

to which they cannot provide straight answers. If they could, it would defy the very nature of cultural studies as always casting a critical gaze on the theoretical paradigms from which it grew. However, the questions raised by the scholars in this volume already contain the most

important bullet points for the further development of trans/national cultural studies. Hence, the volume can be seen as their invitation to other cultural studies scholars to join the translational debate.

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## DE-CENTERING KRLEŽA'S OEUVRE

*Predrag Brebanović, Avangarda krležiana, pismo ne o avangardi, Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk i Arkzin, 2016, 263 pp.*

Miroslav Krleža seems still to be stirring polemic re-readings, especially among the intellectuals of the middle generation. From *Krleža za ponavljače (Krleža for Repeaters)*, edited by Boris Gunjević in 2014, via *Povratak Miroslava Krleže (The Return of Miroslav Krleža)*, edited by Tomislav Brlek in 2016, to the most recent *Mit o Krleži (The Krleža Myth)* by Sanja Nikčević in 2017, his status as a major figure in Croatian literary, cultural and political scenes is undeniable. Krleža's opus spans almost the entire twentieth century, and reaffirms his long-standing influence and inexhaustible provocation, which reach far beyond the period mentioned, and persist despite stubborn endeavours to challenge his status, or at least undermine his importance. The three books

previously mentioned differ greatly in their perspectives, levels of expertise, and ambitions: the first explicitly rejects academic presumption, and continues to see Krleža primarily as a cultural critic whose contemporary resonance does not cease to astonish; the second is more scholarly oriented, praising above all else the writer's literary merits as being on par with the greatest European modernist artists; and the third belongs to the tradition of rebellion against his overpowering shadow. This study desperately attempts to downsize Krleža's almost divine stature, which, as has often been proclaimed in previous decades, dwarfs all other Croatian writers, allegedly without justification. But Predrag Brebanović's playfully titled *Avant-Garde Krležiana, a Letter Not about/to the Neo Avant-Garde* is the first sustained study in the post-communist era that is bold enough to tackle the thorny issue of Krleža's Yugoslav and communist allegiances. Because of these, Krleža was, according to Brebanović, a nuisance to Croatian and Serbian academics and publicists alike: the former were eager to re-appropriate his former glory for contemporary nationalist sacralisation,

while the latter were ready to banish him finally from their own intellectual pantheon as a hater of Serbs.

Far from stooping to these banal politicizations, Brebanović's book is deeply concerned with finding an adequate critical discourse that would, first, pay its dues to the enormity of the oeuvre he unhesitatingly admires, and second, re-establish the lost intellectual connections between Zagreb and Belgrade beyond any self-serving ideological calculations. His aim is not to place Krleža on a concrete – let alone nostalgically evoked – Yugoslav geo-political map. Rather, it is to place the idea of a common Yugoslav cultural space among the most daring avant-garde aesthetic-political projects of the twentieth century; it is perhaps the only one of these projects that saw the contours of its possible realization. For Brebanović, to fight for such a hypothesis meant not only to break post-war taboos, but also to fight for the recognition of Krleža as an avant-garde writer *par excellence*, in spite of the legion of scholars aiming to testify to the contrary: that he endorsed avant-garde in a youthful "phase," which he later gratifyingly rejected. Starting from the well-founded assumption that the consecration of a writer as a "classic" and national Bard requires re-adjusting some of the most challenging parts of the work to fit a more comprehensible, more easily manipulated, mimetic-realist paradigm, Brebanović successfully argues that to act as a conscientious and informed critic today, one should abandon the centripetal strategy practiced by his predecessors. This is particularly the case since their analyses and historical overviews inevitably end up praising Krleža's *Glembay* cycle as the peak of his artistic trajectory.

Therefore, in Brebanović's view, one should willingly adopt a position on

the apparent margins of Krleža's oeuvre, from which one can de-center and re-organize the structure of his personal canon, and glimpse the secret surrealist key to the bulk of his memoirs, essays, novels and plays. That is why Brebanović identifies Krleža's letter, written to (or perhaps we should say painted to, or collaged to) his then close friend Marko Ristić, a prominent Belgrade surrealist, on 2 August 1936, as a precious but surprisingly neglected artefact on which to build his own critical case. In so doing, he demonstrates not only how versatile and spirited Krleža was in his use of crucial surrealist techniques, but also the extent to which this particular letter is a thorn in the side of the commentary on, editing, and interpretation of Krleža's work pursuant to the "business as usual" method. Such de-centering led the critic to a thorough revision – if not downright devastating anamnesis – of how avant-garde as a poetic choice fares in the body of "krležological" contributions. This coinage originates in a title from the most influential of all Krleža's critics and meta-critics, Stanko Lasić, whose estimations were similarly dethroned in Tomislav Brlek's preface to the previously mentioned 2016 collection of essays. But Brlek does not touch other scholarly and not-so-scholarly names that could be equally summoned to historical judgement, some of whom – like our common, never-to-be-forgotten, late professor Zoran Kravar – Brlek venerates as the unquestionable standard of scholarly honesty. Brebanović, however, is unburdened by such loyalties and can whip the Bataillean "academic horse" à *volonté*.

Brebanović is, however, not only widely meta-critically oriented – he includes in his critical survey seminal contributions by foreign scholars, like

Ralph Bogert – but also much more narrowly focused: he is interested in a specific and curious mathematical puzzle. Namely, the triad of avant-garde poetics, the Yugoslav communist utopia, and Krleža's friendship with Marko Ristić – whose mutual implication is epitomized in the selected fateful letter – reveals a consistent tendency to fall apart in the critical writings Brebanović scrutinizes, never appearing in the full aesthetico-ethico-political inter-connectedness of its constituent parts. For the critic, Krleža thus becomes a filter for the contemporary academic, ideological, and cultural mess that plagues two neighbouring communities, sadly preventing them from cherishing a uniquely dignified and constant reminder of what they risk, i.e. the deep regression they – along with Europe, critical discourse, the arts, ethics, and politics – are on the verge of drifting into.

I highly praise the directness, freshness, passion, and theoretical breadth of the framework within which Brebanović places his *plaidoyer* for the avant-garde, communist, Serb-friendly Krleža, and for the re-insertion of the writer's life and work into a non-provincial idea of Yugoslav cultural dialogue. This befits Krleža, because he never wished to discard his own Croatian national cultural heritage, nor did he ever want his oeuvre be reduced thereto. Brebanović's book is brimming with witty *apartés*, like that which states Velimir Visković's "cooperative Krleža is a Prometheus bound by his nation, almost entirely disinfected from communism, and as such very much akin to Freud without sex". This kind of boldness is unimaginable in Croatian scholarly discourse, even were the object of study not so hotly contested. But let us not be misled by this seeming lightness of address: not a word is said in

this book without due reference to the exact sources, formulations or schools of thought on which the author leans in his search for thinkers who measure up to Krleža's intellectual and artistic indomitability. To all of us whom the critic scolds (me explicitly, *mea culpa*) for either not being sufficiently aware of the complexity of the avant-garde as a project, or for not being sufficiently courageous to step out of our limited "fields of inquiry" to envisage the bigger picture – even, paradoxically, from the vantage point of a seemingly insignificant, jokingly conceptualized letter – Brebanović's book is an argument for ending the superfluous dilemmas about Krleža. This especially applies to the problem of having to choose between his aesthetics and his politics, since avant-garde primarily strives to cancel the distinction between the two.

A point remains, however, that I have already communicated to the author, but simply have to repeat in writing: his mordant attack on the entire Croatian cultural scene for pushing away the avant-garde as a monstrous threat to Krleža's bourgeois palatability – behind which lurks the danger of communist nostalgia – neglected to consider carefully all the media of the writer's existences and interpretations. If he had been – as I am, fortunately, obliged to be – informed of some of the best theatre performances Krleža's texts have generated in the last decade, he would perhaps have had a less gloomy outlook. Most of these performances were extremely provocative in the best sense of the word, and some explicitly put Krleža's notoriously realist plays into the surrealist camp. An example of this is Branko Brezovec's 2007 version of *Gospoda Glembajevi* (*The Honourable Glembays*) performed at the "Ivan Zajc" Croatian National Theatre

in Rijeka. After Brezovec made the high-brow character Laura from *U agoniji* (*In Agony*) weave a tapestry in a rural Dрниš setting in 2009, in 2013 Anica Tomić and Jelena Kovačić's Zagreb-Podgorica coproduction depicted a violent, anti-neoliberal, feminist third part of the trilogy, *Leda*. Additionally, last year's Zagreb festival, dedicated to Krleža, put on a hilarious contamination of that same play with Ionesco's *Cantatrice chauve* (*The Bald Soprano*), by students from the Zagreb Academy of Dramatic Arts.

I know only too well how difficult it is to follow the theatrical line of a writer's life. It is much harder than, perhaps, taking hold of the writings by Lacan, Derrida, Žižek, and Badiou that are so often (rightfully) evoked in Brebanović's study. But theatrical productions provide a precious line that should not be neglected, and prove once again that even scholars like Brebanović are doomed to tread paths that will always be reclaimed first by art itself, or even better, its present avant-garde.

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