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DANILO KIŠ BETWEEN TRANSLATION AND HISTORY

Hello to you all, and thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts with you today. My great thanks go to Professor Radojka Vukcević for the invitation to this conference. I hope to work with many of you in the years to come, and I hope that the connections made during this conference will prove enduring and productive for us all.

Today I will be speaking to you not primarily as a historian, and not as a would-be literary critic or theorist, but as a practitioner of the craft of translation who happens to be an academic historian. I will attempt to answer these twin questions: what do I get out of interacting with the works of Danilo Kiš and other excellent Serbian writers, and how do translated works interact with and cross-pollinate the field of history?

1. WHY KIŠ? HOW KIŠ?

I have had the great good fortune to publish six volumes of translations of works by Danilo Kiš. I could thank many editors for shouldering the publication of these works, but above all of course I must thank Mirjana Miocinović and Pascale Delpech, who have been unfailingly generous and gracious in their support of these projects. These works comprise the most unified and significant sub-set of my translating activity, and, together with

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the articles I have written about them and Kiš's other works, including his essays, they form the most extensive of what I term my "engagements." These combinations of translation and intellectual history began with articles I wrote about Ismail Kadare in the early 2000s (and included, alas, only one published translation, a dark and fantastical story about the Ottoman Empire); after Kiš, and we can speak of the end of this phase of his translation into the Anglosphere now, at least for me, has come Biljana Jovanović, on whom I am still working in several directions.

It was in graduate school at Indiana University that I discovered the writings of Danilo Kiš. Various professors referred to him and his works in lectures, but I am not sure I had actually read anything by him (save perhaps Boris Davidovich) before I was presented with his obituary, from *NIN* or a similar Yugoslav publication, to translate, as part of my proficiency exam in Serbo-Croatian. I dutifully translated the piece and passed the various component parts of the half-day exam, but what has always stuck with me was the reverence with which the two professors spoke of Kiš when we discussed my brief translation. I was deeply impressed by how deeply Kiš had impressed them. When I began reading Kiš again in the 1990s, I was struck by the power and depth and enormous beauty of his works. Literature is first and foremost art, I kept reminding myself, and as a historian I must always remember that, and so I tried always to stay aware of more than just his themes or his own biography, to pay attention to the high modernist, polyphonic, and even intertextual pathway he followed.

Obviously it did not take long for me to fall in love with the rest of Kiš. And so these are the reasons I wanted to do the translations and why publishers and readers in the Anglosphere value his works: his specific style of distanced story-telling, the muddy search for his father, the brutal fate awaiting the outsider, the elegiac chronicling of a disappeared culture in Pannonia, the autonomy of art and artist and, for some of us, his sensitivity to world literature (especially Hungarian and southeast European) and his studies of revolutionary poetics (especially in the examples of France and Russia). After translating two of Kiš's novels, two volumes of his short stories, his collected dramas and screenplays, and about half of his poetry, I felt, for the first time, the following sense of clarity and purpose: that I was very lucky to be a historian, and very happy to be a translator.

2. HISTORIANS AND CULTURE

When I meet people who are surprised or skeptical about why a historian would pursue literary translation, I often end up sensing a divergence in our views about what it is that historians do. That is to say, what we should be doing, or what we are actually do in “real existing historical practice.” For some, historians are stern father figures who know and maintain “the real story,” especially if it is political or military. For others, historians are cranky or quirky custodians of curiosity cabinets writ large, with Wizard of Oz-like powers less explanatory than arbitrary and declamatory. For others historians are guardians of national culture or identity, either in school curricula or as appendages to political movements.

For me, historians are scholars of societies, ideas, individuals, institutions, their own or those of others, who inquire ceaselessly into context, contingency, and causality, and who naturally engage in revisionism when they are in possession of new (expanded) sources or new (updated) questions. They are never prophets or builders of walls of any type. Above all – and my students once committed this phrase to a club t-shirt – history is an attitude. It’s an approach to political issues, to headlines, to phenomena of all types, including trends and dilemmas, a way of looking at things, a type of questioning, a fearless form of inquiry – and it involves studying and appreciating culture.

From this derives one of the great benefits of having Danilo Kiš translations in our language: the way he translated Yugoslavia for external readerships. There are leitmotifs in Kiš’s highly varied oeuvre that attract the historian’s attention over and over: nationalism, varying understandings of politics, and totalitarianism. This is not the place to elaborate on those three topics, but I would like to note the five things that I tend to come away with when I read Kiš as a historian. I daresay that my views are not unique in the Anglosphere, and they are probably very familiar to people in the Balkans and Central Europe as well. These five themes circulating through Kiš’s life and works are: dissidence and human rights; *homo politicus* versus *homo poeticus*; study and remembrance of the Holocaust; and, in parts of his corpus, queries into what was Yugoslavia and what was communism. Thank goodness history is an attitude, because this is half a lifetime of labor to unpack.

3. HISTORIANS AND LITERATURE

In this section, I shall briefly address three aspects of my work as a specialist in intellectual history: teaching, theory, and research. Let's look first at pedagogy. Yes, I am that guy – who has taught Ismail Kadare to coal miners' kids in West Virginia, and Biljana Jovanović to wheat farmers' kids in North Dakota. You might be surprised how well the blood feuds of *Broken April* went over with those classes of first-generation university students, or how *Dogs and Others* intrigued young people from flyover country about life in cosmopolitan, but apparently loveless, Belgrade. And I did these things in history courses. I feel like I should add and perhaps emphasize that fact. Today historians use literature in our courses. We do this for various reasons, but above all to illustrate key points. Well-written novels, especially those written at the time under study by people from the society under consideration, can add important details about daily life, and they can situate ethical dilemmas in a historical context so that students can engage with them very concretely. They are also fun, of course, because of their emotional content and – sometimes – plot, and they encourage students to keep history in mind when doing any kind of serious reading. One must be careful when introducing fiction in the classroom, because it is not (typically) a primary source or a monograph, and it is under no obligation to “tell the real story.” But of course all books can leave their own tracks and ruts in history, and that means we also have a chance to talk about books' origins and receptions. The main cautionary note to emphasize, I find, is the important distinction that I have from the French writer Marguerite Yourcenar, who wrote in one of her essays that authenticity is something distinct from accuracy, although both are valuable. Students generally appreciate the unique requirements and benefits of both, when careful but tenacious discussions happen in the classroom.

I will not pretend that theory is my strongest point, in literary criticism, translation studies, or history, but I do employ some approaches of George Steiner and Raymond Williams (and others of course, less relevant to this talk) in my work. For today I would simply like to mention one bugbear of the intellectual historian: the “historical novel.” Typically this designation refers to a fictional work using a set of “real” historical figures as characters. This simple working definition is being problematized today by the development of creative nonfiction, “faction,” and even auto-fiction. But never mind: I vote strongly in favor of considering all novels historical novels and then

discarding the term. Why? Because all novels originate and exist in historical time and, even if they treat of fully imaginary or future they are their own products and they speak to and of their time. All novels are historical, in some way or other. Gojko Bozović, in a recent essay, refers to a kind of realism in which “referentnost nadmašuje iluziju.” From my belief in the historicity of all novels, I derive also my belief in the “universality” of all novels. As “ethnographic” or as country- or period-specific as a story might be, I fail to see why Terence’s injunction (“Homo sum...”), when compounded with a bit of curiosity and industry, would fail to apply to our modern prose. I would then expand these insights to include vast swaths of writing prior to the era of realism. And this is a source that historians can and should use in a variety of ways.

Turning now to research, I would like to highlight briefly what is, I believe, one of the less common ways of using literary texts for extra-literary research. Indeed, the kind of intellectual history that I see fueled by the novels and other prose that I translate, for instance, goes off in another direction not only from literary criticism but also from literary history. In short, I see novels as sources of questions, not answers. If literary texts can be primary sources when we are studying the biography, political engagements, or world views of their authors, they can also be primary indicators of topics needing investigation when we are writing social or political history, in particular. Perhaps an example will help me establish this point. When we read Jovanović’s *Dogs and Others*, for instance, how many topics for needed historical research are we struck by? Many, I maintain. The book makes me want to look into public health, jurisprudence, the administration of the higher ed system, and eldercare in late Yugoslavia. In short, I think one very cogent way of seeing this book is as an indictment of the social contract under Tito. Specific topics broached in the book include sexual assault, drug abuse, intimate partner violence, the mental health system, sexually transmitted diseases, emigration, and many others. The suggestive power of a novel like this causes the historian to take note of things that might have been of substantial but neglected importance to people living in that society at that time. If these topics have not been adequately treated in the existing historiography, then we have meaningful prompts for new research; if they have been (partially) researched, then we can still take clues from their presentation in fiction about the nature of awareness and discussion of these issues in society, or even the zeitgeist of the period.

Another example might be *Hourglass* or *Garden, Ashes* by Kiš. Who can read it without wanting to know more about the Arrow Cross, the territorial disposition of Yugoslav lands after the Axis invasion of 1941, the “cold days” in Novi Sad, the forced labor on the Eastern Front involving Jewish civilian prisoners, the (disappearing) material culture of Pannonia, the post-1945 diaspora, unpunished or unprocessed war guilt. The deeper one goes into Kiš, the more the questions pile up: there’s no better example of this than *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, of course. I mean questions here in the most positive sense: not whether the author was right to use these sources, or whether the sources he used would still be considered “right” today, but whether the concatenation, arrangement, or resonance of these data point to under- explored facets of the society in question.

Since this talk is an occasion for me to reflect on my twenty-plus years of literary engagement, I would like to change gears now and make a plea for more historians of various stripes to take up work with the translation of fiction. Perhaps the three points I just made explain the value of such work. I will now simply speak to why I believe historians can make very good translators. Obviously, a love of “art with words” is necessary to make such an undertaking a success, but just as necessary is some facility or familiarity with literary history or criticism. No one needs to pretend to be an expert in a field not their own, but avid students we historians must be when we edge into literature. At all events, here are the skills that I believe historians bring, perhaps surprisingly in a couple of cases, to the translator’s task. First, historians know foreign languages. Sure, lots of people do. But lots of other people don’t. Similarly, historians know the context of literary works as well as anyone. From general cultural familiarity to period vocabulary, this is another capacity that, while not unique to historians, is easily deployable by them. The third consideration is about time and access. Historians, as members of the academic community, have access to research libraries (for locating suitable source texts) and subject experts (for technical terms, etc); furthermore, if a historian enjoys the status of tenure, he or she has a kind of windbreak or shelter from most commercial concerns and can work carefully on a manuscript while judiciously seeking a suitable publisher. I am very aware of my position of relative privilege in this regard, and I try to “pay it forward” by being a resource for writers, especially younger or newer ones, in Serbia. Fourth, translation of texts that can be used with students is a bracing way of keeping our own take on the discipline fresh and also a way of enriching the field of possibilities for other teachers. Fifth, and

finally, when we analyze, from the point of view of intellectual history or any other approach, the texts that we translate, we are reviving or enlivening important discussions that might have lapsed, while revisiting old ideas or even possibly putting them back into circulation.

The final part of my brief presentation involves all three of the facets of my translation that I just touched on. I am firmly convinced that 20th-century writers offer us important angles on what history actually is. This is a different topic than history as “what happened” or how we establish cause and effect and change over time. I am talking here about what the discipline actually is. When Kiš writes, in “All the Genes of My Reading” (1973), that “[l]iterature is the concretization of abstract history,” and follows this up by saying that if “literature didn’t show the peaks and abysses of human existence and the human psyche, the death of a child would be equivalent to the death of a sheep” (from “I Don’t Believe in a Writer’s Imagination,” 1989), we are confronted with a whole range of obligations from the cognitive to the moral. It is good thus.

Biljana Jovanović also has her moments of historical elaboration, but I’d like to focus here on a passage from my forthcoming translation of Judita Šalgo’s *The Road to Birobidzhan*. In Chapter 5 of this work, she writes:

Why didn’t everything, or at least part of everything, make it into the letter that Bertha wrote to Miss N.? Because a true explosion, an activation of reality, ensues only after the recording of events. A letter induces events, occurrences, history. Until humanity began noting things down, history was much slower, and events great and small, and general and individual, took place much more slowly, and only occasionally, at great intervals. A letter, a recording, condenses events on paper or on papyrus—or even in stone—the same way it concentrates characters and letters. Besides that, it’s in the nature of reality, of events, to want to fail, to get past, to trick the record, or the image of themselves: events strive to remain unencoded, free, to sail about at liberty, to whirl and twist through time and space, able to be ascribed to first one thing and then another, here and there, yesterday and tomorrow.

4. CONCLUSION

In closing, thank you again for the honor of speaking at this conference. It is heartening to see the amount of serious work being done in Serbian literature, not just on Kiš but on Milka Žicina, Judita Šalgo, Biljana Jovanović, and others.

I welcome continued contact and discussion after the conference on the modest set of points I have raised today, as well as suggestions for future

translation projects. Next year I will be applying for a Fulbright for Serbia, probably for the fall semester of 2023, and I look forward to seeing many of you again then, if I am chosen for the award. Currently I am putting the finishing touches on my translation of Judita Šalgo's *Put u Birobidžan*, and then I shall finish the third and final novel by Biljana Jovanović, *Duša, jedinica moja*. As for what comes after that – I can only say that I'm thrilled to have so many great options for what to translate. I usually draw a bead on a publisher first, before I jump with both feet into a project, and since I've witnessed some interest in publishing Mirko Kovač in the anglosphere, perhaps something by him will be first. But I also have a strong interest these days in Milka Žicina, Dragoslav Mihailović, and Vladan Desnica. Perhaps I am halfway through my translation odyssey in Serbian. There is still plenty of time for neglected, courageous, and above all consequential works. I am shooting for fifteen more of them. And secretly I seek – but am not passively awaiting – my fourth engagement, of course.

It is my hope that you have enjoyed these front-line notes from a colleague and a great admirer of Serbian culture who works at the intersection of history and literature. Thank you very much for this opportunity, your warm welcome to the University and to Belgrade, and your attention today.