

The Dried-out Mire

Isušena kaljuža

Presented by: Andrea Milanko

A tripartite novel, *Isušena kaljuža* (The Dried-out Mire) was written by a Croatian novelist, essayist and poet Janko Polić Kamov, from 1906 to 1909, but published only in 1957. It is considered unique and unprecedented in Croatian literary history but its status has been contested in terms of its completeness due to its remarkable structure (unaccounted change from the third-person narration to the first-person, fragmentary style of storytelling, modernist techniques such as style indirect libre and inner monologue, liberal combination of novelist models ranging from autobiography and autofiction to Künstlerroman and social satire etc.).

The novel opens up with a preface-like introduction presenting us with the novel's protagonist, a writer, Arsen Toplak, who has recently received confirmation from his doctor that he has been infected with tuberculosis, a disease with lethal consequences. This sets in motion Arsen Toplak's re-examination of his life and opinions, which were formed under the influence of the catholic church and a prominent Croatian right-wing party (so-called starčevićevci) but also by literary movement in fin-de-siecle Croatia, reading French and Italian writers and reckless behaviour in brothels and taverns. Toplak is monitored closely by the narrator and the analysis of his psyche is presented in a variety of modernist literary techniques in order to convey paradoxes, biases, contradictions and confusion at play when an individual's psyche is attempting to co-exist with social norms.

In the first part (On the bottom, Na dnu), the hero spends his days at home in Croatia, socializing with friends, avoiding interaction with his family members, and scrutinizes his previous literary oeuvre; everything is superfluous, only blasphemy and vulgarity stemming from Arsen's wish to shock and dismantle social norms that serve nobody, since everybody's true nature is yet to be discovered and lived authentically. Alcoholic escapades help in quieting inhibitions but deteriorate his health. Thus, he realized that only when he was sober and dedicated to study was he able to be true to his nature and write (the second part, U šir). In the second part of the novel, Arsen travels to Italy and spends his time in Rome, Venice and Napoli, discovering similarities and differences between his people and Italians, while also realizing his way of thinking is closer to Italians. His being is further split: nature vs. culture, alcoholism and brothel vs. health and library, urban vs. rural mentality, poet vs. storyteller, true to himself vs. polite and social, etc. All these antitheses push the novel towards a turn to first-person narration, whereby Arsen Toplak himself embarks on self-examination, which results discursively and rhetorically in irony: "And this is what I am. For I am not – myself." (p. 355). Therefore, what we have been reading is a novel by a writer who creates a protagonist in his own image and forces him, in gradual but irreversible self-reflexivity, to abolish his character in order to adopt another, that of the novel itself (the third part, U vis).

What makes this novel political is its relentless commentary both on its hero - his political, literary

and ethical views – and the novel's progression, all the while criticizing other Kamov's literary pieces such as lyric poems, novellas and dramas. Namely, by refusing to be historicized itself, i.e. stuck with an identity exhibiting a constitutive blind spot one is unable to see (as is the case with all points of view, which is a lesson learned and taught by the hero-portrayed-a-writer), the novel adopts a metaliterary stance of commenting on itself and any future reading that would pigeonhole it. This remarkable narrative position is achieved by Arsen Toplak the autodiegetic narrator, who keeps sawing off the branch he is sitting on by simultaneously affirming his position – for example, claiming he is emancipated from his religious, political and literary beliefs – and negating it via his style of writing – for example, exhibiting the same vocabulary of the institution he purports to have been freed from, taking up literary models he has supposedly relinquished due to their anachronic status in modern literary production, etc. While this particular self-effacing discursive position has all too often been mistakenly attributed in literary history to Kamov's personal struggles, temperament and biographical circumstances, this methodologically unsound view has been systematically debunked by Brlek (2022) and Čale (2016).

LANGUAGE: Croatian / Hrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: