

Laudatio for Mark Thompson, Jan Michalski Prize for Literature 2015

Ladies and gentlemen, my dear Mark Thompson,

For the first time in its history, the Jan Michalski Prize has been awarded to a biography – and with good reason. This is an outstanding biography of an outstanding writer. As you know, biography is a broad church, a genre that is very popular among readers, as it affords them almost voyeuristic glimpses into the destinies of the great and the good. Most biographers are content with documenting the life of their subject in a suitably chronological manner, fitting in as much detail as they can. Other approaches rarely cross their purview and little attention is paid to language and style.

Mark Thompson is wonderfully out of step with his peers. His biography of Danilo Kiš, *Birth Certificate*, is a threefold achievement. Not only does it shed light on Kiš's life and works, but it also paints a profound portrait of his time. The voice that speaks to the reader is by turns that of a gifted storyteller, a literary scholar, and a historian. The book's formal structure is equally ground-breaking – of which more later.

Let me begin with a question that many of you will be asking yourselves. Who is Danilo Kiš, the subject of the biography? Kiš was one of Yugoslavia's foremost men of letters. His multifaceted oeuvre, which explored the Holocaust and Stalin's gulags, would certainly have earned him the Nobel Prize had his lifespan been just a little longer. He was born in 1935 to a Hungarian Jewish father and an Orthodox Montenegrin mother in Subotica on the Serbian-Hungarian border. He spent his early years in Novi Sad, where he was baptised at the age of four. His father Eduard Kiš having narrowly escaped a massacre perpetrated by Hungarian Fascists in January 1942, the family fled to Eduard's home village in south-west Hungary. In 1944 Eduard and some of his relatives were taken to the Zalaegerszeg ghetto, and from there to Auschwitz, where he died.

Danilo Kiš was only nine years old when he was driven out of his childhood garden of Eden. His father's death was the most painful turning point in his life: it turned him into a sceptic and a lifelong restless wanderer. After the war Kiš was repatriated to Montenegro with his mother and sister. He went to high school in Cetinje and then moved to Belgrade to study comparative literature. There he moved in artistic circles, read James Joyce, and wrote his novel *Psalms 44*, swiftly followed by the satirical Bildungsroman *The Attic*. He also began translating Hungarian, Russian, and French poetry. Kiš found his own voice in the autobiographical trilogy *Early Sorrows; Garden, Ashes; and Hourglass*, a poignant memento of childhood lost, his dead father and the disappearance of Mitteleuropa's Jewry.

Kiš's masterpiece *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* explores the horrors of Stalinism. The heroes of the seven stories are Russian, Hungarian, Polish, and Irish revolutionaries, mostly Jewish. As unfortunate idealists, they all meet tragic ends, either being murdered or sent to the gulags. Joseph Brodsky described *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* as "the best book of the post-war period in Europe" and Kiš's art as "more devastating than any statistics". *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* was translated into numerous languages and earned Kiš a far-reaching, albeit short-lived, reputation. In Yugoslavia, however, the work triggered a scandal. The Belgrade civil service saw themselves mirrored in the "Stalinist" practices it described and launched a general broadside against the author, who hit back with the wide-reaching polemical book-length essay *The Anatomy Lesson*. Kiš then turned his back on his homeland, going into exile in Paris, where he wrote the collection *Encyclopedia of the Dead*, his last major work. He died from cancer in 1989.

Kiš's complete works in fourteen volumes include poetry, short stories, novels, plays, and numerous essays on Flaubert, Borges, Nabokov, issues of poetology and the relationship between *Homo politicus* and *Homo poeticus*. As an artist, Kiš was a master of form; as a political thinker, he was terrifyingly lucid, predicting the dangers of nationalism as soon as the early 1970s. He did not live to see the collapse of Yugoslavia and the bloody nationalist conflict that ensued.

I was fortunate enough to know Kiš personally. As translator of some of his works into German, I met him on several occasions. The year he died he came to Zürich, where we read aloud together from his novel *The Hourglass*: an extensive reading-tour through Germany was on his drawing board. Twenty-five years have gone by since then, and I still keenly feel Kiš's absence. With his death, we lost a clear-thinking poetic voice, the voice of an author, who never sought to curry favour or follow ideological or literary trends. He was opinionated, sceptical, completely immune to corruption and highly sensitive – a poet who mistrusted rhymes and preferred to imbue his prose with poetry. He was a complicated man, with a complicated background, living in complicated times. He pitilessly dissected the complication within and around himself, and his work reflects this obsession.

Mark Thompson's biography carefully dissects Kiš's dissection. It does so with uncommon subtlety and sophistication; the result is multifaceted and thoroughly researched. Yet the project was by no means an easy one. Thompson is a professional historian, yet the project demanded considerable skills in psychology, literary scholarship, even literature, together with extensive research in all these fields.

How did Thompson get a handle on Kiš? As he writes in the introduction, "To have a chance of being truthful, a study of Kiš should be experimental, encyclopaedic in style, with a flavour of pastiche." He truly achieved what he set out to do. His guiding thread was *Birth Certificate*, a brief autobiographical text Kiš wrote in Paris in 1983. Each sentence of *Birth Certificate* is explored in a new chapter. For instance, Kiš's sentence "The 'troubling dissimilarity' that Freud calls *Heimlichkeit* was to be my basic literary and metaphysical stimulus" is the pretext for a magnificent essay on Freud that sheds light not only on Kiš's multiple identities, but also on his love of doppelgängers and mirrors as motifs in his oeuvre. These are "deep x-rays", meticulously detailed considerations conducted with magnifying glass in hand – something that is beyond the capacities of most biographers. The difference

is that Thompson does not stubbornly follow chronological order; rather, Kiš's outer and inner lives unfurl like a web with a multitude of strands. A handful of nodal points crop up repeatedly from various points of view that bring them into focus. Thompson also intersperses the web of the biography with seven "interludes" devoted to Kiš's works. Reading the work is an immensely varied and enriching process.

Thompson pays particular attention to the historical background and context not only of Kiš's life, but those of his parents and forebears. He paints a vivid panorama of Mitteleuropa between the two world wars, and more broadly, a detailed portrait of the persecution of the Jews in the region he calls Pannonia. The complex relationship between history and literature is also explored in thorough detail. As no less a figure than Adam Zagajewski has written, "Mark Thompson's mastery of this field is breathtaking".

It should also be recorded that Thompson not only conducted his research in libraries, but also travelled to places that played a key role in Kiš's life and contacted family members, friends and acquaintances. His biography is imbued with his own personal experiences rendered magnificently – especially in terms of his style, which is supple, limpid, and precise, though never dry and scholarly. In short, it is a wonderful read. Let me illustrate this by reading a passage describing the author's visit to Kerkabarabás, the tiny Hungarian village where Kiš grew up.

“Kerkabarabas (population: 303) lies low in the south-west corner of Hungary, amid terrain that drains southwards to the sleek waters of the grey-green river Mura. Slovenia is half an hour away, Croatia a little farther. The towns are sleepy. Deciduous forest, telegraph poles, and bulbous, russet-coloured church spires break the horizon. The road from the border lifts and falls, and then falls again past brick farms where storks' nests spill over the chimney stacks. Traffic noise does not penetrate far into the woods and fields.

Arriving in the village one wet summer Sunday, near the end of the last century, we rolled along puddled roads, past low houses with peeling window frames, mossy roof tiles and ragged orchards. Pipes were being laid to connect the village to the gas mains. In the bar, a quartet of men rocked on their heels. When we explained our purpose, one man spread his arms and grinned: “My friend Dani!” This was Istvan Molnar, whose father Sandor had, as mayor in 1947, signed Milica's papers confirming that she and Eduard had been married; that “because of his Jewish nationality”, Eduard was taken away to Germany, where “they had killed him”; that he had not collaborated with “the occupier”; that she had not remarried or broken the law. (These documents were essential to establish her right to a Yugoslav pension.)”

I'll stop here, though it's very tempting just to read on and on.

The jury felt the same way. We were fascinated by the book: it opened up not just Danilo Kiš's life and work for us, but also the tragic fate of the Mitteleuropa that Kiš called Pannonia, with dazzling erudition and considerable linguistic verve.

Warmest congratulations on winning the Jan Michalski Prize, Mark! It only remains for me to hope your book is quickly translated into French to enchant and delight a new readership!

Ilma Rakusa