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Page 10

Diabolical humor from a Hungarian master

Satantango. By Laszlo Krasznahorkai. Translated by George Szirtes. *274 pages. New Directions, $25.95; Atlantic Books, £12.99.*

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 hocked, its mill shut

BOOK REVIEW

down. Perhaps a dozen residents remain. Like the surrounding buildings, they are rife with rot.

As in much of Mr. Krasznahorkai's work, a sense of hallucinatory conspiracy is in the air. People see visions and hear bells they can't place.

There is also a shared belief that things aren't as they appear. 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."

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 before. 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 Mr. 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," 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. Although 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 Mr. 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, Mr. Krasznahorkai's sentences are strange, elusive, frighteningly radioactive.

"Satantango," Mr. 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, Mr. Krasznahorkai also shows himself to be unexpectedly expansive and funny here.

Mr. Krasznahorkai delights in unorthodox description; no object is too insignificant for his worrying gaze. A Krasznahorkai novel might dilate rapidly from microscopically observed descriptions to great reveries on the shifting cosmos.

Lost in time but also "coolly aware": This dialectic undergirds much of Mr. 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.

"The imagination never stops working but we're not one jot nearer the truth," laments Irimias, the apparent mastermind of "Satantango." Mr. 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 Mr. 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 Mr. 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 important 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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