

Janko Polić Kamov — Precursor of the Croatian Avant-Garde

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Janko Polić Kamov was born in 1882, and died in 1910. Since Antun Gustav Matoš, the most prominent poet of the Croatian Modern period (which is the usual name for the Secession in Croatia) died in 1914, this year is most often considered to mark the end of this period. Consequently, Kamov chronologically belongs to the Modern period. His writings, however, are very strongly suggestive of the aesthetics of the avant-garde. Existentialist themes, as well as the notion of the Subject characteristic of postmodernist thought, can also be discovered in his texts. Polić's notes and correspondence have shown that he knew more about Verga than Pirandello, more about Lombroso than about Nietzsche. And yet, his ideas and his writings have more in them of the avant-garde than of *verismo*, and are closer to Nietzsche than to Lombroso.

The Modern period (which is, together with *Secession* the usual name given to the period of the turn of the century in Central Europe) comes as a reaction, primarily in the plastic and applied arts, not only to realism, but also to Academicism. The main characteristic of the aesthetic of the period is its decorative, highly stylised artistic expression as well as its neo-platonic approach to reality. The art of the period is thus highly artificial, often decadent, fantastic and non-representational. Artists, who are seen as modern priests, recreate rather than mimic the world they live in. Their art is thus an iconic product of spiritual, recreating, mythical or ontological experience. In poetry, the aesthetic overcomes the rational by means of rhy-

thms and the music of words as well as by the suggestiveness of images. As for narrative representation, it also deviates from the mimetic mode. The characters are stylised, psychologically unmotivated, their personalities often fragmented, verging on the fantastic. This is the aesthetic mode with which the Croatian literature of the period also complied. A.G. Matoš wrote some highly aesthetic, even decadent poems and stories, such as his novella *The Flower from the Cross-roads* or fantastic story *The Mouse*, written in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe. Fran Galović's stories also transgress pragmatic experience in their highly mystical symbolism. But the conscious artistry of Croatian literature is only of its aspects, since it had a specific task to fulfil as well. As the art of a stateless nation it had to take over not only one the role of preserver of a sense of national identity, but also the responsibility of defending the nation. This task symbolically marked the beginning of the Croatian Modern period. In 1895, when Emperor Francis Joseph I came to Zagreb, the governor of Croatia, Ban Khuen Hedervary, had Hungarian soil brought to the railway station, so that the imperial foot need not touch Croatian soil. The students found this offence impossible to take. They demonstrated their indignation by burning the Hungarian flag in the Zagreb main square. As a result, the leaders of the demonstrations were expelled from Zagreb University. There are two reasons why this event symbolically marked the beginning of the Croatian Modern period. The practical effect was that the expelled

students continued their studies in other Central European universities and thus personally contributed to the strengthening of cultural links between Croatia and cultural centres in Europe such as Vienna, Prague, Budapest. The other one is that this act, led by one of Croatia's finest poets, Vladimir Vidrić, symbolically announced the arrival of the "young ones" on Croatia's literary scene. The patriotic nature of Croatian literature, although contradictory to the nature of the aesthetics of the Modern period, was very prominent. Stjepan Miletić, the art director of the Croatian national theatre, considered the role of the theatre in fostering the national spirit its dominant function. Thus, during his time the national repertory flourished. Other writers, such as Begović and Vojnović also devoted their works to national topics. However, the most significant of those writers is Vladimir Nazor who attempted to re-create the Croatian past by evoking its Slavonic mythical beliefs and its glorious past represented by its old kings. His mythopoeic epics about glory and regeneration reawoke the national topics in the typical Secessionist style analogous to that of the monumental sculptures of Ivan Meštrović, a Croatian sculptor, and to that of the glorification of the nation in the sculptures of the Austrian artist Karl Metzner.

The national theme is an important topic of Kamov's writing as well. But there it was not embodied in a mythopoeic mode, as in Nazor's writings, or in the bitter self-irony of A. G. Matoš. Patriotic sentiment is for Kamov a topic for an ironic overturn



At the statue of Columbo, you turn off via Rambla towards the interior

performed in an avant-garde manner. Like Joyce, Kamov is a writer of “spiritual paralysis”, and his main aim is to “get under the skin”. This is why he chose the name of Kamov as his symbolic pseudonym. The Biblical hero, Kam, or Ham, as Janko Polić wrote, saw his father naked. Unlike his brother, he did not try to cover him up, but exposed his nakedness which is why his father cursed him.

In 1914, the year which is considered to mark the end of the Croatian Modern period, Ljubo Wiesner published an anthology of contemporary Croatian poetry, called *Hrvatska mlada lirika*. The overall impression of the collection is that it was written in a decadent and highly aesthetic style typical of the disciples of Matoš gathered around the literary periodical *Grič*. This overall impression will even accommodate the poems of two future great literary figures — the young Ivo Andrić and Tin Ujević. So, there was only one poet whose voice was completely dissonant — Janko Polić Kamov. His *Pjesma nad pjesmama* ex-

pressed a completely new aesthetics. The key words were *curse* and *revolt*. Curse, then, is Kamov’s poetic programme, as can be seen in his poems. Written in biblically inspired verse, the *Song of Songs* relies on Bible motifs to provide metatextual reference. The poem is structured on the revaluation of the Biblical myths of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Though we can detect the structure of a diminished parallel between the past and the present (Christ’s sacrifice is not accepted, and the curse is his welcome), in no way can this poem be compared to conservative decadence, or even to the diminished parallels between the past and the present in great modernist works such as *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land* or Yeats’ poem *No Second Troy*. The reason for this is that the poetics of this poem is the poetics of ugliness, of denial and shock. Instead of the Virgin Mary, the new symbol of beauty is a Gypsy; her legs are black, her hair is greasy, her conception sinful. Yet this new beauty does not compel us to look back to the past with nostalgia. On the contrary,

it celebrates the values it stands for — the curse, rebellion and revolt. The biblically long verses, functioning as an inner contrast, their semiotics (the inherent, connotative, or expected meaning) denied by their semantics (the meaning constructed within the poem), only underline the idea of this new aesthetics.

Though histories of Croatian literature mention some texts written by A. G. Matoš and Fran Galović as the forerunners of avant-garde literature, there is an immense difference between the poetics of those two writers and Kamov. Whereas Matoš and Galović mainly explore the irrationality of the human psyche (*Mi, Camao, Through the Looking-glass*) or use shocking, nightmarish images to express the frustrations of political oppression (Matoš’s *Poems*, 1909, and *The Nightmare*), it is Kamov for whom the avant-garde gestures of the anti-hierarchical and the disestablishment of the social value system become a poetic program. Kamov thus opposes both aesthetic principles typical of the Croatian Mod-

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ern period. He is anti-aesthetic, as opposed to the highly aesthetic, even decadent style of writing in the Modern period, and he ironized himself as both subject and narrator instead of taking the prophetic stand of a turn-of-the-century poet. Thus, the role of literature drastically changes. It ceases to be a place of sacred, ontological search, and becomes a place for the self-ironizing, personal soul-searching of an insignificant subject. Consequently, its role in the world also diminishes. Thus, patriotism, family values, the existential search for ultimate meaning become topics for ironic and parodic mimesis.

The *Curse* is also the programme for Kamov's prose writing for, as he claims, it is "nakedness" that he strives to obtain in his prose texts. This nakedness, however, should not be understood as the Naturalist "naked truth" for it is spiritual nakedness Kamov desires to portray. This is why he calls his novellae grotesqueries and buffooneries. In a certain way they are similar to Pirandello's plays. As Pirandello reduces his characters to masks of one, predominant passion, so Kamov re-

duces the portrayal of his characters to one situation, or one gesture. In this, his method could be compared to Joyce's notion of epiphany, yet there is also a significant difference. In the best of his novellas, such as *The Beard*, Kamov moves away from realistic, even Modernist representation. Based on an anecdote, almost a joke, the novella puts forward very important existentialist considerations. What is the relationship between man's essence and his perception in the eye of the Other. What is man? Is he the mask he wears, or the essence behind the mask. Is there an essence indeed, or is it the mask, the perception of One by the Other, that finally becomes his essence?

The question of identity is the predominant consideration of perhaps Kamov's best work, his novel *The Dried Swamp*. Completed in 1910 when Kamov was 23 years old, this novel could be compared not only to Kafka's nightmarish world but also to the existential angst described in Sartre's works. This is a confessional novel, fragmented in its associative, essay-like mode of confession, shock-

ing in its sincerity, in which it considers the central existentialist topics — one's sense of personal, sexual, familial and national identity. Thus this novel, which is the first novel in Croatian literature which openly and straightforwardly deals with those questions, is modern according to the criteria of not only national but also of world literature.

Experiment and innovation are also the key words for Kamov's dramas. Those dramatic fragments, not too skilfully written, are nonetheless new to Croatian literature. Similar in their non-dramatic poetics of mood rather than action to the theatre of Ivo Vojnović, their topics of family and national identity, dealing with genealogical theme of "tainted blood" they do not only resemble the dramas of Ibsen and Strindberg, but foreshadow the Expressionist theatre as well.

This volume intends to demonstrate that Janko Polić Kamov was not just a young rebel. He was an avant-garde artist in his own right, who anticipated much of the repertoire of the century to come.

Written in English

