

FOR a Hungarian to call a novel *The Melancholy of Resistance* (*Az ellendíls melankóliája*) could be an exercise in truth-telling, a peeling away of illusions, or else a play on the national stereotype of Magyar dolefulness and gloom.* László Krasznahorkai seems to be trying to do both, though some of his most enthusiastic champions outside Hungary have seized on the grand themes of his work while paying little attention to the sly comedy that subverts any pretensions to grandeur. W.G. Sebald called *The Melancholy of Resistance* 'a book about a world into which the Leviathan has returned', and Susan Sontag saw it as 'both an anatomy of desolation, desolation at its most appalling, and a stirring manual of resistance to desolation – through inwardness'. Such endorsements have about them the ring of good intentions, as well as truth, but the emphasis on lugubrious profundities (Sontag's em-dashed pause only ups the earnest ante) makes it sound as if Krasznahorkai's fiction takes itself as seriously as Sontag's does.

James Wood, writing in the *New Yorker* last summer, began by placing him in the capacious context of such postwar avant-garde novelists as Thomas Bernhard, José Saramago and David Foster Wallace, only to acknowledge that, despite a shared affinity for 'very long, breathing, unstoppered sentences', Krasznahorkai was 'perhaps the strangest' of them. The writer is 'peculiar'; his work is 'strange and beautiful', with passages that are 'strange, unstable'. Wood gives an outline of *The Melancholy of Resistance* but then admits that his summary 'doesn't do justice to the unfathomable strangeness' of the book.

This strangeness has to do with the specifics of the Hungarian experience and the Hungarian language. Krasznahorkai's heritage infuses his sentences and sensibility, even when he's writing against it. His books concern people on the margins, at the edges of empire or of their sanity, and the great powers and promises that exert their centripetal pull. The text itself rarely resolves into a paragraph break; in his novel *War and War*, each section is a single sentence that sometimes coils over several pages. His translator George Szirtes has written of 'the slow lava flow of narrative . . . the vast black river of type', which beautifully describes the physical experience of reading Krasznahorkai's work, the need to slow down in order to find its rhythm, the feeling that the narrative is oozing outward rather than converging on a neat conclusion.

'It was no use struggling,' a character realises:

he had to understand that his customary Eszterian mode of wit was of no help to him here, for the phrases he thought of failed abysmally to establish his proud superiority over the world; the meanings of words had faded like the light in a run-down flashlight, the objects words might have referred to had crumbled under the weight of fifty or so years that had passed and given way to the unlikely trappings of a Grand Guignol stage-set in the face of which every sober word and thought confusingly lost its meaning.

* *The Melancholy of Resistance*, translated by George Szirtes, was published by New Directions in 2002; *War and War*, also translated by George Szirtes, and *Animalinside*, translated by Otilie Mulzet, in 2006 and 2011 respectively.

Where Forty-Eight Avenue joins Petöfi Square

Jennifer Szalai

SATANTANGO

by László Krasznahorkai, translated by George Szirtes.
Atlantic, 320 pp., £12.99, May, 978 1 84887 764 1

Language here is not only a mechanism for understanding but also an obstruction to it. The passage is from *The Melancholy of Resistance*, Krasznahorkai's second novel but the first to be translated into English, and the challenges of translating him have not so much detracted from his project as enacted it. Hungarian and English share virtually nothing by way of syntax or sound. Hungarian uses suffixes to convey a massive amount of information (something I learned when I tried to buy a train ticket in Budapest using the word *szertelek* instead of *szertélek*, which is the difference between 'I would like to' and 'I love you'). Otilie Mulzet, another of Krasznahorkai's translators, notes that in Hungarian 'an incredible amount of information can be expressed very tersely, in many fewer words than in English, and in addition, information can be encoded in other words (for example, objects included in verbs).' There are also different registers of formality: an informal 'you' is *te* whereas a formal 'you' is *maga*. (One of Krasznahorkai's characters gets bewildered by a sudden change in pronouns: 'What's going on here? Are we *te* or *maga* now? Are we fellow workers or not?') The Hungarian language lends itself to irony, to meanings within meanings and embedded contradictions.

The Melancholy of Resistance was first published in 1989, and the novel gestures obliquely to the political changes that were afoot. A circus bringing with it a giant stuffed whale is coming to an unnamed Hungarian town, whose residents have been convinced for some time that apocalypse is imminent. The characters are types, but no less vivid for it. János Valuska marvels at the constellations and is so guileless he's often taken for a fool; his mother, Mrs Plauf, strenuously avoids contact with her embarrassing son, retreating to her cosy world of embroidered cushions and fruit compote; Eszter, a sober, rationalist sceptic, limits his exposure to the disappointing world outside his apartment; and Mrs Eszter, estranged from her husband, schemes to take over the town.

The violence that eventually erupts is aimless. Valuska finds the notebook of one of the participants, who describes the way 'we smashed and pounded everything we could lay our hands on until we arrived back where we started, but there was no stopping, no brake, the blinding joy of destruction impelled us to surpass ourselves time and again.' Krasznahorkai was born in 1954, two years before Soviet tanks entered Budapest, but the violence in his books has a timeless quality, as if to mimic the repetitions and reversals of Hungarian history, where one cycle of repression and rebellion gave way to another. The town in *The Melan-*

choly of Resistance is threaded with streets whose names read like desperate attempts to find military glory in a history inclined to defeat. Valuska keeps running into the marauders 'where Forty-Eight Avenue joins Petöfi Square', a junction of failed revolution: in 1848 the Hungarians failed to gain independence from the Habsburg Empire; Sándor Petöfi was the movement's poet and martyr.

Krasznahorkai seems to be having a moment in the English-speaking world – or as much of a moment as an avant-garde writer can have, especially one who writes in a language that barely any English-speaker can recognise by sound, let alone speak. There is something both specifically Hungarian and universal in his obsessions, as he continually retraces these defeats. He has never felt at home in Hungary, but neither has he found a home anywhere else. 'I often go into exile wherever I can, from America to East Asia, just to make sure I am not here,' he said in a 2007 interview. 'Of course, the end result is that when I go to a place like

this, I usually return shattered, disappointed and disillusioned . . . Bit by bit, after many years of unwilling wanderings, I am getting to be convinced there is no place worth yearning for. There isn't anything anywhere anymore.'

Sátántango is the most recent of his works to be translated into English. It also happens to be his first novel, published in 1985 and written at a time when, even if already disillusioned, he was still contending with the power of illusion – with the way in which entrenched mythologies both deceive and seduce. The residents of a run-down collective farm spend their days doing anything but farming. They guzzle pálinka, sleep with the libidinous Mrs Schmidt, and fantasise about leaving their decaying estate. When they finally do, it is at the urging of the charismatic Irimiaş (the name sounds like Jeremiaş, prophet of doom), who persuades them to give him all their savings – 'From today, my friends, you are free!' – and directs them to another estate even more decrepit than the one they left behind. Irimiaş responds to their complaints by sending each of them off in a different direction with a few forints and the promise of a job, for which they are all grateful; their faith in him has been restored.

A plot summary will miss much in a novel that derives its power from a steady accretion of language and detail. Like a tango, *Sátántango* has a 12-part structure: six steps forwards and six steps back. For all that he resembles a Nietzschean Übermensch, Irimiaş is a police informer, and the penultimate chapter is a superbly absurd



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scene in which his disdainful notes on the villagers are rewritten by clerks tasked with 'producing a usable document' for the bureaucracy's needs. 'That foul old bag of poisonous gossip became the more reassuring "a transmitter of unreliable information" and the phrases seriously, someone should think about sewing her lips together and fat slut were solved without undue difficulty': one kind of idiom is translated, and mangled, into another – neither captures the story we've been reading.

But the story we've been reading isn't settled either. The last chapter ends with the estate's reclusive doctor rewriting, word for word, the chapter with which *Sátántango* begins:

He reached for the pencil again and felt he was back on track now: there were enough notebooks, enough pills, his medication would last till spring at least and, unless the nails rotted in the door, no one would disturb him. 'One morning near the end of October not long before the first drops of the mercilessly long autumn rains began to fall on the cracked and saline soil on the western side of the estate ...'

The ending brings us back to the beginning: an existential choice as much as an aesthetic one – it's unlikely that Krasznahorkai would see much of a distinction. The individuals in his books are often almost incidental to the landscape, as if in rebuke to the privilege they would be accorded in another kind of book by another kind of author. In *Sátántango*, we learn that the land is sinking, continuing a process that began 'at the end of the Paleozoic era [when] the whole of Central Europe begins to sink'. The doctor feels himself getting 'lost in successive waves of time, coolly aware of the minimal speck of his own being, seeing himself as the defenceless, helpless victim of the earth's crust, the brittle arc of his life between birth and death caught up in the dumb struggle between surging seas and riding hills'. The *Melancholy of Resistance* ends with a scrupulous description of a corpse succumbing to the process of decay: 'When, after a long and stiff resistance, the remaining tissue, cartilage and finally the bone gave up the hopeless struggle, nothing remained and yet not one atom had been lost.' He has since written a book (not yet translated into English) inspired by his desire 'to write a novel with no people in it'. Its 'hero', he told an interviewer, 'is a monastery in Kyoto'.

Krasznahorkai has long collaborated with the filmmaker Béla Tarr, and the film version of *Sátántango* also resists confining itself to a human scale: the opening shot is a nine-minute take of a herd of cows. Another shot fixes our gaze for several minutes on a house. Krasznahorkai's winding sentences find their visual analogue in Tarr's long takes, but film has its own rhythms. The novel is a relatively brief 288 pages, whereas its translation on film takes seven and a half hours. *Werdmeister Harmonies*, Tarr's film version of *The Melancholy of Resistance*, also translates the text into its own terms and ends not with the cellular breakdown of a corpse but with a shot of the circus whale lying amid the wreckage in the town square, shrouded in fog.

The two other works of Krasznahorkai's that have been translated into English, *War*

and *War and Animalinside*, haven't been filmed, and it's hard to imagine a movie version of either. *Animalinside*, which first appeared in 2010, is a series of short texts that alternate with paintings by Max Neumann. According to Colm Tóibín's introduction, 'the writer worked first 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

into it, I ask you kindly, my dinner ... until that point when I'm all grown up, then your little food dish won't be needed any more, because then I will rip away your ears, because then I will tear off your nose, because then I will burn out your eyes, and I will bite your chin apart.

I'm only kidding – my little master.

The voice is enigmatic, relentless and exhausting. Whatever narrative niceties were adhered to in *Sátántango* and *The Melan-*

choly of Resistance, which seems to offer perfect if inadvertent proof – the book was originally published in 1999 – that quests for immortality are doomed.) The novel reads like an obsessive, repetitive hallucination, veering from Korin's thoughts to the text of the document to Korin's description of it, without providing much to guide us by way of full stops or quotation marks. The document itself follows the stories of four men as they travel through space and time to the scenes of various wars (hence *War and War*, as opposed to *War and Peace*), and the document and the novel start to merge into one text, the text we are reading, within which whatever thread of a narrative could be said to exist gets buried by a proliferation of detail. The overall effect is not so much of a story to be followed as a general sensation to be apprehended and absorbed:

it was as if the manuscript had suddenly recoiled in shock, surveyed the scene and registered every person, object, condition, relationship and circumstance individually while utterly blurring the distinction between significance and insignificance, dissolving it, annihilating it ... the essential and inessential, catalogued indiscriminately together, next to each other, one above another, the lot building up into a single mass whose task it was to represent a condition, the essence of which was that there was literally nothing negligible in the facts that comprised it.

If you go to the website www.warandwar.com, you won't find the manuscript – only a message informing you that all data have been erased 'due to recurring overdue payment'. After all of this desperate searching, immortality ends when the money runs out.

Although *Sátántango* and *The Melancholy of Resistance* are too idiosyncratic to be read as simple Communist-era fables, they abide by recognisable constraints of structure and form: sentences, though long, end with a full stop after a few lines; the characters might struggle with meaninglessness, but cunning opportunists devise ways to impose order. A dictatorship with totalitarian ambitions structures everything, including resistance to it.

Having been released from such constraints, both political and literary, Krasznahorkai's work has apparently moved on. On his website he describes the novel *War and War* as only one part of a work whose 'actual ending' takes place 'within the more compliant fabric of reality', with a plaque in memory of Korin, who shot himself after failing to 'find what he had called a Way Out'. The work in its entirety includes the novel along with footage from the ceremony at which the plaque was unveiled, all of it on a CD-ROM (another invention that has gone the way of AltaVista). In an interview, Krasznahorkai described text as yet another constraint, one that offers handy categories that not only guide thought but keep it contained: 'Between them and Heraclitus' rippling stream, [people] interpose a book.' He predicted that literature, at least in the form of the printed word, will give way to something else. 'Maybe at some point in the future, there will be nothing between them and the rippling stream,' he said, sounding less mournful than amused. 'And they'll get nice and soaked.' □

At Sils-Maria

T.J. Clark

The mountains are still there, monotonously changeable,
And the men in the sky with their slices of melon
Are managing their ennui – at least until teatime,
Till the dim philosopher comes to persuade them
Of the pathos of distance and the pessimism of strength.

On the cupboards for dogshit along the trails
There are faces of spaniels with snouts like Nietzsche's,
And his weeping moustaches, done in sourdough plaster,
Are preserved on a bed in his holiday home.

You know the kind of place – it's safe and strange;
The past is near, your guard is down,
And round the bend in the path by the waterfall
Come comrades you haven't seen for years, thank God,
With something they want to say.

'The life you have lived since you left us' (this is the gist)
'Is a long betrayal, a simple negative
Of the moment we shared that counted; and those you have loved –
The few fool enough to return the favour –
Will face madness in the end because of it,
Spread-eagled, screaming, in a Cairo street.'

Old friends, I salute you! – still vetting the files
On our long-ago Garden Airplane Trip ...
O lords of the quadruple bypass! Wisdom itself,
With the smell of oil paint and turpentine clinging to you,
Undeserved, irremovable (that smell you despised),
Like a nimbus or a caul.

And my negative life?
How sure you both were in the old days,
And wrong, that those who succeed – your brother, for instance –
Had the taste of iniquity afterwards in their mouths.
Some do, some don't, it turns out.
Happiness is inexcusable, the man said,
But there it is, a permanent scandal – as specious and inspiring as a Swiss resort.

visuals, responded by writing the other 13 texts.' The resulting chapbook is a rolling, menacing howl that sounds like the supplication of a pet at one moment and erupts into the fury of a savage beast the next:

my little master, don't do this to me, give me
my little food dish here, give me my dinner
here, and I ask you kindly, don't do this again
to me, and every evening, when it is dinner-
time, give me my little food dish here and put

choly of Resistance have been dispensed with altogether.

War and War, although it adopts the more capacious form of a novel, is even more claustrophobic. György Korin is an archivist who finds 'an extraordinary document, something so out of the ordinary' that he travels to New York, 'the centre of the world', with the intention of posting the document on the internet and thereby 'ensuring its immortality'. (Korin makes con-