

A CRITIC AT LARGE

MADNESS AND CIVILIZATION

The very strange fictions of László Krasznahorkai.

BY JAMES WOOD



“Reality examined to the point of madness.” What would this look like in contemporary writing? It might look like the fiction of László Krasznahorkai, the difficult, peculiar, obsessive, visionary Hungarian author of many works of fiction, only two of which are available in English, “The Melancholy of Resistance” (which appeared in Hungarian in 1989, and in English in 1998) and “War and War” (which appeared in 1999, and was translated in 2006), both published by New Directions. Postwar avant-garde fiction, like postwar conventional fiction, has tended to move between augmentation (abundance, immersion, getting more in) and subtraction (reduction, minimalism, what Samuel Beckett called “lessness”): Beck-

ett started out as an augments, and ended his life as a subtracter. But this division is not really a sharp one, because augmentation in the avant-garde novel often looks like a kind of subtraction: augmentation takes the form of an intensification of the sentence rather than an intensification of the things that many people habitually associate with the novel—plots, characters, objects. A lot has already disappeared from this fictional world, and the writer concentrates on filling the sentence, using it to notate and reproduce the tiniest qualifications, hesitations, intermit- tences, affirmations and negations of being alive. This is one reason that very long, breathing, unstopped sentences, at once literary and vocal, have been al-

most inseparable from the progress of experimental fiction since the nineteen-fifties. Claude Simon, Thomas Bernhard, José Saramago, W. G. Sebald, Roberto Bolaño, David Foster Wallace, James Kelman, and László Krasznahorkai have used the long sentence to do many different things, but all of them have been at odds with a merely grammatical realism, whereby the real is made to fall into approved units and packets.

In fact, these writers could be called realists, of a kind. But the reality that many of them are interested in is “reality examined to the point of madness.” The phrase is László Krasznahorkai’s, and, of all these novelists, Krasznahorkai is perhaps the strangest. His tireless, tiring sentences—a single one can fill an entire chapter—feel potentially endless, and are presented without paragraph breaks. Krasznahorkai’s brilliant translator, the poet George Szirtes, refers to his prose as “a slow lava-flow of narrative, a vast black river of type.” It is often hard to know exactly what Krasznahorkai’s characters are thinking, because his fictional world teeters on the edge of a revelation that never quite comes. In “War and War,” György Korin, an archivist and local historian from a provincial Hungarian town, is going mad. For the whole of the novel, he stands “on the threshold of some decisive perception,” but we never discover what that perception is. Here is a necessarily long quote from early in the book, as Krasznahorkai introduces Korin’s relentless mental distortions:

because he didn’t feel like going home to an empty apartment on his birthday, and it really was extremely sudden, the way it struck him that, good heavens, he understood nothing, nothing at all about anything, for Christ’s sake, nothing at all about the world, which was a most terrifying realization, he said, especially in the way it came to him in all its banality, vulgarity, at a sickeningly ridiculous level, but this was the point, he said, the way that he, at the age of forty-four, had become aware of how utterly stupid he seemed to himself, how empty, how utterly blockheaded he had been in his understanding of the world these last forty-four years, for, as he realized by the river, he had not only misunderstood it, but had not understood anything about anything, the worst part being that for forty-four years he thought he had understood it, while in reality he had failed to do so; and this in fact was the worst thing of all that night of his birthday when he sat alone by the river, the worst be-

Krasznahorkai’s translator describes his work as “a slow lava-flow of narrative.”

cause the fact that he now realized that he had not understood it did not mean that he *did* understand it now, because being aware of his lack of knowledge was not in itself some new form of knowledge for which an older one could be traded in, but one that presented itself as a terrifying puzzle the moment he thought about the world, as he most furiously did that evening, all but torturing himself in the effort to understand it and failing, because the puzzle seemed ever more complex and he had begun to feel that this world-puzzle that he was so desperate to understand, that he was torturing himself trying to understand, was really the puzzle of himself and the world at once, that they were in effect one and the same thing, which was the conclusion he had so far reached, and he had not yet given up on it, when, after a couple of days, he noticed that there was something the matter with his head.

The passage displays many of Krasznahorkai's qualities: the relentless ongoingness of the syntax; the way Korin's mind stretches and then turns back, like a lunatic scorpion trying to sting itself; the perfect comic placement of the final phrase. The prose has a kind of self-correcting shuffle, as if something were genuinely being worked out, and yet, painfully and humorously, these corrections never result in the correct answer. As in Thomas Bernhard, whose influence can be felt in Krasznahorkai's work, a single word or compound ("puzzle," "world-puzzle") is seized and worried at, murdered into unmeaning, so that its repetition begins to seem at once funny and alarming. Whereas the characters in Bernhard's work engage in elegant, even oddly formal rants—which can be removed from the fictions and performed as bitterly comic set pieces—Krasznahorkai pushes the long sentence to its furthest extreme, miring it in a thick, recalcitrant atmosphere, a dynamic paralysis in which the mind turns over and over to no obvious effect.

In "War and War"—whose epigraph is "*Heaven is sad*"—Korin has found a manuscript in the archive where he works. He came across the text, which seems to date from the early nineteen-forties, in a box labelled "Family Papers of No Particular Significance." This text is a fictional narrative about four men, named Kasser, Falke, Bengazza, and Toót, who have various adventures, from Crete to Cologne and the North of England, and in different historical periods. Korin is overwhelmed by the

beauty of this unknown manuscript; the moment he took it out of its box, "his life changed forever." Already unstable, he decides that the manuscript holds a religious or visionary answer to the "puzzle" of his life. He feels sure that it is really "speaking about the Garden of Eden," and decides that he must go to what he thinks of as "*the very center of the world*, the place where matters were actually decided, where things happened, a place such as Rome had been, ancient Rome, where decisions had been made and events set in motion, to find that place and *then* quit everything." He decides that this place is New York. There he will publish the manuscript by typing it up and posting it on the Internet. Then, he thinks, his life will come to an end.

László Krasznahorkai was born in Gyula, in southeast Hungary, in 1954. He has lived in both Germany and America, but his name is more familiar in Europe than it is here. (In Germany, he is almost canonical, partly because of the amount of time he has spent there and his fluency in German, and is spoken of as a potential Nobel laureate.) He is probably best known through the oeuvre of the director Béla Tarr, who has collaborated with him on several movies, including "Damnation," "Werckmeister Harmonies" (Tarr's version of "The Melancholy of Resistance"), and the vast, overwhelming "Sátántangó," which runs to more than seven hours. These are bleak, cavernous works, which in their spectral black-and-whiteness, sparse dialogue and reticent scores, seem to want to revert to silent pictures, and they offer a filmmaker's analogue of Krasznahorkai's serpentine sentences in their tracking shots, which can last as long as ten minutes: in "Werckmeister Harmonies," the camera accompanies two characters, Mr. Eszter and Valuska, as they walk through the streets of a gray provincial town; the wordless, protracted ambulation seems almost to occur in real time. Throughout the film, the camera lingers on the blank, illuminated face of Valuska (a naïve and troubled visionary) with the devotion of a believer kissing an icon. "Sátántangó" uses a complex tango-like structure (six steps forward, six back) to present the tableau of a collective farm on the brink of collapse. It is famous for

its long, uncut shots, such as one of villagers drunkenly dancing (an intoxication that, according to Tarr, was not fictional).

For all their daring and austerity, these works cannot replicate the peculiar engrossment of Krasznahorkai's prose (nor, of course, do they exactly seek to). "Werckmeister Harmonies" simplifies considerably the political machinations of the villagers in "The Melancholy of Resistance," at the cost of pushing the story toward a Central European magic realism. So readers of English await more of Krasznahorkai's fiction, and are, seemingly, reliant on Szirtes, his translator, and on the enlightened largesse—for that is what it is—of New Directions. His work tends to get passed around like rare currency. I first heard of "The Melancholy of Resistance" when a freakishly well-read Romanian graduate student handed me a copy, convinced that I would like it. I opened it, was slightly excited and slightly alienated by that typographic lava flow, and then put the book on a shelf, in the resignedly optimistic way in which one deals with difficult work—one day, one day. The sense of somewhat cultic excitement persists, apparently. While I was taking notes on these books, a Hungarian woman stopped at my table in a café and asked me why I was studying this particular author. She knew his work; indeed, she knew the author (and had, she said, gone to see "Pulp Fiction" with him in Boston, when it came out), and she wanted to talk to me now about this writer.

The excitement has something to do with Krasznahorkai's literary mysteriousness. Thomas Bernhard's world, by comparison, is at once reasonable and insane. A pianist and writer, say, recalls a friend who committed suicide and their interaction with Glenn Gould. This book—Bernhard's "The Loser"—is an extreme form of unreliable first-person narration but at least conforms to a basic generic conventionality. Even if the sentences are difficult, such a world is comprehensible, even desperately logical. But the abysses in Krasznahorkai are bottomless and far from logical. In Krasznahorkai, we often have no idea what is motivating the fictions. Read-

THE CIRCUS WATCHER

I wear red to match the air
that comes over the fence
and fills the jar in which I keep the day.
I say every dog looks like no other
but that isn't true. Not entirely.
Difference is slippery. I say,

Just look at my head, how it tilts to look up
at these over-large leaves. They're large
and blue, the better to be seen
by my pincushion eye, so bright in the light.
I am sad. I am happy. I keep busy.
I count the eight legs of the tick

on the table. Arachnid and such.
The book I leave open, the wind blows it shut.
In late April I make a schedule: June
to July, July to August. I begin to realize
the circus will be places, minds, people,
pleasure. The drumming all of these.

I practice, when I'm not sure of myself,
this repetition: know, know, know, knew.
I think that chaos fascinates me. I say,
I am part of that,
one of the characters in a cage.

—Mary Jo Bang

ing him is a little like seeing a group of people standing in a circle in a town square, apparently warming their hands at a fire, only to discover, as one gets closer, that there is no fire, and that they are gathered around nothing at all.

In "War and War," Korin travels to New York, finds lodgings with a Hungarian interpreter, Mr. Sárvary, gets a computer, and begins to type the text of the transcendently important manuscript. But the desperation of his attachment to this text is equalled only by his inability to describe its actual import:

It took no more than the first three sentences to convince him that he was in the presence of an extraordinary document, something so out of the ordinary, Korin informed Mr. Sárvary, that he would go so far as to say that it, that is to say the work that had come into his possession, was a work of astonishing, foundation-shaking cosmic genius, and, thinking so, he continued to read and reread the sentences till dawn and

beyond, and no sooner had the sun risen but it was dark again, about six in the evening, and he knew, he absolutely knew, that he had to *do something* about the vast thoughts forming in his head, thoughts that involved making major decisions about life and death, about not returning the manuscript to the archive but ensuring its immortality in some appropriate place . . . for he had to make this knowledge the basis of the rest of his life, and Mr. Sárvary should understand that this should be understood in its strictest sense, because by dawn he had really decided that, given the fact that he wanted to die in any case, and that he had stumbled on the truth, there was nothing to do but, in the strictest sense, to stake his life on immortality.

It is not just that this "truth" upon which Korin has stumbled is not defined; it is also that Krasznahorkai recesses Korin himself. The passage is third-person description, but notice the strange, unstable way in which it veers among the report of an ongoing activity ("he continued to read and reread the sentences till dawn"), the description of a mental state ("he had to *do*

something about the vast thoughts forming in his head"), and an account of an unstoppable monologue that Korin is apparently delivering to Mr. Sárvary ("something so out of the ordinary, Korin informed Mr. Sárvary"). The entire passage, even those elements which seem anchored in objective fact, has the quality of hallucination. One senses that Korin spends all his time either manically talking to other people or manically talking to himself, and that there may not be an important difference between the two. Almost every page of "War and War" contains the phrase "said Korin," or some variation thereon ("It was Hermes, said Korin, Hermes lay at the heart of everything"). It is a parody of the source attribution we encounter in a newspaper, whose purpose is to put such journalistic authority in doubt. At one moment in "War and War," we get this sublime confusion: "Believe me when I say, as I said before, he said, that the whole thing is unreadable, insane!!!"

In New York, Korin starts to tell first Mr. Sárvary, and then Sárvary's partner, about the manuscript. Day after day, he sits in the kitchen, retelling the stories about Kasser, Falke, Bengazza, and Toót. Krasznahorkai reproduces these strange and beautiful fictions—there are remarkable passages about Cologne Cathedral and Hadrian's Wall. Korin tells Sárvary's partner that, as he reads the manuscript and types it up, he can "see" these characters, because the text is so miraculously powerful: "He could see their faces and expressions from the moment he started reading as clearly as anything . . . faces and expressions you see once and never forget, said Korin." And slowly the reader confirms what he has suspected from the start, that Korin found no manuscript but is writing his own in New York; that "the manuscript" is a mental fiction, a madman's transcendent vision. The "said Korin" tag inevitably slips into the implied "wrote Korin." Reading, saying, writing, thinking, and inventing are all mixed up in Korin's mind, and inevitably get mixed up in the reader's mind, too.

For all these reasons, this is one of the most profoundly unsettling experi-



ences I have had as a reader. By the end of the novel, I felt that I had got as close as literature could possibly take me to the inhabiting of another person, and, in particular, the inhabiting of a mind in the grip of “war and war”—a mind not without visions of beauty but also one that is utterly lost in its own boiling, incommunicable fictions, its own grotesquely fertile pain (“Heaven is sad”). This pain is inscribed in the pages of “War and War” much as Korin feels that pain is inscribed in the pages of his own manuscript:

The manuscript was interested in one thing only, and that was *reality examined to the point of madness*, and the experience of all those intense mad details, the *engraving* by sheer manic repetition of the matter into the imagination, was, and he meant this literally, Korin explained, as if the writer had written the text not with pen and words but with his nails, scratching the paper into the paper and into the mind.

Krasznahorkai’s most recent work in English is not a novel but a collaboration between the writer and the German artist Max Neumann. “Animalinside” (translated by Ottilie Mulzet, and published jointly by New Directions,

Sylph Editions of London, and the Center for Writers and Translators at the American University of Paris; \$20) is a series of fourteen exquisite and enigmatic paintings, with paragraph-length texts by Krasznahorkai. In a brief introduction, Colm Tóibín explains that Krasznahorkai first worked from one of Neumann’s images, “and then Neumann, spurred on in turn by the words, made the rest of the images to which Krasznahorkai, his mind let loose by the captured visuals, responded by writing the other thirteen texts.” Neumann’s images feature black dogs, pasted into the pictures in dense silhouette, sometimes menacing and wolfish, sometimes playful and even cartoonish. In the first, a dog (or wolf) seems poised to jump but appears to be imprisoned in a small room, its head almost touching the ceiling. In the fourth, the black dog, again leaping, is trapped within a gridlike rectangle. In the fifth, a man calmly reads a newspaper—he looks like a contented, professorial gent—while the black dog leaps at his head from the left of the picture.

Resembling, in form, Beckett’s

“Texts for Nothing,” Krasznahorkai’s words often seem to be a commentary on late Beckett; there is a steady emphasis on nothingness, entrapment, going on and being unable to go on. These beautiful fragments have the packed intensity of Krasznahorkai’s longer fiction, particularly its control of repetition and echo. In the first text, for instance, Krasznahorkai sees the dog as a boxed victim, desperate to escape its cage, and condemned to “howl with one howl.” He takes two words, “tautening,” and “nothing,” and makes “one howl” of them, by using them again and again:

I want to stretch open the walls, but they have tautened me here, and here I remain in this tautening, in this constraint, and there is nothing else for me to do but howl, and now and forever I shall be nothing but my own tautening and my own howling, everything that there was for me has become nothing. . . . I have nothing in common with this space, in the entire God-given world I have nothing in common with this structure . . . so that I don’t even exist, I only howl, and howling is not identical with existence, on the contrary howling is despair.

The reader might think of Beckett’s “The Unnamable,” and the narrator’s cry at being “a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks . . . like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in a cage and dead in a cage, born and then dead.” Krasznahorkai is a more political writer than Beckett and, inevitably, this caged beast accrues political and moral significance. The dog is both victim and aggressor; aggressor because it is victim. If it could, it would “jump up to sink my teeth into your throat.” In the fifth text, which accompanies the picture of the dog leaping at the man contentedly reading a newspaper, the beast seems to have become the Other, everything that threatens bourgeois contentment, such as an immigrant, a terrorist, a revolutionary, or just the feared stranger: “I shall rear up and tear apart your face and then what good will all your expectations spent in horror, in anguish, in dread turn out to be.”

The dog promises to come like the apocalypse, like a thief in the night, and shatter every consoling structure:

Because in reality I will be there so quickly that it will be impossible at all to measure it . . . because before me there is no

past, after me there will be no need of the future, because there will be no future, because my existence is not measured by time . . . you raise your head from today's newspaper, or you just happen to look up, and there I am in front of you.

By the end of this relentless text, the dog has passed through the political and become metaphysical or theological. The dog is now everyone's secret dread, everyone's inevitable fate. It might be suffering, pain, death, evil, what Norman Rush in his novel "Mortals" calls "hellmouth": "the opening up of the mouth of hell right in front of you, without warning." And though Krasznahorkai's dog seems to be thinking its savage thoughts and threats and aiming them at the human in a terrible monologue, the subtle suggestion is that this may be nothing more than the recitation of human fear, a projection of savagery, by the man mildly reading his newspaper.

Krasznahorkai is clearly fascinated by apocalypse, by broken revelation, indecipherable messages. To be always "on the threshold of some decisive perception" is as natural to a Krasznahorkai character as thinking about God is to a Dostoyevsky character; the Krasznahorkai world is a Dostoyevskian one from which God has been removed. His novel "The Melancholy of Resistance" is a comedy of apocalypse, a book about a God that not only failed but didn't even turn up for the exam. Less manic, less entrapped than "War and War," it has elements of a traditional social novel. Set in a provincial Hungarian town, it features an array of vivid characters: the wicked, quasi-fascist Mrs. Eszter, who is plotting to take over the town and appoint herself the head of a committee for moral and social renewal; her sickly, philosophical husband, a musician who long ago resigned from the directorship of the town orchestra, and spends his days on a chaise longue, thinking bitter and refined thoughts; János Valuska, a postman and visionary dreamer, who walks all day through the town considering the purity of the cosmos, and is mocked by people who think him simple or odd; and the kind of supporting cast you want in Central European comic novels (the drunken police chief, the hapless mayor).

But this summary doesn't do justice to the unfathomable strangeness of the novel. The town is in a state of decline and uncertainty: the streetlights are out, rubbish is piling up uncollected. A travelling circus arrives, whose only attraction is an enormous whale, mounted in a curious, doorless truck, and some preserved embryos. The circus has been moving through the region, accompanied by a group of apparently aimless but oddly menacing onlookers, men who hang around the town's main square near the whale, waiting for something to happen. Everything is full of vague and doomy imminence, and Mrs. Eszter sees her opportunity: if she can foment (or even manage) some kind of anarchy, blame the unrest on unnamed "sinister forces," and then successfully quash that unrest, she may attain her desire, to head the "tidy yard and orderly house movement." The men do eventually go on a rampage, smashing up things and people, burning buildings. But why? We are never told. One of them states that "we could not find a fit object for our disgust and despair, and so we attacked everything in our way with an equal and infinite passion." The army is called in, and Mrs. Eszter triumphs. Within fourteen days of taking charge, she has "swept away the old and established the new."

It is unclear whether the whale had anything to do with the irruption of violence; Krasznahorkai mischievously dangles the possibility that the circus is a difficult art work, that it was simply misread by everyone as an agent of apocalypse, in the way that all revolutionary and obscure art works are misread (by implication, this novel included). The whale is a funny, gloomy allusion to Melville, and perhaps Hobbes; like the leviathan, like Moby Dick, it is vast, inscrutable, terrifying, capable of generating multiple readings. But it is also static, dead, immobile, and the Puritan God who makes Melville's theology comprehensible (however incomprehensible Melville's white whale is) has long vanished from this nightmarish town in the shadow of the Carpathians. Meaning scrambles for traction, and the sinister doorless truck that sits silently in the middle of the town square is also a

joke about the Trojan horse. Naturally, in Krasznahorkai's world, the Trojan horse is empty. No one gets out of it.

"The Melancholy of Resistance" is a demanding book, and a pessimistic one, too, since it seems to take repeated ironic shots at the possibility of revolution. The only resistance offered to Mrs. Eszter comes in the form of Valuska (who is picked up and confined to a mental asylum) and Mrs. Eszter's husband, who is a feeble, isolated foe. The pleasure of the book, and a kind of resistance, as well, flows from its extraordinary, stretched, self-recoiling sentences, which are marvels of a loosely punctuated stream of consciousness. These are used with particular brilliance to capture the visionary gropings of Valuska, who wanders through the town thinking cosmic thoughts, and of Mr. Eszter, who, for years, has been obsessed with tuning his piano to Werckmeister's old harmonic system, and then with choosing one suite of music to play for the rest of his life.

Krasznahorkai can be a comic writer, and comic justice is meted out to Mr. Eszter, who finally tunes his piano, sits down to play, and is horrified by the hideous sounds he makes. For Eszter, music is a sort of resistance to reality:

Faith, thought Eszter . . . is not a matter of believing something, but believing that somehow things could be different; in the same way, music was not the articulation of some better part of ourselves, or a reference to some notion of a better world, but a disguising of the fact of our irredeemable selves and the sorry state of the world, but no, not merely a disguising but a complete, twisted denial of such facts: it was a cure that did not work, a barbiturate that functioned as an opiate.

Mental fictions may enrage us, and may lead to madness, but they may also provide the only "resistance" available. Korin, Valuska, and Mr. Eszter are, in their different ways, all demented seekers after purity. That they cannot exactly describe or enact their private Edens makes those internal worlds not less but more beautiful. Inevitably, as for all of us but perhaps more acutely for them, "heaven is sad." ♦

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