

Kamov's Lyric Poetry in the Context of Croatian Modernism

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In his two collections of poetry that appeared in 1907, *Swearword* (*Psovka*) and *Paper Pinched* (*Ištupana hartija*), Kamov at once defined himself as having a radically negative stance not only toward the literary tradition but also to his own particular literary and aesthetic moment. Within the context of titles like *Knjiga Boccadoro* (Milan Begović), *Slavenske legende* (Vladimir Nazor), *Valovi misli i čuvstva* (Ante Tresić-Pavičić) or even *Lapadski soneti* (Ivo Vojnović), and individual poems (mainly sonnets) by A. G. Matoš or the idyllic sketches written in the northern Croatian Kajakavian dialect by Dragutin Domjanić, the titles of Kamov's books of poetry rang out with a sharp, irreconcilable dissonance. Rejecting choice lyric expressions, Kamov gives free rein to swearing; the aspiration to harmony is renounced in the creation of disharmony and chaos; "art" is unknown to him and his forms (in *Swearword*) are free and open, with no model in Croatian poetry (a certain parallel could be drawn with the free verse of Walt Whitman); the cult of beauty cherished by the poets of the modern period is discarded in favour of a kind of aesthetics of ugliness. All this is connected quite naturally with the revolutionary significance of his verses in relation to the social and moral norms, which sometimes escalates into extremes of cynicism, amorality and sadism. Kamov comes down particularly hard upon the canonized sexual morality; the motif of sex is to become dominant, not only in the lyrics, but also in the whole of the literary oeuvre.



For Kamov the absolute freedom to which he aspired but which life never allowed him was sublimated in literature, as he himself says in a letter to his brother Vladimir:

"When you can't give free rein to your passions, to your ideas and so on, in reality, life and practice, then you have — nothing but paper; and as you make love to a woman with kisses — so paper with pen; as you fertilize a woman with protoplasm, so paper with ink... As you pinch and so on."

That is why Kamov's lyric poetry does begin with these significant, sexually charged verses in the poem *Prelude*:

I'll rape you, white paper, virginal paper:
 vast is my passion, and you will find it hard to bear.

Eros is an existential beginning, the *spiritus movens* of the world, and it comes in, logically, as an essential factor in the relation between poet and literature, symbolized by the white, pure paper. Through new concretizations, this relation develops into a permanent tension, but its fundamental agenda is indubitably to be found in these initial verses. It is from this tension, that leads to a wild and untrammelled symbiosis, that the work is born, not as something that joins the primal separation into harmony, rather itself containing immanent elements of difference, the spasmodic, and disharmony. This primary, one might say biologically imposed, postulate of Kamov's poetics is crucial in his relation to the world too, in the appearances of the poetic forms, which are themselves torn, dissonant, irreducible to any general rules of the formalization of literary material. With this kind of individualistic smashing of all accepted arrangements, Kamov isolated himself in his own time, appearing as something as an anticipator of later literary movements. But since his writing, which lasted four years in all, came in an intermediate period, the modern period being on the way out, and new literary movements pulled together under the general name of the avant-garde (futurism, expressionism) not yet having taken shape, the elements of the new were not capable in his work of being intentionally shaped so as to provide full awareness and understanding of the significance of Kamov's own literary proceedings. And if we take account of Kamov's having in this short

period gone through an important evolution in his ideas about literature and life, which might be characterised as the journey from the imprecation to scepticism, and which tends to last for decades in writers, the previous insight remains a much more important reason why Kamov's work remained just a torso than his early death.

Let us go on with the key signals from the introductory poem of *Swearword*. The first verse of the second stanza expresses the principle of radical individual opposition to all social and moral standards:

There are no laws above you, and the laws have died for me.

Then there is a systematic display of the key lexemes of Kamov's poetics: orgy, lechery, madness, frenzy, rage. After a grotesque picture of the people in the fourth and fifth stanza¹, point is given to *Prelude* by its returning to and underlining very strong sexual connotations, as limned in the first verse, thus suggestively rounding off the poetic image and the fundamental authorial idea.

I am loving you, paper, and hot is my love;
hot like my blood and frenzied like my rage.
Give yourself to me for ever — black are my kisses;
black my kisses, but red in them the blood.

We have already commented on the way the titles of Kamov's lyric collections oppose them to their contemporaries in Croatian poetry. Now however we would like to bring in one correction to this, an exception to the rule. There is one, conditionally speaking, precursor in the last collection of Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević to be published during his lifetime — *Twitches (Trzaji)*, 1902. Although discord and rupture are not announced in Kranjčević through a violent disintegration of poetic form, as they are in Kamov, the intellectual starting points and the underlining of meaning are very close in the two poets. This is why one of the

important, and in fact quite unavoidable, questions which every consideration of the literary historical context and the stylistic complex of the lyric poetry of Janko Polić Kamov must inevitably address is its relation with Kranjčević. For if the poetry of the Croatian modern period is that synchronically dominant stylistic and poetic complex against which Kamov's versifying defines itself both aesthetically and ethically as a consistently conceived and implemented negation, then Kranjčević's lyric poetry is at the very first glance intellectually and thematically, and with respect to *Paper Pinched* formally too, in its metrical and rhythmical system, very close to Kamov's poetry of revolt and opposition. Accordingly a comparative analysis of Kranjčević's and Kamov's lyrical ideas, motifs, images and forms is a proceeding which will allow us to get inside the spiritual root of Kamov's verse.

Kamov and Kranjčević

Kamov himself, who is otherwise little disposed to discuss any models and precursors², made very direct reference to his connection with Kranjčević. Just as Kranjčević in his poem *In Memory of August Šenoa*, 1885, acknowledged the begetter of modern Croatian literature his teacher —

I learned at the ardour of your heart
At your fire, that heav'n-sent gift...

— so Kamov, clearly not merely conventionally, but with an intensely experienced spiritual affinity mentions Kranjčević — directly, intimately, fraternally, as fellow sufferer — in the poem *The Risen Christ*.

But Silvije looks and looks, the powerful eye
that sees all wretchedness
and turns back to the empire of the barricades
and sees you here.

Silvije has ardour, and blood and living flesh,

that wrote his verse.

I made peace with you, Oh reanimated Christ,
I dreamed that time.

The previous phrases used to describe the relation between Kamov and Kranjčević are modifications of words used in one of Kamov's most inspired essays³, all of which speaks quite explicitly of a spiritual connection of the kind that literature and art are very familiar with (and which are, doubtless, among the most powerful inner stimulants in the process of the constitution and construction of every art). It is quite understandable from this why all the relevant research into Kamov's lyric poetry, from Čerina's "impressionist and scholarly" study of 1913 down to Ivanišević's of the seventies should make particular reference to the component of Kranjčevićism.⁴ From this condensed introduction or insight into the primary and secondary sources the importance and complexity of the problem can be seen well enough, as well as the extent to which it has so far been researched and interpreted, so that the question might reasonably be asked: why turn it over again today? Has something slipped the notice of these critics, can anything new be said at all about the relation between Kranjčević and Kamov, anything different?

A certain encouragement can be found in a marginal note of Čerina from the beginning of his work. Establishing, of course, Kranjčević as a forerunner of Kamov, Čerina wrote the following idea in a footnote:

"They coincide in the main, and diverge in the inessential, although it is this inessential, this form, manner and expression that frequently, very frequently, makes the poem the poem, gives it its scent and soul and savour."

With his impressionist vocabulary and *belles lettres* style, Čerina seems here to have cut intuitively to one of the main postulates of literary theory of this century, starting from Russian formalism (which, in passing, came into

being only a year or so after Čerina's homage à Kamov): that the meaning of a text is read from its form, that is from the construction and details of language in the concrete literary work. From this point of view Čerina's statement could be turned about, as follows: Kamov and Kranjčević meet in the inessential, and diverge in the main. This of course is a hypothesis only, demonstrated by a mere witticism. So we should make the problem more radical: Kamov in his poetry, often adopting Kranjčević's ideas, either embodied them according to identical or similar linguistic and stylistic principles, or fundamentally reshaped the Kranjčević ideologemes via his own Kamovish procedure through which they gained a new meaning. The dilemma is of considerable importance. In the first case Kamov's lyric poetry is a more or less interesting epigone. In the second case, it would be an independent, free-standing element appearing at that watershed time of the new Croatian lyric when modernism itself slowly became a traditional canon, and the new poetic form, created later in expressionism, can be sensed only in the germ. Kamov would in this case be something of a landmark, the kind that stands isolated, ultimately inexplicable in terms of the parameters of society and nation, intellectual history and stylistic movements.

An answer to this kind of question can be found only through interrogating the immanent linguistic and structural features of the juxtaposed literary texts. Kranjčević-Kamov, in other words, means an investigation of the lyrical textualities of Kamov and Kranjčević. But before this it will be useful to have some biographical information, reduced to the most essential, useful because it can best take us into the most probably central ideologeme there in the works of both of the poets.

Kranjčević first appeared as a poet in 1883, and Kamov in 1905, both of them between the ages of 18 and 19. The first was undergoing a grave spiritual and religious crisis in the Rome

Germanicum, the second had gone through it earlier still. It is interesting to follow this path from belief to doubt, and then the rejection of religion, a process which is manifested exceptionally strongly in both Kranjčević's and Kamov's poetry. In the case of Kranjčević this development is gradual, full of hesitations and pangs of conscience, quite similar to the dilemmas of Stephen Dedalus. Even later, when he was confirmed in his anti-clericalism and, philosophically, pantheism, he always retains a feeling of respect for the person of God and particularly of Christ. Just like Nietzsche in his philosophical thinking, Kranjčević in his poetical statements tends to show that institutionalized Christianity has betrayed all the fundamental principles of its Master. Kamov, on the other hand, solves the same dilemma at once, over night, so to speak, with youthful impulsiveness and thus with total negation. Talking of his apostasy, his brother, the poet Nikola Polić draws attention to this feature that is typical of Janko, which was to have a crucial influence on his life and literary work.

"Expelled from the fourth class of the Sušak high school, with the help of his father's friends, Janko enrolled in the fifth form of the Senj high school, and got a place in the boarding section of the school called Ožegovićianum, which brought up the lads entrusted to it in an ultra-clerical spirit, which Janko could not tolerate, although to date he had been a practically fanatical believer. He had his first crisis in the boarding house, his first spring tempest, confiding to his brother Vladimir in a letter that he was deprived of all privileges; he was not allowed to receive papers, except those recommended by the curators; he couldn't read books of his own choosing; in the first of these letters, a big change in his thinking, way of looking and believing could be seen. Suddenly, practically in one go, he lost his belief and every respect towards received regulations and ecclesiastical mysteries. Previously a believer, in that den he turned into an infidel, a rebel, what

is more into the most fanatical of the kind. I won't be making a mistake to say that Janko, in this very boarding school, started off his *Swearword*, this programme for the whole of the first period of his literary work."⁵ And what about Kranjčević? Leaving his native Senj for Rome he was enthralled by a vision of Croatia, captive and debased in the present, but glorious in the past. He took an oath that he would fight for the country's liberty (*A Vow*), and, hedging and putting a question mark, it is true —

It came about, you call me
For me to tell you: I will not?

— surrenders himself to God. The ancient and eternal motifs of country and faith, traditional, permanently engrafted upon Croatian poetry from its origins and from Marulić, from its inception that is, come out in *Bulgarian women*, one more of the countless versions of complaints upon historical misfortune, this time in the political reality of the darkness of Khuen Hedervary. Quickly rejecting faith in its institutionalised, ecclesiastical form, Kranjčević consecrates the idea of Croatia, which is to remain his own ideal refuge in the bitter disappointments and bitter experiences he is to have until the end of his life.

I breathe one soul — dedicate to you,
I have one church — your bosom.
(*To Croatia*)

But in the first phase, still completely in the spirit of the age-old literary tradition, he links the idea of faith and fatherland in the symbols of the sword and the cross:

I'll raise the holy cross
Terror of the damned,
And crucifix in hand will go
To the troop of the avengers.
Oh, still living, ancient God,
His arrows still do serve him
To avenge the wretched
When they wail their sorrow.

By the cross the biting sword

m DOSSIER: JANKO POLIĆ KAMOV o

Will shine in fatal light,
At the bloody feast
Will drink its fill of blood.
With cross and sword and flame
Of the sacred ancient faith
But forward — look where they shake
The troops of hell.

(I burn)

Just as these lines are intellectually speaking full of the conceit of youth (and naive as well), so they are from the point of view of value completely worthless (because so banal). The whole of the structure of the poem, from ideologeme to semanteme, from the metrical scheme to the rhythmical dimensions, is well within the framework of the poetic optics defined by Šenoa and Harambašić. The later development of Kranjčević's patriotic poems moved in a regular relation of profit and loss: the less faith, the more thought, the fewer traditional canons, the more expressiveness and perfection of poetic form. He was to reach his peaks in the last poems dedicated to his nation, before the last ten years of his life he fixed his gaze on the stars and transcendental visions: *My Home* and *In front of the Royal Inscription of Baška*. No further treatment or detailed analysis of this aspect of Kranjčević will be attempted here, for it is not of any vital interest for the comparison with Kamov, in whom he is to be seen in different connotations entirely, and in one, more important, part in a different poetic form too. While in these verses of Kranjčević the dominant mark — blood — with its derivations comes up as a link of the signifier and signified, which derives entirely from the age old tradition, and is to this extent denotative, in Kamov, completely by way of contrast, in the first book of poems, *Swearword*, it is markedly individual, connotative, a sign of personal passion. Between the poet and the subject of his poem there is no mediation, his emotion, and the sign or word, are violent, violatory:

I'll rape you, white paper, virgin paper:

vast is my passion, you will find it hard to bear.
you evade my rage, you're pale with fear;
a kiss on your pallour, my kisses are black.

Kranjčević, then, as is usually said, came into Croatian literature with a Šenoa-Harambašić toned, rhythmicised verse, but Kamov quite simply by raping paper. The powerful, drastic, sexual connotation that breaks out of the first verse of Kamov's poem will strongly mark all his later, not only lyrical, but all other literary writing. It will be his fate:

I am loving you, paper, with my hot love;
hot like my blood and frenzied like my rage.
Give yourself to me for ever — black are my kisses;
black my kisses, but red in them the blood.

This, of course, is the rhythm of the psalms, the same that moved and set in motion the free verse of Walt Whitman, which Kamov heard while creating *Swearword*, suffused to the very roots with a fanatical calling into question of Christian morality and ethical principles. And it was this very rejection that absolutely had to breach everything, including even the hymnal and psalmodic rhythmical frame, had to burst into the unrestrained anarchy of the verse, analogous to Kamov's temperament, character and experience of the world. Thus, from the measured trochaic and dactylic metre, which is what the pseudo-hexameter of Kranjčević actually is, at the beginning of *Song of Songs*,

Come, my Gypsy, my black love;
tawny is your skin and your eyes are black;

the verse in the second stanza simply overrides the set limits, grows like a powerful, unpredictable tide, aspiring to the expression of the shriek and of chaos, those elementary beginnings of

Kamov's lyric poetry to which he will return again and again, as to his source and estuary:

I love the shriek from your eyes, love the shriek from your breasts;

In the third stanza the rhythm calms; as if hesitating between what was limned in the first, and massively disturbed in the second stanza. In the fourth it explodes, completely breaking down the boundary between the poetic and the prose pulsation of the sentence:

Our love will be chaos: turbid and mingled and the right words cannot be found for it;

This by now certainly is not the rhythm of the psalms. The poet begins directly to recreate the sexual act, at two levels, the visual and the rhythmic. It is the beginning of that verbally erotic ecstasy in the second stanza where the woman's "shriek from the eyes and shriek from the breasts" is loved. And the continuation comes, with its magisterial crescendo and coda, in these lines:

we shall kiss naked and warm and the pinch shall be our bloody song,
I shall pull out your hair, and you will press your eyes in my soul and anger shall be our damnable song;
we shall twist like a snake and crawl like the ideal — and tragedy will be our song of despair;
our love will bewitch us — it will whip us with terror and pain will be our dreadful song;
the forest will be our temple, the grass our bed — chaos our deity,
and souls our sacrifice.

This kind of rhythm and structure of text cannot be adequately described by any kind of schemes, not even those familiar in the versification of free verse, while the lexis (naked, warm, pinch, pulling hair, twisting like a snake...) is directly under the control of the signified, coitus. All the elements of the structure, from the phonetic, via

the semantic to the contextual, vibrate wildly, aiming at a single target, expressed in the last verses. An interpretation postulated and carried out in this way makes it possible to grasp and interpret the metrical "shortcomings". This comes in the final verse of the second stanza, which runs "oh my naked love," the only short verse in the whole of the poem. And it is short since, because of the real context it is putting into words, it has to be that way. If we bring these two verses into intertextual relations within the segment, it will have to be concluded that they mark the beginning and the end of the real context assumed, the moment of tension and expectation, the moment of ecstasy and stillness in parallel. Every kind of verbal expansion, with respect to the context stated, every supplement over and above this expressive and concise statement would be less than adequate, and in fact crude and pointless.

The artistic and aesthetic value of *Song of Songs* is that the act of love is not approached purely descriptively, but is through the poetic means of visualization and rhythm creatively transformed into a specific and distinct world of linguistic art. The fact that Kamov in various other poems, inspired by the same motif, never managed to liberate such a degree of creative power and expression does not mean that it is not necessary to separate them out and subject them to analysis. For only then will coitus (and for Kamov, as will be seen, this is not only a physical act but very often a libidinous state of mind) be able to be seen as one of the obsessive loci and motifs of his lyrics. But before that we should return for a moment to Kranjčević in a search for verses of his in which the same motifs can be seen, and in which they are most directly reflected, as a counterpoint to what has just been discussed with Kamov.

The first four stanzas of the poem *Overture* will be taken; in this Kranjčević gives a lyric evocation of the motive for the first sin, linking the germ of physical love with fratricide

(Cain and Abel) and the loss of immortality and the departure for continuation and temporality. The awakening and realization of the love of "the forefather of the human race" for the first woman is expressed in this way:

When the demi-god of flowery Eden
glanced his eye
Eve was kneeling there beside him. Her
childish face, and breasts
Were early strawberries, summ'ry
youth panted from her skin
A ruddy flush, intoxicating tingling.

The first time it is he sees her. His
vig'rous arm all of itself
Draws out in passion to her. A trem-
bling hot shudder
Does bend him, when, nor woman nor
child, she lisps
You are mine, her eyes are filled with
glass.

Eden rocks entire; as if on some al-
mighty tide
The lotus and palm are borne, the sky
gleams grandly,
Birds chirrup in their sleep, and he on
the warmth of ocean
Swims with her, and swings, and flies...

Eden sang its paeon; dense above them
leaves
Shook with their hot breaths, shook
quieter and quieter
Hid their sweet mystery, their never
purer kisses
Love both earthly and yet more of the
skies.

All the essential elements of Kranjčević's lyrical subject can be seen in these verses. An exalted rhythm, borne along by grandeur of feeling, is developed in the extensive poetic form. The carefully chosen lexis expresses a fullness of creative passion, but never in harsh, rough lines. Often with very discreet nuances, the construction of the poetic phrasing is, on the contrary, always firm and fully articulated. If this kind of image of linguistic and stylistic structure is counterpointed to that offered by Kamov's *Swearword*, the difference is more than manifest. There

is a total absence of grander feeling, the rhythm, as shown in the analysis of the *Song of Songs*, is broken and flows into an anarchic sentence structure, the lexical choice is regularly managed by words with straightforward, most frequently extremely direct, connotations, and the poetic image which is built with them is naturalistically drastic, grotesque even (and here Kamov is apt, from a literary and stylistic point of view, to go in for gratuitous exaggeration).

But there is a great similarity in rhythm and metre to Kranjčević revealed by Kamov's second collection, *Paper Pinched*, in which he abandons free verse and adopts a regular form. Although here too, as the title suggests, the poet "pinches the paper", a grotesque linkage of the animate and the inanimate, creature and thing), he does it differently, one might say, more classically, disciplinedly, organizedly. Nor is it unimportant, finally, that there is a difference in meaning between rapping and pinching, for the semantic mitigation points to a transition on a structural plane that has been genuinely accomplished. What is the point of this transition, how is it concretely brought about?

The long verse line, with its fifteen or sixteen syllables including a caesura after the eighth, is characteristic of the later poetry of Kranjčević. It is also used by Kamov in *Paper Pinched*. It is true that in the first book of this collection poems with a shorter metre, mainly a regular octosyllabic, alternate with the longer version (*Diana Dead, In Impulse, In Inspiration*), or that the two forms are used side by side in the same poems (*New Spring, The Cry*). But in the second the long metre prevails, especially in poems with a kind of narrative structure such as *Debauchery of the Spirit, Novel, Kitty*. Since in addition in both books tercets and quatrains prevail, and almost always with a regular rhyme, the picture of a transition to a more classical and traditional form of verse in *Paper Pinched* is complete. Nevertheless, a slightly more careful look would reveal, even if we had no externally derived knowl-



Vilko Gecan: The Cynic, 1921

edge, that the collection was written by the same poetic mind that had composed *Swearword*. Not only because of the thematic treatment of the same motifs, among which physical and spiritual debauchery is absolutely dominant, but because of the particular lexis and the characteristic Kamovian phraseology. Čerina made up a very detailed inventory of the lexis of Kamov's lyric poetry, correctly drawing attention to the poet's pronounced fondness for an obscure and irregular vocabulary full of loanwords, which made this poetry "very deformed and monstrous"⁶. From the frequency with which they occur, however, it could well be concluded that Kamov does not use them merely from the whimsy of his youthful anarchism, but quite consciously, as an apostle of the "aesthetics of the ugly", which will later become one of the most important options of various trends in modern art. The brothel, the madhouse and the hospital, this triple deity of modern times, are not just key sites of Kamov's calvary of a life, but an essential symbolization and sublimation of his psychic processes and aesthetic understanding. From among the many sites that will show this we might choose this characteristic one:

The debauching fervour of my soul wanders whole before a deity in three figures... in the spasm of the whorehouse and then on ... in the madhouse, to the spectre of the jest... and on and on... in the scent of scabs of the infirmary... oh, where discord weds and winds with ill-omened creases and pure beauty deformed gasps trampled 'neath the table.
(*Debauchery of the Spirit, III*)

In this stanza, in the grotesque imagery augmented by fierce oxymoron, expressionism is clearly present long before it actually becomes a stylistic formation in European poetry. The space to be drawn in all its fullness of expression by Krleža in *War lyrics, Croatian rhapsody, Galicia, Croatian God Mars* is present in all its essential

features. Of course: Kranjčević's lyric poetry is also, in its deepest dimension, a cry from a wounded soul, a song of ever stronger and more painful resignation, of the personally and nationally tragic. But even in its extremities of loss it nevertheless retains two personal residues: the motherland and the tear, the first as godhead, the second as charity.

I bear this godhead — like a marvellous account,
Like the last gasp of life;
And if it fall beneath th' all destroying claw,
I plunge to no avail.
(*My home*)

Grief retreated to pure solitude
She mourned for man, and left the world;
After a kiss of pain, inseparable friend
She, loyal, turned, a black sunflower.

She raised him an altar in cavern cold,
Kissed his charm in bitter sighs;
And in clear, clear and wretched, tears
The preciouses of heart gave him as a gift.

....

And when it burned in cavern so cold
The only star above a grievous sleep
In clear, clear and wretched, tears
Sang to Pain th' eternal "Gloria!"

Love with childish cry did smile
Happy took the tears — precious jewel
And with its own its darling hand
Placed them on the forehead — like God himself.
(*Two Friends*)

It could then be claimed that Kranjčević even in his darkest poems was somewhere at the most covert level of meaning still the poet of Hope. If in this world, in the reality of it, national feeling, love, charity, humanity do not exist, for these are crudely humiliated and cynically disfigured, they are still preserved in the dreamy intimacy of the human heart.

Since, however, in Kamov the least sign

or trace of the transcendental has been thoroughly quelled, he is the poet of the absurd, of hopelessness, in a word, of absolute resignation. Paradoxically, linguistically more drastic and vociferous, stylistically more destructive, Kamov's lyrics are the expression a greater weakness and vulnerability precisely because he neither admits nor offers any metaphysical category of salvation. Country is for Kamov always just a grotesquely deformed picture provided him by the present moment of society and history, love is a cynically contorted mask, beauty, we have seen "deformed gasps trampled". And no kind of inner ideal projection comes to oppose this. In the treatment of the patriotic theme, the grotesque comes particularly into the foreground in the fracturing of the existential planes of the human and the animal in the first two poems of *Swearword*:

Pious are the people, and their tails are
twixt their legs
there's no frankness in their eyes, their
walk is just a sloping;
sniffing out their work is, and rich is
their payment....
Stop a while, my love, listen to my
pain;
you take the human word, yet the ass
has not understood man;
oxen pull the plough and their serfdom
brings them hay;
the horse pulls the boyar and shining
is his coat;
finely is the porker fed and unctuous
is his flesh;
the laws are harsh and agile, and the
stalls are full of oats.
(*Prelude*)

Dead is the world, my love, and it is
black in its boredom;
dead the people, my love, and dreamy
is their song;...
no unrest in their eye, their eye is the
eye of the sow;
no revolt in their movements, their
movements are those of the ox;
no blood in their bodies, and empty
their soul like god.
(*Song of songs*)

m DOSSIER: JANKO POLIĆ KAMOV **o**

It is not to be wondered at, then, that Kamov looks towards eros as the only value, and that it is for him embodied in perversions of physical and spiritual debauchery. And also to alcohol, to which, among other things, one of his last poems (*In delirium*) is devoted, written in Zagreb on February 2, 1910. Here there will be an investigation of one of the most obsessive of the erotic symbols of Kamov's poems and a list will be given of the appearance of it in the verse. This image has already been mentioned by Čerina: "He never had anything to do with the discreet "breasts" but loved the indiscreet "tits" to distraction," although no elaboration is given. Here then is a list which speaks for itself.

Moist earth, sun beams kiss you and
heaven's drops caress you;
woman of milky tits and lovers' secrets;
(*Day of the dead*)

Look, ice falls, and our godhead is
dying;
my mother has no shine, dead is her
mouth;
there is no milk from her tits, and her
children will perish;
(*Icy debauchery*)

Death, is it? Look, numbed little face,
and faded, enervated tits
(*Diana Dead*)

Suckled it with blood itself
while it tears her tits,
and what mangles you with tooth
has me a hundred fold more.
(*Vitlaj duše*)

A woman with wearied tits,
that from the sky seeks breath
(*Voluptas*)

And I just tear books and papers,
and drain my cups,
and damn the rulers, smell tits
and appall the children
(*Passion of being*)

While she with her white tits and buck-
ling knees

stuttered in first shame
and the scent like mist in debauched
drops
would cover the sight.

In bond where my heart sees no trace
of gold
here rots the woman's breath;
they've torn out her hair, squashed her
tits,
when all is earthly dust.
(*The Risen Christ*)

Just sounds he with a smile — as a
mother sees her child
naked where it quivers,
seeks upon its lips, and she offers it
the tit
laughing, happy, and quick.
(*New spring, III*)

You know those tits of yours, those
panting hard tits,
when I put my arm around your waist,
and whispered through hair the May
breeze fluttered,
at mid-day, half aloud
(*New spring, IV*)
And my furrows laugh aloud, and
drowsy lust of my eyes
will trample mercifully,
The first time there goes a woman with
untouched firm tits
offering her dewy flowers
(*New spring, V*)

Come, thirteen year old, with the
shame of first youth
flaring with the flame of secrets,
and eyes overflowed with a veil of tears
and fears and passions
in the first flowering of tits.
(*Cry, IV*)

Somewhere I sang her a thirteen year
old, as the blooming of tits
and penned a wild poem on timorous
paper
(*Debauchery of the spirit IV*)

Dejection in your eye, dejection in your
figure;
crackling on your tits, the heat of burn-
ing stove,
sobbing on your lips, where fever has
scattered them,

abyss and collapse in your eye, where
thunders cleave.
(*Roman 2*).

I tore off your painting of linen: now
out jut your naked tits...
(*Roman 9*)

This lexeme has been singled out, and
so exhaustively addressed in the quo-
tations, because it represents one of the
most powerful semantemes and
stylemes, not only in the context of
Kamov's poetry, but in the unit to
which this poetry belongs linguistically.
That in a wider sense it has a pro-
nouncedly connotative, stylistic value
can be seen from the fact that it comes
in at a juncture where Croatian poetry
had so far known only words like
breast, bosom, perhaps teat. This lexe-
me is absolutely new and previously
unknown. Looked at synchronically, it
is a strong enough, or more than that,
violation of a tabooed lexical area,
similar to that of the later use of
signifiers from sex organs. But Kamov
does not abuse it, does not make of it
a new lexical or stylistic convention
(which would of course lose it its sty-
listic power); this is shown by the use
of synonyms that are always used
whenever there is no actual sexual con-
notation. Čerina is not entirely right
to say that Kamov did not admit the
discreet breast. The lexeme appears
quite often, for example in the poem
After the carnival.

On your knees, woman, on your white
knees
on which debauchery shook;
the cold tile will scold the flesh,
and kneeling still the breast.

Many more examples could be cited,
but it will be enough to attend to the
last two songs in *Paper Pinched: Kiss*
and *Sobbing of a Whore*. In the first, it
is true, there is the sound of *Swear-
word* still, that basic sound that made
Kamov

the poet of mud, poet of hate, poet of
cursing,
taunted steed on a hill, that breaks all,

tears, destroys
collapsing through the abyss without
compassion, without mercy.

but the kiss of the whore opens him to
another side of his being, an unex-
pected, non-Kamovian side, where he
suddenly shows himself genuinely
close to Kranjčević. In these songs
there is another semanteme, almost
non-existent in the swearing phase,
which is characterized by dark and
macabre, grotesque eroticism: tears.
The kiss of the whore is a sign of re-
demption and conversion:

I go through the world with it — bear-
ing the whore upon my breast —
her kiss, her tear like a brilliant medal
gleaming;

— while the tear, one of Kranjčević's
key semantemes becomes a sign
through which Kamov emerges from
the mire of hatred and swearing into a
space that has been so far unguessed
at for him:

Through her my hand is shaken by the
tear, my words are stifled,
and at the bitter time the stir of hate is
smilingly abducted,
and while the final flame of devasta-
tion billows black,
I by now the poet am of loving and of
goodness.

The introduction of the tear motif is
logically followed by another seman-
tic shift: the usual Kamovian cry will
be turned into an exclamation, while
the final two words point up the re-
versal made, sensed implicitly in the
final two verses of the programmatic
poem *P.S.* which closes the first book
of *Paper Pinched*: I am poet but of the
swearers / and for the moment noth-
ing more!" Love joined inseparably to
goodness with a doubly repeated cu-
pola gains a connotation completely
different than that of physical and spir-
itual debauchery; it is, *si parva licet
componere magno*, the Dantean uni-
versal *Amor che move il sole e l'altre
stelle*.

The Sobbing of a Whore makes, with
Kiss, a diptych, rounding off and deep-
ening an only just begun, new, poetic
world. However, with its special lin-
guistic art, this poem is for several rea-
sons completely exceptional in Ka-
mov's lyric works as a whole. Paying
his tribute to youthful impulsiveness
and an intractable temper, Kamov of-
ten, especially in *Paper Pinched*, over-
burdens and ruins potentially authen-
tic lyric creations with verbalism mani-
fested in the structure of the poem
through the introduction of elements
completely at odds with the authentic
lyric experience: elements of narrative,
at places of pamphleteering. Thus the
lyric is lost and dissipated in long,
structurally prosaic, verbalizations.
Sobbing of a Whore on the other hand,
in all its segments, is extremely con-
centrated, sublimated actually, the lin-
guistic expression of a genuine lyri-
cism. And the basic tone is soft, pain-
fully tender, anti-Kamovian in fact.

Your face is damp, sister of my nights,
oh wretch of lonesome bonds;
is that a kiss, paid for, drowsy, heavy
or tear without a toll?

You fell upon my breast in drunk em-
brace of tears,
like frenzied despair you fell
in the abyss of my breast, I heard the
plunging cry
with which you called on man.

The cry strayed, strayed, sobbing
shakes my lips
as if the whole world found me guilty;
Thus fell Raskolnik to the whore's feet,
Sonia's,
and lapped upon her heels.

The poem actually submits itself to tex-
tual and stylistic analysis. In the short
and condensed unit of text, allied key
lexemes of an imaginary Kamovian
poetry that will never be written are
arrayed and collected: sister, wretch,
kiss, tear, breast, cry, sob. Of the pre-
viously dominant lexis and style there
remains just a fragment in the last line
— the verb form licked. And it can be
linked only when taken out of the

whole. Understood in the context lin-
guistically built by the textual stylemes
mentioned, and evoking one of the
crucial elements from Dostoyevsky's
Crime and Punishment, it is completely
at one with the textual and stylemic
series already established. If an ethical
standpoint can be expressed by style
(and we know it can), here it could be
summed up by a single, again non-
Kamovian word: compassion.
Since this has broached the theme of
counterpoint in Kamov's poems, it
would be interesting explore a poem
that has in the structure of *Swearword*
a place analogous to *Sobbing of a
Whore* in *Paper Pinched*. The poem *Fi-
nale* does indeed contain all the key
semantemes of Kamov's rebellious,
profane and negative poetry: the grave,
despair, anger, wrath, perversion and
frenzy, as well as the most important:
revolt, cursing and shouting. but like
Kiss it ends with an unexpected re-
versal, an unpredictable exit into the
light, with a poetic vision of resurrec-
tion:

Oh trembling is my pain and great are
its imaginings;
I shall smash the icy coffin and tear up
the land;
the broken bones will crawl and their
great eyes gleam —
the sun is there and resurrection and
dithyrambs flutter in the air.

This contrastive motif of the sun, the
symbol of joy in life and gaiety, there
in Kranjčević, richly present in Vidrić's
poems, is not only exceptionally im-
portant for a complete understanding
of and an interpretation appropriate
to the subject, but is also present in a
quantitative sense. Thus in *Paper
Pinched* the "midnight of the wild cry"
(*Baptism*), "the passing bells and
gloomy clouds" (*Diana Dead*), the
"endless psalms and hecatomb spirit"
(*After the carnival*), "and eternal fog
and dull lethargy" (*Hungrily*), "...rows
where the flesh now rots / and where
lie the broken bones, / where suffering
smiles like an idiot and the tongue dries
up with cursing" (*Sun*), are, apparently

unexpectedly, intersected by “a wave of heat and the kiss of the sun”. Apparently unexpected, we might say, because it will not escape the careful reader of *Swearword* that this introduction of contrast is structurally perfectly predictable. The poem *Sun in Paper Pinched* is placed in exactly the same order with respect to the previous individual structural units as is *Song to the Sun* in *Swearword*. The only difference is that the much greater size of *Paper Pinched* enables Kamov to develop this motif (which is just an intersection in the first collection) much more, not only in a qualitative but also in a quantitative sense, thus only here being established as a counterpoint to the basic tone of Kamov’s lyrics. The exclamation that the *Song* starts with:

Sun! Sun! —

is importantly extended and varied in the chromatically lighter poems like *Voluptas*, *New Spring*, *Under a White Heaven*. The cry of blackness in them turns into a call for whiteness, for lightness, as if the poet is constantly responding to a line from the poem *In-termezzo*:

Give me the sun! is Oswald’s terrible finale!

This reading could perhaps now be brought to a close.

In the final part of the analysis, quite a lot of attention has been devoted to the contrasting motifs and signifiers in Kamov’s lyric poetry, contrasting with respect to its dominant poetic axis. Too much, it might be said, with respect to the nevertheless relatively small amount of such signs in the whole of his poetic oeuvre. This has been done deliberately, for two reasons. Firstly, because in previous discussions this element has been only touched incidentally, and almost never analysed. And secondly, because from Kamov’s

final poems it can be fairly well gathered what direction the poet’s lyrics would have developed in if they had not been stopped by his untimely death. If, that is, poetry was still important to him at all after he had gone in for dramatic and novelistic ways of expressing himself.

And what about the Kamov/Kranjčević relation? What is it that comes out of the analysis: independence or imitation? We might say, with a Kamovian paradox, both. It is undeniable that a whole series of Kamov’s weaker poems offer just a pallid reflection of his reading of Kranjčević. But then, to make up for it, in the more valuable ones, among which two classic poems, *Song of Songs* and *The Sobbing of a Whore*, he is incontestably independent and unique, authentically Kamovian in rhythm, lexis, experience of the world, in a word, in style. Here we can see him as a remarkable and very particular source of a highly tense and individual creative energy, which is in an essential way without either predecessors or successors.

Notes:

- 1 The grotesque is expressed here above all in the attribution of animal characteristics to man, to the people actually: “its tails are between its legs”, “sloping is its walk”, “sniffing is its work”; then a grotesque metaphor for the people is given in the following lines:
 oxen pull the plough, their serfdom brings them hay;
 the steed bears the boyar, shining is his coat;
 the swine’s well fed and unctuous is its flesh.
- 2 From Croatian literature at least. There are more references to European writers: Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Zola, Rousseau, Wilde, de Sade in poems; Ibsen in the drama; Gorky, Leopardi, Carducci, Poe (the most important) in the prose writings; there is also a permanent and specific treatment of Biblical topoi in the lyrics from *Swearword*.
- 3 J. Polić Kamov, *Silvije S. Kranjčević (Impresija) in Articles and Columns, Letters*, pp.201-210. At the beginning we can read: “Like every death, his too makes us weep:

as if a member of the family had died, a comrade, a dear, a fellow sufferer, a brother. A poet who was closer than the closest, more intimate than we are with ourselves, has died, without us finding out how he walked, smoked, ate... Kranjčević both pains and exalts us.”

4 Here is a short selection of quotes that are quite typical:

“It is not unimportant for the whole of the life and work of the late Janko Polić Kamov that he was born in Sušak, between Učka and Velebit, not far from Senj, the cradle of Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević, our best, deepest, most powerful and most rebellious poet, from whom Polić learned all sorts of things.” (V. Čerina, *Janko Polić Kamov*, 1913).

“However, there is no doubt that Kamov continued from Kranjčević. The proposition: Kranjčević was the first Croatian modern poet, Kamov the first Croatian European poet.” (J. Ivaštinović, *The Poetry of Janko Polić Kamov*, in *Riječka revija*, 1956.)

“And yet, young as he was, reading everything that fell to hand, he could not avoid certain elements of the poetry of Vidrić or Domjanić, of older poets like Mažuranić, or Kranjčević, who was closer to him.” (T. Čolak, *The Lyrical Poetry of Janko Polić Kamov*, Belgrade, 1960).

“There can be no doubt that Polić read, loved and respected Kranjčević, and created many of his poems more or less under his influence ... What is probably the most essential mark of Kranjčević’s poems, the motif of the tear, is hardly there at all in Polić, and Kranjčević’s nuanced discreet eroticism is diametrically opposite to Kamov’s temperament of blood, debauchery, the spasm, the scream, the absurd. This can be felt in the relation between the less important Kranjčević, author of a few love poems, and the most interesting Polić, author of *Swearword* and the accompanying work *Paper Pinched*. And thus this most important Polić, as it were, read Kranjčević, but in spite of this adequately poetically expressive, and individually marked original, his own man.” N. Ivanišin, *Tradition, experiment, the avant-garde: the modern Croatian lyric* (Split, 1975). (For this occasion, the author’s notes have been simplified — tr.)

- 5 N. Polić, *Excavations*, in J. Polić-Kamov, *Poems, Novellae and Farces*.
- 6 V. Čerina, op.cit. p. 326