

KRLEŽA AND HUNGARIAN MODERNISM*

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In his recent work, *Nomadi Ljepote*, Aleksandar Flaker devotes an entire chapter to Krleža's Hungarian *veduta* as they appear in *Zastave*.¹ He points out that the Hungarian cityscapes appear as fragments shaping the visual conception of the text and express subjective relationships between characters and objects. Indeed, the hero, Kamilo, finds Hungary familiar because it is like Croatia:

The entire state, with small oak trees and fields on the monotonous route Zagreb–Pest he knew by heart: all the cross-roads and the interseactions, all the plotted parcels and all the stations with their gardens of tulips, panned pathways covered with white sand, grey-bearded clay dwarfs and shining glass in the rose-beds, with hanging baskets and red geraniums, with lime covered toilets and empty telegraph rooms...²

So it is today: the traveler barely notices that after Gyékényes, he has entered Hungary.

There is no need to recapitulate Krleža's biography here; we know that he was at home in Budapest and familiar with the Hungarian countryside, literary life and its protagonists. In his works he depicted a large number of the "moving spirits" of his time, and in *Banket u Blitvi* and *Zastave* they appear in a barely disguised manner.³

In *Zastave*, the editor-in-chief of *Flags of the 20th Century*, Ottokár Erdélyi, is modelled on Oszkár Jászi, the editor of Hungary's major sociological journal, *20th Century* (1900+). This publication, with a bourgeois radical profile, had contributors representing the political spectrum from center to left, including Marxists. The journal supported Endre Ady against the conservatives. (Ady, the most important poet of the Hungarian fin-de-siècle, did influence Krleža as we shall see.)

It is in this journal that Krleža's hero's response to an outrageous article on the *Croatian Question* which had appeared in the *Pester Lloyd*⁴ is published. Kamilo declares that one cannot talk about parliamentarism in Croatia because the land is occupied by the Hungarians. Only when the counts and the entire feudal system disappear can one discuss a future victory of democracy in Croatia. This part of *Zastave* should be read together with another voluminous work in Hungarian, the autobiography of Anna Lesznai, entitled *Kezdetben volt a kert* (In the Beginning there was the Garden), treating the same period.⁵ Lesznai, who in real life was the wife of Oszkár Jászi, appears in *Zastave* as Anna Boronkai. The negative picture drawn of Count A., anglo-

phile oligarch and politician, reflects Krleža's views on Count Andrassy who according to local gossip, was the real father of Anna Lesznai.

Kamilo formulates his views about Croatian rights in the Monarchy as follows:

Today the Croat nation has no influence upon the so-called Hungaro-Croatian legal system... These laws were drawn unilaterally, and published in Hungarian only. No Croat legal experts participated in the project (I: 202).

No matter how "liberal", the Hungarian intellectuals cannot fully share Kamilo's concerns. (The same split is treated earlier in *Banket u Blitvi*.) *Zastave* is full of images familiar to the Hungarian reader. Foremost of them is the literary café, modelled on Paris. The *Stammcafé*, a sadly disappearing concept, gains a central role in all the novels depicting the last decades of the Monarchy. In Budapest, Krleža writes about the Croatian Café (the coffee shop of the Technical University), so nicknamed because the Croatian coat-of-arms decorating the wall above the cash register. This was the home away from home for students of many nationalities, each a Cassandra of the fate of his own country. Real and fictitious characters move about the place (Njegos, Meštrovic, but also Montaigne are discussed, the Illyrian movement is debated). Yet everywhere in the background the alienating, condescending voice of the host country is heard. Against this backdrop Krleža creates a polyphony of ideas which distinguishes his work from his Hungarian contemporaries.

Krleža's elegant irony creates distance and hilarity by presenting some stories without a comment:

After the second bottle of *Veuve Cliquot*, an Austrian officer turns out to be a Russin who proudly claims that his people fill the professional positions at the most prestigious American Universities and in Oxford. The Metropolitan Opera could not exist without Russin singers – all the *Ufa* stars are Russin, including Pola Negri. There are Russin futurists, Faust, Dante and Baudelaire translators (I, 717). Therefore: East and West – these are but the identity problems of small countries versus large countries.

In another chapter of *Zastave*, a typical conversation of young intellectuals is repeated. Names and movements are dropped by the dozen:

Munich Impressionism, Vienna Seccession, French plain air, Szinnyei, their Hungarian follower, Klimt, Klee, and Picasso are discussed. Central Europeans, permanently off-center, prove that they are *with it*.

Another familiar figure emerges in the background, the waiter who turns into a veritable *topos* in fiction about the Monarchy. In his physical description and literary role as mediator between classes and cultures, this waiter is the same in Krleža, Krúdy, Hašek and Musil, and he survives into the fiction of Hrabal, Danilo Kiš and Esterházy. He is the paradigmatic figure of the Monarchy, frequently multi-lingual, servile and aggressive at the same time, a reflection of the shallowness of the social values surrounding him, yet an unfailing conservator of bygone decades.

Much of Hungary is described in Krleža's fiction as landscape seen from a moving vehicle. Flaker points out that Krleža was one of the creators of railroad poetry, and in this context I would like to call attention to one of the earliest poems about travel-

ling by rail, written by Sándor Petőfi in 1848.⁶ Here we might be able to establish a line of influence, since Krleža, in his interview with Matvejevič, said that Petőfi was his first and favorite Hungarian poet whose work he began to read at the age of 15.⁷ Flaker rightly points out the kinetic character of a Pest daybreak in *Zastave*, as seen from a military transport train:

Above the yellow-reddish horizon there appear first horizontal spots of yellow, as of light-yellow chalk, bluish lemon-like morning above gas-meters, hydrants and viaducts, over the piles of grey warm rocks, with the lyrical accompaniment of copper gongs (*Finale*, 5, 207).

The contrast between soft and sharp colors, and the geometrical combinations indeed remind us of the work of the constructivists and their preoccupation with the formal organization of planes, and the expression of volume in terms of industrial material and strong color. But a similar description can be found in *Banket u Blitvi*, from the static position of the window of the *Savoy Hotel*:

The grey morning rain throws vaporous light on viaducts, gasmeters, hydrants and bridges (399).

While Kamilo sees the world in the semiotic signals of modern times, his father's eyes pick out the baroque traits of the same capital: bronze and marble lions, pavilions and turrets. He bears the carefree music of Lehár while Kamilo sees the "grey and misty Pest October dragging itself like a sick cat".

Krleža's young hero views Budapest as a spoiler, the end of simplicity and innocence:

...here in the Pannonian mud, a Great City is raising a lot of tumult, a phony Great City, a monumental gala performance in a circus (*Zov* 2, 198).

This picture of the Hungarian capital is perhaps influenced by Ady whom Krleža translated into Croatian and about whom he also wrote an important essay.⁸

Ady too hated the feudal manifestations of Hungary, yet at the same time, he never learned to love Budapest. He saw in it the "wicked city". In his *A Duna vallomásai* (Confessions of the Danube) the river looks contemptuously at the capital on its banks. In another poem "Zúg-zeng a jégcimbalom" (The Ice-Cimbalom Rings and Clangs, 1909), the dirty grey waves of the river are metaphors for the city's ugliness. When Kamilo leaves after his father's death, the train

...turned and got lost in the night, in the great Hungarian night with terrifying Danubian waters dark as pitch, with a locomotive wailing in the distance... (*Pokoj vječni* 5, 355).

Here I should mention that while Krleža's essay displays thorough knowledge of Ady's work, he merely follows the standard evaluation of Ady's oeuvre, labelling him a modernist most closely influenced by the French symbolists. A more independent critical approach could have provided a different reading, identifying the red thread of late Romanticism of which Krleža himself is not entirely free. He shares, however,

with Ady a "broad" view of the region in which the Danube connects the whole of Central Europe with the Balkans. As opposed to what Flaker claims, Krleža does *not* represent a different ideology. It was Ady who first sent out the message "The Danube and the Olt have one voice".⁹ He was the only literary figure of his time entirely free of petty chauvinism. In describing Hungary as a land on which nothing healthy can grow, Krleža also borrowed the Pannonian mud or marcsland concept (a frequent metaphor in his poetry) from Ady.

In *Banket u Blitvi*, which I too believe was meant to be a satire of East European chaos,¹⁰ Blitva and Blatvia allude to marshes (Blato) and so does the name of the village in the *Return of Filip Latinovič* (1932).

The first parts of *Zastave* and *Banket u Blitvi* are played out against the background of the disintegrating Monarchy with its extended fin-de-siècle, which lasted at least to 1914. This is a decadent, suffocating world in which a gigantic bureaucracy is engaged to patch together the ever widening gap between megalomaniac imperial dreams and glum reality. In the war and its aftermath, the Monarchy and with it an entire way of life came to an end. Musil, Ady, Csáth, Kafka, Hašek, and Krleža were prophetic invaders of that middle-class complacency which refused to see the writing on the wall. By destroying the make-believe harmony, their work gives artistic formulation to the real fears and anxieties of the period.

Yet in a number of these works the break with Romanticism remains incomplete – patriotism cannot be given up until the native country achieves independence, and this bars the full development of a Western-type modernism. This is also true for Krleža, especially in *Banket u Blitvi*. Nielsen is only partially a modern hero: his intentions and actions (his world view and behavior) are separated – thus demonstrating a break from the romantic stance. Yet this grand East European satire on the Pannonian marshland is flawed as *satire*. The genre is constantly invaded and subverted because of its national commitment. The same attitude is present in Hungarian literature of the period.

Ervin Sinkó who worked extensively on this period in Hungary and who wrote several penetrating essays on Krleža did not pay enough attention to these reversible similarities.

In *Banket* Nielsen, straight from the front – the time is 1916 – visits a "Hun" poet, Oktavian Desiderius Kronberg. "En famille", as two free men, they talk. But when Nielsen deplors the "Hun campaign against the Blitvian language" – his host becomes nervous, and impatiently moves the conversation away from the subject, and disapproving of his separatist efforts, he considers it high treason to fight against *Aragonia*. With condescending politeness Kronberg refers to the question of independence as mere "formalism" and asks whether the entire problem is really *so* important. The host presents his guest with his recent volume "Hunnish Accords" and dedicates it with the inscription: "Right or wrong, my country." Ten years later Nielsen is in exile but Kronberg appears in the encyclopaedias as someone who has consistently fought for his country's independence.

This conversation really took place. The other protagonist was Dezső Kosztolányi. Krleža also described this meeting in his diaries,¹¹ yet his entry has not been identified as the source of the episode in Yugoslav works. It is a sad commentary about our ignorance of each other's literature. It is even more sad that Kosztolányi, who excelled also as a translator, never rendered anything by Krleža in Hungarian.

I was planning to write about the Hungarian influences on Krleža's work, but the more I thought about it, the clearer it became that Hungary is simply a background and not an inspiration. Perhaps no two people shared more *subtext* in their culture than the Hungarians and the Croats. While all member-states in the Monarchy used German, Latinity remained pronounced in these two cultures (in Hungary against Austria, in Croatia against Hungary).

One of Krleža's early pieces "Magyar királyi honvéd novella" (1921) could have been written by any good Hungarian realist (the mode of expressionist visions of his *Croatian Rhapsody* are omitted here). The story's captain is a small cog in the Austrian war machine. There is no compassion there for the soldiers either – nothing but a fundamental transformation of society can change the world Krleža depicts. The piece has little to do with modernism.

The *texture* of *Zastave's* language is also intimately familiar to the Hungarian reader because dialogues render the conversational style of the Croatian and Hungarian lesser Mobility and bourgeoisie in the first decades of the century perfectly. Similarly educated and reading the same German papers (primarily the *Pester Lloyd*), they mix the same foreign phrases and "bon mots" in their speech. They would all prefer to draw a "cordon sanitaire" around Serbia and paste on each toilet a slogan: "Hände waschen vor dem Essen, nach dem Stuhlgang nicht vergessen" (*Zastave*, I, 284).

They love their stable lifestyles and safely prearranged cultural surprises. The prototypical example for this convergence is the marriage connecting the Habelič and Emericzy families:

In this marriage two related souls united in the quotes of shared reading material, according to which Dante describes love as the supreme ruler of human fate, and Faust is a grand song reaching the pivotal heights of human intelligence... and so forth. (*Zastave*, I, 251).

The "intimate" knowledge of Goethe accompanies the husband even to the boudoir of his mistress where he muses: "– merkwürdig, dass ihn das Ewig-Weibliche bei seiner eigenen Frau eigentlich nie hinangezogen hat" (*Zastave*, 252). The same characters appear in the novels of Babits and Móricz. Krleža's Italian honeymooners (uttering the clichés about Leonardo, Raffael, and Canova) are exchangeable couples – no reader would notice the difference, if they popped up in contemporary Hungarian fiction.

Just as *parvenu* Hungarians degraded their own literature, the old lady in *Zastave* asks: "Who are this Matoš and that Kranjčević?... Meinen Sie wirklich das wäre et-was?" (I: 231). As is known Krleža wrote on Kranjčević's poetry.¹²

I wanted to present excerpts from *The Return of Filip Latinovič* and compare it to Hungarian works.

But there are *too many* similar descriptions of small town Sunday afternoons, and the same is true about the prototypical dinner party in Domačinski's vineyard in *The Edge of Reason* (1938). They all demonstrate the results of their shared history.

In conclusion, Krleža was not influenced by Hungarian literature in any measurable way. All works mentioned above are products of a shared civilization, even if the political objectives were oppositional. It is only sad that Krleža remained untranslated before 1945, and that his name does not appear even once in the most prestigious and modernist journal of Hungary, *Nyugat*, which during its 34 years of existence (1908–41), with the exception of a handful of translations of Jovan Dučić's poems (1932), never published a Southern Slav.

However, when summing up the work of Krleža during, or related to the first part of this century, I would be unwilling to claim him for modernism. In my view he suffered from the same debilitating issues of *national versus modern* as did his Hungarian colleagues. His oeuvre therefore remains bi-directional, often impairing the harmony or the profile of the individual piece.

Banket u Blitvi is perhaps the clearest example of this: naturalism, pathos, 19th century rhetorical devices impede the author's progress. Among his fiction, probably *Edge of Reason* bears most fully the distinctive features of a western-type literary modernism.

Banket u Blitvi appeared late in Hungary because of the rift between Tito and Stalin. Only *Zastave* was translated almost immediately. Still today Krleža's work reaches Hungary primarily through *FORUM*, the Hungarian-language publishers of *Novi Sad*. Let's hope that Central European *postmodernism* will fare better.

Notes

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1. Aleksander Flaker, *Nomadi Ljepote; intermedijalne studije* (The Nomads of Beauty; Intermedial Studies), Zagreb, 1988, 326–33.
2. Miroslav Krleža, *Zastave* (Flags). First published in Hungarian, in the translation of Zoltán Csuka. Novi Sad, 1965 (Vols I–II). Later vols appeared in *FORUM*.
3. *Banket u Blitvi* (A Banquet in Blitva). Translated by János Herceg. Novi Sad, 1960.
4. A German language periodical published in Budapest (1853–1944).
5. *Kezdetben volt a kert* (In the Beginning There was the Garden), Budapest, 1960, 2 vols.
6. "Vasúton" (On the Train). First published in 1848.
7. Predrag Matvejevič, *Stari i' novi razgovori & Krležom* (Old and New Conversations with Krleža), Zagreb, 133.
8. "Madzarski lirik Andrija Ady," ("Hungarian Lyrical Poetry of Endre Ady"), *Eseji* (Essays), Zagreb, 1930, I, 95–119.
9. "Magyar jakobinus dala" ("Song of the Hungarian Jacobin"), first published in 1908.
10. For more on this, see György Spiró, *Miroslav Krleža*, Budapest, 1981, 259 and passim.
11. Quoted by Stanko Lasic, 122 and 127.
12. *Hrvatski revija*, 1931, 3: 137–58.