

Facts and Fiction, Biography and Interpretation

(Thompson, Mark. *Birth Certificate. The Story of Danilo Kiš*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 2013. Xiii + 355 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index.)

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Mark Thompson's *Birth Certificate* is the first biography of Danilo Kiš in English, preceded only by Viktória Radics' *Danilo Kiš – Pályájaz és breviarium*, published in the original Hungarian in 2002 and in Serbo-Croat translation in 2005. Perhaps the most interesting feature of this book about this much translated and internationally famous writer is the author's idea to structure it around a document, Danilo Kiš's brief 'autobiography'. It is quite a Kišean device, and recalls Kiš's best novel *Hourglass*, developed around his father's unsent letter. It also promises a biography, or a 'life and works' overview, a genre which went out of fashion long ago, but which can still appeal to both a wider and specialist readership. However, after the opening pages of the book – an account of Kiš's family history and earliest childhood – this biographical determination disappears from *Birth Certificate*. Kiš's 'Birth certificate' is a brief and ironical award acceptance speech, in which the author fictionalizes and self-exoticises himself, and should not be taken literally. Thompson's *Birth Certificate*, however, takes it as a *sujet*, and comments extensively on things mentioned there only in passing. Hence an extended history of the Roman province of Pannonia, or of Jovan Cvijić's and Vladimir Dvorniković's ideas – introduced by Kiš's mention of 'ethnographic rarity' – the relevance of which is not quite clear. On the other hand, Kiš sums up in only two sentences the decades in which his books were written, and as a consequence, biographers who want to follow his 'Birth certificate' are left to their own devices in researching the relationship between Kiš's life and literature. In the second part of *Birth Certificate*, significant periods of Kiš's life are presented in broad outlines – one finds here more or less the same data as on Kiš's official website (www.kis.org.rs) – and a choice of what is included as significant, or excluded as irrelevant, strikes one as incoherent. Occasionally, omissions lead to unnecessary confusions: at the very end of the book, the author wonders why Kiš had wanted his books and papers to be deposited in the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), a testamentary wish, which, in addition to Kiš's request for an Orthodox funeral, disappoints Thompson, but which he nevertheless accepts with much dignity. The answer would have been simple had Thompson chosen to tell the reader that Kiš had been elected as a member of SANU in 1988, and that depositing their books and papers is what members of academies often do in order to make their archives available to scholars. This membership seems for Thompson to be a feature of Kiš's life less worthy of mention than the title of a literary award for which Kiš was nominated, but did not win.

If *Birth Certificate* disappoints as a biography, perhaps it was not meant to be one in the first place? However, as a work of literary criticism, or interpretation, or whatever you want to call the commentary of a work, *Birth Certificate* disappoints as well. The author deals with the seven books Kiš published in his lifetime in seven interludes, three of which are woven into the narrative of Kiš's life in the years of their publication, and four in such a manner that they interrupt the narrative of Kiš's childhood. This could be justified to a certain extent, but the unavoidable consequence is that, once one decides to consider *Garden, Ashes* (1965), *Early Sorrows* (1969) and *Hourglass* (1972) to be Kiš's fictionalized autobiography or family history, using them as representations of Kiš's childhood, one cannot say much else about them. The relationship between life and literature, facts and fiction, documents and stories, which is the most important notion in Kiš's poetics and the most frequent

theme in his works and interviews, is dispensed with. Kiš insisted on preserving the tension between them, and when asked to explain the autobiographical background of *Garden, Ashes*, he kept repeating both alternatives: on the one hand, 'embellished memories', 'a lie', 'what we should have been', but then 'this is me, my father, my mother' (*Varia*, 2007: 486). Thompson, regrettably, though quoting from the same interview, resolves this tension in favour of the latter. This attitude is most obvious when he wonders if the telegraph pole mentioned in Kiš's 'The Aeolian Harp' could be one of those linking Kerkabarabás and Zalabaksa. Perhaps it could; what is certain, however, is that this kind of questioning is a misdirected interpretative effort.

It would have been better if *Birth Certificate* persevered in the initial decision to be a biography, as Thompson's paraphrases and descriptions of Kiš's stories and novels are unlikely to recruit any new readers for this undervalued modern classic. Occasionally, the paraphrases are followed by brief quotes from Proust or Joyce, Hannah Arendt or Eva Hoffman, etc., but these suggestions need to be developed into substantial, rigorous and coherent arguments in order to be illuminative. Neither can the author's disconnected impressions or associations, which also often follow the paraphrases, substitute the missing arguments. The work of connecting, interpreting and explaining should not be left to the reader of *Birth Certificate*, as precisely this is the task of literary criticism. Thompson does not think much of contemporary literary theory (p.244), and, as authors who share the same attitude often do, expects Kiš's literature to interpret itself. This expectation reaches its peak when, instead of analysing, interpreting and explaining, the author abandons all critical efforts and simply includes the whole story of 'The Lute and the Scars' in *Birth Certificate*, leaving the reader to make of it whatever they want.

Perhaps this disregard for ideas which stem from twentieth-century literary culture is the main cause for his misreading of Danilo Kiš's work. Thompson sees him as 'unsophisticated': 'There is, around him and his books, always a primordial sense that he and they come from a background which has little to do with literature in the academic sense and nothing to do with popular culture in its mass forms.' (p.59) It is not obvious how popular culture in its mass forms makes one sophisticated, but most readers would agree that Kiš's novels and stories have a lot, for some even too much, to do with 'literature in the academic sense'. The 'how' of literature, the questions of poetics and aesthetics – instead of its 'what' – was Kiš's main focus: this is what makes *Hourglass* a great novel when compared with many other novels about the Holocaust. Perhaps fearing primordial readers, Kiš never tired of trying to impress this message in his many interviews, now collected in several volumes: there one sees a self-conscious, self-reflective author well-versed in questions of aesthetics and literary theory, always in a dialogue with his epoch's most exciting ideas about art, and an author who does his best to warn all unsophisticated readers that there is more to his writing than merely Holocaust and totalitarianism. To miss this dimension of Kiš's works is to miss everything. This has quite appropriately become the main focus of a dozen or so excellent books about Kiš written in Serbo-Croat; Thomson mentions several, but his main sources are three review articles, not these studies themselves. This crucial oversight misleads Thompson into trying to link Kiš with nineteenth-century Montenegrin literary figures such as Marko Miljanov and Njegoš, although he admits that Kiš had not read the former until very late in life and showed no interest in the latter. If this is so, why spend ten pages on them? Wouldn't it be more profitable to discuss Andrić, Krleža and Crnjanski if the idea was to limit the discussion to Kiš's national literature context, authors whom Kiš repeatedly mentioned as his teachers, his 'roots' or his background? A better researched book would not have missed this

opportunity, as it would not have missed noticing the main features of Kiš's writing which have already been extensively discussed in works belonging to 'the Kiš industry'.

It must be a daunting task for a non-specialist to place Kiš in his national literature context while attempting to avoid many potential errors: Skerlić was not 'the father of Serbian literary studies' (p.60), Dobrica Ćosić is indeed famous as a writer, but better candidates for the title of 'Serbia's most famous postwar novelist' (p.171) are Andrić, Crnjanski, Pekić or Pavić; it is difficult to believe, in the absence of any evidence, that Kiš 'admired' Marko Ristić, the Zhdanov of Yugoslav culture (p.314), etc. *Birth Certificate* approaches Kiš from a point of view formed by the political circumstances of the 1990s and the 2000s, which bears certain risks. For example, the author maintains that Dragan Jeremić's position in the polemics about *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* was inspired by nationalism and anti-Semitism (p.260). Thanks to Boro Krivokapić's book *Treba li spaliti Kiša* (1980) this is the best documented polemic in postwar Yugoslav culture, and a careful reading disproves both accusations: Kiš introduced several pages on nationalism at the beginning of *The Anatomy Lesion* in order to prevent his opponents from exploiting his careless mention of 'Vlachs' in one of his previous contributions, not in order to accuse Jeremić and others of nationalism (*Čas anatomije*, 1983: 30). Also, Kiš suspected Erih Koš, a Jewish-Serbian writer, of being the *éminence grise* behind the affair (*Čas anatomije*, 1983: 21-22). Kiš's opponents certainly tried to dismiss *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* as 'a Jewish book', taking aim at the number of Jewish characters in it (incidentally, Predrag Matvejević, the most fervent of Kiš's supporters, was the first to describe it in such a manner). The meaning of this dismissal was that Kiš's book lacked 'universality', that it might be relevant only for minority or identity politics – in brief, that it was exactly the kind of book Kiš abhorred. There is no evidence that either Kiš or any other participant in this polemic sensed anything anti-Semitic in it. While *Birth Certificate* dwells extensively on these speculations, it misses the opportunity to discuss the literary and theoretical relevance of the polemic, and the role played by *The Anatomy Lesion* in inaugurating and elaborating a new poetics.

One would expect Thompson, who entered the scholarship on Yugoslavia with his writing on the war in 1991-95, to be on firmer ground when it comes to political circumstances in which Kiš's books came into being. Despite being an unusually politicized biography, *Birth Certificate* does not establish direct connections between the political life of the country and the genesis of Kiš's works, opinions and attitudes, nor is it obliged to do so. But when it does try, it should have done so in a correct manner, as it risks losing much of its legitimacy and the trust that the reader may have granted it. Throughout the book, the author underlines Kiš's anti-nationalism and cosmopolitanism with approval, but when his narrative comes to 1973 and Kiš's famous interview with Boro Krivokapić, in which Kiš presented a consistent and thorough criticism of nationalism in general, Thompson suddenly changes the tone: 'Kiš seemed to be aligning himself with communist repression' (p. 169), 'at the time – the early 1970s – when nationalism was buried deep beneath the ruling ideology and, apparently, presented no threat to anybody' (p.170). Buried deep? The early 1970s was the time of 'Maspok' or 'Croatian Spring', a nationalist mass movement in Croatia which threatened the survival of Yugoslavia, and which was eventually suppressed by Tito. This interview was published eighteen months after Tito had 'encouraged' the nationalist leadership in Croatia to resign. Thompson, however, misrepresents Maspok as merely a 'reform movement [...] urged on by students and intellectuals' (p.158), on a par with Serbian 'liberals', and in no way related to nationalism, thus dismissing any assumption that Kiš's critique of nationalism could have been directed against it. Exculpating Maspok – which historians have already dealt with extensively and thoroughly – is only possible here at the price of

misrepresenting Kiš as a supporter of communist repression and the ruling ideology, and in order to avoid this outcome the author puts forward the hypothesis that Kiš had 'a sixth sense for detecting nationalism' (p.170) and that his 1973 interview was, in fact, directed against the wave of Serbian nationalism which was to come only in the mid-1980s. The evidence for this extravagant claim is Kiš's quarrel with Dragoslav Mihailović about *couleur locale* in literature, which even the most benevolent reader will not be able to accept as sufficient. One wonders if a book on Danilo Kiš is the right place for attempting revisionist historiography – perhaps a monograph on Maspok would be more appropriate? – especially if the price to be paid is presenting Kiš as someone who, although possessing a sixth sense for detecting nationalism, was unable to see what was going on in his country. One did not need a sixth sense to know that Croatian extreme nationalists assassinated a Yugoslav ambassador in Stockholm (1971), carried out an armed incursion near Bugojno (1972), or planted a bomb at Belgrade's main railway station (1973), amongst many other similar actions. In the early 1970s, just reading newspapers sufficed. Equally disappointing is Thompson's sentence: 'Controversial in Serbia, Boris Davidović won garlands in Croatia' (p.237). Krivokapić's book *Treba li spaliti Kiša* shows that this claim is not and cannot be supported by evidence, as much as the opposite claim – 'the campaign against Kiš started in Zagreb', as this is where Golubović published the article which started the ball rolling – cannot be. They are equally absurd, and have no place in the discourse of scholarship, with its rigorous demands for developed arguments, verifiable evidence and firm theoretical frameworks. The small scholarly community of authors who write about former Yugoslav cultures in English has so far successfully resisted importing from journalistic discourse such toxic elements, which pit one culture against the other, cannot withstand evidential scrutiny, and contribute nothing to our knowledge and understanding. Similar cover-ups, half-truths and misleading allusions form an undercurrent in *Birth Certificate* which is at odds with Thompson's admiration for Kiš's anti-nationalism.

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