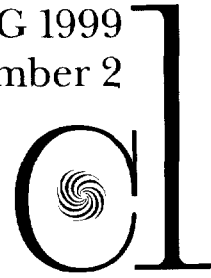


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Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and *The Protocols of Zion*

TO *CONSPIRE* MEANS literally to breathe together. And usually it's about bad breath. The word *conspiracy* tends to be used pejoratively to designate a subversive kinship of others, an imagined community based on exclusion more than on affection. *Conspiracy theory* is a conspiracy against conspiracy; it does not oppose the conspiratorial world view as such but doubly affirms it. Because conspiratorial thinking, whether based on facts or on fictions, produces vicious circles of analogy and paranoiac overdetermination, conspiracy theory can become a cause of violence, not merely its effect. How, then, can one produce a critical reflection on conspiracy that will not turn into a conspiracy theory? If conspiracy can be fictional, can fiction conspire to undo it?

The terms of conspiracy and of narrative overlap: in both cases one speaks about plots and plotting. Although we might all be complicit in the desire for a plot, in what Roland Barthes called "the passion for making sense," ideally our plots exist in the plural, not in the singular. In contrast, the conspiracy theory that will be discussed here relates everything to a single subterranean Plot, promising a comfortingly totalizing allegory that leaves nothing to chance. In this case narrative passion turns into paranoiac obsession. For a paranoiac-conspirator the other is seen as another—more or less successful—paranoiac. The whole world appears as a kind of global village or new international of double agents and conspirators, a secret society of those who are not with us but against

us. Hence the boundaries between life and literature, fact and fiction become virtually irrelevant.

I will examine an extreme case in which reading for the conspiratorial plot—with a capital *P*—presents an ethical problem, and the conflation of life and fiction turns deadly. As a “secret” book that expounds the myth of the Jewish plot for world domination, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were one of the most influential forgeries of the twentieth century, having inspired and justified pogroms in Russia and the Ukraine and Nazi policies of extermination. In this case a blatantly fictional conspiracy theory, not the conspiracy itself, contributed to tragedy. At the end of the twentieth century the *Protocols* have surfaced again from the subterranean levels of international popular culture and enjoy new popularity in post-Soviet Russia, Japan and the United States. I will look at the making of the “secret” *Protocols*, their ripple effect in contemporary culture, and at two recent literary works that engage with conspiracy theories and practices: Umberto Eco’s novel *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) and Danilo Kiš’s short story “The Book of Kings and Fools” (1983). Since the *Protocols* themselves were a misread work of fiction, returning them to the realm of literature will help to disclose some of their seductive and persuasive tactics.

Conspiracy theories flourish at a time of crisis, of political and social change. Many modern conspiracy theories in the West can be traced to the English and the French revolution, or even to religious wars and crusades such as the massacre of Cathars in Southern France and the disappearance of the Templars. Yet twentieth-century conspiracy theories are rarely engaged with actual history. Instead they appeal to myth and end up exemplifying what Eco calls “Ars Oblivionalis” rather than the art of memory. The conspiratorial world view is fundamentally nostalgic. Its revival in modern times reflects a nostalgia for a transcendental cosmology and a quasi-religious world view dominated by an order of similarities and analogies. The conspiratorial world view is based on a single transhistorical plot that explains all historical events, and the specificity of modern circumstances is thus erased; modern history is seen as a fulfillment of ancient prophesies. Nostalgic for the mythical age of purity or innocence, conspiracy theories often forget or ignore actual collective memories of the recent past and abdicate any responsibility for actions in the present. Contemporary conspiratorial theater thus contains an element of the medieval mystery play and a touch of nineteenth-century melodrama: here premodern fantasies coexist with modern problems and post-modern technology.

The end of the second millennium has witnessed a rebirth of conspiracy theories. Left and right are equally prone to conspiratorial plottings—from the historically rooted conspiratorial imagi-

nation of Oliver Stone's *JFK* to the more transcendental world conspiracy of Pat Robertson's *New World Order*, the central text of the Christian Coalition. Conspiracy theories are as international as the supposed conspiracies they are fighting against; they spread from post-communist Russia to Japan to all parts of the globe. Usually there is a secret/sacred conspiratorial text—The Book of *Illuminati*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Terence Diaries (favored by the American militia movement)—that functions like a Bible and is read as a revelation or a prophesy rather than a text written or compiled by an individual author; it invites incantation, not critical interpretation. Moreover, the production and distribution of these books is also secret and is executed “outside” the official “corrupt media magnates.”

The history of the making of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which has been translated into fifty languages, demonstrates how a certain archetypal plot travels from medieval demonology to gothic fictions, then to the classical nineteenth-century novel, and finally to right-wing popular culture. The conspiratorial plot migrates between religious and secular texts, between high and popular culture, and across state borders. In this process of cross-cultural migration the fictional frames of the story and the names of its authors disappear. Fiction is read as a document; a novelistic scene turns into a text of revelation. The history of this migrating conspiratorial structure is thus an important topic for cultural studies, which tends to examine the more benevolent democratic side of popular culture, rather than its reactionary superstitions and prejudices. “Maybe only cheap fiction gives us the true measure of reality?” asks Umberto Eco's disgruntled hero (407). Kiš, on the other hand, insists on the need to return to self-reflexive modernist literature and the practices of estrangement and perspectivism in order to think through ethical ways of confronting the absurdity of evil and politics of paranoia that haunted much of Eastern European writing and life.

In Freud's description, paranoia is a fixation on oneself and a progressive exclusion of the external world through the mechanism of projection. Paranoia is a logically reasoned delusion usually involving persecution or grandeur. The paranoiac believes that there is a pattern to random events and that everything is somehow connected to him or her. The rational quality of this delusion is very important; every element and detail makes sense within a closed system that is based on a delusionary premise. For example, the proposition “I hate him” becomes transformed by projection into, “He hates (persecutes) me, which will justify me in hating him,” and then, “I do not love him—I hate him, because he PERSECUTES me.” Thus, “the internal perception is suppressed, and instead, its content, after undergoing a certain degree of distortion enters consciousness in the form of an external perception” (Freud

33).¹ In the case of Schreber, for instance, the internal crisis was projected into an external world on the verge of immanent catastrophe. He saw himself as the only real man still surviving and perceived others as “cursory contraptions” (Freud 39). While a case of acute paranoia, it highlights the typical paranoid relation to the other as a terrifying projection of the self. Moreover, the terms *paranoia* and *conspiracy*, besides being used in a narrow sense to describe a clinical disorder or a historical plot, have also become important metaphors in twentieth-century culture—from Salvador Dali’s “critical paranoia” as a *modus operandi* to Frederick Jameson’s recent reappropriation of conspiracy theory for the discussion of “geopolitical aesthetics.” Lacan has even suggested that the paranoid state is not merely the opposite of a normal psyche, but corresponds to a certain developmental stage and informs fundamental structures of human knowledge. (And for Foucault paranoia is partially justified as a response to institutionalized violence. Cultures whose experience of historical violence is more immediate tend to be more suspicious of naturalizing and equalizing different kinds of violence and acceptance of paranoia.)

Since ethics is precisely about one’s relationship to others, it stands in counterpoint and in reaction to paranoia. Moreover, it is based on estrangement as much as on human solidarity. “Literary ethics,” in this case, is not reduced solely to moral examples and the ethical behavior of characters, but highlights the ethics of storytelling itself. “Literary ethics” does not read literary discourse merely as a moral recourse,² but offers a special kind of optics that focuses on the moments in texts when words are propelled into deeds, and when the relationships between general and particular, between abstract ideals or ideologies and singular acts, are called into question. In particular, self-conscious literary texts such as Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* and Kiš’s “The Book of Kings and Fools” offer us ethical insights into, and unique heuristic tools for understanding, “secret books” and conspiratorial temptations. Is there a difference between paranoia with and without quotation marks? Is there a way out of the conspiratorial labyrinth? An alternative to paranoid thinking?

1. The Making of the *Protocols*: Deadly Intertextuality

“Let us recall, for our pleasure and to remind ourselves, the main

¹ For a relevant bibliography see Laplanche and Pontalis. I am interested in some common mechanisms of paranoia that inform our “normal thinking” and hence do not release us from moral and ethical responsibility.

² For the most recent illuminating discussion of narrative ethics see Newton. My approach to literary ethics is influenced by Levinas 1984. Also see Bakhtin; Morson and Emerson; Booth; J. Hillis Miller; and Kristeva.

provisions of the *Protocols* . . . For an Aryan, nothing is more invigorating than to read them. It does more for our salvation than any number of prayers . . ." Thus wrote Ferdinand Céline in 1937 in his *Bagatelle pour un massacre* (277-89; also quoted in Cohn 250). Reading the *Protocols* provides him with an acute spasm of paranoiac pleasure, the ultimate sadomasochistic fantasy of world domination in which he could play both dominatrix and dominated. It might even have been amusing had such thoughts remained the fantasy of a writer, and not an anticipation of the Holocaust. Céline compares the reading of the *Protocols* to praying, but salvation in this case comes through hatred, not love.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the supposed revelation of an Anti-Christ and a secret plan for Jewish world domination, was first published in Russia in 1905 by a religious writer, Sergius Nilus. He claimed that the book's original was in Hebrew and that this was a rare recording of the secret protocols.³ In 1905-1907 the book inspired the bloodiest pogroms in Russian and Ukrainian history and later became Emperor Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra's favorite bedtime reading. In the early 1920s the book was published and widely discussed in France, Italy, the United States (with Henry Ford's generous assistance), Syria, Egypt, Persia, Palestine, Poland, Denmark and Sweden. In the *Philadelphia Ledger* the *Protocols* were called "the red Bible" of the Bolsheviks and said to contain a plan for world revolution. In London, *The Times* and *The Morning Post* discussed the *Protocols* with great seriousness and published several articles interpreting world history in light of the new revelation of a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy.

In August, 1921, an even more spectacular revelation appeared in *The Times*, when Philip Graves, its Constantinople correspondent, published an article demonstrating that the *Protocols* were plagiarized from Maurice Joly's little known "Dialogues in Hell" (1864), a fictional political pamphlet directed against Napoleon III and written in the form of a dialogue between Machiavelli and Montesquieu. In the *Protocols* the part of Machiavelli, slightly rewritten, was attributed to the "wise men of Zion." Graves's evidence came from a certain Mr. X, a Russian refugee in Constantinople—Christian Orthodox by religion, and Constitutional Monarchist by political conviction—who did not wish his real name to be known. A White Russian who had long been interested in the Jewish question, Mr. X had himself searched for the secret "Masonic organization" in Southern Russia, but the only conspiracy he had found

³ According to another (false) version of its origins, the *Protocols* were written by Dr. Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism. Most of my information on the history of the *Protocols* comes from Cohn and Bernstein. Bernstein's book *The Truth About "The Protocols of Zion"* contains documents used at the trial in Berne in 1934-35. I add to their findings my analysis of the *Protocols* in the Russian cultural and literary context.

was a monarchist one. In 1921 Mr. X purchased a number of old books from a former officer of the Okhrana, a White Russian refugee like himself. Among these books was a small volume in French lacking the title page. Glancing through it, Mr. X discovered, to his great surprise, that the fictional polemic of Machiavelli bore a very close resemblance to the "revelations" of the old men of Zion. Later this same rare French text was discovered in the British Museum with the name of its author—Parisian lawyer and enlightened French Catholic Maurice Joly—still attached. Joly had no Jewish connections whatsoever. In fact, the fictional dialogues between Montesquieu and Machiavelli in "Dialogues of Hell" were intended to criticize the government of Napoleon III. Subsequently arrested for anti-government propaganda, Joly committed suicide in prison. Although all copies of his pamphlet had apparently been ordered to be burned, one somehow ended up in the hands of the Russian secret police and another in the British Museum.

Having identified the fictional source of the *Protocols*, we can now trace the history of the fictional Judeo-Masonic conspiracy in more detail. Obviously, anti-Semitic propaganda did not start and end with the *Protocols*. According to Norman Cohn, the myth of a Jewish conspiracy is a combination of medieval superstition and a fear of modernity. In medieval Christian demonology Jews are seen as the servants of the Devil, a league of sorcerers employed by Satan for the spiritual and physical ruination of Christendom. In the nineteenth-century secular version of this prejudice, Jews become identified with all the "evils" of modernity—cosmopolitanism, uprootedness, modern law, and finance. This association became the foundation of what can be called "metaphysical anti-Semitism," a cultural myth that had little to do with a real conflict of interest between living people or even racial prejudice as such. The link between Jews and Masons is likewise historically false, since Jews were in fact not allowed to enter Masonic lodges until the nineteenth century (and only if they were converts). Notions of a Judeo-Masonic plot in fact had their own origins in the gothic novel and nineteenth-century detective thriller.⁴

Umberto Eco has analyzed the transmigration of conspiratorial plots both Jesuit and Judeo-Masonic in the work of Balzac, Dumas, and Eugene Sue, as well as less well-known aspiring writers. For

⁴ According to Eco's "Fictional Protocols," the origins of European conspiratorial thinking go back to the legends about the clandestine activities of the Templars, Rosicrucians and Freemasons. On the eve of the French revolution there was a great anxiety about actual and fictional secret societies, and the stories about the ultimate conspiracy of the "Unknown Superiors," who decide the destiny of the world, became an object of anxiety. Between 1797-1798 Abbé Barruel published his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, where he described the French revolution as the final result of an age old plot of the secret followers of the Templars, who had dedicated themselves to the destruction of the monarchy and papacy and to the establishment of a world republic. In Barruel's text there is no

our purposes, perhaps the most important member of the last category is Hermann Goedsche, a German postal worker and occasional graphomaniac, who under the pen name Sir John Retcliffe published a novel entitled *Biarritz*, which contains an intercalated scene set in the Jewish Cemetery in Prague where the secret council of Representatives of the Twelve Tribes of Israel takes place—complete with gothic special effects and a cameo appearance by the Devil himself.⁵ A good example of reactionary middlebrow culture, *Biarritz* would not have made it into history had the scene in the Prague Cemetery not appeared mysteriously a few years later in a Russian pamphlet, “Jews, Masters of the World,” published by A.P. Krushevan. Goedsche’s novel thus foreshadowed the making of the *Protocols* and presented a literary scene as a historical document supposedly recorded by Rabbi John Retcliffe—not a likely name for a rabbi, but for a Russian ear it sounded foreign enough.⁶ It is in the Russian context, then, that the literary frames of the tale are dropped and a fiction is presented as a historical document and a call for retaliation. Krushevan himself was directly responsible for instigating major pogroms in Kishinev by distributing copies of “Jews, Masters of the World” among the police and Cossacks. Responses to this text, as well as those to the *Protocols*, provide a particularly extreme and distorted allegory of how in Russian society literature functions as revelation of truth and prescription for life.

How did these French and German texts come to Russia? Not without two exemplary Russian characters that seem to have come straight from Dostoevsky—a double agent, Peter Ivanovich Rachkovsky, the mastermind of the Okhrana (the Tsarist secret police), and Sergius Nilus, the *Protocols*’ ostensible “discoverer,” “translator,” and publisher, a Nietzschean turned religious prophet. The former started as a minor civil servant who cultivated ties to nihilist and revolutionary students. Once called to the Secret Police for routine questioning, he quickly joined in and soon became the foreign chief of the Secret Police in Europe.

mention of the Jews. But in 1806, at precisely the time when Napoleon decided to extend citizenship to French Jews and met with representatives of the Jewish community, Barruel received a letter from a certain Captain Simonini who claimed that Masonry had been founded by the Jews, who had (Simonini believed) infiltrated all secret societies. Barruel was repulsed by Simonini’s letter and allegedly said that it might cause a massacre of French Jews. Nevertheless, rumors of a Judeo-Masonic plot began to spread and even Garibaldi was accused of being its agent.

⁵ Eco (“Fictional Protocols” 135-36) shows that the scene in the Prague Cemetery, with its gothic ambiance, is modeled directly after Alexander Dumas’s *Giuseppe Balsamo*.

⁶ Later the French periodical *Contemporaine* republished the pamphlet, claiming it was written by Sir John Radcliffe. Thus the mythical Russian rabbi Retclif undergoes another metamorphosis and appears in a more plausible incarnation as a reliable English diplomat.

Rachkovsky's activity consisted in unmasking Russian revolutionary organizations (such as *Narodnaya Volya*) that were manufacturing bombs abroad, but also in planting bombs on their behalf. To discredit revolutionary activities, Rachkovsky was the first Russian to assert that all revolutionaries were Jews (which in the 1880s was hardly the case at all), and he orchestrated the first major anti-Semitic campaign in Russia. Using a pseudonym, he even wrote a critique of himself, attacking "the security chief Rachkovsky who employs as his agents a former revolutionary, a literary adventurer and a blackmailer, whose cheeks still bear marks of the slaps he received for attempted extortion in 1889." Here Rachkovsky plays with many of his own personae—literary adventurer, blackmailer, security chief, the man who informs on the security chief, and the man who outsmarts the man who informs on the security chief. Rachkovsky the conspiracy theorist thus attacks Rachkovsky the conspirator; he wishes to be an author and a character at once, the subject and object of conspiracy. As such, he could easily be imagined as a character in Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, but Dostoevsky rarely attacked nationalist reactionaries. Rachkovsky in turn helped Joly's texts come into the possession of another wild character worthy of Dostoevsky—Sergius Nilus, who polished the crude plagiarism of his predecessor and added to it some prophetic Russian flavor.

Sergius Nilus began his days as a free-thinking and fun-loving young man in Paris, an avid reader of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Later he was born again as a devout Orthodox Christian, who had a prophetic revelation about the coming of the Anti-Christ. He retired to a monastery where he lived in a strange *menage à quatre*—with his wife, the emperatrice's lady in waiting, his ex-mistress, and her daughter. The monastery where he resided, Optina Pustynia, had a remarkable influence on Russian thought. It was visited by many Russian writers, including Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, who used one of the elders in the monastery as the prototype for Father Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this, as in so many Russian contexts, it is difficult to determine whether literature draws from life or life imitates literature.

The *Protocols*, then, present a curious act of plagiarism. This is not just another example of a Russian creative misreading of Western literature and popular culture, but a fanatic religious codification of a secular political text. If, traditionally, secular literature has borrowed from religious writings, this is a case of reverse plagiarism—a fantastic quasi-religious Russian text borrows gothic imagery from a Western work of fiction. In fact, Rachkovsky planned to use the *Protocols* to destabilize the so-called "Western democracies and make them more like Russia"—an ultimate revenge for all Russian insecurities vis-à-vis the West. The *Protocols* masquerade themselves as an anonymous book in a premodern rather than in a modernist

Borgesian fashion. Yet in fact, their “translator”/publisher Nilus was a modern author who appropriated contemporary means of technological reproduction in order to propagate a radically anti-modern message. As is characteristic of right-wing popular culture in general, he used modern means of mass communication for anti-modern propaganda.⁷

Nilus’s authorship of the *Protocols* was confirmed in part thanks to the testimony of Count Alexandre de Chayla, a Frenchman doing research on Russian religious life, who lived near the monastery for nine months. Nilus spoke with him about the secret protocols of the wise men of Zion and, when Alexandre de Chayla expressed doubt, Nilus accused the Frenchman of devilish complicity: “You are indeed under the influence of the Devil,” he said. “The greatest trick of the Devil is that he can make people deny not only his influence on human events but even his very existence.” To prove his point Nilus showed du Chayla his “collection” of material evidence of devilish deceptions, what could be called his “Museum of the Anti-Christ”: “He opened the chest and I saw amidst indescribable disorder a number of objects made of rubber, some household utensils, insignia of technical schools, even the cipher of empress Alexandra Feodorovna and the cross of the Legion of Honor . . . It was enough for any object to bear on it a figure resembling somewhat a triangle for his inflamed imagination to see in it the sign of the Antichrist and the seal of the wise Men of Zion.”⁸

Nilus’s so-called “Museum of the Anti-Christ,” an accidental collection of domestic trash, various found objects, tarot cards and insignias, exemplifies the logic of paranoid overdetermination that permeates the *Protocols*,⁹ which are in essence a narrative version of this museum. Like Nilus’s collection of demonic objects, the *Protocols* bring together a mass of seemingly unrelated material united by a single interpretation. There are many inconsistencies: both capitalism and socialism are blamed on the Jews. Among the agents of the conspiracy are usual and unusual suspects such as European bankers—for instance, Rothchild (recently mentioned by Pat Robertson in his *World Order*); social democrats; the adepts

⁷ Nilus’s book had a direct impact on the family of Nicholas II. The empress drew swastikas in the margins of her copy of the book, which, at that time, were a symbol of peace and happiness. After the execution of the Tsar’s family, the Tsarina’s copy of the *Protocols* was discovered and seen as an uncanny confirmation of the Judeo-Masonic-Bolshevik conspiracy in action. (Although the Tsar’s executioners were not Jewish, such “minor” factual contradictions were dismissed as irrelevant—as they usually are—by committed conspiracy theorists.)

⁸ Count du Chayla, “Exposé of Nilus” in Bernstein 364-65. All these objects appear in the preface to the 1911 edition of the *Protocols*.

⁹ It also dominated Nilus’s everyday life. Chayla recalls that Nilus was afraid to keep his protocols at home since he somehow believed that the local Jewish pharmacist who occasionally passed near the monastery on the way to work would steal them. Daily incidents and casual encounters thus all become related to the plot.

of Darwinism, Marxism, and Nietzscheanism; the builders of the Panama Canal and of the Paris metro, that mysterious subterranean world of modernity; liberal journalists; and, most of all, "Jewish women who operate under the guise of French, Italian and Spanish women" (this is a specific Rachkovsky-Nilus addition to Joly's text). The slogan of the elders is "the end justifies the means"—an idea straight from Machiavelli that would later become Stalin's motto. The *Protocols* conclude by predicting the coming of a Jewish King described as the cosmopolitan monster par excellence: "the real Pope of the Universe, the patriarch of the international Church and the divinity Vishnu with a hundred hands holding the springs of the machinery of secret life."¹⁰ Transformed into the *Protocols*, Joly's satire of the proto-totalitarian tendencies of Napoleon III's government ironically and tragically became the inspiration for totalitarian and nationalist parties.

The logic of the *Protocols* is that of inverted projection. This allows the perpetrators of the most violent crimes to present themselves as victims. The Jews are blamed for inventing anti-Semitism to distract attention from their plot and for faking persecution. There is no way out of the conspiratorial labyrinth. Skepticism is presented as another "trick of the devil" and the eternal blackmail is ultimately justified in the perverse logic of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor: "If the devil didn't exist, he must be invented." Moreover, the *Protocols'* critique of liberalism and of the Western "trinity"—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity (not surprisingly seen as Judeo-Masonic propaganda)—is similar to Dostoevsky's own devastatingly sarcastic critique of this principle in his *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* and in his *Diaries*. Indeed, some of Dostoevsky's critique of the "West" and of modern society seems to be echoed in the description of Jewish world domination in the *Protocols*. The great writer and the inspired plagiarists might even have shared the same bedtime reading of Russia's reactionary and nationalist popular culture.

Parallel passages from Joly's "Dialogues in Hell" and Nilus's *Protocols* presented at the Berne trial of the *Protocols* in 1934-1935 demonstrate how the latter's Jewish Masonic conspiracy was concocted from the former's anti-Napoleonic satire.¹¹

"Dialogues in Hell"

Machiavelli: "You know the unfathomable cowardice of humanity . . . servile in the face of force, pitiless in the face of weakness, implacable before blunders, incapable of supporting the contrarities of the liberal regime, are patient to the point of martyrdom before all violence of bold despotism, upsetting thrones in its

¹⁰ *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, reprinted in Bernstein (295-360).

¹¹ These comparative passages were used as the evidence at the Berne Trial and are reprinted in Bernstein 378 and 390-91.

moments of anger, and giving itself rulers whom it pardons for actions the least of which would have caused it to decapitate twenty constitutional kings.”

The Protocols

It is the bottomless rascality of the goyim peoples, who crawl on their bellies to force, but are merciless towards weakness, unsparing to faults and indulgent to crimes, unwilling to bear the contradictions of a free social system but patient unto martyrdom under the violence of a bold despotism—it is in those qualities which are aiding us to independence. From the premier dictators of the present day the goyim peoples suffer patiently and bear such abuse as for the least of them they would have beheaded twenty kings.

“Dialogues in Hell”

Montesquieu: Now you may go on to the regulation of books

Machiavelli: . . . In the first place, I shall oblige those who wish to exercise the profession of printer, editor or librarian to secure a seal, that is, authorization which the government may always withdraw, either directly or indirectly, or by decision of the court.

Montesquieu: But in that case . . . the instruments of thought will become the instruments of power!

The Protocols

Let us turn again to the future of the printing press. Every one desirous of being a publisher, librarian, or printer, will be obliged to provide himself with a diploma issued therewith which, in case of any fault, will be immediately impounded. With such measures the instrument of thought will become an educative means in the hands of our government . . .

Rachkovsky’s and Nilus’s plagiarism is obvious. The contempt for humanity in general expressed by the character Machiavelli in “Dialogues in Hell” is presented in the *Protocols* as a Jewish contempt for the “goyim peoples”; the polemical dialogue is absorbed into a prophetic monologue in the first person plural. In Rachkovsky’s perfect calculation, the reader was incited to conspire against the supposed conspirators and fight against them. No Jewish author had anything to do with the making of the *Protocols* or their intertexts; they were mere fictional ghost writers in the “goyim” paranoid fantasy of the “goyim” secret police. As Herman Bernstein writes: “The only ‘protocols of the wise men of Zion’ are the Holy Scriptures. Moreover the future reign of the Jewish king as presented in the *Protocols* strikes one not so much as a satirical description of the Government of Napoleon III (the way Joly intended it) but as Tsarist Russia.”

The forgery of the *Protocols* was publicly disclosed and meticulously documented during two trials of 1934-1935—in Grahamstown,

South Africa and in Berne, Switzerland. Both denounced the *Protocols* as defamatory anti-Semitic propaganda. Yet this did not stop the book from remaining a best-seller within right-wing popular culture; since 1935, it has been republished, rewritten, and translated all over the world, from Japan to Argentina. Nesta Webster, one of the literary predecessors of Pat Robertson, completed her book when the truth about the *Protocols*' forgery was revealed. Defenders of the *Protocols* have even claimed that Joly himself was a part of the conspiracy, that his real name was not Joly but Joe Levi. Popular etymology thus becomes a means to reveal "tricks of the devil" that hide the truth of this conspiracy from the people.

This kind of logic persists in post-Soviet right-wing popular culture. *The Protocols of Zion* (an un-critical edition) is widely sold on the streets alongside Yeltsin dolls, Easter eggs with portraits of Nicholas II, Dale Carnegie's *How to Succeed in Business*, and the most up-to-date Buddhist manuals. It can be spotted even in the bookstore at Moscow University. "We have freedom of speech now," the student salesman proudly said when I questioned him about the presence of the *Protocols* in a university bookstore. Paradoxical as it may appear, the "freedom of speech" that in the *Protocols* was presented as part of a Jewish-liberal plot, now allows for a new edition and dissemination of the *Protocols* throughout Russia.

The conspiratorial circles continue to generate new ripples. There is now a claim that another book besides *The Protocols of Zion* has been hidden from the Russian people by an international conspiracy. *The Book of Vlas*, which supposedly dates back to about 1000 BC and appears to be a chronicle or a *protocol* by pre-Christian pagan Slavic priests,¹² reveals that the proto-Russians were truly the chosen people, descendants of Atlantis and surely of the Aryans and Phoenicians, Trojans and Sumerians. Among other discoveries, it reveals that Mount Zion was originally Slavic and that its name derives from the Slavic word "to shine" (*siiat*'). So much for the love of etymologies.

One last, grotesque embodiment of paranoiac projection in contemporary Russia is a story about Valery Emelyanov, one of the founders of the nationalist group Pamiat' and a convicted murderer. An orientalist by training, Emelyanov's book *De-zionization*, in a special gift edition in Damascus, claims that Jesus Christ himself was an agent of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy. In 1980 Emelyanov murdered his wife Tamara in a moment of extreme anger, cut her to pieces, and put the body into a large suitcase. Then he asked his

¹² See Boym, "Russian Soul," 133-66. The *Book of Vlas* was first mentioned in the pages of an obscure San Francisco journal, *The Firebird*, where it was considered to be the chronicle of pagan priests. The book tells the story of five thousand years of Slavic civilization and shows that Russians were the true descendants of the Aryans, the first Indo-Aryan people who spread their culture throughout Europe with the help of the Phoenicians. See Laqueur.

associate Bakirov to burn the heavy suitcase, saying that it contained “the worst kind of Zionist propaganda.” This particular burden of “Zionist propaganda” was used as evidence to convict the conspiracy theorist.¹³

2. Umberto Eco and the Poetics of Paranoia

Both Umberto Eco and Danilo Kiš search for an alternative framing of the conspiracy theory and so help to destabilize—to use a charged term—the devilish logic of the *Protocols*. While Eco’s narrator is a self-doubting conspiracy theorist who discovers a paranoid within himself, Kiš’s narrator is a witness to the violent consequences of conspiracy theory who tries to distance himself from forced paranoid identification. Eco and Kiš show different escapes from Sergius Nilus’s museum of the Anti-Christ. The *Protocols* function in both texts as an ultimate ethical test, but there are other projects of total interpretation, mystical books, and moments of collective engagement that are framed in these texts: Mallarmé’s *livre*, Borges’ infinite book of total interpretation, the avant-garde dream of transforming experimental art into life revived in the 1960s’ student movement, the Russian national myth of literature being a guide to life. In this way they comment on various poetic and political projects of the twentieth century.

In Eco’s novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*, the *Protocols* are not the central conspiracy but only the most lugubrious avatars of the transmutation of the Templar plot. The story unfolds through a series of autobiographical narratives by the protagonists. This is a novelistic fable about the paranoid desire for a plot and about the limits of interpretation. Eco, with his good sense of humor, declares himself to be “a great vulgarizer” who both mystifies his readers with esoteric tales and gives them clues to understand his mysteries (“Master of Semiotic Thrillers,” pp. 78-79). The three editors in the novel, Casaubon, Diotallevi, and Belbo, all of whom have spent too much time reading obsessive manuscripts on occult and secret conspiracies written by paranoid dilettanti, decide to load the bits of esoteric knowledge they have accumulated into a computer capable of making analogies and connections between everything. As a result, nothing is left underinterpreted: even phrases like “the rubber plant is free” or “Minnie Mouse is Mickey’s fiancée” find their way into the masterplot. In contrast to *The Name of the Rose*, *Foucault’s Pendulum* is not structured as a roman-policier, or an English detective fiction; here the protagonists play detective to their own virtual crime. They

¹³ The story is discussed in Laqueur 210. Moreover, it turned out that one of Emelyanov’s close assistants in the Pamiat’ movement was, not surprisingly, an employee of the KGB. So there might have been a conspiracy there after all—or at least an active involvement, not of Masons, but of the KGB.

decipher and justify their own tampered evidence. They play all the parts in the detective drama—those of the author and of the characters, of the conspirators and of the victims of conspiracy theory. This text is not about characters in search of the author, to paraphrase Pirandello, but about characters in search of the plot. Casaubon compares himself to a psychiatrist who grows overly fond of his patients; from writing *on delirium* he moves to writing *delirium*. He hopes to become both a student of paranoia and an artist, but as the novel progresses he starts to wonder if he has become merely a paranoiac.

In Eco's view, interpretative paranoia, while a part of any interpretative process, might lead to an "unlimited semiosis" that is an exercise in the forgetting of recent history, individual experience, and the quest for knowledge and understanding that motivated the interpretive process initially. Eco shows how difficult it is to distinguish between paranoia with and without quotation marks and examines different motivations that turn his skeptical protagonists into conspiracy theorists.

Casaubon, who is also the narrator, gets involved in conspiracy theory not because he is a believer, but because he is not. He does not believe in anything, not even in the truth of his own skepticism; he is easily seduced by the exoticism of the irrational. Moreover, Casaubon is a non-believer with a guilty conscience, nostalgic for a grand collective engagement. He is a survivor of the 1960s, but during the years of student protest he was a non-believer too. Although he went to the demonstrations, and chanted, "Fascist scum, your time has come!" he didn't do so out of conviction, but rather because of a desire to belong and sexual curiosity. He confesses to having made an ironic comment about Lenin and Krupskaya's sex life and to reading the pamphlet "What is Truth" "only with a view toward correcting the manuscript" (p. 51). Casaubon has followed the paradigmatic route of the Western-European intellectual of his generation (who had been fascinated with Maoism and Brazilian mysticism), yet he has also managed to preserve a skeptical world view. For Casaubon, involvement with a conspiratorial plot fifteen years after his frustratingly unheroic youth is the last temptation. The plot offers him a position of power in the new collective game, even if it is only a computer game—a game of *virtual* world domination. Casaubon confesses: "I believe that you can reach the point where there is no longer any difference between developing the habit of pretending to believe and developing the habit of believing" (p. 386). The ironic and skeptical narrator of Eco's novel begins by parodying the logic of the secret Plot, but, as he continues, parody begins to verge on analogy, and his creative authoring seems about to turn into plagiarism.

The second of Eco's three editors, Belbo, belongs to a different

generation. He was a young adolescent at the end of the war, and he yearns for a clarity of vision, of right and wrong, of partisan patriotism. He is not reading but living for a plot. For him the grandiose conspiracy theory is a substitute for his failure to have a heroic life or at least a creative one. Conspiracy becomes his creative act. Like many twentieth-century conspiracy aficionados and dictators, he is a failed artist:

Humiliated by his incapacity to create . . . he came to realize that by inventing the plan he actually created. Life—his life and mankind’s as art, and art as falsehood. *Le monde est fait pour aboutir a un livre (faux)*. But now he wanted to believe in this false book, because if there was a Plan, then he would no longer be defeated, diffident, a coward. (p. 435)

Stephane Mallarmé’s famous aphorism about the metamorphosis of the world into the book is thus attributed to an untalented artist. Jacopo Belbo plagiarizes both high modernist culture and popular mystical lore; both can be loaded into his magic computer. However, Belbo fails to remember that Mallarmé’s *oeuvre* dramatizes the impossibility of composing a book that would be an orphic explanation of the world. His poems enact the exquisite crisis of literature and preclude any transference into life. They remain precious fragments, fractured gestures and interrupted desires that never amount to a plot.¹⁴

The conspiracy game allows Belbo and Casaubon to play out unfulfilled fantasies. Conspiracy is like a gladiators’ match that compensates for missed opportunities to participate in collective causes. Belbo dies “like a partisan” during World War II; he neither betrays nor makes up a secret that he did not possess. The novelist kindly grants him a glamorized heroic death to redeem his unfulfilled mediocre life, despite the fact that Belbo’s enemies are not Fascists, but a virtual army of crackpot occult aficionados, conspiracy believers, and bad writers.

The third editor, Diotallevi, is the least developed character of the three. His autobiographical narrative is defined in mythical rather than in historical terms. He is described as an albino who imagines he is Jewish. At the beginning he thinks that loading the *Cabala* and the Torah into the computer is like praying. At the end, his body succumbs to the conspiracy of cancer cells because he believes that he has sinned against the word. Thus Diotallevi’s body incarnates violence against the word. For him an erroneous interpretation is an erroneous act for which he pays with his life.

Eco chooses not to play with the *Protocols*. To avoid replicating them, he decentralizes them. The issue of the Jewish conspiracy

¹⁴ The only project Mallarmé completed was not this mystical book, but the fashion magazine *La Dernière Mode*, in which he gave explicit prescriptions concerning how life could imitate art. Conspiratorial reading is a reading that always invites you to look underneath the surface, to seek subterranean treasure or a single melodramatic plot. Mallarmé invited the reader to stay on the elusive foam-like surface of his poems, which defy conspiratorial depth.

appears as a minor and irrelevant incident in the history of the cross-cultural transmigration of conspiratorial plots (a history which actually is historically accurate). This is a witty ethical solution—not merely to parody the *Protocols* but to deny their originality and centrality. Casaubon claims that the idea that Jews were privy to the mystery of the Templars is “a mistake of Pico de la Mirandola,” described as a not very well-educated “Italian excluded from the plan” who mixed up Israelites and Ismaelites. A few centuries later that tragic misspelling leads to the *Protocols*. Casaubon explains that in the time of the Templars, Jews were only second-class citizens, hardly powerful or respected enough to be a part of the Templars’ plan. The mystery of the *Cabala* is a parallel story. Spanish rabbis did not know the secret, but they knew that secret knowledge is linked to power and so they feigned that knowledge. In Casaubon’s words, “cabalistic tradition was ‘a heroic attempt of the dispersed, the outsiders to show up the masters, the ones in power, by claiming to know all.’” Unfortunately, their lie was all too convincing: others believed them. Or perhaps the others simply chose them as scapegoats by an unfortunate accident of fate that had little to do with the actual activities of the Jews and their self-perceptions. To understand conspiracy theories, then, one has to trace their mythical genealogies and not look exclusively for historical referents and realist motivations. Curiously, in describing the supposed motivations of Spanish rabbis, Casaubon reveals his own *modus operandi*. Like the cabalists in Casaubon’s description, the three editors feign their knowledge of a secret plan and blackmail the fanatic believers of secret conspiratorial lore. Moreover, the novel as a whole is organized around cabalistic spheres—sephirot—perhaps a little too neatly, as it vacillates between analogy and irony.

Any conspiracy theory requires a secret, a treasure, a sacred Grail or a root of evil. The virtual conspiracy theory cannot help but follow the same route. It is Casaubon who claims to have deciphered a secret message procured by some vague descendant of St. Petersburgian double agents. The message, which Casaubon found scribbled on the faded piece of paper in an attic in Provence, contains a list of items with a few missing words. Lists, especially incomplete ones, are particularly seductive for conspiracy theorists. They look for invisible connections where they appear explicitly missing to make up their own versions of Sergius Nilus’s museum of the Anti-Christ. Casaubon’s secret message is of a more secular nature; the list does not describe the exhibit of the Anti-Christ but a map of the treasure island where the secret of the Templars was buried for centuries.

The deciphering of this message is pivotal in the novel. At that moment, thirsty for power, Casaubon loses all critical distance. The only person who challenges his interpretative game of intoxicating analogies is his girlfriend, Lia, also a bibliographer and researcher.

After two days of intense examination, she comes to the conclusion that the note deciphered by Casaubon is an everyday message, not a hermeneutic one. This is not a list of items in Nilus's museum of the Anti-Christ, where everything has a trace of mystery, but only a random list of everyday objects. The secret instruction is nothing other than . . . a laundry list. It is not a symbolic code, but a mere enumeration. As the ethical subject of the novel, Lia tries to counter with humor and down-to-earth intelligence the temptations of paranoid semiosis. But although her interpretation might make good sense, it doesn't amount to a good story.

"The secret is that there is no secret," observes Lia. But should we take this for the moral of the story? While recognizing the lucidity of Lia's interpretation, Casaubon walks out on her. Rational lucidity lacks seductiveness, even for a rationalist interpreter such as Casaubon. The hermeneutic interpretation is eroticized, the everyday reading isn't. In the novel Casaubon's girlfriend, with her feminine down-to-earthness, maternal instincts, and reality principle is herself also framed: she is given an allegorical name, Lia, the unloved wife of Jacob in the Old Testament.¹⁵ Gradually, Casaubon also comes to the realization that one shouldn't be too intoxicated with what he calls the "infinite peeling" of the onion of mystery. For a conspiracy aficionado, the universe appears to be "an infinite onion that has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere" (514).

Here, Eco explicitly challenges Borgesian patrician irony and a Borgesian aesthetics of the secret. Indeed, Borges' narrator often presents himself as a privileged bearer of a secret; he sees the Aleph but does not reveal its meaning, he receives from a mysterious salesman the Infinite Book of Sand which he then chooses to lose in a library. But whereas in Borges we find reticent aristocratic ellipsis—the secret knowledge after all resides between the laconic lines and the authorial narrator who does not rush to share it with his readers—in Eco we find obsessively intricate fabulization, the multiplication of overlapping plots, long explanatory monologues and dialogues. Eco's Casaubon is not a "strong and silent" Borgesian modernist aristocrat; on the contrary, he presents himself as a negative example, he exposes his own vulnerability—his obsession with the whirlpool of kinships and analogies. Eco's novel thus undercuts any analogical imagination that could subsume irony and parody. Although Freud once remarked that "analogies decide nothing but they can make us feel more at home," in Eco's novel Casaubon's home life paradoxically helps him defamiliarize his conspiratorial paranoia and infatuation with infinite analogies. At the end he shares Lia's wisdom.

¹⁵ The three women in the novel are neither conspirators nor self-conscious explorers of their fates, but rather allegorical principles: Lorenza—of romantic love, Amparo—of exotic passion, and Lia—of the reality principle.

Richard Rorty has suggested that *Foucault's Pendulum* be read as a "Pragmatist's Progress," "renouncing structuralism and abjuring taxonomy." "Eco, I decided, is telling us that he is now able to enjoy dinosaurs, peaches, babies, symbols and metaphors without needing to cut into their smooth flanks in search for hidden armatures" (91). Such a reading, while illuminating, seems to ignore the intricacies of Eco's narrative labyrinths and that peculiar literary knowledge that is irreducible to its use value.¹⁶ Eco, after all, has written a novel, not a treatise. The moments of lucidity are less charged with novelistic desire than the glamorous conspiratorial rituals. In this sense, the novel presents a more complex ethical challenge than a morality tale. While Eco would like us to examine *Foucault's Pendulum* as a cautionary tale against what he called "unlimited semiosis," the novel reads more like a 1980s version of the allegory of temptation, where the representation of temptation appears much more seductive than its antidote. Perhaps the danger of the conspiracy theory is not in unlimited semiosis but in a limited semiosis driven by analogical madness. The secret remains at the heart of Eco's narration—never entirely de-eroticized. It resides not where we looked for it, not in the messages of the Templars, but in the seductions of storytelling itself.

Danilo Kiš and the Ethics of Estrangement

"My intention was to summarize the true and fantastic—'unbelievably fantastic'—story of how *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* came into existence and to chronicle the work's insane impact on generations of readers and its tragic consequences," wrote Danilo Kiš ("Postscript" 196-97). He began by composing a documentary essay but then realized that knowledge of the facts of the story was not likely to stop its influence. He thus decided to resort to fiction in order to dramatize the absurdity and danger of the Plot, imagining "the events as they might have happened" and changing the title of his text from *Protocols* to *Conspiracy*.¹⁷ If for Eco conspiracy theory is interesting as a problem of interpretation, for Kiš it is an actual historical threat. Kiš's characters cannot afford the playful and ambiguous repertoire of Eco's computer games. Eco's novel is about the desire for a plot. In contrast, "The Book of Kings and Fools," Kiš's fictional history of the *Book of Zion*, is about the urge to inter-

¹⁶ In this respect I agree with Jonathan Culler's point about "learning from literature," not merely "using" literature in a pragmatic manner. (See Culler 118-19.)

¹⁷ Kiš claims to work "on the fringe of facts" and never betrays them entirely. The story takes its own direction "where data [is] insufficient and facts unknown, in the penumbra where objects acquire shadows and outlines" (197). Kiš quotes Borges, Cortazar, and Hawthorne to justify his desire "to give the story a bit of drama."

rupt conspiratorial logic. His heroes are the anonymous Mr. X and the no less anonymous victims of conspiracy theories. Instead of looking for analogies and connections, Kiš's narrator looks for the breaks in the transmission of the conspiracy theories from text into life. "A Book is interrupted discourse catching up with its own breaks. But the books have their fate; they belong to the world they do not include, but recognize by being printed . . . They are interrupted and call for other books and at the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said"—these words of Emmanuel Levinas could serve as an epigraph to the story. Kiš's aesthetic-ethical project is deeply concerned with the interruptions and breaks that inform the fate of the "sacred" book and with the violence that could result from prophetic rather than ethical reading.¹⁸

"The Book of Kings and Fools" is narrated by an anonymous essayist who only at the very end tells us "that conspiracy loosely affects him as well," and that after the new Hungarian edition of the book in 1944 someone shot at the window of his house. This is a very different positioning from that of Eco's characters. The story itself appears to have a circular structure, as it is framed by two scenes of violence and destruction. From the very beginning we enter Kiš's dense fictional woods:

the crime, not to be perpetuated until some forty years later, was prefigured in a Petersburg newspaper in August 1906. The articles appeared serially and were signed by the paper's editor-in-chief, a certain Khrushevan, A.P. Kruscheva, who, as the instigator of the Kishinev pogroms, had a good fifty murders on his conscience. (Throughout the darkened rooms, mutilated bodies lie in pools of blood and raped girls stare wild-eyed into the void from behind heavy, rent curtains. The scene is real enough, as real as the corpses; the only artificial element in the nightmarish setting is the snow.) *"Pieces of furniture, broken mirrors and lamps, linen, clothing, mattresses and slashed quilts are strewn about the streets. The roads are deep in snow: eiderdown feathers everywhere; even the trees are covered with them."* ("The Book of Kings and Fools," 135; italics are Kiš's)

¹⁸ Although in "The Book of Kings and Fools" Kiš restrains himself from writing a confessional autobiographical narrative, even ironically, the way Eco does, his own biography is rather novelesque. The son of a Jewish father and Montenegrin mother, he was born in Hungary in 1936. While Kiš was still a young boy, his family moved from Hungary to Serbia where, for the sake of survival, he was baptized as an Orthodox Catholic. Later, the family returned to Hungary where he attended a Catholic school. After the Second World War they once again returned to Yugoslavia. When Kiš's novel *The Tomb of Boris Davidovich* first appeared in 1976, the Yugoslavian literary establishment accused him of plagiarizing Borges, Solzhenytsyn, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, Joyce, and Koestler. The collected title of the essays criticizing Kiš—"Should we burn Kiš?" ("Treba li spaliti Kiša?")—should remind us of many previous book burning campaigns on the right and left. Obviously someone who could plagiarize Borges, Solzhenytsyn and Joyce must already be a genius.

In the case of Kiš we are dealing with a peculiar genre that he himself called "faction"—a hybrid of fact and fiction. Similarly, one could speak about Kiš's "poethics"—the poetics and ethics of using facts and fictions together, questioning and reasserting their boundaries depending on context. Kiš thus combines the Russian post-revolutionary avant-garde idea of the "literature of facts" used by, among others, Isaak Babel in *Red Cavalry* with the fantastic metahistoriography characteristic of Borges.

The first long paragraph is a tortured narrative montage of various scenes, voices, and quotes. The documentary style of the description is immediately interrupted by the parenthesis, a sudden traumatic memory of mutilated bodies and the wide-eyed stare of an anonymous girl. Then there is a quote, without a source, of an anonymous witness who describes the destruction of objects and the depopulated scene of a pogrom. Although the scene might remind us of Eco's laundry list of furniture to be repaired, this is not a conspiratorial message but the description of the consequences of a conspiracy theory. In place of Sergius Nilus's museum of the Anti-Christ, Kiš shocks us with a display of violence. "The scene is real enough, as real as the corpses"; violence is the only measure of reality, and the broken mirrors bear witness to the event. One is reminded of Borges' story "Tlon Uqbar and Orbis Tertius," explicitly alluded to by Kiš, which opens with the "conjunction of mirror and encyclopedia." But in Borges the mirror haunts and distorts; in Kiš the broken mirror actually bears witness. It does not let us escape into a hypothetical world, but rather forces us to remember the unimaginable but actual world of twentieth-century violence. The Borgesian "fallacious and plagiarized Anglo-American encyclopedia" is replaced by a similarly plagiarized and fallacious—but much more dangerous—guide to life, a "new Bible" called "Conspiracy."

In Kiš's work the word "real" is juxtaposed to theatrical metaphors, the last of which appears at the end of the story in another eye-witness account of senseless murders perpetrated by the Nazis: "In 1942, thirty six years after Krushevan's articles first appeared in his Petersburg newspaper, a witness to the crime noted in his journal: I cannot comprehend the judicial bias for these murders—men killing one another in the open, as if on stage. But the stage is real, as real as the corpses" (174). The stage is real, "as real as the corpses." The phrase turns into an obsessive refrain. The unimaginable can be real, and the only way to make sense of its senselessness is to compare it to fiction.

"The only artificial element in this nightmarish setting is the snow"—the kind of decorative white snow that is indispensable for any picturesque Russian setting, a touch of Russian exotica such as is found in *Doctor Zhivago* with its teary-eyed Omar Sharif. It is a kitschy theatrical snow, mixed with the feathers from sliced-open pillows. But this artificial snow triggers Mr. X's memory throughout the story and so helps him to reconstruct the scene of violence. In particular, it helps him remember the soldiers gathered around the fire listening to an officer reading from Nilus's prophecies and *The Conspiracy* before the pogrom, the silence between words interrupted only by the whisper of large snowflakes: "The officer lowers the book to his side for a moment, marking the place with his index finger. 'That, gentlemen, is the kind of morals they preach.' (The

officer's orderly takes advantage of this break to brush the newly accumulated snow off the tent flap over his head.)" (145).

Mr. X recalls this scene while reading Joly's "Dialogues in Hell" and discovering its similarities to *The Conspiracy*. At this moment, as on that wintry night, he feels "the snow slide into the sleeve of his greatcoat" (p. 154). The snow brings back those moments of interruption in the reading of the Book of Revelation, when the authorial reader made his fingernail marks on the margin. Although those breaks in inspirational communal reading were intended to recharge the energy of hate, in the case of this witness, they permitted moments of reflection and doubt that disrupted the incantatory self-justification of violence. It is neither political ideology nor abstract morality that drives Mr. X, a white Russian officer, constitutional monarchist, and Orthodox Christian to act against the conspiracy theory of his fellow officers, but rather basic honesty and elementary humane responsiveness, something akin to what Levinas calls "anarchic responsibility," that is, responsibility for the other individual in the present moment and "justified by no prior commitment."¹⁹

Kiš's story dramatizes those interruptions in reading that preclude the transference of text into life and estrange its incantatory spell. The book is described as a material object with fingernail markings, reader's notes—including the swastika signs that the Empress of Russia drew in her three favorite books: the Russian Bible, *War and Peace*, and *The Conspiracy*. At the end of the story an ordinary German, the Nazi officer Captain Wirth, places *The Conspiracy* next to his heart in the hope that the book will protect him from enemy bullets. The book is for him a magic talisman and a protective shield; its message goes straight to the heart. This is not a case of a victim identifying with his victimizer, but a dangerous and often ignored reversal—the victimizer thinking himself a victim. The perpetrator of violence employs the logic of paranoid projection where "we are killing them" and "they wish to kill us" is interchangeable. In this way Kiš's story helps us understand the vicious circles of conspiratorial projection. Moreover, if a given conspiracy theory seems short of proof, the dedicated theorist tries hard to provide it. To give a contemporary example: after Ashahara, the leader of the Japanese sect Aum, told his followers to wear gas masks in their compound and prepare to defend themselves against a poisonous gas attack, he went on to prepare just such an attack. Conspiracy theories predicting the end of the world thus inevitably

¹⁹ This responsibility "that summons me from nowhere into the present time, is perhaps a measure or the manner or the system of immemorial freedom that is even older than being, or decisions, or deeds" ("Ethics as First Philosophy," p. 84). Anarchic responsibility is "justified by no prior commitment, in the responsibility for another" (92).

lead to attempts to conjure up and ensure that such a catastrophe will indeed occur.

For the narrator-witness in Kiš's story it is important not to succumb to the other's paranoid fantasy, not to look for a paranoid within oneself, but to affirm one's separateness from the paranoid other. Any East European writer has a well-nourished paranoid within—that's no revelation. It's the resistance to communal paranoia that has to be nourished. Levinas writes that one has to recognize the humanism of the other man; in Kiš's story one also has to recognize his paranoia.

Kiš's story unfolds as a series of face-to-face encounters between men and books, and as a clash of various quotations.²⁰ The witnesses help to interrupt the conspiratorial chain, even if this interruption is only temporary. An ironic magician, Kiš reveals to us the obsessive refrains and patterns in his story as well as incidents, chance encounters, accidents, and individual singularities. In fact, there are two mythical books in Kiš's collection—both intertextually linked to Borges—*The Conspiracy* and *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*. The first one describes the hypothetical new world order, while the second one records all the minor particular details and incidents of human lives, omitting only the famous names that might have appeared in other books. Unlike the encyclopedia of Tlon, which records impossible but not improbable idealist theories of immaterial objects and anonymous subjects, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* is, in fact, an encyclopedia of unrecorded lives, a collective Proustian *oeuvre*, the redemption of the lost time of ordinary people who never became famous and never wrote. It salvages individual ir-replaceability—to borrow Michael Holquist's term. Kiš formulates his own ethically maximalist vision of human history, in which "each individual is a star unto himself, everything happens always and never, all things repeat themselves ad infinitum yet are unique" (Baranczak 42). His stories are always poised on the brink between allegory and a chance encounter.

"The Book of Kings and Fools" is at once tragic, violent, and playful. Kiš gives wonderful evocations of émigré nostalgia, with cockroaches in a third-class hotel under an embalming Mediterranean sky, and excels in Dostoevskian descriptions of double agents and anti-Semites like Rachkovsky. Almost every West-European and American critical discussion of ethics and narrative opens with Dostoevsky's moral pronouncements. In contrast, for many East-European modernist writers Dostoevsky is not a model of ethics;

²⁰ Moreover, the circularity of the story should not be taken as Borgesian repetition. While employing refrains and repetitions, Kiš's story defies any neatly constructed form. The narrator makes an observation that two books, that of Joly and that of Nilus, are separated by "the cabalistic distance (and I tremble as I write the word 'cabalistic') of four letters of the alphabet" (p. 157). Cautious of analogies, the narrator refrains from making more "cabalistic connections." This hesitancy contrasts the rather superficial cabalistic arrangement of chapters in Eco's novel.

he is held responsible for conflating ethics with melodrama in a way that became so ubiquitous in a Russian and East-European context, where sentimentality and cruelty, preaching and prejudice went hand in hand.

In fact, the ethical dimension of Kiš's story resides in the way it undercuts both tragedy and melodrama. The ethical in Kiš is connected with the aesthetic; Kiš's stories present a peculiar dialectical, or rather ethical, montage of multilayered literary allusions and aesthetic palimpsests disrupted by violence. Realist or pragmatic ethics are unavailable to him, as are rational, positivist solutions. After all, the facts have been revealed but the violence persists. Hence, the reader is left to confront the absurdity of evil and experience devastating powerlessness, what Hannah Arendt describes as an experience of "radical evil": "When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive. Just as the victims in the death factories or the holes of oblivion are no longer 'human' in the eyes of their executioners, so this newest species of criminals is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness" (Arendt 459).

Kiš's Russian contemporary, Joseph Brodsky, notes in his memoir the untranslatability of that Russian and East-European sense of the absurdity of evil. He observes that "such advanced notion of Evil as happens to be in possession of Russians has been denied entry into [Anglo-American] consciousness on the grounds of having a convoluted syntax. One wonders how many of us can recall a plain-speaking Evil that crosses the threshold saying "Hi, I'm Evil. How are you?" (Brodsky 31). Perhaps Kiš's convoluted syntax owes something to his no less convoluted encounter with Evil. One of Kiš's favorite Russian critical tropes is an old-fashioned and, in the Western context, mostly forgotten term: Shklovskian defamiliarization. Kiš uses defamiliarization both as an artistic device and as a strategy for survival. His poetics are, he states, based on the "defamiliarizing effect of history on the destiny of the Jews." For him, among other things, "Judaism is an 'effect of defamiliarization.'"²¹ (Kiš goes on to say that Judaism in his case "is a persistent sentiment that Heine called Familienunglück, the family misfortune.")

The poethics of East-European art is informed by defamiliarization as a device central to both art and life. Victor Shklovsky's *o-stranenie* (estrangement or defamiliarization) both *defines* and

²¹ "Judaism in *The Tomb to Boris Davidovich* has a twofold [literary] meaning: on the one hand . . . it creates a necessary connection and expands the mythologeme I am involved with, and on the other hand . . . Judaism is simply an 'effect of defamiliarization'" (quoted in Longinovic 140).

defies the autonomy of art.²² In the Russian and East-European context, the call for defamiliarization and the “autonomy of art” was not depoliticized but rather a political issue. It was an attempt to sever the connection between art and despotic power, and to prevent a quasi-religious reading of literary texts as revelations and grids for life. Defamiliarization is an ethical stance for Kiš; he both acknowledges the primary role of art in the discussion of ethics and affirms the separateness of text and life, the intransitivity of fiction or at least the chance to interrupt its transmission which, in the extreme case of the *Protocols*, is a matter of life and death. At the same time, for a writer-survivor there is no question that literature has to exist after the Holocaust. For better or for worse, literature remains an ideal space for the ethical encounter.

In recent newspaper reviews in the West of East-European fiction, reviewers frequently complain about the frequent literary references, intertextual play, disconnectedness, and convoluted syntax characteristic of these works. What the reviewers fail to understand is that this seemingly excessive literariness is not so much about literature as it is about an autonomous sphere of cultivated bourgeois entertainment. Dense literary intertextuality in recent East-European texts signals membership in an alternative imagined community of East-European cosmopolitans, who share, in Mandel'shtam's words, “nostalgia for world culture” and nomadically inhabit that alternative universe that goes beyond national borders. The alleged “plagiarism” and cosmopolitanism for which the Belgrade literary establishment attacked Kiš was his way of belonging to that highly individualized literary cult. In this respect, he follows the tradition of early twentieth-century modernists such as Witold Gombrowicz and Osip Mandel'shtam, not the avant-garde.²³

Kiš begins his postscript to *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* by saying that he first wished to call his collection of stories “The East-Westerly Divan” “for its obvious ironic and parodic undercurrent” (p. 191). Indeed, all of the stories present interesting East-West encounters. Moreover, the word “divan” is a curious Eastern import into Western languages. Both Persian and Turkish in its origins, “Divan” at first referred to the privy council of the Ottoman Empire and then came

²² It also acknowledges the unique role of art and literature in the national conscience. Estrangement is what makes art artistic, but by the same token it makes everyday life lively, or worth living. By making things strange the artist does not simply displace them from an everyday context into an artistic framework; he also helps to “return sensation” to life itself, to reinvent the world, experience it anew. Estrangement in this sense mediates between art and life. See Striedter, Erlich, and Steiner. On the connection between the theory of estrangement and romantic aesthetics, see Todorov. See also Boym, “Estrangement.”

²³ These writers could be also compared with Latin American authors of the Boom generation, authors whose literary games were also perceived as controversial within their highly politicized contexts.

to signify a sofa or a couch as well as, in Persian and Arabic, a collection of poems (*Webster's New College Dictionary* 333). The history of the word reveals, through a series of metonymic substitutions, the shrinking influence of an imperial power. From a secret council of the powerful, "divan" came to mean a hedonistic piece of furniture, and also a collection of tales one could read or write while lounging upon it. The early title also alludes to Goethe's poem cycle *Der Westostliche Divan*, suggesting that Goethe's dreams of world literature and aesthetic cosmopolitanism has been reappropriated by Kiš over a century later.

As we leave Kiš's ethics on the divan—his version of philosophy in the boudoir—one is tempted to suggest a certain didactic conclusion. While paranoia might be critical, the critical enterprise should not be reduced to a singular paranoia. Because for a conspirator the other remains only another conspirator, an encounter between individuals is impossible or else results in the violence of broken mirrors. As far as books are concerned, Kiš remarked: "Books in quantity are not dangerous; a single book is" (p. 197). And if by a rare chance one becomes a possessor of a book that aspires to supersede all others and give a total explanation of the world, one should find courage to return it to the library, where it can be lost among other books with and without secret fingernail messages in their margins.

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