The Devil They Know

In Laszlo Krasznahorkai's first novel, published in Hungary in 1985, a charismatic leader may be a benighted hamlet's last hope.

BY JACOB SILVERMAN

"SATANTANGO," the latest novel by the Hungarian writer Laszlo Krasznahorkai to be translated into English, takes place over a few rain-sodden days in a dying hamlet. The local estate has been closed, its animals

SATANTANGO
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hocked, its mill shut down. Perhaps a dozen residents remain. Like the surrounding buildings, they are rife with rot.

As in much of Krasznahorkai's work, a sense of hallucinatory conspiracy is in the air. People speak ominously, if vaguely, about what lies ahead. They see visions and hear bells they can't place. "If they read the papers properly," one character says, "they would know that there is a real crisis out there."

But there is also a shared belief that things aren't as they appear. Some mistake must have been made; things can't be as bad as they seem. And so the residents "are waiting. They're waiting patiently, like the long-suffering lot they are, in the firm conviction that someone has conned them. They are waiting, belly to the ground, like cats at pig-killing time, hoping for scraps." (This repetition, with its gradual slathering of metaphoric detail, characterizes Krasznahorkai's style.)

The book's title refers to a dance performed when the hour is late enough and the people, gathered at the local watering hole, find themselves sufficiently sozzled. It could also describe the book's structure: ever moving forward and back, orchestrated by a knowing, even otherworldly figure behind the scenes.

Depending on your interpretation, that puppet master may be a man named Irimias, who, along with his sidekick Petrina, was reported killed 18 months prior. But when the novel opens, both are spotted on the road leading to the hamlet — a miracle, some believe — and so the people wait for their arrival, thinking that these resurrected men will lead them out of their malaise.

The setup is typical of Krasznahorkai. On its surface, it appears allegorical and loaded with religious imagery, but his novels tend to construct allegories only to demolish them. Consider "The Melancholy of Resistance" (published in English by New Directions in 2002), about a bizarre circus that arrives in a small town, setting off a cycle of suspicion and violence, and a local woman's efforts to seize political power. Though the novel,

which consists of a single long paragraph, bears some marks of an anti-Communist critique, it veers off in oblique directions, following Valuska, an introverted dreamer obsessed with cosmology, and Eszter, a once celebrated musician, now a hermit, looking for a new way to tune his piano. And its real work happens on the level of language. Wonderfully translated by George Szirtes (who also translated "Satantango"), "The Melancholy of Resistance" is a great slab of text — a "slow lava flow of narrative," in Szirtes's indelible description. At times, so dense is the material, it's difficult to distinguish who is speaking or thinking. Like something far down the periodic table of elements, Krasznahorkai's sentences are strange, elusive, frighteningly radioactive. They seek to replicate the entropic whirl of consciousness itself and, in the case of Eszter, to stop its "onward rush" entirely.

"Satantango," Krasznahorkai's first book, shares many of his later novels' thematic concerns — the abeyance of time, an apocalyptic sense of crisis and decay — but it's an altogether more digestible work. Its story skips around in perspective and temporality, but the narrative is rarely unclear. For a writer whose characters often exhibit a claustrophobic interiority, Krasznahorkai also shows himself to be unexpectedly expansive and funny here. There's some of Gogol's and Bulgakov's diabolical humor, in the way this cast of debauched characters is manipulated toward some mysterious end.

Krasznahorkai delights in unorthodox description; no object is too insignificant for his worrying gaze. One of his still untranslated novels is said to feature no

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characters (its hero is a Japanese monastery), and spiders receive generous attention in "Satantango" as rats do in "Melancholy." At times, his radical shifts in perspective resemble an avant-garde take on "Powers of Ten," Charles and Ray Eames's short film illustrating the scale of the universe. A Krasznahorkai novel might dilate rapidly from microscopically observed descriptions to great reveries on the shifting cosmos. Through all this, we are continually reminded of the triviality of existence, as in this reflection by a doctor in "Satantango":

"He was lost in successive waves of time, coolly aware of the minimal speck of his own being, seeing himself as the defenseless, 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 rising hills."

Lost in time but also "coolly aware": this dialectic undergirds much of Krasznahorkai's fiction. It reflects the essential push and pull his characters have between metaphysical realization and cultivated ignorance. There always seems to be a conspiracy afoot — at the very least, some essential bit of knowledge eludes them — but do they care to know? Would it improve their lives?

"The imagination never stops working but we're not one jot nearer the truth," laments Irimias, the apparent mastermind of "Satantango." Krasznahorkai returns to this idea in "The Melancholy of Resistance," where he speaks of "the realization that knowledge led either to wholesale illusion or to irrational depression." Notably, this very thought is itself a form of epiphany, yet it produces nothing uplifting or actionable. Such is the case throughout Krasznahorkai's work: epiphanies occur with regularity but are, if not useless, then obstructive. They simply lead to another set of questions; they don't make the world a larger place.

WE never know quite where we are in a Krasznahorkai story. He sometimes places us in particular locations — New York or the Hungarian countryside — but his narratives are eerily decontextualized, with few familiar guideposts. "Satantango" could as easily take place in 1920 as in 1985, when it was published in Hungary. The result is that, like the dreamer Valuska, readers of Krasznahorkai are "trapped . . . in a bubble of time, in one eternal, impenetrable and transparent moment." This is an exquisite description, light as gossamer, but it's also horrific, reflecting the author's belief that something always stands between us and a true understanding of the surrounding world. The veil can never be torn away.

In "Satantango," as the hamlet's residents give up their benighted lives (and their life savings) to follow Irimias into some promised land, we find ourselves no closer to answering some key questions: What happened to Irimias and Petrina? What is their plan? Or, as Eszter puts it in "Melancholy," "What does all this chaos add up to?" In the fiction of Laszlo Krasznahorkai, such questions are secondary. Instead, he offers us stories that are relentlessly generative and defiantly irresolvable. They are haunting, pleasantly weird and, ultimately, bigger than the worlds they inhabit. □

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