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## The Vow to Testify: On the Gulag and Intertextual Economy of Literature (Karlo Štajner, Varlam Shalamov, Danilo Kiš)

### Abstract

Departing from the “aesthetics of unrepresentability” of testimonial literature and implied “belatedness and collapse of witnessing” (G. Agamben, Sh. Felman, D. Laub), the paper engages in the economic foundations of literature through analysis of symbolic meanings of economic metaphors in Štajner’s memoirs *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia* and Shalamov’s story *Lend-Lease*, and through illuminating different aspects of intertextual and intercultural exchange between Štajner’s memoirs and Kiš’s “pseudo-factual” fiction *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. What is testimony and can it be – considering the nature of the one who testifies and the language in which he testifies – “valid,” “valuable,” “useful,” to use the language of economy? Can we think about Kiš’s literary appropriation of Štajner’s memoirs as an outlet for reclaiming the voice not only of Štajner, but also of Kiš’s father, who perished in Auschwitz? What are the uses of economic hypothesis in literary studies?

**Keywords:** economy, GULAG, witness, testimony, Štajner, Shalamov, Kiš, (post)memory.

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In my last book I abandoned the field of recognizable facts, a coordinate system of values where the I of the narrator is a sufficient guarantee of the truth, while memory, even only as a deciphering of infantile stresses, lost all its value. The only link, the only connection still remaining to my earlier books, is the author's handwriting and some mythologems present in my earlier books. (Kiš, 1980, p. 70)

What else was the aim of literature, any literature, but to convince the reader of the truthfulness of what was being told, and of the truthfulness of all our literary fantasies? (Kiš, as cited in Gorjup, 1994)

With sixty million dead in the civil war, collectivization, the Great Terror, and things in between, Russia in this century has produced enough history to keep the literati all over the world busy for several generations. (Brodsky, 2010, p. xiii)

## 1

Noting the analogy and parallelisms between the symbolisms in literature and economy<sup>1</sup>, the paper engages with the economic foundations of literature through examples of literary texts about the Gulag, the Soviet forced labor camp system. I approach this complex issue from two perspectives: (1) that of economy, economic relations and economic rules as the subject of a literary work, where literature makes it possible to discover different meanings of economy and material culture than could be possible through other forms of knowledge; and (2) that of the narrative conditions of the genre of testimonial literature as a signifier of an authentic economy of this genre ("economic" as a discourse dimension of the genre itself). To the extent that testimonial literature<sup>2</sup> about camps is literature

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<sup>1</sup> As many scholars have argued (Marc Shell and Jochen Hörisch in particular), this is especially evident with respect to the analogy between money, language, and literature: starting with Gertrude Stein's verses ("Money is what words are. / Words are what money is. / Is money what words are, / are words what money is."), among other literary examples, Hörisch notes that this analogy was developed extensively in theory, "along with the structural linguistics of value of de Saussure (who, as is generally known, hailed from a family of bankers)" (Hörisch, 2000, p. 58). To that end, as Hörisch emphasizes, "Literature makes it possible to discover more than one meaning in money. Its true ambition, however, is to discover the currency of meaning itself" (Hörisch, 2000, p. 38). Marc Shell's book *The Economy of Literature*, with its fruitful and well elaborated thesis that literature has (material and symbolic) exchange value, inspired this research as well.

<sup>2</sup> My understanding of testimony and testimonial literature is closest to Ricoeur's notions of testimony as "a philosophical problem and not limited to legal or historical contexts where it refers to the account of a witness who reports what he has seen". To that end, "The term testimony

about trauma, about what continually eludes linguistic symbolization<sup>3</sup> and integration, it can be observed through an “economic point of view” insofar as “economic,” psychoanalytically speaking, qualifies “everything having to do with the hypothesis that psychical processes consist in the circulation and distribution of an energy ... that can be quantified, i.e. that is capable of increase, decrease and equivalence” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2006, p. 127). Trauma, in that respect, reinforces the economic hypothesis because it relates to disturbances which “appear to have been provoked by *too intense* a shock – by an influx of excitation which exceeds the subject’s level of tolerance” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2006, p. 128; emphasis by the authors). In the context of the latter analytical axis, I am interested in the paradigm of exchange and circulation in the text through the cultural transfer of Štajner<sup>4</sup>’s *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia (7000 dana u Sibiru, 1971)* in Kiš<sup>5</sup>’s *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich (Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča, 1976)*. I observe this

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should be applied to words, works, actions, and to lives which attest to an intention, an inspiration, an idea at the heart of experience and history which nonetheless transcend experience and history” (Ricoeur, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Prisoners in the Soviet Gulag can indeed be regarded as “bared lives,” i.e. as desubjectivized individuals, suffering the voiceless silence outside the law, without any rights, deprived of any identity – national, gender, or class identity. Maybe one of the best metaphors of such an individual, invisible and silent (practically nonexistent), is one from Albert Camus, who in his essay *The Rebel* referred to the journal *Das sibirische Tagebuch* (1929) by Edwin Dwyer. In it he writes about a prisoner who made a tiny, silent piano out of wood so that he could play his silent music on it every day – silent to everybody but him (quoted according to Boym, 2010, p. 281).

<sup>4</sup> Karlo Štajner was a communist activist, born in Austria, and lived in Yugoslavia. In Zagreb he founded and directed a printing house. In 1932 he settled in Moscow, where he was named director in the Comintern publishing house. He was arrested in 1936 (on the grounds of being a Nazi agent), spent 17 years in the Gulag, and the next three in exile in Siberia. He was released as one of “the 13 surviving Yugoslav Communists” (see Kis, 1988) after Tito and Khrushchev’s meeting in June 1956. His *7000 Days in Siberia* was finished by 1958, but not published until 1971, with Tito’s personal consent. The book received numerous literary awards, and was a bestseller.

<sup>5</sup> Danilo Kiš, the writer “who boldly embraced the ecumenical designation of the ‘last Yugoslav writer’” (Debeljak, 2013–2014, p. 21), witnessed violence in relation to his Jewish father throughout his childhood. One massacre, in Vojvodina in 1942, he described as the start of his conscious life (cf. in Thompson, 2013, p. 82). His father’s death in Auschwitz in 1944, together with their troubling relationship during his childhood, had a huge impact on his life and writings: as a “mythological, rather than psychoanalytical” figure (Matvejević, cf. in Birnbaum, 1989, p. 354), an absent father haunts Kiš’s storytelling (see also Jukić, 2013), and reverberates with his proclamation of being “the child of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges and the Polish writer Bruno Schulz” (Debeljak, 2013–2014, p. 21). *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* is a collection of seven short stories which are based on representation of traumatic historical events in Eastern Europe during the first half of the 20th century from the perspective of a “first-hand” witness. The book caused a long plagiarism controversy, notably that Kiš plagiarized *7000 Days in Siberia* by Karlo Štajner, among other works. To his critics, and Dragan M. Jeremić in particular, he responded in a full-length book called *The Anatomy Lesson (Čas anatomije, 1978)*.

as a diegetic expression of Kiš paying off his so-called “literary debt,”<sup>6</sup> which includes the following: Kiš’s *Tomb* on the one hand canonizes the status of Štajner as an immediate witness of the Gulag, and on the other hand Kiš expresses his position as a writer burdened with postmemory, as defined by Marianne Hirsch<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the author created his *Tomb* around his personal feeling of (both ethical and poetic) debt to his suffering ancestors (including his father) in the camps<sup>8</sup>. This connection, the concatenation of fates, after all, can already be seen in the subtitle of his *Tomb*, “*Seven Chapters of a Single Story*”.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of “intertextual economy” in the title of this paper was borrowed from Mark Osteen’s close-reading of “verbal metempsychosis” (i.e. of a speech situated amid several layers of literary borrowings, on which Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* is based) in three of the novel’s episodes, “Aeolus,” “Scylla and Charybdis,” and “Oxen of the Sun.” Although his research is more focused on restoring the postmodernist intertextuality of Joyce’s masterpiece, Osteen’s claims, according to which Stephan’s “borrowed verbal credit” (Osteen, 1995, p. 208) is designed for other needs – to earn financial credit, to confront “the ghost of Shakespeare,” or catalogue not only Stephan’s but also Joyce’s debts to English literature and “illustrate Joyce’s own labor theory” (Osteen, 1995, p. 208), resonate with the main claim of this paper: the displayed “double-voicedness” (Mikhail Bakhtin) of Kiš’s *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* affirms the authority of Kiš’s father, the ghost-like figure *par excellence*, and catalogues Boris Davidovich’s but also Kiš’s debts to Štajner’s trauma. At the same time, Kiš’s literary work, as argued by many scholars after he was accused of plagiarism, could be read through the lens of postmodernist poetics of extended citationality (Barthes’ theory of “plurality of lost codes,” or Derrida’s “iterability”) of Kiš’s *Tomb*, that “destroys the boundaries that allow us to determine whom a text ‘belongs to’; it places words into the same condition as the pauper in the song Bloom recalls in ‘Hades’ – they are that which ‘nobody owns’” (Osteen, 1995, p. 229). To that end, there are no authors (it could be neither Kiš’s deceased father, nor Karlo Štajner, Gulag survivor), “only circulating and recirculating texts” (Osteen, 1995, p. 230). From a historical perspective, as Osteen writes, “the ‘crime’ of plagiarism defines the modern idea of authorship as much as authorship defines plagiarism” (Osteen, 1995, p. 232). However, this paper focuses, more narrowly, on Kiš’s dialogue with Štajner through the specificities of testimonial discourse, trajectories of historical witnessing, authorship and representation of traumatic memories.

<sup>7</sup> Responding affirmatively to the question of whether other people’s memories can be or become our own, Marianne Hirsch (2008) with her now well-known concept of postmemory covers the form of memory transmission between generations when an individual perceives the traumatic experience of others (closely related ancestors in most cases) as an integral part of his or her own life and memory. The prefix “post” in the concept of postmemory, of course (as in other terms with this prefix, such as postcolonialism, postimperialism, postsocialism, postmodernism, etc.) does not signify a linear course of time or its link to causation. The prefix suggests a complex relationship between proximity and distance, where it does not mean “neat” endings and “new” beginnings, but rather the complexity and interconnectedness of what was “before” with what followed “after” (see, for example, Jelača & Lugarić, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Even though Kiš’s father was killed in Auschwitz as a Hungarian Jew, Kiš himself said, as stated by Tonko Maroević: “Whoever claims that Kolyma was any different from Auschwitz can go straight to hell!” (Maroević, 2016, p. 97). In other words, the story of the Gulag, which is the main theme of his *Tomb*, is also a story about every (concentration and forced labor) camp.

## 2

In Karlo Štajner's memoirs the camp is not a "state of emergency," but quite the opposite: it is a miniature version of the Soviet state (in the sense of a place where all the neuralgic points of the system are visible, whereas elsewhere they are frequently invisible). As Anne Applebaum stated in her book *Gulag: A History* (2003), the Gulag was in essence an expression of the Soviet system (Applebaum, 2003, p. xxix). Reversed logic would have it that the Soviet state is a giant version of the Gulag. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the prisoners' slang the world beyond the barbed wire was called the "bol'shaja zona" or "the great prisoner zone" (Applebaum, 2003, p. xxix).

After all, Štajner wrote about this explicitly. When he came to Moscow, the center of "the land of his dreams," he was shocked by the panhandlers, lines in front of poorly equipped shops and striking inequalities. Everything was available to foreigners and to members of a certain class (Štajner arrived in Moscow in 1932, which was when Stalin's privileged class, the elite, was created), from caviar and champagne to Russian girls, and ideological slogans became completely devoid of meaning, reduced to mere performativity:

I was even more surprised when I walked the streets of Moscow the following day. Suddenly I found myself in front of stores which were full of groceries and clothes. There were no lines here as there were for bread. I marveled at this miracle. These were the so-called "Torgsin" shops where you could buy anything for foreign money and gold. Diplomats and foreigners who came to Moscow on business shopped here. But you could also meet poor people here, people who brought their wedding rings and other jewelry so they could buy bread or milk for their children. In Moscow hotels "Metropol," "Savoy" and "National" foreigners could get everything for foreign money: caviar, French champagne, and Russian girls. They offered their bodies to the foreigners and information to the NKVD. This was what Moscow looked like. On the streets you could see big signs with the inscription "The foreign proletariat looks at us with envy". (Štajner, 1971, p. 117)

Unlike other testimonials, such as those by the Russian authors Varlam Shalamov, Vasily Grossman, or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Štajner's *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia* offers a detailed analysis of the economic nature, economic conditions and atrocities in the Gulag (possibly because as a foreigner he was doubly displaced, he was "the double Other" – both to the camp and away from his homeland).

For example, when he writes about the politics and economics of labor, he does not speak about its symbolic value in the context of Soviet state policy, or if it is about extreme hunger, cold, and physical exhaustion, he does not engage in philosophical (self)reflexivity of any kind. Instead, he –

almost mathematically dully – writes about the profitability of “non-free people,” the “suffering majority.” Looking at the Gulag from a geopolitical perspective, Štajner points out its (macro)economic value – it is necessary for the development of the unpopulated Soviet regions rich in natural resources. In such a system of political and economic relations, camp inmates were not only profitable workers but also the main source of money for the railway and hydropower plants, as it is illustratively described in the episode about postal cards:

“That’s another question. This is not about profitability, but about financing the construction.”

“Yes, that’s what I meant,” Saša confirmed.

“In a way, the prisoners finance these ventures.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.”

“I’m not kidding. It’s true. Though I have to point out that the prisoners finance these ventures only partially. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners are working on construction, and a million and five hundred prisoners on the construction of the BAM. As soon as a prisoner arrives in order to work, he receives a postal card from the management of the labor camp which says, ‘Dear family, I’m writing to let you know I’m fine. I’m sending you my new address: BAM, post office box 2131/161. Please send me some money every month to this address because I can get food and tobacco at the local store. Yours truly, XY.’ ... After a week, sums of money from 50 to 1000 rubles start appearing in the account of the prisoner. But he can get a small part of that money only in exceptional cases. He has to work three months in a row and fill the norm 100%, and only then can he take out 50 rubles a month from his account. But which prisoner can meet the norm three months in a row? Sometimes the prisoner gets his 50 rubles, and then asks for money from his relatives again. ...

“Wait, that’s not all. You know what the usual ending of every verdict is: confiscation of the entire property. People convicted in the Soviet Union are not millionaires, but each of them has furniture, a watch, paintings, jewelry, especially intellectuals. How thorough the NKVD is! You are not allowed to bring even a pair of old boots. They collect hundreds of millions like that.” ...

“I’ll prove what I’m saying. In all major cities, especially Moscow, there are antique shops. In them you can buy gems, gold jewelry, paintings, porcelain, carpets, even old icons. Where did these things come from? They are all confiscated goods for which the government receives dollars, pounds, and marks. That comes to millions of rubles a year. One should not forget the money confiscated after the arrest. ... This is a country that you can’t find on the map. It’s called the ‘GULAG’. And the inhabitants of this great state are camp inmates. There were 21,000,000 of them based on the counts in 1938”. (Štajner, 1971, pp. 160–161)

These passages can be viewed as excellent political and economic analyses of the Soviet and Gulag reality in the period between the 1930s

and 1950s, and Karlo Štajner through his *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia* not only as a surviving witness, but also an excellent economic analyst and expert on the economic affairs of the Soviet Union. However, despite the really high level of plausibility of his analyses, one question should be asked. Judging from his micro-perspective of a prisoner whose freedom of movement and access to information were extremely limited, to which extent could he indeed have been acquainted with the macro-perspective of the political economy of the Gulag in the context of Soviet Russia in the long and turbulent period from the great purges of 1937 through the Second World War and the construction of a new economy in its aftermath until Stalin's death in 1953? It is worth remembering that, in spite of its ambition of documentarism and factuality, *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia* is primarily a work of fiction<sup>9</sup> (in the second part of the paper I will deal with the problem of the testimony's credibility as expressed in Kiš's *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*), which means that precise economic analyses can be read through another prism: one which uses economy and the economic (profitable, material) as a universal binary opposition to man, human and the humane (unprofitable, emotional). In other words, Štajner's testimonial shows that two topics – the inhumanity, perversion and deviance of the Gulag and its economic aspects – are not and cannot be separated. Although in different languages, both speak of the absolute negativity of life in the camps and of Soviet political economics. The negativity (non-humanity) of economy and the economic points to the negativity (non-humanity) of the Gulag (while the negativity of the Gulag is clearly reflected in the negativity of the economy), so the function of the economic analyses is that, through the use of the language of economic metaphors, dry numbers and calculations, they further emphasize the pain and suffering of prisoners and the dehumanizing mechanism of the camps.

The economic plays a similar role in the famous short story *Lend-Lease* (*Po lendlizu*) by Varlam Shalamov. Its narrator, like Štajner's and in contrast to Shalamov's otherwise highly self-reflexive and affective prose, describes the U.S. economic aid program in detail, and states what the Lend-Lease program (scraps of which reached the prisoners as well) gave to the Soviet people: from garments, food and technology to means of transportation. However, most of the plot of this short story revolves around the motif of an American bulldozer, whose function – as the inmates believed from

<sup>9</sup> In his text *Potresne (neizmišljene) priče* [*Moving (Non-fictitious) Stories*], Igor Mandić, referring to the relationship between fiction and faction in Kiš's *Tomb*, states that the definition of "non-fiction prose" is a contradiction in terms: "For, if (artistic) prose presupposes imagination and building a story beyond the shackles of reality, then this term conflicts with the term 'non-fiction,' meaning 'non-fictitious'" (Mandić, 1980, p. 25).



their less represented micro-perspective in Štajner's analyses – was to help clear the forests of Kolyma which they could not clear on their own. The bulldozer is ordered to move from the path towards previously cleared parts of the Kolyma land. The narrator then continues:

Only now did I see and understand the reason for all of this, and I thank God that He gave me the time and strength to witness it. ... The mountain had been laid bare and transformed into a gigantic stage for a camp mystery play. A grave, a mass prisoner grave, a stone pit stuffed full with undecaying corpses from 1938 was sliding down the side of the hill, revealing the secret of Kolyma. ... The earth opened, baring its subterranean storerooms, for they contained not only gold and lead, tungsten and uranium, but also undecaying human bodies. ... The bulldozer scraped up the frozen bodies, thousands of bodies of thousands of skeleton-like corpses. Nothing had decayed: the twisted fingers, the pus-filled toes which were reduced to mere stumps after frostbite, the dry skin scratched bloody and eyes burning with a hungry gleam. ... The bulldozer roared past us; on the mirror-like blade there was no scratch, not a single spot. (Shalamov, 1994, pp. 491–496)

The metaphorical series of “*Lend-Lease* – the material – the bulldozer – humanitarian help” stops at the metaphor of violent death as a mystery, and the human body as stone, frozen, undecomposed in the Siberian winter. Such metaphorical linking of an American bulldozer on the one hand, as the ultimate symbol of the American humanitarian Lend-Lease policy, and the ultimate symbol of the power of violence in the Soviet Gulag on the other, shows that there is no fiction more terrible than reality, and that collective historical catastrophes often uncover their deceiving, falsehood face, which reinforces and prolongs the traumatic effect:

In Kolyma, bodies are not given over to earth, but to stone. Stone keeps secrets and reveals them. The permafrost keeps and reveals secrets. All of our loved ones who died in Kolyma, all those who were shot, beaten to death, sucked dry by starvation, can still be recognized even after tens of years. There were no gas furnaces in Kolyma. The corpses wait in stone, in the permafrost. (Shalamov, 1994, p. 492)

The documentary (and the economic in this context), referred to by Shalamov's narrator, not only plays a very important part in understanding the role, meaning and idea of art after Kolyma and Auschwitz, but also raises the question of the representation of historical reality in art and through artistic devices (or, as Matvejević writes, between “historical testimony and insight that art provides,” Matvejević, 1980, p. 21), where fragments from reality not only open up new perspectives in the interpretation of specific historical events and social processes, but also make a significant

contribution to the decomposition of the “effect of the real.”<sup>10</sup> All of the above entails another important question about the limits of representability in testimonial narrative discourses and literature in general, but at the same time it could be argued that literature uncovers meanings which tend to stay hidden in other forms of knowledge. As claimed by Hörisch in the book about the poetics of money, “Always under the suspicion of being useless and therefore superfluous, belles lettres lives in superfluity. It can afford observations, assessments, and commentary that seem at first glance dysfunctional and that must be forbidden other discourses. But that means: literature interferes, literature makes observations that more likely disturb, literature irritates accepted codes, literature interrupts and disturbs communications and common figures of speech – for example those of finance and business administration ...” (Hörisch, 2000, p. 27; see also pp. 37, 39 and elsewhere). Some aspects and key features of this complex problematic field will be highlighted in the following part of this paper.

### 3

Apart from economy, economic systems, the organization of the economic and economic issues in general as a topic in a literary text, economic aspects of literature refer to linguistic, intertextual and intercultural aspects as well, but also to some less obvious ones, and most notably to those of genre. This brings the area of my interest closer to the local (Yugoslav) contextual field and can also be covered by the phrase of “economic foundations of literature” in the sense in which language and literature can be viewed as socioeconomic phenomena, which can include a wide range of topics: from the relationship between economic and linguistic situations and structures, laws of linguistic and cultural development, to linguistic and cultural imperialism. In this sense, I find a methodologically fruitful point of reference in the contextualization of the genre of testimonials, as proposed by Giorgio Agamben and Shoshana Felman, while the literary framework can be found in Kiš’s intertextual and intercultural dialogue with Štajner’s memoirs in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> As Norbert Czarny has observed, Kiš, who “does not invent much,” but rather “The lives he tells are those of people met by Karlo Štajner,” offers in his *Tomb* “an expansion of the real” (Czarny, 1984, p. 281, emphasis ours).

<sup>11</sup> The cultural transfer of Kiš’s *Tomb* is obviously not limited to Štajner’s *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, which has been discussed by various authors (see Krivokapić, 1980; the writer himself, Danilo Kiš, also wrote about his sources in *The Anatomy Lesson*). As noted by Tatiana Petzer in her text *Olimp vorov. Fiksacija sledov Varlama Šalamova i Danilo Kiš*, “the character of Taube was created out of Golubev (from the Russian golub, German Taube) from Shalamov’s short story *A Piece of Meat*, as well as other facts found in the literature on camps, for example from the testi-

Agamben's philosophical accounts on testimony as a genre (which could easily be related to the broader literary field in general) are associated with a possibly misleading witness ("collapse of witnessing" / "belated witnessing," as conceptualized by D. Laub and Sh. Felman). Let us recall that the integral (real, credible, truthful) witness in the interpretation of Primo Levi, around whose testimony Agamben builds his philosophical accounts of this genre, is one who did not return alive (often a "Muselmann" in the context of concentration camps or "dohodyaga" in the context of Soviet camps). On the other hand, considering the specific nature of a traumatic experience as the cause of cognitive dissonance, which prevents the stabilization of the self and one's identity, as it continuously and persistently eludes symbolization, and thus returns in the form of flashbacks and nightmares – the subject cannot give his testimony because how can a subject report on his own breakdown?<sup>12</sup> In Agamben's interpretation, testimony abides where there

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mony of Karlo Štajner about the physician Georg Bilecki, who worked in a nickel mine and who was struck with an axe by a bandit because he did not want to declare him sick" (Petzer, 2007). Petzer points out that Taube's character includes biographical information about the Hungarian-British writer Arthur Koestler, and about Shalamov himself. She also interprets the meaning of Taube's name in a very interesting way: "if we take into consideration that the pseudonym of Taube is Kiril Bajc, and if we read his last name in Cyrillic letters, we will end up with 'vajs' or Wes, and by reading his Jewish name, we will end up with a palindrome of Lirik or the 'poet'" (Petzer, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Davor Beganović also raises the issue of the witness and his testimony in the context of Kiš's *Tomb*. He correctly notes that "Kiš's ... clear goal was to point out that there is a past in Yugoslav society that does not want to go away, it cannot disappear because it is still present, absolutely unprocessed in the consciousness of the people who survived it and who cannot bear witness to it. Therefore, as in the case of the Holocaust, we are faced with paradoxical witnesses or quasi-witnesses – silenced and suppressed to the margins, covered with shame because they survived, and condemned by society which sees in their return from hell, above all, an immoral act, and for two reasons: they see it as a political or ideological offense, as a reason for exclusion from the community on the one hand, and since they were able to return from the place where numerous victims were killed at all on the other" (Beganović, 2007, p. 237). Beganović's analysis is built around the issue of the function of documents in a narrative text (Beganović, 2007, p. 238). We cannot speak about the reliability of Štajner's testimony unconditionally, because of the implied "belatedness of witnessing" and the "collapse of witnessing," which the (im)precise economic analyses from the first part of the book exemplify. Beganović also noticed this: "Kiš uses documents in such a way so that the reader is aware of their literariness, that there must have been another person who transposed the document from its (incomplete and utopian) originality into a text which is not, and by definition cannot be, anything but an element in a series of others whose far-reaching and incomprehensible goal (hence a certain melancholy of all postmodernism) is the creation of a continuous, closed history of past events. The more complicated, contingent, or simply horrific the events, the more distant and impossible such a goal" (Beganović, 2007, p. 243). Precisely because of this necessarily melancholic, inscrutable, unreachable and utopian nature of reliability in the memories of a witness, my reading of the fruitful (Maroević, 2016) dialogue between Kiš and Štajner emphasizes that Štajner is a necessity of Kiš to the same extent that Kiš is a necessity of Štajner.

is inconsistency, “a fracture between the living being and the speaking being, the inhuman and the human. That is: *the human being exists in the human being’s non-place, in the missing articulation between the living being and the logos*” (Agamben, 1999, p. 134; emphasis by the author). That is to say, “... precisely this impossibility of conjoining the living being and language, *phōnē* and *logos*, the inhuman and the human – far from authorizing the infinite deferral of signification – is what allows for testimony. If there is no articulation between the living being and language, if the ‘I’ stands suspended in this disjunction, then there can be testimony. The intimacy that betrays our non-coincidence with ourselves is the place of testimony” (Agamben, 1999, p. 130; emphasis by the author). Further on, Agamben states that “Testimony is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech; it is, moreover, an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking. These two moments cannot be identified either with a subject or with a consciousness; yet they cannot be divided into two incommunicable substances. Their inseparable intimacy is testimony” (Agamben, 1999, p. 146). The “suspended I,” which stands in disjunction between the living being and language corroborates the *aporia* of a witness. Agamben’s insightful remarks are once again useful: the Italian philosopher reminds us that the word “author” obtained its contemporary meaning relatively late – in Latin it signified someone who participated in a legal act of a minor to grant him the necessary validity/credibility. Other meanings include “seller,” “counsellor or promoter” and, finally, “witness.” Agamben’s triad of author – seller – witness is worth repeating: the path from author to witness “leads” through the seller. In other words, the seller “guarantees” that the author who testifies to the unrepresentable will become a witness: “An author’s act that claims to be valid on its own is nonsense, just as the survivor’s testimony has truth and a reason for being only if it is completed by the one who cannot bear witness. The survivor and the *Muselmann*, like the tutor and the incapable person and the creator and his material, are inseparable, their unity-difference alone constitutes testimony” (Agamben, 1999, p. 150).

The seller, as Agamben notes, is said to be an *auctor* “insofar as his will, merging with that of the buyer, validates and legitimates the property at issue” (Agamben, 1999, p. 149). In this way, “The transfer of property thus appears as a convergence of at least two parties in a process in which the right of the acquirer is always founded on that of the seller, who thus becomes the buyer’s *auctor*” (Agamben, 1999, p. 149). Agamben further states that the meaning of the “witness” now becomes apparent – *auctor* signifies witness “insofar as his testimony always presupposes something – a fact, a thing or a word – that preexists him and whose reality and force must be validated

or certified” (Agamben, 1999, pp. 149–150). In this sense, testimony is “thus always an act of an ‘author’: it always implies an essential duality in which an insufficiency is completed or made valid” (Agamben, 1999, p. 150). Shoshana Felman’s considerations complement the idea of testimony as a genre which offers a very interesting economy of exchange of a witness symbolically (un) able to express himself in a symbolically (non-)powerful language. Namely, she states that the testimony does not offer

a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*. To testify – to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one’s own speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is *action* that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is *impact* that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations. (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 5)<sup>13</sup>

The cohesive comments by Agamben and Felman prompt the following question: what is testimony and can it be – considering the nature of the one who testifies and the language in which he testifies – “valid,” “valuable,” “useful,” to use the language of economy? In other words, the narrative conditions of testimony as a genre which deals with trauma as an unintegrated axis, i.e. which circles around its own empty center and/or a center which cannot be integrated into a stable core and be symbolized by language (testimonial “aesthetics of unrepresentability”), can also be seen as a signifier of an authentic economy of this kind of literature. Therefore, it would be useful to look more closely at not only how Štajner remembers things and how he testifies, but also how Kiš, that is, more precisely, Boris Davidovich, uses “Štajner.” But unlike other studies so far, we are not interested in an interpretation of Kiš’s story relying on a testimony from Štajner<sup>14</sup> (which

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<sup>13</sup> Although Ricoeur approaches testimony from a different analytical angle, and includes the notion of a listener, he emphasizes the “quasi-empirical” quality of testimony: “I say quasi-empirical because testimony is not perception itself but the report, that is, the story, the narration of the event. It consequently transfers things seen to the level of things said. This transfer has an important implication at the level of communication. Testimony is a dual relation: there is the one who testifies and the one who hears the testimony. The witness has seen, but the one who receives his testimony has not seen but hears. It is only by hearing the testimony that he can believe or not believe in the reality of the facts that the witness reports. Testimony as story is thus found in an intermediary position between a statement made by a person and a belief assumed by another on the faith of the testimony of the first. ... The eyewitness character of testimony, therefore, never suffices to constitute its meaning as testimony” (Ricoeur, 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Kiš considered Štajner’s memoirs one of the best books of post-war literature in Yugoslavia (Kiš, 1980, p. 75), and the scandal that broke out after the publication of Kiš’s *Tomb* is well known

resulted in a kind of “pseudo-factual fiction”), but the other way around – the interpretation of Štajner’s testimony in relation to Kiš. After all, let us recall that during his meeting with Kiš in 1976, Štajner himself said that his wounds, his scars are located nowhere else but “somewhere in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*”<sup>15</sup> (Kis, 1988). My thesis can be formulated as follows: in relation to Štajner’s text, Kiš set himself up as an *auctor* – in the meaning of a “seller” who will make Štajner a “witness” – that is, as the one who confirms Štajner’s testimony and acknowledges his legitimacy of ownership. This means that Kiš’s literary strategy is not merely an echo of Borges’ poetics

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to scholars not only of Kiš’s oeuvre but of Yugoslav literature as well. D. Beganović quite accurately states that Kiš’s *Tomb* itself, in which he wrote about the historical trauma of the Gulag, became a real trauma for him (Beganović, 2007, p. 7) – he soon emigrated to Paris, eventually was diagnosed with lung cancer and died at the same age as his father, so that Kiš’s life came to resemble a narrative circle: “the escape from Nazism, which prompted Kiš’s first forced journey, was framed by a forced escape from Stalinism – an ideology that seemed to be definitively defeated in Yugoslavia in the 1970s. However, the scandal around Kiš showed how much the belief in that victory was just another in the series of delusions surrounding the myth of the Yugoslav original path to ‘communism’” (Beganović, 2007, pp. 7–8). I mention the scandal primarily because the disputes that gave rise to the controversy and criticism are related to what constitutes Kiš’s fundamental poetic principle. Namely, oscillating between fiction and faction, his works intertwine literary and historical discourse, which pushes the worlds he portrays to the margins of “the relationship between fiction and reality” (Beganović, 2007, p. 18; see also Maroević, 2016; Rupel, 1980; Visković, 1980). Kiš’s *The Anatomy Lesson* is a response to what modern scholarship called the biggest literary scandal and controversy in post-war Yugoslavia (Longinović, 2013, p. 113; see also Krivokapić, 1980) and a defense of his poetic principle. While Longinović (like Beganović, 2007, and numerous other researchers, such as Mandić, Matvejević, Rupel, Visković, and others, see Krivokapić, 1980) see in Kiš’s “borrowing” echoes of Borges’ pseudo-historical poetics (Longinović, 2013, p. 115), allowing him “to show the absurdity of and discrepancies in the proclaimed goal of attaining peace and fraternity on the planet” (Longinović, 2013, p. 115), Kiš was accused of non-originality, epigonism and imitation, and was termed a “Narcissus without a face” (“every writer who does not see himself realized in his own work, but in that of somebody else,” Jeremić, 1981, p. 8), and *Tomb* was read as a “conglomerate of retold, borrowed, imitated works directly taken over from other people” (Jeremić, 1981, p. 8).

<sup>15</sup> The whole section describing, from Kiš’s perspective, the meeting between him and Štajner, deserves to be quoted:  
“Where Are the Scars?”

In 1976, at the bar of the International Hotel in Zagreb, I get ready to meet the famous survivor of the Gulag, the author of ‘Seven Thousand Days in Siberia’ – which had been an invaluable guide for me as I wrote my own ‘Tomb for Boris Davidovich.’ I had dedicated one of the stories in the collection to him. A solidly built man of medium height, with a ruddy, brisk appearance and closely cut hair, came up to our table, his hat in his hand. No, it’s not him! That cannot be him! ‘Štajner.’ Though 20 years had passed since his return from Siberia – sufficiently long for the wounds to turn to scars – where, I asked myself, are the scars? Just as the mark of the murderer is, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn tells us, imprinted on the face of the murderer in the form of a vertical line at the corner of the lips, there must be a mark, a scar, visible on the faces of the victims, like the wound on Christ’s palm.

‘Somewhere in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*,’ says this gentle man, without malice or pity, ...” (Kis, 1988).

of the pseudo-historical approach (however, as Mark Thomson writes, more than once Kiš “described his *Tomb for Boris Davidovich* as a counter-book to Borges’s *Universal History of Infamy*,” Thompson, 2014, p. 65), nor is its function merely that of expressing a troubled relationship between story and history in postmodernist writings, where the past exists as an “untold story” (Gorjup, 1994; see also Crnković, 2000; Lachmann, 2006), and where trauma, as D. Beganović correctly noted, is “the embodiment of the Other’s voice” (Beganović, 2007, pp. 13, 17; see also R. Eaglestone’s claim about testimony as an encounter with otherness, Eaglestone, 2002). In fact Kiš’s use of the reference codes of “other people’s testimonies” (having in mind the exploration of witnesses and testimony by Agamben and Felman, can testimony ever be anything else but that of “other people”?), his “cultural appropriation” functions as empowerment, he recognizes the status of an actual historical witness – Karlo Štajner, but also Kiš’s deceased father. After all, in *The Anatomy Lesson* Kiš himself concluded one chapter by referring to Borges’ comment about the influences Kafka had on his writings, which illustrates well the ambiguity of the “pre” – “post” relationship: “The fact is that every writer creates his predecessors. His contribution changes our conception of the past as much as it changes the conception of the future” (Kiš, 2008, p. 198; translation ours). In Kiš’s *Tomb* K. Š. (i.e. Karlo Štajner) is regarded as a true witness of Taube’s life and death. For example:

“According to the testimony of K. S., who spent some six months with Taube in the Norilsk prison camp, this is what happened that day: ...” (Kiš, 2001, p. 60; emphasis ours)

“Ungvári states that it was tuberculosis, while K. S. claims she was being treated ‘for nerves’”. (Kiš, 2001, p. 61; emphasis ours)

“I’m convinced’, says K. S., ‘that for Beitz anything that was happening to him could not have had larger repercussions: ...’”. (Kiš, 2001, p. 61; emphasis ours)

With this literary gesture, where K. Š. is given the status of a real-life witness, coming from outside the literary fiction, together with Kiš’s “cultural appropriation” of Štajner’s memory in the historiographic metafictional *Tomb*, Kiš on the one hand testifies “on behalf of” Štajner, and on the other hand he confirms his status as a witness, so it really follows that the dedication of Kiš’s story to Karlo Štajner is in itself a “significant paratextual testimony” (Beganović, 2007, p. 243). Because, if we agree with Agamben in his assertion that testimony always presupposes a witness, pre-exists him<sup>16</sup>, then Kiš’s story can be viewed as a necessary act for Štajner’s

<sup>16</sup> In his analysis of Meša Selimović’s oeuvre from the perspective of the narrative (in)ability of memory, Ivan Majić offers a lucid insight: “instead of retelling (past) events, the subject already possesses a narrative means through which his consciousness has registered the (past) event. Figu-

text, that of a true artistic gesture without which, as Matvejević wrote, the essential things would have remained “undefined” (Matvejević, 1980, p. 21). Namely, Kiš recontextualizes Štajner in his *Tomb* by the way he embodies it in fictional characters, *but also leaves it scattered* – which is paramount to the narrative figure of a witness – in the character of doctor Karl Taube and the true historical witness with the initials K. Š. (i.e. Karlo Štajner himself), who gives his testimony about Taube’s life in *Tomb*, and especially in its story *The Magic Card Dealing* (because Taube was killed, as was Kiš’s father, so he cannot give his own testimony).

By such recontextualization, reorganization, and cultural transfer of Štajner’s testimony in duality – through the very person/witness who is necessarily broken/fragmented/multiplied (into Taube, K. Š., and also the integral witness, i.e. Kiš’s murdered father) – Kiš’s *Tomb*, by playing with the authenticity of documents and testimonies, confirms and guarantees the reality and integrity (credibility rather than fragmentation) as well as the validity (timeliness, authenticity, and not belatedness) of Štajner’s testimony<sup>17</sup>. Not only that – given the many autobiographical elements, Kiš’s *Tomb* confirms and guarantees the reality and validity of all those absolute Others (“absolute” because they are legitimated “as the other in all the worlds in which he moved”, Beganović, 2007, p. 248), embodied in the character of Taube in Kiš’s work: Štajner himself, but also the writer’s father, who perished in Auschwitz, as – let us not forget – *the only integral witness* according to Levi.

The space of economy and the economic in the context of the genre’s logic itself can be found in the figure-signifier of *auctor* as author, representative, but also seller – because by supplementing Štajner’s will (and the will of his father), Kiš’s will confirms and acknowledges the legality of ownership to Štajner (and his father) over their (not) preserved, (non) authentic memory. After all, Kiš’s first story (or chapter) from *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* begins with a direct question (and simultaneously its answer) about the (non) truthfulness and (non) trustworthiness of the witness: “The story that I am about to tell, a story born in doubt and perplexity, has only the misfortune (some call it the fortune) of being true: it was recorded by the hands of honorable people and reliable witnesses” (Kiš, 2001, p. 3). But

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ratively speaking, the event has already been told even before its story begins” (Majić, 2017, p. 13).

<sup>17</sup> This does not deny the fact that, historically speaking, the social recognition of Štajner as a witness came before Kiš’s “acknowledgment.” Štajner’s testimony, with the permission of Josip Broz Tito himself, was printed, the book received awards, and numerous editions and translations followed. Our thesis about Kiš as the one who has empowered Štajner’s status as a witness is derived from the consideration of the complex issue of the witness and his or her testimony, i.e. the mechanism of the act of testifying by the witness as a literary fact.



at the same time, Kiš adds: “But to be true in the way its author dreams about, it would have to be told in Romanian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, or Yiddish; or, rather, in a mixture of all these languages” (Kiš, 2001, p. 3). Since there are no authentic witnesses (if we remember Levi and Agamben, such are those who saw the gas chamber, so they did not come back alive to give their testimony), Štajner could not have been an authentic witness because he neither could have known all that he is claiming to know (the examples from the first part of the paper, regarding Soviet economics viewed through the macroeconomic perspective, unknown to Štajner at the time when he served his punishment, demonstrate this well), and even if he had such knowledge, he didn’t have a language to articulate the depth of his own trauma (that hybrid language, the mixture of Romanian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish Kiš was asking for). Openly emphasizing the pseudo-factual and pseudo-historical nature of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and the unreliability of his narrator, Kiš actually does the following: he strengthens Štajner’s position as a credible, authentic, non-fragmented, and integral witness. Moreover, by such a “roundabout,” simultaneously ethical and poetical approach, he lends a voice not only to his deceased father (the only “integral witness” in Levi’s understanding), but also testifies on his own behalf as a child, gives voice to his own personal trauma, and his personal (post)memory of his father’s trauma.

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## Zavjet svjedočenja: o Gulagu i intertekstualnoj ekonomiji književnosti (Karlo Štajner, Varlam Šalamov, Danilo Kiš)

Polazeći od “estetike neizrecivosti” književnosti svjedočenja te implicirane “zakašnjelosti i kolapsa svjedočenja” (G. Agamben, Sh. Felman, D. Laub), rad prilazi složenoj problematici ekonomskih temelja književnosti kroz analizu simboličkog značenja ekonomskih metafora u Štajnerovim memoarima *7000 dana u Sibiru* i Šalamovljevoj znamenitoj priči *Po Lend-Leasu* te kroz intertekstualni i interkulturalni upis Štajnerovih memoara u Kiševu “pseudočinjeničnu” fikciju u djelu *Grobница za Borisa Davidoviča*. Što je svjedočenje i moželi ono biti – s obzirom na status svjedoka kao subjekta izricanja i jezik na kojem svjedoči – “valjano” i “korisno” (iskoristimo li jezik ekonomije)? Može li se o Kiševoj aproprijaciji Štajnerovih memoara razmišljati kao o jednom od načina vraćanja prava glasa ne samo Štajneru, nego i Kiševom preminulom ocu, stradalom u Auschwitzu? U čemu je epistemološka korist ekonomskih analiza u proučavanju književnosti?

**Ključne riječi:** ekonomija, Gulag, svjedok, svjedočenje, Štajner, Šalamov, Kiš, (post)sjećanje.

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## Przysięga świadectwa: O gułagu i intertekstualnej ekonomii literatury (Karlo Štajner, Warlam Szałamow, Danilo Kiš)

Wychodząc naprzeciw koncepcjom mówiącym o „poetyce niewyraźności” literackich świadectw oraz założeniu o „spóźnieniu i upadku świadectwa” (G. Agamben, Sh. Felman, D. Laub), artykuł podejmuje problematykę ekonomicznych podstaw literatury poprzez analizę znaczeń (symboli) metafor ekonomicznych w pamiętniku *Siedem tysięcy dni na Syberii* Karlo Štajnera oraz opowiadaniu *Z lend lease’u* Warłama Szałamowa, a także poprzez wskazanie na różne aspekty intertekstualnej i międzykulturowej wymiany pomiędzy wspomnieniami Štajnera a fikcyjną literaturą „pseudo-faktu” Danilo Kiša w książce *Grobowiec dla Borysa Dawidowicza*. Czym jest świadectwo i czy może być – biorąc pod uwagę to, kim jest świadek i język, w którym daje świadectwo – „ważne”, „wartościowe”, „użyteczne”, używając języka ekonomii? Czy możemy zinterpretować literackie przywłaszczenie wspomnień Štajnera

dokonane przez Kiša jako jeden ze sposobów przywracania prawa głosu nie tylko Štajnerowi, ale także ojcu Kiša, który zginął w Auschwitz? Jakie są zastosowania hipotezy ekonomicznej w literaturoznawstwie?

**Słowa kluczowe:** ekonomia, Gułag, świadek, świadectwo, Karlo Štajner, Warłam Szalamow, Danilo Kiš, (post)pamięć.

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