burden and responsibility without recourse to theodicy. At the same time, according to Blanchot, the 'disappearance' of man within the 'anonymous community' has always occurred by way of 'affliction', as a profound suffering for the other and for the fact that it is 'man' himself that is the source of all human misery.<sup>46</sup> This means that responsibility in suffering for the other is always in the *now*, as an incomplete task and relation, which introduces a kind of alterity within the self that one could term a form of *homelessness*, i.e. not being at home within the self as 'dwelling'. (A key term for later Heidegger, 'dwelling' might, of course, also be translated by the Greek word *ethos*; this opens a further question with regard to how we are to understand the aporetic relation between being and ethics, dwelling and homelessness, as a condition of the ethical relation with an *other* being.) This accordingly means that, for Blanchot, as well as for Levinas and Kiš, essentially, there can be no ethics without a homelessness within being.

In *The Unavowable Community* – divided into two parts, the first one being the 'negative community', a response to Jean Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1986) and Bataille's *Acéphale*, and the second one entitled the 'community of lovers' – it is not surprising, therefore, that Blanchot emphasises the paradoxical necessity to acknowledge the mortality of 'another's death' as a kind of permanent task from which politics is not exempt. From this emerge two important issues. First, this 'acknowledgement' of the death of the other - which thereby, 'acknowledges' Blanchot's understanding of a community<sup>47</sup> - is *paradoxical* precisely because it is founded upon that which has no ground, foundation or power, in so far as death is here understood as impossibility and absence,<sup>48</sup> as something that one cannot *avow* as a stable ontological presence, but, rather, as that which is experienced as a neutral relation of radical passivity

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<sup>45</sup> See 'The Limit-Experience' in Blanchot, Maurice, *The Infinite Conversation*, (1993), translation Susan Hanson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, pp.131-134.

<sup>46</sup> 'The Limit-Experience', pp.131-134.

<sup>47</sup> *Unavowable Community*, p.56.

<sup>48</sup> This is something which I discussed in chapter one and have addressed throughout this thesis.



and alterity within the self, consequent upon suffering for the other. Second, this relation of ethical exigency always already carries a political ‘meaning’ (as Blanchot claims at the end of the book) considering that it addresses the future in order that the destructive events of the past are not repeated.<sup>49</sup> Blanchot’s understanding of the ‘community’ – and here he is in agreement with Nancy’s own<sup>50</sup> – is a community of *asymmetrical* relation with the other in dying; hence, it is a community relating to ‘birth and death’ as ‘first and last event’<sup>51</sup> in *everyone* and, as such, relating to the intertwining of *Tanatos* and *Eros* as the infinite relation of an eschatology that never ends.

Taking into consideration such an understanding of community, it therefore becomes possible to acknowledge a kind of kinship between Blanchot’s and Kiš’s oeuvres in this respect. This is especially relevant, I think, in seeking to make sense of Kiš’s obsessive deployment of, for example, condensed encyclopaedic elements within his novels, where, as the writer of biographies and totalitarianism, the events of ‘birth’ and ‘death’ relate together different human ‘fates’ within a collective whole that, nonetheless, always goes *beyond* totality. If all of Kiš’s texts testify to this, it is in this way that his poetics thereby establishes a community of dying wherein suffering is not necessarily redeemed but rather appears to be an essential aspect of an ethical relation without which there can be neither a ‘true’ community nor an affirmation of life itself.

## 2. Levinas and Kiš: Suffering as ‘a Duty Beyond All Debt’

*A responsibility such that everything in me is debt and donation and such that my being-there is the ultimate being-there where the creditors find the debtor?*  
– Levinas<sup>52</sup>

*Then the thought flashed abruptly through his mind, like an electric shock extending deep into his core, that he had not paid off his debts.* – Kiš<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See Hill, Leslie, *Blanchot Extreme Contemporary*, (1997), Routledge, London, p.196, p.200. Here Leslie Hill discusses in detail the difference between Nancy’s ‘inoperative’ notion of a community and Blanchot’s ‘unavowable’ community.

<sup>50</sup> *Unavowable Community*, p.11.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p.10.

<sup>52</sup> ‘God and Philosophy’, Chapter 10, in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (1987), translation Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, p.169.

<sup>53</sup> ‘The Debt’ (1986) in Kiš, Danilo, *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), preface Adam Thirlwell, translation John K. Cox, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, Dublin, London, p.85.

In light of what has been discussed thus far - the Central European theme, the figure of the stranger/outsider, images of homelessness and community - it is important here to give an overview of Levinas's understanding of suffering in order to demonstrate the strong kinship I am claiming that this has with Kiš's story *The Debt* (1986) and, indeed, with aspects of Kiš's entire literary opus. Although some of Levinas's crucial arguments regarding the ethical relation and the phenomenology of suffering have already been discussed in the thesis (for instance, the hierarchical primacy of the suffering of the other in relation to me rather than my *own* suffering),<sup>54</sup> in what follows they will be addressed specifically in relation to the conception of an unrequited *debt*, as this is articulated in Levinas's work, and of homelessness as what the latter defines as the 'communication' of responsibility in dying.

Levinas's doctrine of ethics aims towards a reevaluation of a sense of the subject's freedom (as a critique of being) by placing an enormous demand on the subject. Within this demand, the subject's freedom is constantly challenged and questioned by *me* within the self by the other and, as such, it is neither free nor the priority in Levinas's terms: the subject is constantly *subjected* to justify his/her right to be. This is, however, necessary for Levinas, in particular after an event such as the Shoah, as a condition of addressing the problem of nihilism not in view of some false humanism but precisely by placing the subject at the centre of his/her freedom wherein simultaneously, and paradoxically, their existence is challenged by the other as an enormous responsibility. This does not imply that Levinas's discourse concerning ethics can be understood simply as either theology, moralism, or even a strange form of masochism. As Jill Stauffer, in her essay on Nietzsche and Levinas 'The Imperfect', puts it: 'The subject given to us by Levinas is not a saint or a masochist and hasn't lost what liberalism names its human

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<sup>54</sup> In addition, the importance of the 'human skin' and the 'body' in Levinas, as a phenomenological passage to the ethical language could be deployed as the *ethical* in regard to Kiš's obsession with the 'body' as a metonymic relation to totality and as an *aporia* between life and text. That would, however, require a separate project, outside the scope of this thesis. For the relation between the 'body' as a metonymy itself of the *political* in Kiš's prose, see Jukić, Tatjana, 'Plus d'un: Narrative Collectives in Danilo Kiš'.

status, wherein it is owed rights much as it grants them'.<sup>55</sup> In fact, it is through the suffering *for* the other that the source of all *transcendence as questioning*<sup>56</sup> emerges, whereby both the limit and limitlessness of the self are constantly challenged by the other who individuates me in my separation: 'To transcend oneself, to leave one's home to the point of leaving oneself, is to substitute oneself for another. It is, in my bearing of myself, not to conduct myself well, but by my unicity as a unique being to expiate for the other.'<sup>57</sup> In this sense, any discourse of the ethical relation is always a 'personal' (or, better, 'singular') affair, i.e. not something one can apply to others as a norm, or, say, a subject for preaching.<sup>58</sup>

According to Levinas, there is an intertwined relation between suffering, death, exile and homelessness as a structure of the subjectivity-for-the-other. Not only is the death of the other that which puts my own existence into question as my responsibility for his/her death but also, tautologically, it is because of his/her death as the 'first' death that I have an *a priori* relation to mortality: 'It is the death of the other for which I am responsible, to the point of including myself in this death. This is perhaps shown in the more acceptable proposition: "I am responsible for the other insofar as he is mortal". The death of the other: therein lies the first death'.<sup>59</sup> For Levinas, the death of the other as 'a death without experience and yet dreadful'<sup>60</sup> is, therefore, a never-ending (or always beginning) *misadventure* of the self, an emotional departure from the ego that is being *misplaced* as the other by the other for whom there is *no measure* of my responsibility. This 'no measure', 'beyond measure', 'debt' or 'beyond debt', as an *unintentional* affectivity that does not permit a return and recovery of the self, is precisely a condition *par excellence* of the ethical relation. As such in these terms, for Levinas, there can be no ethics without a profound sense of homelessness

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<sup>55</sup> See Stauffer Jill, 'The Imperfect: Levinas, Nietzsche, and the Autonomous Subject', in *Nietzsche and Levinas: 'After the Death of a Certain God'* (2009), edited by Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo, Columbia University Press, New York. See in particular the footnote six regarding freedom and responsibility in Levinas, p.47; 33-47.

<sup>56</sup> Here 'questioning' should be considered in terms of being both a host of and hostage by the other who introduces the pluralism of the self.

<sup>57</sup> *Otherwise Than Being*, p.182.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.47. Levinas, also claims: 'But to say that the other has to sacrifice himself to the others would be to preach human sacrifice.' In *Otherwise Than Being*, p.126.

<sup>59</sup> Lecture 'Being-Toward-Death as the Origin of Time', Friday, January 9, 1976, p.43 in *God, Death and Time* (2000), translation Bettina Bergo, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, Lecture 'Initial Questions', Friday, November 7, 1975, p.10.

within the self, as a breaking up or interruption of being. In fact, it is because of the latter that Levinas deploys an economic vocabulary within so many of his writings, precisely as a challenge to everything that re-presents 'being': interest, ego, utility, home, security, etc. For instance, towards the end of *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas famously claims that 'subjectivity is not here aroused by the mysterious housekeeping of being's essence'.<sup>61</sup> This is a direct critique of Heidegger's notion of being – and of the later Heidegger's claim that 'language is a house of being' – and implies that the Levinasian 'saying' as communication is found, by contrast, in the destitution and vulnerability of the homeless subject.

Although such 'economic' terms permeate Levinas's entire *oeuvre*, in particular *Otherwise Than Being* as an ethical 'performative disruption of the language of ontology',<sup>62</sup> as Critchley claims, I would like to refer here to a passage from Levinas's text 'God and Philosophy' (1975) which underlines this point most clearly:

This subject unreplaceable for the responsibility assigned to him finds in that very fact a new identity. But in extracting me from the concept of the ego, the fission of the subject is a growth of obligation in proportion as obedience grows, the augmentation of guilt that comes with the augmentation of holiness, the increase of distance proportionate to the approach. Here there is no rest for the self sheltered in its form, in its ego-concept! There are no conditions, not even those of servitude. There is an incessant solicitude for solicitude, the extreme of passivity in responsibility for the responsibility of the other. Thus proximity is never close enough; as responsible, I am never finished with emptying myself of myself. There is infinite increase in this exhausting of oneself, in which the subject is not simply an awareness of this expenditure, but is its locus and event and, so to speak, its goodness. The *glory of a long desire!*<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Otherwise Than Being*, p.184.

<sup>62</sup> See Critchley's 'Introduction' to Levinas in Levinas, Emmanuel, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (2004), edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> 'God and Philosophy', Chapter 10, in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (1987), translation Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, p.169.

The 'never being finished with emptying myself of myself' and 'an infinite increase in this exhausting of oneself', suggests, in this way, an idea of a kind of debt beyond measure for which I am subjected to homelessness, destitution, vulnerability and a break from everything secure within me that I could hold onto as my own.<sup>64</sup> This, of course, is closely related to Levinas's critique of the Western 'metaphysical' tradition as a whole - or of what he terms, on occasion, a 'bourgeois morality' - as a critique of totality understood as an *egology* where 'being', at home with itself, is the source of all violence. (This crucial aspect to Levinas's thought has been touched upon throughout this thesis.) What emerges from this is a kind of Dionysian chaos of the self where, as John Drabinski notices, the 'collapse of what was the foundational'<sup>65</sup> never repairs itself. Drabinski argues instead that, for subjectivity itself, understood as a recurring 'emptying of oneself', strictly speaking, there can be no redemption since the recurring destitution never really ends. The paradox, however, lies in the idea that this profound sense of homelessness is precisely life affirming because, although one is left without security or a tradition to hold on to, the future though uncertain and deferred is unavoidably *incumbent on me*, i.e. without recourse to God to decide *for me*. It is this that constitutes a kind of silent 'saying', as Levinas calls it, a kind of primordial *communication* derived from uncertainty of the self within this home-less, nomadic site. As Levinas puts it: 'Communication is an adventure of a subjectivity, different from that which is dominated by the concern to recover itself, different from that of coinciding in consciousness; it will involve uncertainty.'<sup>66</sup> It is this burden for the other and his/her death that signifies the beginning of a community for Levinas.<sup>67</sup>

It is this Levinasian account of *debt* that I want to argue throws some productive light upon Kiš's story 'Dug' ('The Debt'). As I remarked earlier in this thesis, juxtaposing Levinas's account of the ethical relation with Kiš's poetics can be, at times, challenging. This is not so much, I think, because their approaches to, say,

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<sup>64</sup> Levinas sometimes claims that there is precisely *no payable* debt to the relation to the other since it is *beyond* measure; insofar as to claim there is debt toward the other is almost to give it a finite, completing character, as it were. However, one could still claim there is debt, as Levinas, again, often does, but in such a way that this debt is always already impossible to pay and henceforth impossible to give a possibility of return to the self.

<sup>65</sup> See John Drabinski's 'Beginning's Abyss: On Solitude in Nietzsche and Levinas' in *Nietzsche and Levinas: 'After the Death of a Certain God'*, p.143; pp.134-148.

<sup>66</sup> *Otherwise Than Being*, p.120.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p.87. 'The community with him begins in my obligation to him'.

political questions can often seem quite different - for instance, Kiš would no doubt have rejected Levinas's apparent eurocentrism in the eighties, in the same way that he would evidently have rejected Blanchot's communism in the post-war era and his politics of the right in the thirties<sup>68</sup> - but precisely because some of Levinas's descriptions are so similar to those of Kiš. This, in turn, means that it often appears that many aspects of Levinas's thought regarding ethics are *doubled*, as it were, in Kiš's prose. The story 'The Debt' is one of those examples. Consider, for instance, this quote from Levinas, where he speaks of the irreplaceability of the I [*Moi*] induced by *me* [*moi*] in terms of a responsibility 'beyond measure' in relation to another's death: 'This is a nonknowledge that translates into experience through my ignorance of the day of my death, an ignorance by virtue of which the "me"[*moi*] writes checks on an empty account, as if he had eternity before him. In this respect, this same ignorance and this carelessness must not be interpreted as a diversion or as falling into decadence.'<sup>69</sup> Kiš's story 'The Debt' centres *literally* around this idea of 'writing checks on an empty account' by a great writer on his deathbed, wherein Kiš both underlines the infinite aspect of debt as an unintentional affectivity in relation to the other, and opens up, consequently, an idea of a (absent) community in dying.

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<sup>68</sup> This thesis has attempted to bridge together the philosophical pronouncements on ethics by both Levinas and Blanchot with Kiš's poetics. Considering that neither Levinas nor Blanchot had betrayed the ethical in their work, at least on my reading of them, their political pronouncements were never fully discussed in this project. It is, however, worthwhile mentioning here that Kiš firmly opposed eurocentrism (which was, for him, another form of strong identity thinking equivalent to nationalism or even neo-colonialism) and it is in this light that he also underlined the importance of the *Weltliteratur* in the original Goethean sense (which stemmed precisely as a voice against nationalism in Germany), as opposed to minor literature or a literary 'ghetto-ism' as he liked to call it. See, for instance, Kiš's essay 'Protiv Duha Evrocentrizma' (1978) [Against the Spirit of Eurocentrism] where he precisely justifies the importance of the continuation of world literature and the task of 'minority' literatures to be included not by way of political correctness, as it were, but rather, by setting up literary standards worthy of their inclusion. In *Varia*: Danilo Kiš, priredila Mirjana Miočinović (2007), Prosveta, Beograd i Budućnost, Novi Sad, pp. 513-515.

<sup>69</sup> In Lecture 'The Death of the Other [*D'Autrui*] and My Own', Friday, November 21, 1975, in *God, Death and Time* (2000), p.21. In addition, regarding the 'tripartite' structure of subjectivity in Levinas, Jill Stauffer summarises it perfectly in her essay on Nietzsche and Levinas 'The Imperfect': 'the self (*soi*) is affected by an ego (*le Moi*) and also by "me" (*moi*), the part of the self we might call prepolitical. This *moi* senses the demand of an other and thus is pressed by a responsibility it never chose. Fleeing into itself (*soi*) in an attempt to evade the demands of responsibility, *moi* finds *le Moi*, and disturbs its tranquillity. This movement of "me" into the self, where it encounters the ego, fractures or interrupts the sovereignty that the ego formerly thought it possessed. One might say that *le Moi* thought it was all of *soi* until *moi* came along to trouble the seamlessness of that narrative.' In *Nietzsche and Levinas: 'After the Death of a Certain God'* (2009), p.41.

In the 'general notes' to the publication of the last collection of the stories *The Lute and the Scars* (published in Serbian in 1994), Mirjana Miočinović suggests 1986 as the year in which the story 'The Debt' was written. This year is mainly attributed to its genesis for two reasons. The title of the story was never seen in any of the seven tables of contents for the *Encyclopaedia of the Dead* (unlike the five other stories in this last collection) which indicates that it was written after 1983. Furthermore, Miočinović argues that, considering that in 1986 Kiš was writing the foreword to the French edition of *Gospođica* [*The Woman from Sarajevo*] by the Yugoslav novelist and 1961 Nobel Prize winner for literature, Ivo Andrić (who was one of Kiš's 'closest relatives' on his 'literary family tree'),<sup>70</sup> it is most likely that this induced an idea of paying homage to Andrić by way of a story. What is also important to mention here is that the end of 1986 was the time when Kiš's lung cancer was finally diagnosed and, as Miočinović goes on to argue, the *unfinished* aspect of this story precisely implies even more strongly that its genesis was that same year.<sup>71</sup> Considering that the entire text is a kind of stream of consciousness of a dying man in a hospital bed, a dying man who is the 'debtor' of the title, the story also becomes the *doubled* incarnation of a deathbed, where the *other* dying man is Kiš himself.<sup>72</sup> In fact, as Miočinović points out, Kiš, who asserted that Andrić was a 'moralist', in this story emphasises his own debts here, as it were, which are carefully construed in the story itself as a 'double portrait' – 'the portrait and the vase', as Miočinović puts it.<sup>73</sup> This double portrait of 'portrait' and the 'vase' is, arguably, one of Kiš's most important leitmotifs, for it is at the beginning of *Hourglass* (1973) that such a relation is fully diagnosed and/or incarnated as a form of *infinity*. In particular, in that novel, Kiš's *clepsydra* becomes an infinite relation of the time of dying not only between E.S. (based on Kiš's father) and the writer (son) but, in addition, between the writer and the reader. In the story 'The Debt', however, I would also argue that Kiš precisely underlines more prominently, so to speak, the difference between the morality and ethics of the ethical relation

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<sup>70</sup> See Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), written by Mirjana Miočinović, translation John K. Cox, pp.128-129.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Regarding Kiš's biography, it is, perhaps, worth mentioning here that his final will to be buried with Orthodox Christian rites (which many different groups used against him for different reasons) is not that much of an act of Pascal's wager in relation to existence of God, but more perhaps Kiš's attempt to return his own debt: his parents baptised him when he was five years old into the Orthodox church, which saved his life.

<sup>73</sup> See Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.129.

with the emphasis placed on *unintentionality*; although this differentiation of the two is, of course, always noticeable in his prose which is, as we have seen throughout this thesis, the core element of the ethical as Levinas defines it, since it implies a relation beyond cognition/comprehension. After all, it is Levinas who claims and repeats the mantra that 'human esse' is not *conatus essendi* but 'disinterestedness', 'adieu' and a 'hostage of the other'.<sup>74</sup>

Apart from the obvious knowledge of Andrić's life and his work (which influenced Kiš's poetical impetus enormously, along with many other writers/thinkers), Miočinović claims that Kiš found the information regarding the people mentioned in 'The Debt' in Miroslav Karaulac's book *Rani Andrić* (1980) [*Early Andrić*]. As she puts it: 'singling them out from the abundance of persons who come up in Karaulac's study, he transformed them into character-paradigms via a process of extreme fictional compression, that essential hallmark of his prose.'<sup>75</sup> Since almost the entire story is literally the chanting of the repayment of debt that the protagonist wishes to return to those who affected and helped form his life, I shall only quote here briefly a few short passages. Firstly, the ineliminable religiosity of the co-relation between people, as being essentially a relation *in dying*, is incorporated here, in a typically Kišian manner, by way of defamiliarisation, or through metaphor. Specifically, the materialised idea of the religiosity of a relation in death is here expressed in terms of a relation between the drops from the bottle that are dripping into the tube of the patient and a 'rosary':

And just as one drop was flowing down along the clear piece of tubing toward his body, the next drop had already begun to blossom. The sick man lay observing these drops. They served as a kind of rosary...[text interrupted] The idea came to him, struck a part of his consciousness, that the hour of his death was drawing near.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Levinas claims: 'Intentionality is not secret of the human. The human *esse*, or existing is not a *conatus*, but disinterestedness and *adieu*'. And furthermore: 'The Human *esse* is not primordially *conatus* but hostage, a hostage of the other.' In *God, Death and Time* (2000), 'What Do We Know About Death?', Friday, November 14, 1975, and 'The Death of the Other [*D'Autrui*] and My Own', Friday, November 21, 1975, respectively, p.15, p.21.

<sup>75</sup> See Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.129.

<sup>76</sup> 'The Debt', in *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.83. In Serbian: 'I taman dok bi jedna klizala niz providnu cev ka njegovom organizmu, dotle bi već druga počela da pupi. Bolesnik je gledao u te kapi. One su mu



The word 'rosary' is in Serbian morphologically related to the word 'number' (in Serbian 'rosary' is *brojanica*; number is *broj*), which thus preserves the ambivalence concerning the notion of debt that the story explores. (The protagonist soon after this passage quoted above begins to list people to whom he wishes to pay back his debt.) In doing so, it also preserves the intertwining of debt and religiosity in the imagery of the story - with each *numbering* of a name/person being like a string of prayer (beads) for the other. In addition, it also provides a fine example of allegorical writing that underlines the very infinity of this relation and/or the (im)possibility of debt in dying, wherein each drop as a drip (like beads) measures always one step closer towards that final *adieu* that is always only a beginning of a relation: 'and just as one drop was flowing down along the clear piece of tubing toward his body, the next drop had already begun to blossom.' Here the infinity of this relation between people is not preserved (only) because the story itself is unfinished (although it poignantly highlights human frailty as an omnipresent aspect of Kiš's prose, which, in this collection of stories, is perhaps most emblematically noticeable in 'Jurij Golec' (1982)); instead, it is precisely because the listing itself represents *ad infinitum* (again) the condensation of a condensation of an (im)possibility of debt, insofar as behind every person mentioned by the dying man there is at least another person (i.e. the 'vase') to whom the one mentioned is also indebted.<sup>77</sup>

At the same time, and for precisely the same reason, the singling out of some of these people, paradoxically, emphasises the infinity of this list itself and of those who are not mentioned. Furthermore, the relation between life and literature, the writer and the world, writer as a 'man of flesh and blood'<sup>78</sup> and the writer as 'even

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služile kao neka brojanica. [text interrupted] koja je naglo sinula u njegovoj svesti, u delu njegove svesti, da mu je smrtni čas blizu.' In 'Dug' in *Lauta i Ožiljci* (2011), pp.81-82.

<sup>77</sup> This thus opens a relation of what Levinas's terms 'fraternity' *in* debt and also in terms of Derrida's concept of *plus d'un*. Another work that acknowledges this kind of relation of pluralism that springs to mind would be Wim Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987) [Wings of Desire]. Towards the end of the film, this notion of *plus d'un* is most emblematically expressed with Marion's claim: 'Ich bin zusammen' [literally: 'I am together'], where the adverb 'together'[zusammen] is, arguably, a Levinasian saying that reinforces the infinity *as* the infinity of the other and any another. In addition, the English translation preserves a kind of Levinasian notion of the 'metaphysical desire' of which he speaks in *Totality and Infinity* precisely as the ethical relation of infinity and fraternity in relation to the other.

<sup>78</sup> 'The Debt', p.84.

more of an abstraction',<sup>79</sup> the 'earthly' debts and the 'spiritual ones',<sup>80</sup> the material traces within a writer's prose texts and the *invisible* traces that helped enable the very existence of those prose texts - in other words, the relation between particular and general - are even further intertwined through this 'debt' with which this particular writer, Andrić, weighs himself down: for 'he [the writer] looked at himself with others' eyes and took stock of his life as the others, the strangers, saw it'.<sup>81</sup> Building up thus the 'portrait' of a writer through the relation of debt in dying, Kiš also allegorically attempts to build an *incomplete* portrait of the world as a portrait of a community in dying. I shall briefly quote here selected passages, or stanzas so to speak, as an example of this *debt*, written on the principles of a 'writer-moralist' (Andrić), as Miočinović claims:

To Ajkuna Hreljić, the first person to take my hand and lead me across the bridge: two crowns.<sup>82</sup>

To Draginja Trifković, the school teacher, who taught me my first letters of the alphabet: two crowns.

To Idriz Azizović, nicknamed 'the Arab', who taught me how to listen to the human voice, which can be a musical instrument: two crowns.

To Ljubomir Popović, who taught me kindness, because it isn't enough simply to have a kind heart, and goodness has to be learned like the alphabet: two crowns.

To Milan Gavrilović, who taught me friendship, because friendship also has to be learned like a foreign language: two crowns.

To the waiter in the 'Green Salon' in Krakow, who served me herbal tea the way I like it, and the way the state of my health requires, and who did so gladly and with a smile: two crowns.

To the judge from Split, Jerko Moskovito, who assisted me in regaining my freedom at my trial, and who thereby *demonstrated the degree to which one's personal attitude and courage in hard times are capable of changing that fate*

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<sup>79</sup> The Debt', p.84.

<sup>80</sup> 'The Debt', p.85.

<sup>81</sup> 'The Debt', p.84. In Serbian: 'Gledao je sebe očima drugih i pravio je bilans svog života onako kako ga oni, drugi, neznani, vide', 'Dug', p.83.

<sup>82</sup> She was a domestic help that helped Ivo Andrić get to school and cross the bridge every day as a child. Andrić, who won the Nobel prize for his contribution to literature in 1961 is most famously known for his novel *Na Drini Čuprija* (1945) [The Bridge Over the Drina] that centres metaphorically around this same bridge as a metonymy to historical and political changes that span over four centuries of the town of Višegrad, in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*which cowards believe to be inevitable and pronounce to be fate or historical necessity: two crowns.*<sup>83</sup>

To the young investigating magistrate, a Viennese, who, on the occasion of my arrest in Split, allowed me to send for my personal effects, which had remained behind in my pension; he brought me Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, and that book would end up having a decisive impact on my intellect: two crowns.<sup>84</sup>

Apart from the obvious democratic, egalitarian stance taken by this dying 'writer-moralist', wherein every single person (regardless of their religion, nationality, etc.) listed here *should* receive two crowns for their deeds,<sup>85</sup> regardless of whether it was for making a good cup of tea or for teaching him how to write, and regardless of the fact that some were a part of the writer's life longer than others (some people listed here remain even unknown but they are, nonetheless, remembered for their good deeds), there are a few other important aspects that need to be addressed here. For instance, with the intertwining and opening up of a fluid relation between life and literature – of which an example is, as cited above, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* as the book that influenced the poetics of both Andrić and

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<sup>83</sup> My emphasis. Andrić was imprisoned at the beginning of World War I by the Austrian police in Split and taken to a few prisons, amongst them in Šibenik and Maribor. The emphasised part of the quote is almost a *verbatim* passage from the footnote of Kiš's story 'Dogs and Books' in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* with which Kiš does not only establish a metonymic relation between the story 'The Debt' and 'Dogs and Books' (thereby, consequently, also with *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*). Considering that Kiš was threatened with a prospect of imprisonment after the publication of *A Tomb*, he also asserts here both himself and Andrić not only as writers but also as 'men of flesh and blood'. Most importantly, however, this passage underlines throughout Kiš's *oeuvre* an ethical belief or stance based on a personal experience that precisely gives emphasis to the potency of the courage of an individual to change the course of history without (thereby) any justification for atrocities. See Mirjana Miočinović in Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.132.

<sup>84</sup> This is just a fraction of a long list that spans over five pages and, since they are selectively cited, their pages vary from 86, 88 to 89. In Serbian: 'Ajkuni Hreljić, koja me je prva pvela za ruku preko mosta; dvije krune. Draginji Trifković, učiteljici, koja me učila prvim slovima; dvije krune. Idrizu Azizoviću, 'Arapu', što me je naučio slušati ljudski glas koji može biti instrument; dvije krune. Ljubomiru Popoviću, koji me je naučio dobroti, jer nije dovoljno biti samo dobar u duši; dobrota se uči kao azbuka; dvije krune. Milanu Gavriloviću, koji me naučio drugarstvu, jer i drugarstvo se uči kao strani jezik, dvije krune. Konobaru iz 'Zelenog balona' u Krakovu, što mi je služio *herbati* onako kako ja volim i kako mi je trebalo zbog zdravlja, a da je to činio sa osmijehom i rado; dvije krune. Splitskom sucu Jerku Moskovitu, što mi je na suđenju pomogao da se oslobodim, i time pokazao u kolikoj mjeri lični stav i građanska hrabrost u teškim vremenima mogu da izmijene sudbinu pojedinca, sudbinu koju kukavice smatraju neminovnom i proglašavaju je fatumom i istorijskom nužnošću; dvije krune. Mladom isljedniku, Bečlijci, koji mi je prilikom hapšenja, u Splitu, dozvolio da pošaljem po moje stvari što su mi ostale u pansionu; donio mi je Kjerkegora, *Ili-ili*, i ta će knjiga izvršiti na moj duh uticaj od presudne važnosti; dvije krune.' In 'Dug', in *Lauta i Ožiljci*, pp.84-85, pp.86-87.

<sup>85</sup> In the text itself are listed a few names that would get 'one crown'. However, this does not undermine the democratic relation to the notion of a good deed, considering these debts are 'earthly ones' and they were supposed to be returned from a 'two hundred crown' budget that the writer had. This sentence is omitted in the text. See Miočinović's Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.130.

Kiš - Kiš here does not only expand the excessiveness of the debt assumed only within the 'literary family tree'; in these terms, the chain linking together Kierkegaard and Kiš is linked *via* Andrić as the paradigm of the chain itself that would, as it were, *de facto* include the *absence* of many other writers/thinkers who influenced their work. What this means is that, arguably, Kiš here only *appears* to impose a kind of quasi-totality on the literary genealogy itself, in so far as literature's own meta-textuality from one epoch to another opens a chain of influence between writers *ad infinitum*; this means that, instead, through this infinite chain of debt, Kiš, in fact, affirms that each writer *creates* his or her own literary tradition.<sup>86</sup> However, what is perhaps more important here (and, dare one add, more democratic), is that, with the insertion of *Either/Or* into his text, Kiš underlines the fluid relation between the body of the book and life where the *excessiveness of debt* goes beyond the *visible* traces (e.g. of different writers) to open out onto the anonymous names which, as such, in Levinas's sense, remain *proper* names. This, then, ineluctably asserts the paradox inherent in the process of enumeration itself – the impossibility of totality or *otherwise* than totality. At the same time, the 'vase' itself, as the *other* portrait within this biography *in debt* of a dying man, that Miočinović rightly acknowledges, mirrors Kiš himself as the other who is in debt to Andrić insofar as Kiš himself is not listed *inside* the text. Accordingly, if the 'shortest novel' 'A and B' is a 'universal history of loss', as Thirlwell claims, then, similarly, 'The Debt' is a *universal history of debt* where one is always bound to the other and, through that relation, to all others.

This universal history of debt in 'The Debt' implies, then, a necessarily *recurring* sense of homelessness and alterity within the self, caused without intention by the 'exigency of the other'. As Levinas puts it: 'It is a recurrence to being, a duty becoming a debt and an extreme passivity prior to the tranquillity, still quite

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<sup>86</sup> See also, for instance, Kiš's ironic *formula* of literary reductionism as an effort to build a literary genealogy tree, with the example of Borges. Kiš here asserts a critique of positivism and reductionism whose goal is an absolute knowledge that can never reduce the irreducible so to speak (even though he himself openly spoke of literary influences). In addition, the tone is mostly ironic, given the fact that this essay was written after the accusations of plagiarism in Yugoslavia that started in summer 1976 (amongst such accusations, the influence of Borges was also included in these debates) and so this was perhaps his way of demonstrating the absurdity of any attempt to reduce to its essence all the influences of a writer. This can be originally found in Serbian in *Čas Anatomije* (1978), pp.202-203. In English, in *Homo Poeticus*, pp.70-71.

relative, in the inertia and materiality of things at rest ... This recurrence ... makes one *other* without alienating.<sup>87</sup> As Levinas continues:

This recurrence would be the ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject; prior to all reflection, prior to every positing, an indebtedness before any loan, not assumed, anarchical, subjectivity of a bottomless passivity, made out of assignation, like the echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of this sound. The active source of this passivity is not thematizable. It is the passivity of a trauma, but one that prevents its own representation, a deafening trauma, cutting the thread of consciousness which should have welcomed it in its present, the passivity of being persecuted.<sup>88</sup>

In debt - as 'beyond measure' - one is, then, alienated within the self '*without alienation*', i.e. one's alienation as *ethical* axiology is necessary as the heart of a community in dying, and, this '*indebtedness before any loan*' means that it is always already radically beyond cognition (where subjectivity is understood as affectivity and suffering).

It is mainly for this reason that I have left the final point I want to discuss in Kiš's story 'The Debt' to the end of this section: Kiš's radical differentiation between morality (as a cognitive act or an acting out of the subject) and an exigency of an ethical relation as *unintentional* affectivity (or what Jill Stauffer and Bertina Bergo term, with regard to Levinas's notion of diachrony, 'the *instant* of sensuous disinvestiture of the self').<sup>89</sup> It is with this kind of gesture at the end of the story that Kiš marks his own personal relation to the notion of debt, contrasting it, as it were, with the attempt of the 'writer-moralist' Andrić to repay his own debts. Here, Kiš also sets up a contrast between two different notions of debt through a relation between the writer Andrić and the nurse Olga who takes care of him on his deathbed. On the one hand, the nurse Olga is placed on the list of those whom the writer feels obliged to return his debt to, but without naming how much he owes her: 'To Nurse Olga, who takes care of me, and who puts fresh flowers in my vase

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<sup>87</sup> *Otherwise Than Being*, p.109.

<sup>88</sup> *Otherwise Than Being*, p.111.

<sup>89</sup> Introduction, in *Nietzsche and Levinas: 'After the Death of a Certain God'* (2009), edited by Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo, Columbia University Press, New York, p.5.

every morning and turns me over in my bed with a light but careful touch. And on he went chanting like that ...<sup>90</sup> This scene ends abruptly, with the writer drifting in and out of consciousness during which time he begins new lists, trying to settle his debt on earth. The story ends when at some point he asks the nurse to give him 'two crowns', the exact amount he is 'shy away from settling his debts'. When she finally gives him what she has ('two dinars') his heart stops beating. The story ends with the sentence: "Summon the director quickly", said the doctor. "You, Nurse, you paid the fare for his ride on Charon's ferry".<sup>91</sup> With this last sentence Kiš asserts that for him the ethical relation stems from a kind of non-intentionality; here, the nurse Olga represents the agent of this unintentional aspect of the ethical relation in so far as she is the paradigm of the other or *plus d'un* of debt. At the same time, with this sentence, as an unfinished debt in dying, Kiš thereby makes this story function something like a *universal* history of debt, of the form which I already mentioned. As Levinas puts it: 'and there is no debt in regard to the other, for what is due is unpayable: one is never free of it'.<sup>92</sup>

### 3. Recurrence from A to B: Homelessness Begins at Home

*Paradoxically it is qua alienus – foreigner and other – that man is not alienated. – Levinas<sup>93</sup>*

In his essay 'Beginning's Abyss: On Solitude in Nietzsche and Levinas',<sup>94</sup> John Drabinski juxtaposes Benjamin's famous meditation on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in the 'Theses on the Concept of History' with the conception of subjectivity, and its relation to history, that is to be found in the work of Nietzsche and Levinas. According to Drabinski, Benjamin's interpretation of Klee's painting informs us that

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<sup>90</sup> 'The Debt', p.90. In Serbian: 'Bolničarki Olgi, što me pazi i što mi stavlja u vazu sveže cvijeće svakog jutra a prevrće me na postelji lake ruke i brižno.' In 'Dug', p.88.

<sup>91</sup> 'The Debt', p.93. In Serbian: 'Zovite hitno upravnika,' kaže doktor. 'Vi ste mu, sestro, platili putarinu za Haronovu barku.' In 'Dug', p.90.

<sup>92</sup> Levinas's Lecture 'What Do We Know About Death?', Friday, November 14, 1975, in *God, Death and Time* (2000), p.12.

<sup>93</sup> *Otherwise Than Being*, p.59.

<sup>94</sup> See John Drabinski's 'Beginning's Abyss: On Solitude in Nietzsche and Levinas' in *Nietzsche and Levinas: After the Death of a Certain God*, pp.134-148.

the 'angel sees the "materialism" of history, of loss, corpses as the wreckage of history's catastrophe(s)' and, nevertheless, the angel projects its gaze into the future at the very moment corpses draw him to the past.<sup>95</sup> Drabinski concludes that, according to such vision, the future is not a possibility but, rather, a 'necessity'.<sup>96</sup> He connects this relation to the catastrophic events of history with what is, he suggests, in Nietzsche, the Dionysian aspect and in Levinas, the realm of the ethical: that is, the profound sense of a loss of any foundation. This conception of the relation between the catastrophic repetition of history and an individual's loss of self in the midst of chaos is tangibly felt in Kiš's work.

In my reading of Kiš's *oeuvre*, his prose exposes the reader to the catastrophic events of history in a radically, non-linear narration, as *an other* side of history, but in such a way that, at the same time, Kiš always addresses the future. Throughout this thesis I have placed this crucial aspect of his work alongside Levinas's notion of 'diachrony' precisely as a kind of passage to the phenomenology of the ethical relation, and, in this chapter in particular, I have argued that, for Kiš, as for Levinas and even for Blanchot, there can be no ethics without a profound sense of homelessness *within* the subject. Having considered some of the Central European themes in Kiš's work early on in this chapter, and the similarities between certain elements of his writing and the Levinasian notion of debt, in this last section I want, then, to try to connect together all these aspects in my reading of Kiš's story 'A and B', in order to underline the ways in which it is a relation between suffering and homelessness that provides a means, for Kiš, of addressing the future and the possibility of a community. In addition, the question of the fragment's future, as the new form of writing the novel - mostly emblematic in 'A and B' - will highlight its connection to Blanchot's more general vision of the future of poetry; for Blanchot, what *truly* informs 'historical actuality' as 'the source of all authenticity' is, paradoxically, literature or poetry, the apparent realm of the *nontrue*.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> 'Beginning's Abyss: On Solitude in Nietzsche and Levinas', p.139, p.143.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p.143.

<sup>97</sup> 'The Original Experience' in Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (1982), translation and introduction Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, p.247. In these terms, literature is the counter-companion to history's actuality.

The story 'A and B', like the previously discussed 'The Debt', was written in 1986, the year Kiš was diagnosed with lung cancer in New York. Unlike the rest of the stories from the last collection *The Lute and the Scars*, 'A and B' is a 'finished' piece of writing (Miočinović claims that the text was found in the folder alongside other literary papers ready for the publication).<sup>98</sup> The story is divided into two brief fragments, named A and B, that altogether can fit into three to four pages. For the Serbian publication of *The Lute and the Scars* (*Lauta i Ožiljci*), in respecting the chronological order of the stories that ended up in this collection, Miočinović also succeeds in preserving the metonymic relation between the first story of the publication, 'The Stateless One' (1980) and 'A and B' (1986). Although the metonymic connection between these two stories is not lost in the 2012 English publication, by deciding not to place 'A and B' at the end, there is perhaps a loss of a certain 'symbolic power' accorded to this specific piece for the collection as a whole, considering that 'A and B' – as what should be the last story of the collection - may be said to 'gather together', in some respects, Kiš's entire opus in one literary 'space'. Indeed, it is in this sense that we can perhaps best understand Thirlwell's reading of the story as a 'universal history of loss' in his foreword to this collection, considering that, arguably, it 'represents' a condensation of the metonymic connections between all Kiš's works. For it is in 'A and B' that, I would suggest, the reader can finally encounter in its 'simplest' form what Kiš aimed for his entire life: the writing of an *ideal* book that, for him, would be created of *encyclopaedic entries*, utterly condensed in such a way that it bridges many human destinies as a whole.<sup>99</sup> In this 'story-novel', Kiš connects some of the (Central European) encyclopaedic entries in a way that is almost too bare, as it were. And yet, it is precisely for this reason that the reader enters the realm of his poetry here in its most radically condensed form. Or, as Kiš would put: 'What is a line of poetry other than an attempt, a constantly repeated attempt, to condense the essence of an intuition or feeling into a single sentence, an ideal formula?'<sup>100</sup>

Everything is *there* in 'A and B' and yet, there is very little *inside* the story, which presents, in this sense, the nearest that writing could perhaps get to reaching a

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<sup>98</sup> See Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.133.

<sup>99</sup> I discussed this 'encyclopaedic' obsession and tendency in Kiš throughout this thesis.

<sup>100</sup> From an interview 'Seeking a Place under the Sun for Doubt' (1984) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.200.



'pure chronos', in terms of - to paraphrase Brodsky's reading of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976) – being an *equation of art to human reality*.<sup>101</sup> This is due to the fact that, at least on my reading of Kiš, his writing can be equated to a realm that one would usually attribute to a painting and/or architectural design:<sup>102</sup> in this story-novel, the dialectical relation and/or 'conversation' between the point 'A' and the point 'B', as a thematically construed outside/inside respectively, opens up another dialectical relation (consequent upon the most radical condensation of these encyclopaedic entries), that of an outside/inside between the text itself and the world. For such a minimal piece of writing, the doubling of this dialectical relation exposes the reader to vertiginously infinite possibilities between these elements. At the same time, for a writer who obsessively wrote and dedicated his life to writing biographies of often (but not exclusively) Central European individuals, 'A and B' may also be read as the shortest possible biography: Kiš's own. In this respect, if *Early Sorrows* (1969) and *Garden, ashes* (1965) are, effectively, quasi-Queneauan<sup>103</sup> 'exercises in style' of writing *the same* story, i.e. Kiš's own childhood during World War II, then 'A and B' is the ultimate biography and/or *Bildungsroman* (written with full knowledge of his illness), where the 'theme' of his own experience of childhood is placed at point 'B'. In these terms, together with 'Birth Certificate (A Short Biography)'<sup>104</sup> that Kiš wrote in 1983 in order, arguably, to avoid constant questions from critics regarding the influence of the biographical in his work<sup>105</sup> - and which was, no doubt, written with *irony* (a writer's 'favourite tool' as Kiš would claim) - 'A and B' is, then, also a tracing of the ultimate condensation itself in relation to Kiš's childhood; as if Kiš had finally found the right aesthetic form to address those childhood elements deployed so often in his trilogy by way of a shortest fragment.

<sup>101</sup> See Brodsky's foreword to *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, xvi.

<sup>102</sup> As, for instance, Kiš's claim regarding his trilogy confirms: 'we began with a sketch (*Early Sorrows*), moved on to a drawing (*Garden, ashes*), and came finally to the painting itself (*Hourglass*)'. in *Homo Poeticus*, p.262. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that Kiš was buried in 'Alley of Distinguished Citizens' [Aleja Zaslužnih Građana] in Belgrade, in the same tomb as Petar Lubarda, Stojan Aralica, and Matija Vuković, the first two being famous painters and the latter a sculptor. Without reading too much into it, one could still, nevertheless, consider this to be what Kiš would call 'the treacherous influence of biography'.

<sup>103</sup> Kiš translated, amongst many other French authors, and some of them together with his then wife Miočinović, both, *Exercices de style* (1947) and *Zazie dans le métro* (1959) by Raymond Queneau, in 1964 and 1974, respectively.

<sup>104</sup> This short piece of writing, since 1983, was always printed at the end of Kiš's books. In addition, needless to say, Mark Thomson's *Birth Certificate* (2013) is based on this short piece. It was translated into English for the publication of *Homo Poeticus*, a selection of his essays and interviews, pp.3-5.

<sup>105</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.183.

Both fragments 'A' and 'B' have subtitles that were written in the English language: the subtitle of fragment 'A' being '(*The magical place*)', and of fragment 'B' '(*The worst rathole I visited?*)'. This is due to the fact that, as Miočinović reveals, these two fragments were actually Kiš's responses to a questionnaire for the French magazine *Actuel* that were never published.<sup>106</sup> The fragment 'A' is, as the subtitle already suggests, an outdoor place: Kiš describes *the most magical place*, Kotor, the Montenegrin town in South Europe, his favourite place from childhood that he often visited. The parenthetical part of the first sentence is originally written in French, which the English translation omits.<sup>107</sup> Kiš describes Kotor (*Cattaro*) with an assertion that his father also visited this same place and saw the same views as he did and suggests that if one were to visit this place one would 'acquire an experience of eternity that Koestler called "oceanic feeling."<sup>108</sup> Deploying a kind of allegory of representation, Kiš claims that, whilst admiring this view, one should 'forget everything else, and to observe from this godlike vantage point the meeting of the elements: air, earth, water.'<sup>109</sup> In 'P.S.', however, he goes on to remark a few other things: that his friend, a photographer, once attempted to take a picture of a Soviet cruiser anchored in Kotor but once the pictures were developed it was 'as black as night'.<sup>110</sup> Kiš writes: 'The awareness of eternity, the "oceanic feeling", yielded, independent of any technique of *brouillage*, only blots, red, black, or green, insofar as the senses of hearing, smell, and sight were unavailable during the taking of the photographs.'<sup>111</sup> Finally, he goes on to claim that his father viewed this same scene five years before his disappearance in Auschwitz in 1939, as, significantly, did Freud (from whom the phrase 'oceanic feeling' derives) in 1898.

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<sup>106</sup> Notes to the Original Edition for *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.133. English edition omits the name of the magazine.

<sup>107</sup> In so doing, I think the translation loses what the original version had achieved: the shortest *Bildungsroman* possible, considering that Kiš lived in France. This interwoven part written in French is precisely one of many condensed sentences that assert with little, i.e. with the fragmentation of the fragmentary, the intersection of many elements and human destinies outside of text.

<sup>108</sup> 'A and B', in *The Lute and the Scars* (2012), p.93.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. In Serbian: 'zaboraviti i posmatrati sve iz te božanske perspektive susret elemenata: vazduha, zemlje, vode.', p.92.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. This, of course, is also another reference point to Freud and repression.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. In Serbian: 'Saznanje večnosti 'okeansko čuvstvo' daje na filmskoj traci samo mrlje, nezavisno od tehnike brujača (*brouillage*), crvene, crne ili zelene, ukoliko je prilikom snimanja izostala neka od senzacija: sluha, njuha ili vida.'

The fragment 'B', concerning *the worst rathole I visited?*, is divided into two sections, both relating to the house: *outside* being its 'garden', and *inside* the interior of the house. Unlike fragment 'A', which, although utterly minimal, nevertheless accommodates a few people, all of them from Central Europe (Kiš himself included), fragment 'B' presents a lonely and deserted place. Kiš's *materialist* sensibility is omnipresent even here. With detached tone, he describes the ragged things that are still inside the house ('a shed' in fact): a few chairs, a few beds, a couple of pots and the smell of a thick smoke from 'the kitchen', caused by a pile of 'wet spruce' used for heating. The scene is intercut with the driver's expression of disappointment that he didn't bring the camera with him to take a photo of this place where this writer lived: "Someday there will be a plaque here," the man noted ironically as we were leaving the house. "It will say: HERE LIVED THE YUGOSLAV WRITER DANILO KIŠ FROM 1942 TO 1947."<sup>112</sup> To which Kiš replies: "Fortunately, the house is slated to be torn down", I say.'

Constituted through the dialectical relation established between these two fragments, Kiš had then, in fact, finally succeeded in 'A and B' in doing what he aimed for in the 'novel': 'in its ideal, unattainable, Platonic form, the novel should resemble an encyclopaedic entry or, rather, a series of entries branching out in all directions yet condensed.'<sup>113</sup> In his PhD thesis 'Fictionalised Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe' (2003), which I briefly mentioned earlier, G. J. A. Snel, takes these entries from the fragments 'A and B' – Koestler, Freud, Kiš's father – and concludes that the fragment 'A' represents the *common* destiny of the Central European Jewry; the fragment 'B', on the other hand, is the 'individual experience'.<sup>114</sup> Yet, as I understand it, these *encyclopaedic* entries connect all these human destinies as a 'Central European 'fate', in *both* 'A and B'. Since, as I mentioned already, Kiš essentially wrote his own biography in this text, both 'A' and 'B' dialectically overlay the biographical and the literary as a part of his

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p.97. The original version in Serbian has the year 1947 whilst the English has 1945. Kiš lived in Hungary until 1947. In Serbian: "Ovde će stajati ploča", kaže čovek ironično u času kada smo izašli. „Na njoj će pisati: OVDE JE ŽIVEO JUGOSLOVENSKI KNJIŽEVNIK D.K. OD 1942. DO 1947.", p.93.

<sup>113</sup> From an interview 'Seeking a Place under the Sun for Doubt' (1984) in *Homo Poeticus*, p.201.

<sup>114</sup> Chapter 3 of Snel's thesis. <http://dare.uva.nl/record/1/220521>, p.61. (Last time visited 13, December, 2015).

biography. Thus, for example, in the fragment 'A' one encounters an *ongoing* polemic between Kiš and Koestler with regard to the Soviet camps, i.e. between *Darkness at Noon* (1940) and *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976); at the end of *Darkness at Noon*, Rubashov mentions 'the oceanic state' whilst remembering his childhood, and the novel itself was written whilst Koestler lived in Paris, like Kiš.

In fact, there are many other polemics with other writers to be found in the fragment also, including with Freud's own discussion (and polemic with Romain Rolland) regarding the 'oceanic feeling' in his *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930).<sup>115</sup> Comparing it to the ancient city of Rome as a repressed memory, Freud traces such a feeling back to the toddler state before the development (differentiation) of the ego and, most importantly, describes it as a profound sense of the infant's 'longing for the father'.<sup>116</sup> Freud claims: 'some sufferings that one seeks to expel turn out to be inseparable from the ego in virtue of their internal organs.'<sup>117</sup> At the same time, Freud also claims that this feeling is prolonged long into adulthood due to the anxiety caused by 'Superior power of Fate'.<sup>118</sup> The fact that Kiš mentions Freud further, in relation to his dream about the three Fates<sup>119</sup> (which *confirms* the co-relation not only of Freud in relation to Kotor, but also between dream and reality), requires further analysis. For it is in the dream of the three Fates - essentially a dream of death and dying - with the image of Freud's own childhood and the memory of his mother's dumplings (*Knodl* in German) that Freud relates one of the three Fates, *Pelagie*, to plagiarism and *plagostomi* (sharks). With this so-called 'entry' Kiš silently asserts his own biographical fate, as it were, and the fact that he was accused of plagiarism in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*.

Most importantly, in these two fragments we find condensed Kiš's entire literary opus itself: through the dialectic relation between the fragment A and his father,

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<sup>115</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1962), translation from German and edited by James Strachey, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, pp.11-20.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, p.19.

<sup>117</sup> *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, p.14.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>119</sup> See Freud, Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2010), translation editor James Strachey, Basic Books, New York, Chapter 5 'The Material and Sources of Dreams', pp.187-294; 'B. Infantile Material as a Source of Dreams', pp.211-239, dream of Three Fates, pp.225-229.

and memory of his childhood in fragment B – we have his trilogy; with Freud, Koestler, ‘oceanic feeling’ in fragment A, and the suffering of an individual due to the totalitarian violence of ideology in fragment B, we have *A Tomb*, *Encyclopaedia of the Dead*, and even *Psalm 44* and *The Attic*.

In the fragments ‘A and B’ there is, then, a *condensed* collection of repetitive ‘themes’ in Kiš’s prose: dying, suffering, abandonment, the fate of Central Europe, homelessness and literature as both endless possibility and (simultaneous) impossibility. As well as contrasting, or rather, overlapping this ‘oceanic feeling’ with the horror of existence, the *il y a*, in both fragments, whether as ‘the magical place’ or as a ‘rathole’, Kiš also asserts that it must be experienced, i.e. *lived*. As he puts it: ‘any technique of *brouillage*’, of trying to *reproduce* this experience, will only have achieved the black, blurred and stained picture images of the photographer in fragment ‘A’: the anarchic memory is there but there is no one sole *primary scene*, as it were. This, again, supports his ‘definition’ of what literature *is*: an ‘attempt at a global vision of reality and its simultaneous destruction’.<sup>120</sup> Writing for Kiš is an experience of affectivity *through images*, where in spite of, or precisely because of, the horror and absurdity of existence, one is not exempt from the ethical. In these terms, as regards the ‘oceanic feeling’, that Freud equates with religious experience, the relation of both infinity (father and son) and universal *religiosity* between people is, nevertheless, preserved (thereby opposing both Rolland’s and Freud’s rejection of religiosity *per se*).

It is perhaps precisely because of this aspect of Kiš’s prose that one could argue that a kind of ‘atheist transcendence’ (to use Critchley’s term) permeates Kiš’s work, by way of a profound sense of homelessness and abandonment. It is precisely in abandonment of the self that there can be a *true* community, one that is never avowed but experienced, through the dying of the other, as an affliction, as Blanchot claims. Although Kiš’s fragments echo Blanchot’s sentiment from ‘Reflections on Hell’ that there is ‘a suffering that has lost time altogether’, ‘without end’, that ‘time can no longer redeem’,<sup>121</sup> what these fragments also address is an idea of homelessness as an *a priori* condition in relation to the suffering *for* the

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<sup>120</sup> From ‘Baroque and Truth’ (1988), in *Homo Poeticus*, p.266.

<sup>121</sup> See *Infinite Conversation*, p.172.

other.<sup>122</sup> Referring to the *same* scene that both Kiš's father and Freud saw in Kotor, in 1939 and 1898, respectively, Kiš quietly asserts a Nietzschean notion of the 'eternal return of the same', where the *becoming* itself must be addressed by way of destitution and loss of identity in order, paradoxically, to truly affirm life. In this respect, what is common for a community (to paraphrase Rancière's question) *is* death and dying, even though one is always '*a star unto himself*' - as Kiš puts it - and, dare one say, always different from the others.

The metonymic relation between the first story I analysed here, 'The Stateless One' and the fragment 'B', precisely preserves, in the briefest possible manner, the notion of pluralism, homelessness and the question of a community with the realm of literature. In the former, different houses and plaques reinforce the idea of the outsider and a sense of an identity *beyond nationalism*, whilst in the latter, Kiš's voice proclaiming the demolition of the house is, apart from the obvious reference to homelessness, also an allegory of destruction of art *in art*. What remains as *reliquiae reliquiarum*, through his writing, is a survival, as an acknowledgment of the mortality of the other man. This is, to paraphrase Kiš's own understanding of a Central European poetics, *not much (yet) everything*.

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<sup>122</sup> The novel *Hourglass* (even though it centres on Auschwitz), through the father's letter, addresses the relation between the notion of homelessness and injustice that starts first from home and family.

## Toward a Conclusion: *Between Hope and Hopelessness*

*Do not believe in statistics, figures, or public statements: reality is what the naked eye cannot see.*<sup>1</sup> – Danilo Kiš

When in his 1949 essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society', published later in *Prisms* (1967),<sup>2</sup> Adorno claims that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' - a dictum with which he asserts even an exclusion of the possibility to understand *why* it is 'impossible to write poetry today' - he addresses both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of that crisis of representation engendered *by* Auschwitz. Yet, with this famous and often misinterpreted statement, Adorno in fact does not exclude the possibility of art and poetry itself after this catastrophic event, for the suffering of humankind must be neither forgotten nor justified; instead, he questions *how* it is possible to address these difficult concerns within art in a way that would not permit a restoring of, or reconciling with, the tradition of a culture that is itself responsible, in crucial respects, for the event of Auschwitz. After this event, for Adorno, 'no word' 'has any right unless it underwent a transformation.'<sup>3</sup>

In this thesis I have attempted to address the concerns of post-Auschwitz poetics by looking at the works of the late Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš and by focusing on four closely related issues with regard to *how* literature responds to last century's catastrophes: the 'representation' of death, the responsibility of literature and the writer, the artwork's freedom and the depiction and experience of suffering. Specifically, I wanted to approach Kiš's work from within Levinas's conception of ethics and of totality, read here alongside Blanchot's 'theory' of literature, in order to open up a discussion with regard to the relations between history, commitment, aesthetics and a democracy to-come in modern literature. My main aim was to demonstrate that there is a conception of ethics as aesthetics at the core of Kiš's poetics. This was premised upon Kiš's 'pessimistic' idea that history, as a history of violence, claims to redeem itself through epic narratives of

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<sup>1</sup> See Kiš's 'Advice to a Young Writer' in *Homo Poeticus*, p.122.

<sup>2</sup> 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in Adorno, Theodor W., *Prisms* (1997), translation from German Samuel and Shierry Weber, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p.34. Adorno redefines his claim later on in his essay 'After Auschwitz' in *Negative Dialectics*, p.362.

<sup>3</sup> 'Metaphysics and Culture' in *Negative Dialectics*, p.367.

progress of, in particular, science and technology, and yet, that true redemption is only possible by opening toward the experience of the *other* side of history: that side which belongs to the victims of the Shoah, the Gulag, Hiroshima and so on. The experience of the other side of history is crucial for Kiš's aesthetics – particularly as this is articulated through the form of 'faction' as generative of a literary diachrony of time - precisely in order to address future demands to a 'humanism' understood in terms of what Critchley calls an 'ethics of finitude'. On the whole, as this thesis has tried to demonstrate, for Kiš, it is the relation to the death of the other human that is the most important relation established within a literary space.

My main argument in chapter one was that Kiš's trilogy, as a 'series' of works that deal with the Shoah, are perhaps best understood as the narratives of the 'impossibility' of death; that is, not as narratives that enable a possibility of comprehension of the Shoah, but, rather, which enable an address towards affectivity and a kind of pluralism within subjectivity itself. It is in this light that I sought to place Kiš's literary use of alienating form and a defamiliarised language within the context of what Levinas and Blanchot term the experience of the *il y a* – as that which, naming the horror of existence itself, threatens any stability of comprehension in the form of an absolute truth and knowledge in dealing with the Shoah. I argued that it is the relationship between Blanchot's 'two slopes of literature' that constitute a pseudo-dialectical movement within Kiš's trilogy (and, indeed, across his works in general), continually, and unendingly, interweaving the desire to 'encompass as much as possible of the totality of the world and its phenomena'<sup>4</sup> with the inevitable ruination of any such totality. Consequent upon a work of mourning, and induced by the deployment of both real and apocryphal documents, I tried to demonstrate that Kiš's trilogy instantiates a desire for comprehension and catharsis, a kind of ideal of a possibility of coming to terms with the event itself (the Shoah). This is, I argued, equivalent to Blanchot's 'first slope of literature', as a desire for the book as an absolute aesthetic achievement. However, I also tried to show that this impossibility of achievement of an ideal through writing is consciously asserted in Kiš's trilogy as a kind of permanent scepticism which I equated with Blanchot's 'worklessness'. In Kiš's trilogy, I

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<sup>4</sup> *Homo Poeticus*, p.195.



proposed that this opens up a radical relation of alterity and dying itself, in the example of protagonist Eduard Scham or E.S.

In chapter two I developed further the discussion as regards the literary work's encounter with the *il y a* and the pseudo-dialectical movement of two languages within Kiš's prose. In the first part of the chapter I addressed Kiš's rigorous sense of the writer's responsibility in terms, specifically, of Levinas's notion of eschatology – as an 'immemorial' experience of the past within an instant, in so far as Kiš's documentary approach to writing exposes the reader to the violence of history. The excess of language as a rupture of/within continuous historical narrative, which is I argue a leitmotif in Kiš's prose, was placed along Kiš's pessimistic conception of history understood as a kind of quasi-Nietzschean 'eternal return of the same'. Here I argued that, in a form of metonymic connection spanning across his stories, Kiš presents both religious and political ideology as the same kind of false messianism that is always ultimately destructive of the singularity of individual lives. The body of work discussed included both collections of his short stories, the 1976 *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and the 1983 collection *The Encyclopaedia of the Dead*, read as narratives of infinite eschatology. Levinas's understanding of the other as 'absolutely Other' was used here to elucidate Kiš's own insistence on the 'metaphysical dimension of every human being', with particular reference to the example of Boris Novsky Davidovich, from the story 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich'; here Novsky's own true biography was a missing aspect of a final synthesis of a perfect revolutionary biography. In these terms, as a trace from the past, I argued that Novsky was, for Kiš, that which enabled the narration and also, an erasure of the trace itself through writing.

The third chapter focused primarily on aesthetic theory. Here, I placed the conception of ethics as aesthetics in Kiš's prose alongside the work of Adorno, Blanchot and Rancière, in order to address art's transformative potential in relation to a possibility of redemption of history. In these terms, it was also argued that, for Kiš, literature is both free and unfree in its commitment to the crisis of representation itself. I suggested that Kiš's work could be understood, in the sense, as an 'art of proximity' which is, in Bruns's reading of Levinas, precisely that which accords an ethical dimension to modern art. Here, Kiš's different literary devices, such as enumeration and the 're-materialization' presence of objects from

the past, serve in fact to obfuscate any possibility of a direct access to the real (most importantly, the real of the Shoah), working instead as a kind of poetics of affectivity and mourning. The third part of this chapter returned briefly to Kiš's novel *Hourglass* in order to elaborate upon the important role played by humour and parody in relation to both human finitude and the ethical demand that accompanies mortality. I drew upon Critchley's conception of a 'comic-antiheroic' paradigm in reading Kiš's depiction of the father E.S., while also emphasising both Critchley's and Kiš's arguments that it is humour which permits a bearable relation to death.

In the fourth chapter, I tried to bring together the arguments from previous chapters in seeking to address the crucial question of how to 'respond' to suffering in the literary work. The chapter specifically chose to focus upon Kiš's three posthumously published stories that were published in the collection *The Lute and the Scars* in discussing this. The Central European element in Kiš's prose was placed along Blanchot's story *The Idyll* in order to explore the latter's idea of a literary 'unavowable' community as a space of a true democracy in relation to Kiš's work. I argued that Kiš's story 'The Stateless One' is an example of an ambivalence of literary language, as that which brings about both a sense of belonging and a sense of homelessness within subjectivity itself. The second section was dedicated to Levinas's conception of the 'debt' towards the other, as an ethically insatiable demand made upon subjectivity, in order to argue that Kiš's own story 'The Debt' articulates a similar understanding of the fabric of the ethical; in particular, I argued that it is this which induces an *non-intentionality* on the part of the subject. I wanted to demonstrate how this is crucial not only for Levinas's ethical philosophy but also for Kiš's own creative impetus, free from morality and any form of dogmatism. I decided to leave the last story 'A and B' to the final part of the final chapter for a few important reasons. Not only does this story exemplify why Kiš famously insisted on the potential of condensed prose, as manifested in, for instance, encyclopaedic entries, but it also condenses, specifically, the theme of exile and homelessness that permeates his entire opus. The story, which consists of the two fragments, was argued to be an example of an instantiation of a radically condensed epitaph to the Central European 'fate' with which Kiš connects Freud, Koestler, Kiš's own father, his other protagonists and finally

himself into one condensed point of departure: that of a relation between birth and death. At the same time, I argued that the story brings together the theme of ‘the eternal return of the same’, the violence of history and the question of the possibility of a future democracy to-come with the most important aspect of the ethical relation as Levinas defines it – the subject’s *essential* ‘homelessness’.

In a recent radio seminar,<sup>5</sup> Jasmina Ahmetagić juxtaposes the existentialist philosopher Camus with Kiš the ‘postmodern’ writer, identifying a few areas of common grounds shared by the two writers: their atheism, their passion for justice, their unvarnished recognition of the absurdity of existence and their rigorous insistence on the exclusion of any justification of suffering. With this in mind, I would like instead to end by positioning Kiš, once again, alongside Blanchot’s arguments, analysed in chapter three and four respectively, with regard to that which always conditions the space of literature itself: the question of death of the other human. In recent years, within the Serbian contemporary reception of Kiš’s *oeuvre*, there has begun to emerge a kind of tendency to think that the primacy of *homo poeticus*, which Kiš insisted upon and defended, could no longer be successfully deployed in writing today. However, considering current world politics, which accommodate the rise of new populist and nationalist doctrines, our ethical responsibility to the other human is once again effaced and placed under threat by ideologically-driven violence. Yet, against this, Kiš’s uncompromising insistence on the ineliminable *value* of a singular human life can perhaps still find a voice in literature, even today. For this reason not only can one assert that Kiš’s work is necessary today (as the recent British resurrection of Kiš perhaps suggests)<sup>6</sup> but, in addition, that it is precisely his insistence on poetry as the last refuge against barbarity that makes his work so resonant today. Writing in defence of literature and its ‘original experience’, Blanchot claims that:

the more the world is affirmed as the future and the broad daylight of truth, where everything will have value, bear meaning, where the whole will be achieved under the mastery of man and for his use, the more it seems that

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<sup>5</sup> RTS radio seminar with Jasmina Ahmetagić, ‘Albert Camus and Danilo Kiš’, 27 of April 2016. <http://www.rts.rs/page/radio/sr/story/1466/radio-beograd-3/2295615/predavanje-u-studiju-6--jasmina-ahmetagic.html>. Last visited: 21 September 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Adam Thirlwell’s article ‘Why We Need Danilo Kiš’. The text can be read here: <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/why-we-need-danilo-kis/>. Last time visited: 6 September 2016.

art must descend toward that point where nothing has meaning yet... [it is the artist and the poet that must] call us back to error...to everything we are, all that opens upon earth and in the sky, returns to insignificance, and where what approaches is the nonserious and the nontrue, as if perhaps thence sprang the source of all authenticity.<sup>7</sup>

Kiš would probably have agreed.

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Original Experience' in *The Space of Literature*, p.247.

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