

The Journal of Čarnojević

Dnevnik o Čarnojeviću

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The novel *The Journal of Čarnojević* by Miloš Crnjanski, published in 1920, deals with the First World War as viewed from the perspective of Petar Rajić, a Serbian soldier. The man fights against the Russians in the Austro-Hungarian army on the Galician front in south-eastern Poland, and on the Italian front. He shares the fate of the author who was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army. The non-chronological, lyrical and melancholic story transports the reader back to childhood and early youth, spent by the protagonist and narrator in the Banat, and to Vienna – a city where students from different parts of the future Yugoslavia met, to Dalmatia and many other corners of the world connected to the eponymous Čarnojević. The retrospection provides the author with an opportunity to present the pre-war historical and political realities.

The identity of the main protagonist-narrator remains unclear. While on the card above his hospital bed, his colleagues wrote (in German) Petar Raitch, religion: Greek Orthodox; age: 23, the narrator adds that it was a joke on their part. When the readers obtain the personal details, some indications cast doubt on the data's authenticity. In Serbian, the surname has clear connotations with the word for paradise. The combination of the surname with the name Peter (Petar) could suggest that the protagonist is Peter of Paradise, perhaps even St Peter. There are many inklings that Crnjanski creates a protagonist with a fragmented identity. This fragmentation is accompanied by the fragmentation of form, numerous threads and genre heterogeneity. The alter ego of Petar Rajić is another protagonist of the novel: the son of Egon Čarnojević, a sumatrist from Dalmatia, probably dating back to Čarnojević's student days. The novel offers clues justifying this interpretation ('he was more than a brother to me', 'he suddenly seemed to have known me for a long time', 'he told me intricately, as if telling me my life', etc.).

A split or even multiplied sense of self marks almost a constant presence in expressionist literature, which emerged in the Yugoslav state founded in 1918. This fragmentation is partly the result of the war experience, from which the expressionists 'fled into cosmic spaces'. Crnjanski, a representative of Serbian and Yugoslavian expressionism, was the originator of Sumatristism, an idea probably inspired by Baudelaire's *Correspondances*. According to Crnjanski, the spaces and events are combined by emotions and actions that leave their mark in faraway places around the world. Speaking of Sumatristism, Čarnojević conjured up visions in which a smile causes a flower to bloom somewhere while another form of existence (e.g. a stream or a tree) follows a person's death; the blue of the Dalmatian coast has a greater impact on the fate of the world than the actions of American politicians, and a smile helps the New York poor more effectively than donations from millionaires.

This lyrical vision, which assumes that the world can be transformed by beautiful thoughts, emotions and spirituality, became a space that saved the protagonist (Rajić) and the author (Miloš Crnjanski)

from the reality of war, corpses, torn bodies, disease and mud – the existential experience. Sumatraism is also a political declaration.

The coincidence of the author's and the protagonist's names in the 'journal' is no coincidence. And yet it is not Crnjanski's journal but a journal about Čarnojević, a journal about a fictional, perhaps (auto)fictional character. Crnjanski plays with the intimate genre, with autobiography. He also refers to a figure and events from Serbian history, called the Great Migrations. In the 17th century, under the leadership of Patriarch Arsenije III Čarnojević, to escape the Turks Serbs from Kosovo and southern Serbia fled to southern Hungary (Vojvodina) and the Military Frontier, which Austria had established where the Habsburg Empire bordered with the Ottoman Empire. Migration has been an integral part of the Serbian national imagination. The protagonist of Crnjanski's story also alludes to his own and his family's constant wandering. The durability of the *topos* is maintained by verbal and pictorial national identification narratives, by the semiotics of texts and the semiotics of space, which speaks from the paintings on the walls in Serbian houses.

While on first reading of *The Journal of Čarnojević*, oriented towards grasping the logical continuity of events and reconstructing the temporal order from a non-chronological narrative, socio-political issues may seem less significant, the narrative fabric of the work is impregnated by them. Sometimes entire passages are marked by their political nature while sometimes they are only subtle allusions. At times, political issues presented in a seemingly casual manner, seem ambiguous, ironic, paradoxical. These include, for example, "a beautiful murder" as a term for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, or "killing is beautiful".

Crnjanski's novel is an example of 'unconscious politicalness' (Jamson). The protagonist was born on the day of the parliamentary elections in his region; as a child, he listened to lullabies as well as bedtime stories about the invasions of the Ottoman Turks, and of burning villages, massacres, and impalement. These themes prevailed in the stories and songs that accompanied meetings, holidays, and rituals. The songs, sung collectively, are an example of historical narratives that leave an indelible mark on the hero, literally pressing him against the wall, taking his breath away, terrifying (pp. 47-48). They are a code or memory space, but also a stigma, a mark. The same kind of saturation of members of the national community with historical, national and confessional narrative emanates from the iconic, pictorial code: "these old icons and paintings burnt my eyes as if I were being pierced by rays reflecting off their dark gold" (p. 48).

The Journal of Čarnojević also raises the issue of class distinctions. The protagonist views the world from the perspective of an educated representative of the upper classes. He calls himself a young master, with white gloves as an inseparable attribute, and servants employed in his household. He was happy to talk to them but trusted them only to a limited extent. National sympathies and loyalty to the Serbian king were concealed from the servants. If there were class antipathies, they concerned the peasants, as a bitter, cunning, instinctive, dirty, stinking social class. But, even in this respect, Crnjanski is ambiguous. Some empathy is directed towards the fate of rural women, beaten, writhing in labour pains or because of contraceptives (p. 69). On the other hand, his sympathy extends to the fate of women and the poor during the war, especially mothers. The drama of war is mainly shown in images from the front, but the reality of war makes the hero perceive only rabble around him: "A rabble of promiscuous women, a rabble of rogue traders, a rabble of workers, a rabble of the sick and a rabble of the dead. [...] Drunken crowds of those who are getting rich now. I see all this, I look at it with a smile. I belong to no one, I have no one, no brother, no servant, no master." (p. 57).

The protagonist's political sympathies before the war were directed towards revolutionary

movements, demonstrations, street clashes and Russia, as were the sympathies and interests of the entire generation of Viennese students at the time (“every evening we talked about Russia”, p. 85). The reality of war also failed to change these sentiments, even though the Austro-Hungarian citizen was on the opposite side of the front (p. 113): “I feel sorrier for the Russians than for those who will be praised in textbooks; we, the last servants of Austria”.

The novel suggests that all behaviour is marked by politics. Crnjanski provides several examples of official loyalty to Austria and secret loyalty to Serbian tradition and the idea of Greater Serbia. In the Orthodox church, the bishop declares loyalty to the Austro-Hungarian emperor, while icons and portraits of Tsar Dušan, the medieval ruler during whose reign Serbia was the greatest power, are hidden in homes. Crnjanski's conclusions are unequivocal in his assessment of the Serbian dream of the Greater Serbia making a comeback. The promotion of the Yugoslav idea appears to be a way of realising this desire (p. 121). “Yugoslavianism is very fashionable at the moment. Portraits of Stefan Dušan are being dusted off and brought out again. People will say that it was all just a bad dream. Everything is going back to the way it was. What is white will be black tomorrow, and yellow the day after that” (PL 138).

Crnjanski questions the sense of getting involved on either side and in any option, emphasising their short-lived nature: “today we will die for a black flag, tomorrow for a white, the day after tomorrow for a multicoloured one” (p. 119). In Crnjanski's concept, ideological and emotional disengagement is a rescue from genuine, inevitable immersion in historicity and events, even as extreme as fighting in a war. This novel has an existentialist undertone, presenting the fate of man as doomed to life and loneliness. The work emphasises the belief that the protagonists belong to a “lost generation” but also repeats the claim that “a better century will come, it always does” and the Sumatraism belief that the world becomes more beautiful when it is touched by a smile.

LANGUAGE: Serbian/Српски/Srpski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: