

## Socrates in Bosnia

**Mark Thompson**

**Nanovic Institute for European Studies**

**University of Notre Dame**

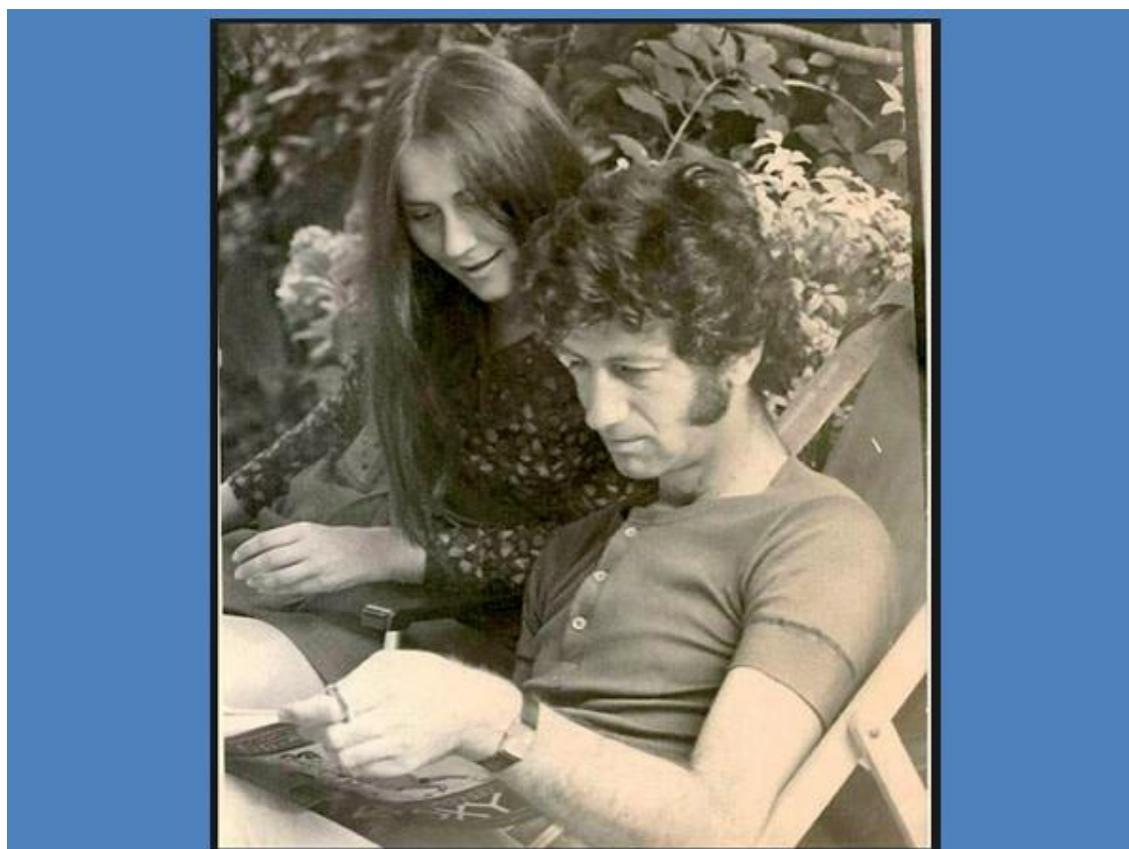
**27 September 2016**

Dear Jim McAdams and Joseph Rosenberg,

Thank you very much indeed. I also want to thank Mrs Laura Shannon and her husband Michael, and the jurors, and the Nanovic Institute in its entirety for the honour of this occasion.

In a collection of maxims called ‘Advice to a Young Writer’, Danilo Kiš said: ‘*Accept with equanimity the prizes that princes may award you, but do nothing to deserve them.*’ As a writer who has not been young for some time, I feel under no pressure to respect the first half of this instruction. I accept the Laura Shannon prize with immense pleasure and delight.

I would like to start with some images of the man.



Here is Kiš with Mirjana Miočinović. There is a beautiful word in their language, *saputnik*, *saputnica* in the feminine, meaning ‘travelling companion’, literally but also in the journey that

is life; in this sense, ‘soulmate’ would be a fair translation. Mirjana was Kiš’s first and longest-lasting *saputnica*, and up to the present day, as the editor of his work. Pascale Delpech, the second *saputnica*, is, with Mirjana, the co-executrix of his estate. He brought them together in his will, and they have honoured him and his work together in every way that they can.

I also want to show you this picture, a rather grainy image that tells a lot about Kiš and his milieu, or one of his milieus: the official culture of communist Yugoslavia.



The sponsorship of culture in communist countries is a fascinating topic. I recommend an older work by a Hungarian intellectual, Miklos Haraszti, an acquaintance of Kiš as it happens. The book is called *The Velvet Prison. Artists under State Socialism*. This picture shows a cell in that prison. It is a ceremony in Budapest in May 1978. Three Yugoslav writers are being rewarded for their services to Hungarian culture in Yugoslavia – as you may know, there was and is a substantial Hungarian minority. I don’t know the man on the left. The one at the back is Ivan Lalić, a fine poet. And look at Kiš, in the centre. The odd man out, with open collar, arms crossed, and a coolly appraising expression, having just accepted the prince’s prize with perfect equanimity.

The central principle of Kiš’s thinking about art and of his practice as a writer is that ethics and aesthetics are inseparable. You cannot write as a free person, standing outside social conventions so that you can question them and include them as material in your work, if you don’t, as a person, act independently towards those conventions – not necessarily rejecting

them, of course. This is the picture of someone who values his independence far more than the bauble which he has just received.

I want to speak about Kiš's non-fiction as well, but fiction is where I have to begin, because fiction is where Kiš did his best thinking. His first published story saw print when he was just 18, a schoolboy in Montenegro. It is called 'The Red Bull'. It is very short – 600 words or so. A girl has killed herself by jumping in front of a tram or streetcar. We don't see the suicide; we overhear a number of witnesses, whose comments are casually cruel or foolish, and we glimpse the girl's body. Music from a nearby café provides a banal soundtrack. The narrator looks at the scene with horror and shame, which he tries to mask so that he 'would be similar in every way to the people around' him. This anxiety to assimilate makes him try to imitate the coarse voyeurism of the people around him. His instinct is to protect himself by concealment. Then he imagines that the girl was a toreador and the tram is a red bull – rearing over its crushed victim. The crowd seems to applaud the bull and to hiss the bloody toreador. The corpse is cleared away, the tram 'lurches into motion', the crowd 'melts away', and the story ends with the strains of the café band still faintly audible.

Kiš was just beginning his quest for a narrative form that would be equal to the subject that had begun to demand his attention. Another ten years passed before he found a satisfactory form – in a book called **Garden, Ashes** (I wish I could recommend the translation). And further years pass before the subject took its final definitive form – he would say, achieved 'the grace of form' – in the novel called **Hourglass**, which was superbly translated by Ralph Manheim

This subject pressing upon him, insisting on fictional working-out, was the disappearance of his father in the Holocaust. For his father was a Hungarian Jew, living with his wife and children in provincial Hungary, rounded up after the Nazi occupation in 1944, put in a ghetto, and deported to Auschwitz.

Kiš did not refer to his father's death or murder. The word he used was disappearance. The distinction matters. Perhaps some of you have read the recent book by Otto Dov Kulka, an Israeli scholar, called **Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death**. Kulka was a little boy, Jewish, from Czechoslovakia, transported with his mother to Auschwitz. His book is both a memoir and a reflection upon memory. There is a passage, unforgettably poignant, where the author recounts his separation from his mother in July 1944 (the same month when Eduard Kiš arrived there). Kulka writes of how his mother turned and walked away from him. – '*Who was Orpheus there and who Eurydice – that is not clear to me – but my mother did not turn her head, and went from that place and disappeared.*'

These boys did not experience the deaths of their parents, only their vanishing. The integrity of this experience had to be maintained, indeed honoured in their writing: I believe this is how the pressure of expression was felt in both cases.

Going back to that early story by Kiš: it is a parable of history as brute force. I don't think the tram is meant to represent fascism or communism (even though the bull is red). It is History,

crushing an individual. This antithesis between inhuman force and frail humanity recurs throughout Kiš's writing. In the work of his maturity, he found more convincing and imaginatively engaging ways to make us *see* this antithesis.

It is a huge challenge in fiction, not so much to evoke the plight of a victim – although the elaboration of a narrative about a character who is doomed to lose is fraught with aesthetic risks. Not so much that, as to evoke convincingly the antagonist, the brute force, the juggernaut, the steamroller of history.

Kiš's mature work creates perspectives on history that respect experience – if not one's own, then one's imagination of what experience in that situation could resemble. For the main character in the novel **Hourglass**, whom we know only by his initials, 'E.S.', the inexorable force of history has many faces and names. It is the Orthodox Christian priest who may – or not – grant him the baptismal certificates for his children which can save them from persecution. It is the police interrogator who compels him to describe and account for his actions, his words, his thoughts about his words, his dreams and desires. And it is the Hungarian policemen who – as he foresees exactly – will, before very long, ride into his village on their bicycles with black feathers in their black gendarme hats, like latter-day horsemen of the apocalypse.

History resides in the unequal relationship between parties, where the balance of coercive power is not in question, nor open to dispute; all that remains to be settled are the terms which the stronger party will exact from the weaker. Whether the stronger party feels that he or she is making history, or indeed is being history, is beside the point.

You may object that there is more to history than this; that deliberation and compromise are not less entitled to their place in our consideration of history than confrontation and strife; that Tolstoy, for example, shows a more richly textured sense of history. And you would be right. But the history which compelled Kiš to write was not that history of evolutionary change, adaptation, and adjustment – let alone a pageant of unfolding liberty or democracy. It was the history of the totalitarian regimes which careened insanely around much of Europe during the last century. Those regimes were millenarian, claiming to be the end-points of history, the final expression of political and even philosophical ideas, the penultimate or definitive forms of statehood.

And the insane careening continues. It might seem nowadays that Kiš's work – framed by the Second World War and the Cold War – was consigned to the past in November 1989, when the Berlin Wall was breached: less than a month, as it happened, after Kiš's own death. If he was, as Milan Kundera called him, the only writer who turned Stalinist terror, the struggle against Nazism and the Holocaust into great poetry, the only one 'who never sacrificed so much as a phrase of his books to political commonplaces', then may it not be that he is now purely historical, a writer whose salience pertains to his own epoch, circumscribed by the experience to which he was loyal, an epoch that belongs to the past?

Well, ideology and coercion remain decisive in our lives. The arena where these forces are seen most nakedly has shifted eastwards, but Europe and North America – our societies – are still deeply implicated, deeply complicit, in the forms currently taken by those unequal relationships between parties.

An official report was finally published last July, after many years' delay, into the decisions which led the United Kingdom to join the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I won't digress here on the momentous consequences of those decisions; you all know them. Suffice it to say that the day after this report was released, a former prime minister went on BBC radio to justify yet again what he had done. I want to quote a single sentence from Tony Blair's interview:

*What we did in removing Saddam had terrible consequences that we did not foresee, and I understand all the criticisms, but when I look at it today, I think still that we moved with the grain of where the future is going to be in these countries and in this region.*

Roy Scranton, of this university, has just published a fine novel [**War Porn**] about the Iraq invasion and its meanings. Near the start of the novel, one character muses about a veteran who has just returned from Iraq. 'What would it feel like, do something like that?' she wonders. 'Break a world in two and walk away?' This video indicates one answer.

I only want to draw attention to the politician's manner, on one hand, and his metaphor, on the other. The great critic William Empson once observed that 'when a man is dutifully deceiving himself, he will often admit the truth in his metaphors'. The politician's manner here is ingratiating; he understands all the criticisms. His metaphor tells a different story: 'we moved with the grain of where the future is going to be.' The logical circularity is the point. The future is a dimension, and unknowable. Even if it were a place, how would this man know its location? He speaks of the grain, evoking polished wood or fields of wheat, but he means gleaming steel tracks, laid down, pointing to a single destination. In that 'Advice to a Young Writer', Kiš said 'Do not get obsessed with the urgency of history and do not believe in the metaphor about the locomotives of history. Do not, therefore, climb aboard "the locomotives of history", for they are nothing but a silly metaphor.' He also said: 'Do not believe in Utopian projects, except in those you are creating yourself.'

So the eagerness to please and the air of strenuous self-deprecation in that BBC interview mean that it may not sound to you like an ironclad political ideology; but, make no mistake, it is one. The truth is in the metaphor, which reveals convictions that possess the blindness and self-righteousness of the ideologies that afflicted Europe and the world beyond Europe during the lifetime of Danilo Kiš. That possess, above all, the potential to inflict immense harm in the conviction that this harm is a price worth paying for the ultimate benefit of those people or at least their descendants.

This reasoning is implicit in the metaphor about the grain of the future, and it puts the speaker in bad company. In March 1992, as the Serbian attack on Bosnia was in its final stages of

preparation, the Bosnian Serb leader who was recently sentenced to 40 years in prison for genocide and crimes against humanity, told a Bosnian Muslim politician: ‘This is history, this is war, I am ready to sacrifice this entire generation if it means that future generations will live better.’<sup>1</sup>

Kiš was fascinated by the blinding, self-blinding power of political ideology. His book of stories called **A Tomb for Boris Davidovich** is about revolutionaries who commit themselves to the Soviet project of world revolution, and – as a result – perpetrate terrible crimes. The stories do not investigate the process by which his characters come to make this commitment. It happens in the space of a paragraph or two, as they move from a placid provincial existence to complete faith. Kiš only hints here and there at grievances or resentments that might have played a part. I interpret this as Kiš’s avowal that his task is not to invent thought, a process of reasoning, on behalf of characters whose significance lies entirely in their actions – in the results of their commitment. I remember these enigmatic, violent characters whenever the outrages of our own time, in the cities of Europe and the USA, are followed by media interviews with baffled neighbours of the perpetrators, saying that ‘he just seemed an ordinary guy, we had no idea...’

Kiš’s sense of the responsibility of fiction before history was highly developed. On one hand, fiction must recognise the reality of history. On the other, it has a margin of freedom that can be used to release the imagination like an irrepressible jester or genie into the endless May Day parade of force that constitutes History with a capital H. The parade is real, the jester is fictional – and the jester’s victories of wit and truth-telling are impossible. But they enlarge the imagination, they widen the scope of our sympathy. And this too is reality: a second-order reality, however.

Kiš once told an interviewer that ‘literature must correct History’. He went on to explain: ‘History is general, literature concrete; History is manifold, literature individual ... Literature corrects the indifference of historical data by replacing History’s lack of specificity with a specific individual.’ His terms here are drawn, ultimately, from Aristotle, who maintained something like the opposite: that History deals in particular facts, while poetry tends to deal with universal or general truths.<sup>2</sup>

Kiš’s verbs, though, have a different source. Leaving the modal auxiliary to one side – that imperative which conveys Kiš’s high sense of the mission of literature – the choice of correct is beautifully exact. Literature is an editor with pen in hand, scanning the draft of history and

<sup>1</sup> Radovan Karadžić to Rasim Kadić, quoted in *Mladina* (Ljubljana), 14 July 1992. Karadžić meant that he was ready to let the generation of young Bosnian Serb men be killed in war. Members of other nationalities were not even worth mentioning. (See also <http://www.faktor.ba/vijest/rasim-kadic-karadzic-mi-je-rekao-da-su-odredili-150-000-mrtvih-srba-u-ratu-za-teritorije-foto-184630>.)

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle: (A) ‘poetry tends to give general [or universal] truths while history gives particular facts.’ (B) ‘the real difference between history and poetry is that one tells what happened and the other what might happen’.

making emendations – restoring the individual dimension which had been expunged. This puts literature in a superior position, with power to alter the record of events. Yet the limitation of this role is inherent in the metaphor – what he would call the ‘silly metaphor’ – because history with a capital H is not a text at all; not the aggregated chronicle of the past; not an ideal historiography. It is a continuum of shattering collisions: the ‘chain of events’ that Walter Benjamin’s angel perceived as a single catastrophe, piling up the wreckage at its feet. History in this sense cannot be corrected except in the realm of imagination, where literature achieves its effects and secures what value it has.

Kiš’s precedent here is not Aristotle; it is Nietzsche, in **The Birth of Tragedy**, elaborating his view of Socrates as the new Orpheus who rose against the god Dionysus and vanquished him. In this telling, Socrates is the fateful figure who casts the shadow of insight over ancient Athens, negating the greatest accomplishments of Greek genius. The harbinger of modernity, which breaks up integrity and brings decadence, that condition in which ‘life no longer dwells in the whole.’

‘Socrates conceives it to be his duty to correct existence,’ writes Nietzsche teasingly, or mockingly. Of course, existence is no more vulnerable to correction by Socrates than history is vulnerable to correction by novels. And yet... Nietzsche was convinced that Socrates’s corrections had been all too deplorably successful in dimming the Dionysian brilliance of Greek culture. Ideas do inflect History with a capital H. If we know anything, working in universities, we know this. And by shaping the past, they shape perceptions of the present, and hence the conditions in which the future is constantly becoming the present – not the false fictitious future that moves like a locomotive on non-existent tracks, but the real fictitious future which we imagine in a myriad ways and that ceases to be fiction only when it solidifies at our fingertips and then envelops us. This is why Nietzsche can so urgently deplore the influence of Socrates, and why literature can, after all, in its way, correct history.

A marvellous correction of history was provided a few years ago in one of the countries that emerged from the destruction of Kiš’s homeland, the country called Yugoslavia. A Croatian writer and editor called Slavko Goldstein published, in 2007, a book called **1941. The Year that Keeps Returning**. The book examines the genocidal violence that was used in Croatia and Bosnia during the Second World War, and traces how *that* violence engendered the violence which attended the destruction of Yugoslavia fifty years later. The claim of a causal connection between the two episodes has long been exploited by propaganda in the region, often to extenuate crimes. Before Goldstein, however, this claim had not been subjected to scrupulous examination by one who lived through both periods. Goldstein was qualified for this task by experience.

His book includes an account of the recovery of a letter from his father. Ivo Goldstein was Jewish, and as such was soon arrested, jailed and tortured by Croatia’s Quisling pro-Nazi regime. That summer, 1941, he was killed in circumstances that the family would not learn about until much later. But fully 64 years would pass before a letter written from prison by Ivo Goldstein reached his son. At the age not of 12 but of 76, Slavko Goldstein received a sheet of

paper, tightly folded, covered in faded pencil script, which had been found among the papers of Vinko Nikolić, another Croatian writer who, as a nationalist, had served the Quisling regime, fled in 1945, and remained loyal to its name and legacy for the rest of his long life. I remember this man's public appearances in Croatia in the 1990s, when the new democratic regime not only permitted him to return home from exile but treated him as a heroic patriot.

Ivo Goldstein's letter is loving and encouraging and noble in sentiment. 'You should know', he writes, 'that there are times when it is a greater honour to be in prison than outside it. Perhaps you were crying because your father is suffering an injustice. It is better to bear an injustice than to commit one.'

I want now to show you another letter from the same period. This letter was written by Danilo Kiš's father Eduard, to his own sister (Danilo's aunt, in other words), in April 1942, just less than a year after Ivo Goldstein's letter. It was found among Eduard's papers, which his widow and children took back with them to Yugoslavia in 1947. The letter was mislaid in the 1960s, then found again. Kiš wrote the novel that became **Hourglass** as a sort of vast commentary on this letter. He published the letter at the end of his novel as a guide to the contents.

It is a brilliant device. As with our own lives, understanding comes retrospectively if it comes at all. Kiš used to say that the letter at the end of the novel was authentic, but this was not true. For he had revised it, moving material around, shaping it, deleting some bits, inserting allusions and metaphors that he then expanded in the novel. You might say that his reworking of his father's letter was another form of the correction of history.

The last correction Kiš made in the letter was the addition of a postscript: '*P.S. It is better to be among the persecuted than among the persecutors.*' This becomes the last line in the novel.

You can imagine my surprise when I read Goldstein's book and found his father expressing almost the same moral principle that Kiš put in a letter written by the fictional version of his father. Let me turn again to Aristotle's **Poetics** to convey the sense of the uncanny, the reverberation, which this coincidence creates. Just after that passage where he discusses the difference between poetry and history, Aristotle says this:

*... the poet must be a "maker" not of verses but of stories, since he is a poet in virtue of his "representation", and what he represents is action. Even supposing he represents what has actually happened, he is none the less a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some actual occurrences being the sort of thing that would probably or inevitably happen, and it is in virtue of this that he is their "maker" ... (1451b)*

Real events can be improbable, as we know from our own lives; and art needs to beware. Ivo Goldstein's letter confirms the poetic precision of Kiš's 'correction' to his father's letter. For the postscript he added to his father's letter, which falsified it as a document, turns out to have been, indeed, what Aristotle called '*the sort of thing that would probably or inevitably happen.*'

The sentence is a quotation from the Talmud, from a tractate called Bava Kamma, where it is attributed to Rabbi Abbahu of Caesarea. Kiš placed this sentence here because he wanted – at the end of this novel about the struggle of a Central European Jew against the forces that will make him disappear – to honour traditional moral thought. It contrasts the monstrous injustice of the persecution that oppresses ‘E.S.’ with the ancestral wisdom of his people.

Of course the line has to work artistically as well as philosophically. The postscript looks back into the difficult family relationships in the novel – the strains between E.S. and his sister. It turns the Talmudic axiom into a snide put-down; the persecution E.S. has in mind is the family bullying that he has been complaining about. So, E.S. might be a loser but he is morally superior. His intention is tainted by pettiness of a very human kind; yet the effect is not petty – it is grand, perhaps because the line faces forward, into the future: the future where the author wrote the book, and where we read it. In its minuscule way, it signals that the West’s finest moral traditions had survived the mid-century onslaught.

The majestic Schottenstein edition of the Bava Kamma translates the Rabbi’s statement as: ‘One should always be among the pursued and not among the pursuers’.<sup>3</sup> The editorial gloss is straightforward, about how we should resist the temptation to turn the tables on a pursuer who wishes to harm us. Then the editor adds, almost as an afterthought, something very endearing and important: ‘*One should rather choose, if one can, to be neither the pursuer nor the pursued.*’ This comes as a reminder of normality, that life is best without pursuit of any kind. Such reminders are precious in a context of History with a capital H, and of vertiginous moral dilemmas. But Kiš is writing about situations where the choice of not having to choose was non-existent. Situations, in other words, such as that in which Ivo Goldstein found himself in 1941.

I wrote to Slavko Goldstein, pointing out this coincidence. He replied that he had no doubt his father – the grandson of a rabbi – would have known the sentence from the Talmud. But he added that if Ivo Goldstein had written the letter just a month later, in June 1941, by which time the scale of persecution in Croatia was plain to see, then he would not – Slavko thinks – have included that sentence. What I take Slavko Goldstein to mean is that his father would have come to support resistance to the injustice, not submission to it. For resistance to such persecution would have been preferable, even if it involved, as it might, the perpetration of injustice in its turn.

I read this reflection with surprise and then with relief. Surely he is right to defend his father in this way, by saying that the Socratic—Talmudic principle is not absolute, for there are circumstances (unimaginable, one supposes, to its originators in Athens or Caesarea) where the cause of goodness and justice mandates action.

---

<sup>3</sup> Mesorah Heritage Foundation, 1990-1993, ‘elucidated’ by Rabbi Abba Zvi Naiman.

Kiš also chose this sentence to end his novel, I believe, because it is not *only* Jewish. It belongs to the common wealth of moral wisdom, beyond national or religious precincts. Kiš believed fervently in the unity of European culture; he was a comparativist by training and a modernist by temperament as well as by fate, with a modernist's sense of working within or across a living cosmopolitan tradition.

To the best of my knowledge, the principle that filtered down nearly two and a half millennia to Ivo Goldstein in 1941, emerged in the Platonic dialogue called **Gorgias**. Polus, taking up the question of what is the greatest good for humankind, asserts that it is *power*. Socrates pushes back, inch by inch, until Polus concedes that suffering wrong is as nothing compared with inflicting wrong. More than this: the wrongdoer who is not punished is – Polus comes to accept – more miserable than the one who *is* punished.

In his transition, Polus puts to Socrates the objection that anyone might put: it is terrible to suffer wrong – as Kiš's novel **Hourglass** shows with extraordinary vividness – so how can it be *better*? Polus comes to agree that to do wrong is more shameful than to suffer it. This gives Socrates a foothold. He proposes that to inflict wrong is worse than to suffer it 'through an excess of evil'. So it is not only more shameful to do wrong; it is also more evil. Polus is also led to accept that the life is most unhappy which is afflicted with evil and does not shrive this burden. Such a man, Socrates says – now he has an open goal before him – is one 'who does the greatest wrong and indulges in the greatest injustice and yet escapes correction or punishment.' Then Callicles steps in, accusing Socrates of obstructing the attainment of wealth and honour. Happy is the man who has cultivated his appetites and can satisfy them. Socrates duly engages, and advances to the same conclusion as with Polus.

From the start of **Gorgias**, Socrates has hardly resorted to his usual deflecting professions of ignorance. As the dialogue moves to its end, he is at full stretch, 'correcting existence' for all he is worth, championing temperance and order against 'the world of disorder or riot', to substantiate his claim that 'it is as much more evil as it is more shameful to do than to suffer wrong'. Eventually his ground of demonstration becomes religious, as he proposes that the worst of all evils is to die and 'arrive in the other world with a soul surcharged with wicked deeds'.

His argument is strongest when he first deals with Callicles. He tells him that if he, Callicles, cannot substantiate his own claim about suffering, then – says Socrates – '*Callicles* himself will not agree with you, *Callicles*, but will be at odds with you throughout your life. And I think it is better that my lyre should be discordant and out of tune and that the majority of mankind should disagree with and oppose me, than that I, being one, should be out of harmony with, and contradict, myself.'

The moral principle or precept upheld here by Socrates was invoked in the twentieth century by Hannah Arendt in her thinking about the Holocaust, above all in connection with the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. She called the Socratic axiom 'the basic assumption of all moral

philosophy'. I believe it provided her with a point of orientation, a means of keeping her compass amid the moral apocalypse that was the subject of the trial.

She was fascinated by Socrates's empirical claim about the necessity to be in harmony with oneself. She saw it as proof of the bifurcation of identity or the doubleness of consciousness. For, she said, 'nothing that is identical with itself, truly and absolutely *one* like A is A, can be either in or out of harmony with itself.' – 'Articulating this being-conscious-of-myself,' she explained, 'I am inevitably two-in-one.'

Linking this to Plato's definition elsewhere of thinking as the soundless dialogue between me and myself,<sup>4</sup> Arendt argued that such dialogue is nothing less than 'the highest actualization of the human capacity for speech'. This leads Arendt to a gloss on the great principle which goes beyond Socrates but is, arguably, implicit in **Gorgias**. 'For Socrates', she writes, 'this two-in-one meant simply that if you want to think you must see to it that the two who carry on the thinking dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends. It is better for you to suffer than to do wrong because you can remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer? Not even a murderer.'

This is a secular psychological 'correction' of the religious ground that Socrates falls back on. Arendt does not claim this is the only reason why it is better not to be a murderer – I'm not sure she even argues that it is the principal reason. You might object, for example, that it is better to suffer than cause suffering because we should do no harm, and causing suffering is a very bad thing to do.

Arendt is building up the hinterland of argument to support her judgement that Adolf Eichmann was incapable of thought, and was for this reason a negligible person, a nobody. This follows from the Socratic axiom; if Eichmann had been capable of thought, he would have avoided those actions which would make his company intolerable to himself. In this circular vein, she reaches the curious conclusion that 'the evil committed by nobodies' is 'the greatest evil'. We see here the strain of trying – as Arendt does try, valiantly – to reconfirm Socrates's axiom for the twentieth century. I think she is more convincing when she observes, splendidly and differently, that 'Morally the only reliable people when the chips are down are those who say "I can't."' We and indeed they themselves can speculate about someone's inner state of harmony or disharmony, and reach such conclusions about that as we or they may; what matters, though, is that there is a moral limit beyond which they cannot go.

Returning to Kiš: while he was not a philosopher, he was a moralist, and he thought long about the moral problems that obsessed Arendt in the 1960s and 1970s. This thinking issued in fictional forms or forms of fiction, as well as in his non-fiction. Arendt was given to insisting that thought – as distinct from contemplation – is an activity. Thinking, she wrote, unfreezes that which language has frozen into thought. One ground for praising the novel **Hourglass** is to say that it dramatizes the activity that is thinking, the thinking which unfreezes thought. In

---

<sup>4</sup> In **Theaetetus** and **Sophist**.

this way, Kiš secured a late place in the Modernist tradition born more than a century ago, with James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Unlike others in this tradition, he carried his modernist writing into the heart of twentieth-century darkness. This was his destiny – for he was raised in that darkness, it drove him and his family to hide and flee and hide again; and it swallowed up his father. Literature became the torch to understand his place in this darkness and his relationship to it.

Among his resources in this endeavour was the figure of the *double*. My perception of you is not yours of yourself; it doubles you. If I deny this is going on, I may efface your reality with my version of it. This is why we generate fiction as naturally as we breathe. The dynamics of perception in a novel are the means by which knowledge of character, situation, and plot is dispensed and controlled. Kiš was fascinated by these dynamics, and his mastery of them is a source of pleasure in his writing.

This fascination also had a political side. Kiš was obsessed with the power of politics to affect people's lives, especially to affect them for the worse in the name of the better. Politics is history in the present tense. This life-changing power is a matter of material strength, but also of conviction. The proliferating energy of perception is dangerous when thwarted. If plurality presents as a threat of disintegration, the reaction will be a counter-movement that enshrines one's own integrity, and sees others as a threat, one which may justify resistance by any means.

This is the background of Kiš's polemical critique of nationalism, which he wrote in the early 1970s. It was much cited during the wars of the 1990s, and is still quoted today as a standard reference on the subject.

*... The nationalist, as we noted, fears no one but his brother. But him he fears with an existential, pathological dread; for the chosen enemy's victory is his own total defeat, the annihilation of his very being. As a shirker and a nonentity the nationalist does not aim high. Victory over the chosen enemy, the other, is total victory. This is why nationalism is the ideology of hopelessness, the ideology of feasible victory, victory that is guaranteed and defeat that is never final. The nationalist fears no one, "no one save God", but his God is made to his own measure, it is his double sitting at the next table, his own brother, as impotent as himself ...*

Kiš found a model for thinking about nationalism in Jean-Paul Sartre's little book, **Portrait of the Anti-Semite**, which Sartre wrote at the end of the Second World War. It is a brilliant performance, contending that anti-Semitism is 'not an opinion' but 'first and foremost a passion', a total outlook on the world, which is 'adopted of one's own free will', a 'philosophy of life brought to bear not only on Jews, but on all people in general, on history and society'.

Mapped onto Sartre's portrait of the anti-Semite, Kiš's portrait is of the local nationalists in Yugoslavia, the ones who used the language that he himself used. To this end, he adds a new feature to Sartre's portrait. This feature is the *sibling double*.

Sartre argued that the pressure of anti-Semitism compels the Jew to double himself, forces what Sartre calls ‘a duplication of the fundamental relationship with others’. Kiš adapts this insight, and he describes the nationalist as one half of a whole, a being out of harmony with himself – in that phrase of Socrates – who is obsessed with defeating another who is his own double not only in virtue of their shared characteristics, but also because this other is – unbeknown to himself – the nationalist’s own brother.

This rivalry between fraternal doubles is Kiš’s extra ingredient, and it fits his portrait onto the deadly rivalry between Serbs and Croats, which was more responsible than anything else for the internecine violence in Yugoslavia in the 1940s and again in the 1990s. Kiš’s archetypal nationalist, destitute of self-awareness, ‘this individual without individuality’ as he calls him, projects outwards the terror of disintegration and converts it into persecution.

At Nuremberg, the former Nazi governor-general of Poland, Hans Frank, announced his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Undergoing trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity, he expressed remorse. He said at one point: *‘It is as though I am two people. Me, myself, Frank here – and that other Frank, the Nazi leader. Sometimes I wonder how that man Frank could have done those things.’* Was this a calculating last play for sympathy by a man who knew what sentence almost certainly awaited him? Or was it the naïve expression of a disintegrated soul, so far out of harmony with himself that the very notion of harmony has no purchase? Or was it both of these?

Sixty years later, a very senior Bosnian Serb wartime leader called Momčilo Krajišnik was tried in The Hague for crimes against humanity. The judgment noted Krajišnik’s attempts ‘to mislead the Chamber into thinking that he was a ... bureaucrat who dealt exclusively with inconsequential matters.’ The judgment also remarked on his very low credibility as a witness, but it also noted, as an exception, what it called ‘a rare moment of relative frankness’, when Krajišnik commented on something he had said during the war that was quoted back at him during the trial.

To explain: Muslims in Yugoslavia were given the constitutional status of a nation in the 1970s, and this was resented ever after by many Serb and Croat nationalists, in Bosnia but not only there. During the war against Bosnia, it was a standard propaganda claim that the Muslims were not a proper people or nation at all, they were an artificial people, just Islamized Serbs (or, indeed, Croats).

During the war, Krajišnik had dismissed Muslim political identity as a fiction. When this was cited in his trial, he responded as follows:

*This here is nonsense, what Momčilo Krajišnik was saying. It's detrimental. I have to say I never thought like this. If I could distance myself from this Momčilo Krajišnik, I would ... this speech is absolutely authentic, and I'm very sorry that this Momčilo Krajišnik said what he said.*

Again, was this a cynical bid to persuade the chamber that he was a reformed man, or an expression of spiritless disintegration? Or does that question make little sense?

Applying for early release from prison, Krajišnik said that he accepted ‘the judgement and has deep remorse for the victims who have suffered as a result of the crimes which were committed and for which he was found guilty.’ (Note the low cunning of the language.) He also pledged to ‘promote reconciliation in the former Yugoslavia’. He was released in 2013, after serving most of a 20-year sentence, and got a hero’s welcome in Serb-controlled Bosnia. He has since published a book that reiterates the familiar propaganda of half-truths and untruths about the war which Bosnian Serb leaders uttered at the time. His nationalist prejudices and blinkers remain fully intact. He insists he is innocent, that he knew nothing about crimes by Serb forces, and that his conscience is clear.<sup>5</sup>

Having followed Krajišnik’s foul career, read extracts from his book, and even testified in his trial, I am tempted to confirm – in the spirit of Arendt – that he is indeed incapable of thinking. But this diagnosis would hardly explain what he did, why he did it, and how he seems to live with himself very easily, with little strain. What does this mean? That we must not define our intellectual definitions and categories to suit our convenience; the normal usage of words like ‘think’ must be respected if we are to keep in contact with the world as it is. Krajišnik, alas, is somebody. He is not incapable of thought; he is a moral imbecile.

In Socratic terms, Krajišnik did evil; was punished for it; and presumably his soul was thereby relieved of the burden of unshriven, unatoned-for evil. If shriving the burden depends on recognition of the evil that one has done, then Krajišnik’s burden remains squarely on his shoulders. But he does not feel it, so who are we to say that it is there at all? He gives no sign of awareness that he is in the unhappiest position a person can be in. Perhaps Socrates was incapable of conceiving moral imbecility on this scale.

In Arendtian terms, he was incapable of recognising what he had done; so his conscience could well be clear – and why not? I am uneasy with an analysis that denies agency to a criminal who is clearly competent, not suffering from diminished responsibility. It looks like moving the goalposts: excluding Eichmann from the category of the thoughtful because her prior definition of thoughtfulness should have made it impossible for him to do what he did. Kiš’s literary portrait of a nationalist gets us further in comprehending Krajišnik and his like than Arendt gets us in comprehending Eichmann.

There has been one defendant at The Hague, however, whose actions in detention showed the edifying sight – to my eye – of an individual achieving individuality; a conscienceless person finding or making a conscience. This was Milan Babić, a leader of the Serb rebellion in Croatia in 1990 and 1991, charged with crimes against humanity and other offences by the prosecutor

---

<sup>5</sup> ‘My conscience is clear. I asked myself a hundred times if I could have done anything differently, and I didn’t find that I could have.’ Also this: ‘I have decided to spend the rest of my life in search of evidence that I am not guilty and that what I was convicted of was not true.’ See <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/the-three-trials-of-momcilo-krajsnik>

at The Hague tribunal. Babić was initially named as a co-perpetrator in the Croatia indictment of Serbian president Milošević. He contacted the tribunal and agreed to testify. Interviews with Babić led to an indictment against him. Under a plea-bargain with the prosecution, he entered a guilty plea and cooperated in his own case, and also in the trials of other indictees. He is not the only defendant to have pleaded guilty – some 20 have done so. But Babić’s statement stands out for its grasp of what he had done, its expression of remorse without self-pity or sly attempts to diffuse responsibility, and its reaching out to the former enemy.

I’d like to show a few moments:

**Babić – first indictee at the war crimes tribunal to admit guilt**

‘The regret that I feel is the pain that I have to live for the rest of my life. These crimes and my participation therein can never be justified. I’m speechless when I have to express the depth of my remorse for what I have done and for the effect that my sins have had on the others. I can only hope that by expressing the truth, by admitting to my guilt, and expressing the remorse can serve as an example to those who still mistakenly believe that such inhumane acts can ever be justified.’



*‘I ask my brother Croats to forgive us, their brother Serbs. And I pray for the Serb people to turn to the future and to achieve the kind of compassion that will make it possible to forgive the crimes.’*

Recall Kiš’s savage portrait of the nationalist, who fears no-one but his brother, his God made to his own measure, his double at the next table.

Babić committed suicide two years after this plea, while testifying in another trial. He left no note. In Socratic terms, Babić had no reason for despair; the worst was over. In the terms of Hannah Arendt, however, his final action has a terrible logic, if the price of recovering these most precious attributes was the discovery that he could not live with himself; that the silent

dialogue could not, after all, be conducted on tolerable terms; that integrity had been glimpsed but could not be secured.

It would be ingenuous to propose a philosophical explanation of Babić's suicide, however, and I am not doing that here. May we not, though, grant him a measure of the generous understanding that he denied to the victims of his regime in 1991, and concede that he was himself, in his plea and his testimony in other trials, making a sincere attempt to 'correct history'?

I want to end on a note of whole-hearted admiration. So let me say how Kiš's first life-partner and soulmate reacted to the fighting in Croatia in autumn 1991. Mirjana Miočinović was born in Belgrade, capital of Yugoslavia and Serbia, and has lived there all her life. She was a senior and much respected teacher at the university. Fighting in Croatia was gathering in scale and violence during the late summer and early autumn of 1991, when the renaissance city of Dubrovnik in southern Croatia came under bombardment from sea and land. Mirjana responded with a letter, dated 7 October:

### To the Dean of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts

Confronted with the terrible destruction of the country that I still consider my homeland, with the barbaric razing of the most precious monuments of the culture which produced those values which I teach in this very school, with immeasurable human suffering, and conscious of the fact that the people [nation] to which I myself belong has a large part in this as both victim and destroyer; and led by a deep feeling of bitterness and shame, I hereby inform you that in these circumstances I neither can nor wish to teach in a Faculty that has found no way to oppose or protest against all of this. As of today, therefore, I am ceasing to teach the course on The History of Yugoslav Theatre and Drama for the next month. Please suspend my salary for the month of October, and inasmuch as peace has not been established in this country by the end of this period, I will leave this school.

(The drama had flourished in renaissance Dubrovnik, at the same time that it flourished in Elizabethan London.)

The absurdity of her ultimatum is its point. Either the war stops, or I go! In that impossible demand lay the assumption of responsibility.

She resigned the following week, when the dean tried to have her sacked. She said afterwards that her action was just ‘normal’. Which of course it was not – except in the highest ideal sense. We remember Arendt: ‘Morally the only reliable people when the chips are down are those who say “I can’t.”’

If we were to presume to ‘correct’ Mirjana’s letter, we might add a postscript: ‘*P.S. It is better to be among the persecuted than among the persecutors.*’

Thank you very much.