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Sorin Titel and Danilo Kiš: Prisoners’ Long Journey to Nowhere

Abstract

The present study aims to explore the similarities between the novels *Lunga călătorie a prizonierului* (*Prisoner’s Long Journey*, 1971) by Sorin Titel and *Grobница za Borisa Davidoviča* (*A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, 1976) by Danilo Kiš. Both Central European writers, Titel (Romanian) and Kiš (a Serbian, born to a Jewish father and a Montenegrin mother) experienced the same traumas, stemming from their living through a nightmarish history and struggling to pursue their literary careers in countries under totalitarian regimes. Influenced by Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, while also learning from the contemporary French *nouveau roman*, Sorin Titel employs the well-known theme of travel in an allegorical novel apt to be made into a road movie – a journey with no beginning or end, enriched by means of myths and symbols, but offering neither revelation nor salvation to the traveler. Danilo Kiš takes a different approach: at first glance a collection of short stories, the stories included in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* enhance the information in the previous texts, adding new dimensions to the characters, accounting for their actions and impulses. At times, the omniscient narrator becomes an unreliable narrator, adding to the confusion,

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despite the exhaustive amassing of facts and data. Nevertheless, subtle affinities can be discovered in the common motifs of Titel's and Kiš's works: victims turned executioners and vice versa; imposture; desacralization; blood and slaughter. On the other hand, the most terrifying characters in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* are embodiments of a certain type of prisoners: trapped in amorality and in their own inability to evolve.

Keywords

narrative, affinity, totalitarianism, captivity, absurdity

In spite of their differing modes of expression, Sorin Titel and Danilo Kiš do share common ground – the territory of themes, motifs and vision, stemming from their similar experience of Central Europe. With different ethnicities, both the Romanian Titel and the Serbian Kiš (born to a Jewish father and a Montenegrin mother) know the trials and tribulations of life in countries under the communist ideology, inherit the traumas of previous generations and have not abandoned the desire to become and remain writers.

Complex and fascinating, Central Europe eludes precise delimitations and simplifying formulations. In the extensive study that opens the *Dictionary of the Central European Novel of the 20th Century*, a study that could constitute volume in its own right (almost 100 pages' worth of small print), the editor (Babeți, 2022, pp. 17–18) provides a comprehensive description of Central Europe, "whether as a concept, a geographic reality, a mental-affective matrix or a cultural pattern":

The overlapping of an infelicitous (historical) time and an often unfavourable (geographical) space engenders other aspects that have shaped, over the centuries, the specific character of the area. First of all, there is the delibility of borders in this «other Europe» – so highly uncertain, borders are likely to be redrawn or even altogether erased from the map at any time. Hence a sense of instability, temporariness and insecurity; hence the skepticism about history and the fear of the future, coupled with an inability to build long-term projects and to put any hope in

them. But, on the other hand, these fragile, porous borders have not always separated groups, but allowed them to interact and communicate.

Thus, ideas were able to circulate unimpeded, especially by virtue of their viability in other regions. The literary critic borrows a compelling image (launched by Kiss Csaba György), very tellingly depicting the fate of the Central European destined to be a prisoner: "Being in the neck of the hourglass is to always find yourself at that point where, like the sand, everything flows ever faster, until the time is reversed and history flows backwards [...] – held captive by an «unfortunate», adverse history, made up of a row of unpredictable «bad days» [...]" (Babeți, 2022, p. 45).

Such *adverse histories* and *bad days* – spanning years and decades – are the subject of Titel's parabolic novel *Prisoner's Long Journey* and Kiš's collection of short stories (actually a novel in disguise), *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. The characters of both writers find themselves *in the neck of the hourglass*, either progressing only apparently – in fact moving in a circle, like the prisoner and his two guards, or immobile, locked in a symbolic tomb, like Boris Davidovich.

As Ungureanu (1980) points out, since its very beginnings the novel is related to the theme of travel, to migrating characters, like Don Quixote, the first great hero of the early modern novel. The travelling prisoner in Titel's novel has a similar identity to the protagonist in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*: "Before the novel's end, Josef K. is captured by two individuals who take him to the place of execution. In Kafka's famous novel, this journey was of no importance at all; it forms an ending in which Josef K., the prisoner, obediently follows his executioners without initiative. Based on this page by a classic of modernism, Sorin Titel writes an entire novel" (Ungureanu, 1980, p. 235).

Critics have repeatedly noted the influence that Kafka and Beckett, authors of tragic absurdist fiction, had on the Romanian writer: "An unsettling book, in the direct lineage of those writings of the century that one might describe as books of human trials, epitomized less by the works of Kafka than those of Beckett." (Balotă, 2005, p. 132);

The motif is Kafkaesque, obviously, but the modernity of the literary form places the book in line with the "nouveau roman". The protagonists'

walk unfolds in cinematic manner. The gaze thus becomes the operating instrument. While walking, the three record snapshot views (Micu, 2005, pp. 263–264).

Ungureanu (1980) was perhaps the first to note that *Lunga călătorie a prizonierului* (*Prisoner's Long Journey*,) is apt to provide the script for a *film-fleuve*. (A road movie, a stream of tableaux, with episodic characters, we might add.) In his subsequent books, the Timișoara-based exegete elaborates on this point, showing that the narrative formula employed by Titel is rooted in his directorial studies (interrupted under unclear circumstances) and in his experience of the contemporary French *nouveau roman*:

His passion for the New Novel, professed in a number of articles, for «educating the gaze», is not separated from his passion for film. As a film commentator, Sorin Titel opts for the Robbe-Grillet model because it offers him a new pattern: in opposition both to [...] the established patterns of the novel and to the dictates of official propaganda (Ungureanu, 2015, p. 291).

But, Ungureanu (2005) points out, *The Prisoner's Long Journey* is not an ordinary *nouveau roman*, a novel of objects, but of places devoid of any personality – of residual spaces, of *non-places*.

The book begins abruptly, in a dismal mood, heightened by the designation of the protagonist by the common noun *the prisoner*, and ends mid-sentence, to suggest the journey continues endlessly. The prisoner, accompanied by two guards, embarks on a journey from nowhere to nowhere, amid apocalyptic scenery in which the succession of seasons creates the illusion of the passage of time.

Exegetes have commented on “an epic of depersonalization” (Iorgulescu, 1971, p. 9); “an allegory of life. Of life seen as the crossing of the valley of tears”. (Micu, 2005, p. 264); “a time of deomposition, of slipping into a kind of nothingness” (Balotă, 2005, p. 132). Or, more trenchantly, they have revealed meanings that could not be overtly declared in 1971, the year the book was published:

The itinerary of the three protagonists of the novel may be a symbolic expression of the search for epic substance, just as it may, of course,

be indicative of something else even more definitively serious in the order of literary significance: an expression of the totalitarian concentrationary universe, of the irrationality of discretionary power, of the annihilation of the individual (Vighi, 2005, p. 85).

“Sorin Titel’s short novel reads as a parable of human existence, but it also presents itself as an image of a concentration-camp universe” (Vintilă, 2004, p. 217).

The fluid, dreamlike setting, in which the characters are deprived of any clearly defined contours, takes on an absurd, sinister turn: the attendants catch butterflies and tear off their wings, slaughter the horse driven by the woman with blood on her hands, devise a bowling game in which the prisoner is supposed to be struck. The guards act as his masters, oscillating between cruelty, inhuman experiments and fake compassion, worrying that the prisoner might die at their own hands. At times camaraderie seems to take the upper hand and the three travelers appear united by their shared circumstance, but soon the cruelty of the torturers takes over as they assert their power over the victim.

Gradually, the illogical, typically oneiric elements give way to suspicions of some deceit – as in the scene where it is not known to which one of the three, the family photos belong. Confusion is all-pervading in the second part of the novel, which takes the form of an inner monologue of an uncertain character, a monologue throughout which the obstinate fear of having lost *the right way* persists. In fact, there is no road that can lead to the destination and the travelers now appear inextricably linked in a triad: “Turning back was now the only solution, but I knew I could not leave them, I knew that if I tried to run away, they would find me, so the last thing left for me – I was lucid enough to understand that – was to get rid of them, that is, to make them be no more” (Titel, 1991, p. 75).

Even more unsettling, the increasing ambiguity of the triad of travelers, by which the roles of victim and executioners shift and are gradually reversed, rendering them undistinguishable, has been noted by the exegesis: “«The struggle with the character» could be the trademark of this novel, for which literary criticism has set in motion a vast array of decoding strategies centered around its

symbolism, most of them admitting, in various hypostases, the essentially «Sartrean fraternity of the executioners with the victim» [...]» (Cruceanu, 2001, p. 155); “*Prisoner’s Long Journey* is an un-masking strongly filtered through the interference between the oneiric and the realistic – a mix that is extremely productive hermeneutically, whose reverberations reach the characters themselves [...]. If, at first, the prisoner is very clearly differentiated from the guards, gradually the distinctions become so blurred that identity becomes ambiguous” (Murariu, 2015, p. 260).

From the outset, the rough fabric of resignation in the face of nothingness has proven permeable to myth: the evil boatman is an incarnation of Charon, the guide to the underworld; the woman carrying the infant, a recurring occurrence, not coincidentally named Mary, brings a ray of light every time she appears. However, according to Cruceanu (2001, p. 157), “as an invoked character, the mother (Maria, the woman) can hardly play the role of the one she stands in for (the father) since his first great absence in the face of the heartbreaking «Eli, Eli...» of the first Golgotha of the first Son.”

The inner monologue in the second part of the *Long Journey...* is reminiscent of Molly Bloom’s, concluding James Joyce’s *Ulysses* with a powerful affirmation of life. The failed Magi, exhausted through desacralization, in Titel’s novel are denied any revelation or salvation:

Derision of an initiatory journey, the journey of the three signifies entrance into the realm of the absurd and pushing its boundaries in search for meaning. The characters continually bear the burden of the labyrinth and always seek to face it together [...]. By choosing the theme of the journey, the author places his novel within the protected area of myth, symbolising the unidirectional human journey from birth to death. Ritualistically echoing the profound meaning of existence, the journey becomes a gnoseological act [...]. This time, however, the characters neither become inwardly richer, nor acquire any significant social status. Quite the contrary. They undergo an intense process of identity dissolution, becoming mere voices in an amorphous mass (Murariu, 2015, pp. 256–257).

However, a star appears at the end of the novel, offering some comfort to at least one of the three and, possibly, the chance of future enlightenment:

[...] at night there are also stars you can gaze at, and while watching them you no longer feel how time passes, no longer feel the night, and darkness especially –, it protects you of course, at night, the darkness and the stars so far away, all around you, at night, the darkness that protects you, you feel the rain less, feel the wind less, and I like to walk especially at night, to walk very fast, at night you can see the star, you fall, then you get up and see the star, you feel less cold [...] (Titel, 1991, p. 84).

Vintilă's commentary (2004, p. 217), however, highlights predominantly negative connotations: "The aimless journey of the three (possible) magi gives a sense of the loss of meaning in the world, speaks of the universalization of the profane, of oblivion, of opaqueness, of the individual's loneliness, of his dehumanization."

Describing the motif of the labyrinth, disseminated from Greek mythology, and tracing the forms it has taken in various historical periods and cultural areas, Santarcangeli (1974) resumes the idea that the purpose of the pilgrimage is to transfigure the pilgrim: by reiterating the labyrinthine path of the Sun or travelling the route – actual or symbolic – to the sacred city, the penitent changes or... finds himself.

Sorin Titel's characters, however, fail the test of the labyrinth. Vintilă (2004) analyses the epic of the journey in the parabolic novel, showing that, although in the first part of the book, the episodes of an initiatory scenario are easily recognizable, the journey undertaken by the small group of three inseparable characters does not align with the known values: initiatory journey, spiritual metamorphosis, path of knowledge, experimentation, learning and formative change. Moreover, *journeying* doesn't even seem to be the most appropriate term – but rather *wandering*, or *rambling*, appear as more apt expressions.

In the world of Kiš's (anti-)heroes, journeys (wanderings, futile attempts at escaping, secret missions or plunges into hell) are both

travels across space and symbolic routes (despite their non-religious nature). Ungureanu (2002) decodes the characters' journey towards the East, towards the new Centre – Moscow, the capital of the World Revolution, as a parody of an initiatory journey that ends up in torture in the Siberian camps.

The author himself undertakes a twofold journey: into the past (the volume published in 1976 includes a number of tales unfolding decades or even centuries earlier) but, on the other hand, he descends into the Dantean universe of the communist camps “not like a documentarist, but like a sculptor studying *écorchés*” (Ungureanu, 2002, p. 108).

Characters unyielding in their amoral, nuanceless stances, are monstrous because they lack flexibility and empathy, embodying a symbolic imprisonment that precludes any evolution. Kiš's ‘wandering Jews’ travel long distances, changing countries and identities, but remain unchanged; their strong convictions fail to protect them from the whirlwind of history. In the end, they become prisoners in the truest sense of the word.

The anarchist Miksha Hantesku, devoid of any trace of humanity, in *The Knife with the Rosewood Handle* devotes himself to the delusions of confusion and imposture that absurdly take human lives. His existence, marked by murder, confusion and bloodshed, makes him a good brother to the guards accompanying the unnamed prisoner in Titel's novel.

Gould Verschoyle from *The Sow That Eats Her Farrow* investigated on the boat by two companions, finds himself caught in the middle of another confusion between victims and executioners, so that all three find themselves handcuffed together. Caught between excitement and error, there are really no significant differences between them.

Chelyustnikov in *The Mechanical Lions* participates as the main actor in a mystifying scenario that mimics the sacred in a society where it has been outlawed: the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, now a brewery, regains the appearance of a church in order to present a false image of religious tolerance. And this was to impress Herriot, the leader of the French radicals, a supporter of Catholicism. Playing the role of the priest does not, however, absolve Chelyustnikov from years in prison.

In *The Magic Card Dealing*, the ironic title refers not to tomes of wisdom, but to the book parties of common criminals – the “social-recoverables” (Kiš, 1992, p. 63). As a metaphor for the Great Lottery, the card game corresponds to the playful, cruelty-laden manifestations of *The Prisoner's Long Journey*. In Kiš's imagined prison world, too, the game ends tragically: the loser is assigned to kill or assumes the status of an outcast. The only sacred image in the prison cells remains the mother (it is not yet known which of the players), doomed to weep, the *mater dolorosa* of a son without a trace of sanctity.

Boris Davidovich's journey, told in a realist style, ends in the crypt-prison, where the torture, both physical and psychological, to which he is subjected suggests to him that “man is nothing but a speck of dust in the ocean of timelessness” (Kiš, 1992, pp. 83–84). The confrontation between the prisoner and the interrogator Fediukin could be read as the struggle of two apocalyptic beasts, matched adversaries who recognize their similar essence:

Behind his tightly closed eyelids, along with the feeling of pain and the foreboding of defeat, hatred arose in his soul, for he had had ample time to think and to understand that Fediukin had sensed his thoughts and had decided to strike him precisely where he felt strongest: In his selfishness; because he (Novsky) had come to the saving and dangerous idea of the futility of the existence of personal suffering and suffering, this could still constitute an act of moral choice; Fediukin's intuitive genius had intuited that such an attitude spoke of a choice that therefore did not include morality, but the opposite (Kiš, 1992, p. 86).

Dogs and Books takes the form of “the amplified metaphor of the classical doctrine of the cyclical rotation of time” (Kiš, 1992, p. 113) to recall the sufferings of an innocent man in the name of faith during the Middle Ages: Baruch David Neumann refuses imposed Christian baptism, believing that “by reading many books, man gains wisdom, and reading one book leads to ignorance, which is always armed with hatred and insanity” (Kiš, 1992, p. 104). Neumann's chaotic wanderings are futile attempts to save himself, the future victim is struck by the implacable slogan of the executioners: “Seek no other way but the way we all walk” (Kiš, 1992, p. 106).

The tales included in *Crypt for Boris Davidovich* (subtitled *Seven Chapters of One and the Same Story*) supplement the information provided by the previous texts, adding new dimensions to the characters, motivating their actions and impulses. Tucan (2022, p. 231) reveals the basic unity of the book, its overall coherence and the flavour of Kiš's encyclopaedic, erudite documentarist, who meditates on the meaning of history: "By quoting imaginary or real sources, relying on history with fabulous insertions, fictionalizing the verisimilitude, he brings out from the darkness of the crypt ghosts of the same world, necessary for the second convergence, that of the characters. For the heroes of the biographies [...] almost all have the same structure." We would add that the omniscient narrator sometimes leaves room for an *unreliable narrator*, increasing confusion despite the crowding of exhaustive data.

Through the pleasure of storytelling and the study of history, Kiš seeks to legitimize a belonging, an affiliation:

In the cultural sense, "Central Europe" probably represents the desire to lay claim to the family tree of Europe, a tree whose eastern branches belong to the same trunk and are nourished by the same sap of the Middle Ages, of religion (or religions), of the Renaissance, of the Baroque; "Central Europe" also represents the legitimate desire to see this common heritage recognised, despite the differences, or rather precisely an active participant *because of them*. Because these are the differences that give it its specificity, they endow it with a particular identity in the wider context of the European entity (Kiš, 1997, p. 284).

The literature of Central Europe largely reflects attempts to exorcise the traumas of a history never forgotten:

The most obvious trait of Central European literature is its awareness of history – both as its past and as its present. [...] The political events of the decade in which the characters live, those of the authors' formative years whose imprint they bear, and even those of their parents' lifetimes, are always present in the background and lend these works a dimension rarely found in Western literature. [...] In Central Europe, time is intense, spasmodic, full of surprises, an active participant in

the story. This is because time is always associated with a danger that threatens the identity of the national community of which the writer is a part. I suppose the historical imagination always springs from collective memory and a certain sense of being threatened (Miłosz, 1997, p. 258).

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