

The devil comes walking

Theo Tait on a visionary Hungarian classic

Satantango

by László Krasznahorkai, translated by George Szirtes
274pp, Atlantic, £12.99

Satantango, first published in Hungary in 1985 and now regarded as a classic, is a monster of a novel: compact, cleverly constructed, often exhilarating, and possessed of a distinctive, compelling vision - but a monster nevertheless. It is brutal, relentless and so amazingly bleak that it's often quite funny.

The action centres on the arrival of a man who may or may not be a prophet, or the devil, or just a violent con-man, in a rotting, rain-drenched Hungarian hamlet. This is the "estate", apparently some sort of failed collective, where all hope has been lost and all the buildings are falling down. It is inhabited by a cast of semi-crazed inadequates: desperate peasants cack-handedly trying to rip each other off while ogling each

other's wives; a "perpetually drunk" doctor obsessively watching his neighbours; young women trying to sell themselves in a ruined mill; a disabled girl ineptly attempting to kill her cat. At the end of the first chapter, they learn that Irimias, a man whom they credit with extraordinary powers, and who was supposed to have died, is on the road to the estate, with his sidekick Petrina. The locals excitedly assemble in the spider-infested bar to await him, where they argue, drink and dance grotesquely to the accordion into the small hours.

If this summary of the first half of the novel sounds baffling, it's a hell of a lot clearer than the book itself. László Krasznahorkai's scenes are designed to disorder and defamiliarise. The chapters tend to begin with some under-explained event: a strangely vehement argument about whether to turn on an oil heater; or the inhabitants trashing their homes and setting out on the open road clutching a few possessions. In the second chapter, two characters who find themselves in the grip of some weird and malign bureaucracy are not identified for nine pages. Mean-

while, each chapter consists of one long paragraph with not a single line break. Within each endless paragraph the individual sentences are often several lines long. The characteristic, if relatively short, opening sentence reads: "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 (later the stinking yellow sea of mud would render footpaths impassable and put the town too beyond reach) Futaki woke to hear bells." Krasznahorkai's translator George Szirtes calls his work a "slow lava flow of narrative, a vast black river of type", and says his sentences take you down "loops and dark alleyways - like wandering in and out of cellars". At one point the wind moves through the trees like a "helpless hand searching through a dusty book for some vanished main clause"; the reader feels something comparable.

In short, Krasznahorkai writes in the high modernist style. The premise and the characters of Irimias and Petrina clearly owe something to Beckett. The unattributed epigraph - "In that case,

I'll miss the thing by waiting" - comes from Kafka's *The Castle*. And, as in Kafka, a depiction of life in an oppressive modern state shades into allegory. The setting is clearly Hungary under communism (Krasznahorkai was born in 1954, and *Satantango* was his first novel) and the plot seems to gesture towards the country's disastrous attempt at forced agricultural collectivisation. But Krasznahorkai keeps it vague and fairly abstract. Twentieth-century alienation is expressed in quasi-medieval forms: *Satantango* is shot through with religious imagery and intimations of revelation, from Futaki's bells and Irimias's "resurrection" onwards. "The imagination never stops working but we're not one jot nearer the truth," remarks Irimias.

Modernism mostly features in recent western writing as just another style to rip off, either jazzed up with pop cultural goodies (Paul Auster), or as more or less amusing pastiche - see, respectively, Italo Calvino or Tom McCarthy. In *Satantango*, it feels like the real thing: a horrified reaction to a world without meaning.

Equally, of course, this is probably

not everyone's idea of a good time. *Satantango* was made into a beautiful but gruelling seven-hour black and white film by Bela Tarr, famous for its insanely long shots. Reading the book is a similar experience. It seems unlikely that the novel will find the kind of success in Britain of two more obviously engrossing Hungarian classics recently republished here, Sándor Márai's *Embers* and Imre Kertész's *Fateless*. Even in Hungary, Krasznahorkai is regarded as forbidding, not least because *Satantango* is his most accessible book. In the words of one Hungarian critic, "The grandeur is clearly palpable, but people do not seem to know what to do with it."

Nevertheless, this is an obviously brilliant novel. Krasznahorkai is a visionary writer; even the strangest developments in the story convince, and are beautifully integrated within the novel's dance-like structure. It's a testament to Szirtes's translation, 10 years in the writing, that Krasznahorkai's vision leaps off the page. The grandeur is clearly palpable.

To order *Satantango* for £10.39 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0330 333 6846.

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