

"DEATH OF A VILLAGER" BY J. KERSNIK:
A REFLECTION ON DEATH IN LITERATURE*

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Non omnis moriar.
Horace

I have always been aware of the frailty of the human condition; however, I have been reluctant to think about death and am otherwise afraid of it.

This phenomenon (it seems) is typical of those who enjoy the privileges of this modern consumer society; we behave as if everything, including eternal life on this earth, were due to us. For personal and objective reasons (many of my friends have recently died), I ponder now more often about us humans, who are a part of nature where everything is mortal. In my meditation about life and death I am closer to Jesus, who sweated blood in the garden of Gethsemane, but on the cross recommended his spirit to his heavenly Father, than I am to Socrates who behaved (if we should believe his disciple Plato) in such a joyful way before death that he appears super-human, that is, non-human.¹

I have examined the works of some philosophers and several writers who have pondered life and death, but here in this brief presentation, I will limit my remarks to some Slovene men of letters. The realist Janko Kersnik depicted, for example, at the turn of the century, a peasant who faces his death as something not desirable but natural and therefore unavoidable. On the other hand, in our postwar times, Jože Javoršek (Brejč) has portrayed a young man (his own son) who, having lost faith in both Christianity and socialism, moreover being spoiled and therefore impatient when confronting difficulties, in despair commits suicide. I will conclude by quoting the great Slovene poet, Edvard Kocbek, who affirms that we mortals, in one way or another, are nevertheless immortals, predestined to eternal life.

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When I discuss Kersnik's story about a dying peasant and his calm attitude toward death, I do not say that this Slovene writer has depicted something unusual; on the contrary, he has observed in his Slovene villages a feature which other authors have witnessed in their own countries.

Although Kersnik's writing is based on his own experience, Anton Slodnjak suggests that he was inspired by Ivan Turgenev, more exactly by the fifth chapter, entitled "Death," of his famous novel *A Sportsman's Sketches* (1852).² The narrator had met many Russian peasants and presented them with greater sympathy than their overlords. These stories were written before the abolition of serfdom (1861), and had a positive social function.

One day, hunting with the proprietor of another estate, Turgenev's nobleman comes upon a peasant who has been crushed by a tree, his legs and arms broken. Realizing that he will soon die, Maxim begs his fellow-workers to forgive him. The peasants with one voice, uncovering their heads, reply: "We ask your forgiveness." He then trembles all over "like a wounded bird," and dies.

The author-narrator then comments: "The scene that I had witnessed made me think of the manner in which people die in Russia. You could not accuse them of indifference at this supreme moment; no, they seem to look death in the face as a duty to be accomplished, and that is why they meet it calmly."

In his novel *Cancer Ward*, in the chapter "What Men Live By," Solzhenitsyn speaks about Yefrem Podduyev who has never been sick, but now suffers from cancer of the throat. At first he cannot accept that this is happening to him, but after several operations he realizes his sad condition. Though he does not stop hoping against hope that perhaps he can be cured, nevertheless:

he remembered how the old folks used to die back home on the Kama. They took death calmly. They prepared themselves quietly in good time, deciding who should have the mare, who the foal, who the coat and who the boots. And they departed easily, as if they were just moving into a new house.

Solzhenitsyn mentions how the dying peasants dispose of their possessions, but he forgets two other elements which are essential in Turgenev's and Kersnik's stories, namely the absolution of sins and forgiveness by one's own people. I believe that these aspects, though of capital importance, are often overlooked.³

Janko Kersnik (1852-97) was one of the better Slovene writers of the realist period; he was the son of a judge and rich landowner, but being a notary by profession, he came into contact with the

peasants and portrayed them as they were (particularly in his *Kmetske slike* [Peasant Sketches], 1882-91). Though in his novels Kersnik insisted that the peasants were better than their educated children, who in order to survive were docile in the face of the influential German minority, his villagers nevertheless are not idolized: they are stubborn, often greedy egoists with violent outbursts and strong passions, but also hard workers, attached to their ancestral land, obedient to divine and human laws, speechless admirers of natural beauty: neither angels nor devils, some better than others, but the majority just average beings.

Kersnik's peasants pray, and on Sundays and holidays go to church where the priest is respected and humbly obeyed; their lives are regulated in accordance with various religious feasts; they have, however, little understanding or care for deeper spiritual values.

Nevertheless, there is one story ("Kmetska smrt" [Death of a Villager], 1890) which gives us an extraordinary insight into a peasant's attitude toward his own death. Although the old Planjavec has managed his property for over thirty years, he has not relinquished its administration to any of his children. He still feels strong. The only thing which annoys him is the epilepsy from which he has suffered since early childhood. He seldom has fits, but he is never sure; he worries particularly when climbing to the roof of his house or crossing the bridge over the stream. Usually he would calm himself by saying: "It will be as must be!" He was a fatalist as were many other villagers."

One day he goes to the nearby woods to cut some birch twigs; he tries to bend them over the fire which he has made there on the spot. He suddenly has an epileptic seizure and falls into the flames. He is badly burned and must be carried home. Seeing that there is no cure for him, his people invite the local priest. After the confession, he dictates his last will to three chosen villagers. Having settled everything, even how many masses should be said for his soul, the old man dies.

The author concludes his brief narrative by saying that his descendants, "rough and tender, selfish and goodhearted, wicked and kind, still live in Planjava. When those people are about to die, they are not afraid of death."

Kersnik's villagers lived under roofs covered with straw, in rooms filled with the smoke and the odor of animals, but they lived on forested hillsides where the view was marvelous, the air pure and the sky blue. They demanded very little, were content when they had bread, cabbage soup and, on rare occasions, pork or roast lamb

with cheap wine; but drought, floods, taxation and court decrees took from them even the little that they could have otherwise enjoyed. However, they accepted their destiny and no revolutionary spirit of any kind moved their hearts, and no despair pushed them towards their own self-destruction.

Slovenia has made tremendous economic progress since Kersnik's times: it is rightly considered the most advanced republic of Yugoslavia, the only one which could be compared, as regards its prosperity, with neighboring Austria or even Switzerland. There is, however, a disturbing phenomenon in this postwar and opulent Slovenia: it competes with Sweden for first place in suicides among its youths.

Hoping to find an answer to the puzzling question what pushes these adolescents to commit suicide, I read with interest the autobiographical treatise of Jože Javoršek (1920-) entitled *How Is It Possible* (*Kako je mogoče*, 1959), in which he desperately searches to find the clue as to why his only son killed himself. Although they were supposedly on good and friendly terms, the young man hanged himself without leaving any explanation or even a farewell note.

Javoršek tries to determine why so many Slovenes kill themselves. He provides us with a survey of Slovene geography and history; he examines the mentality of a small nation surrounded by powerful neighbors; he bitterly criticizes its Catholic "medieval" outlook; and he condemns the interest of the youth in material prosperity and its "decadent" western spirit.

Beside these general but extremely subjective and arbitrary reasons, Javoršek alludes to his own imprisonment and to the lack of justice in postwar Yugoslavia. He describes his anguish in his cell, his rejection by his former friends and associates, his intention of putting an end to his life, and the anger of his small son at being called the son of a condemned man by other children.

Javoršek's judgments are one-sided; he is obviously unfair to the people (usually his former friends, e.g. Edvard Kocbek)⁴ with whom he now disagrees. He appears to be a tormented soul, moving from one extreme to another (from orthodox communism to a Japanese Zen monastery and from there back to Ljubljana). Whatever he does or says, he finds justification for it.

We sympathize with Javoršek's deep grief but have the impression that his son, having lost his mother, was also disappointed in not finding a more stable and balanced father. Is Javoršek ready to point his accusing finger against himself?

Moreover, is he able to see that young people need certain believable ideals? Having rejected both Catholicism and communism, they sense an abyss under their feet. Is Javoršek aware that Yugoslav literatures, not only the Slovene but all of them, are permeated with

a deep pessimism, that no prominent writer (from Krleža to Andrić and Selimović) expresses faith in the dignity of the human being, or hope that one day (as Chekhov wrote) there will be a better and more just life?

We should never forget, as Pascal said, that though a man is feeble like a reed, he is however a thinking reed ("le roseau pensant"); we should remember, as Gorky pointed out, that everything in this world is the creation of human hands. His hero Satin (in *The Lower Depths*) proudly exclaims: "Man! It is glorious. It sounds so big (*èto zvučit gordo*)."

This optimistic view can be shared not only by those who believe in the immortality of their soul, but also by those for whom life itself is a blessing or, as Walt Whitman would call it, a "miracle" for which we should be thankful and of which we should take advantage.

No one expressed this view about life and death better than Edvard Kocbek (1904-) himself, the best contemporary Slovene poet whom Javoršek, his former disciple, has bitterly and unjustly attacked. In his collection *Horror (Groza, 1963)* there is at the end a poem entitled "A Prayer" (Molitva). It expresses my credo too:

I am
and I was
and everyone
will be able
to forget me.

Yet nevertheless
I have to say:
I am,
I was,
I shall be,
and therefore I am more
than oblivion,
immeasurably more
than denying,
than nothing.

All that arises
is eternal,
birth is stronger
than death,
more endurable
than despair and loneliness,

more solemn
 than pain and sorrow,
 more solemn
 than damnation.
 I shall never
 cease to be.
 Never.
 Amen.⁵

I will conclude this sketch by suggesting that we should behave like Kersnik's Planjavec: When the old man hears that he will die, "the words did not appear so terrible; on the contrary—they sounded to him as a relief (*kakor tolažilo*)."

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NOTES

1. Ivo Sivrić, in his interesting article about "death in the works of some philosophers, writers and theologians" ("Smrt i umiranje u svjetlu nekih mislilaca, knjižvenika i teologa," *Nova et Vetera* [Sarajevo] 1-2 [1978], 259-61) discusses in detail their different approach.

2. A. Slodnjak, "Kersnik," in *Enciklopedija Jugoslavije*, vol. 5 (Zagreb: 1962).

3. Nikolai Leskov wrote: "Everybody answered that they had never seen any righteous men, because all men were sinful" (N. Leskov, *Satirical Stories*, tr. and ed. by W. Edgerton [New York: 1969], p. 65). Meša Selimović, from Bosnia, whose characters are generally Moslems, in his famous novel *The Dervish and Death* (*Derviš i smrt* [1966], p. 135), quotes someone who asks: "Who is not guilty?" and in his other novel, *The Fortress* (*Tvrđjava* [1970], p. 169), categorically asserts that "nobody is without guilt."

4. J. Javoršek, *Kako je mogoče* (Maribor: 1969), pp. 196-209.

5. Translated by Janez Gradišnik, *The Parnassus of a Small Nation*, ed. Janko Lavrin (Ljubljana: 1954), pp. 127-28.