

Melancholy and Metamorphosis

The Self-Dissolving Aesthetics of László Krasznahorkai

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Abstract. This paper examines the poetics of decay and the philosophy of language in the oeuvre of László Krasznahorkai, arguing that his prose unfolds as a sustained process of transformation, repetition, and self-reflection. His novels appear as variations on a single metaphysical theme—the impossibility of total expression and the ceaseless reconfiguration of meaning. Through recurring motifs and shifting perspectives, Krasznahorkai’s writing enacts the tension between the longing for linguistic precision and the inevitable failure of language to convey transcendence. Ruin emerges as a central metaphor, embodying both existential disintegration and aesthetic renewal. In dialogue with Anselm Kiefer’s visual art and Albrecht Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, Krasznahorkai’s work aligns with a Romantic and post-metaphysical tradition, thus also connecting to Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic visions—where melancholy functions as a generative creative force. Ultimately, Krasznahorkai’s art reveals a poetics of perpetual self-dissolution, where what collapses philosophically is redeemed through aesthetic form.

Keywords: Krasznahorkai, ruin, melancholy, language and transcendence, metafiction, decay

Krasznahorkai’s writing is characterized by repeated patterns of variation of theme and form, and self-borrowings of roles and motifs. Not only are the nagging questions related to the doubtfulness of expressibility, the problem of conveying (even in the sense of whether *there is* actually anything to convey), and to the validity of language and concepts thematized in the novels, but they are manifest in the form of prose that shows the repeated motivic configurations in new contexts. The changes in focus and repetitions signal the hopelessly determined desire to elaborate a language and form that strive for as precise an expression as possible, and also create multiplicitous retroactive shifts in meaning, and distant relationships between the individual works and the oeuvre as a whole, which is thus in a state of continuous (trans)formation. This oscillation lends the oeuvre a sense of mobility and instability. Thus, when reading a Krasznahorkai novel we are not reading only one work; rather we are trying to navigate through an intricate web of clues that refer forwards and backwards.

The motifs, themes, and linguistic-poetic structures that run mesh-like through the prose in a repeated series with subtle changes of perspective, designate the desire for a language that requires perpetual clarification. Successive works could be described as variations on a theme that, through new perspectives, aspects, forms of speech, and framings, endeavour to find an ever more suitable form of utterance.

From one work to the next, the variations on decay, sometimes presented with apocalyptic majesty, sometimes in a mythical or biological context, in absurd scenography or as a wordless threat, portrayed as some kind of silent and delicate collapse, signal the desire to utter, to record accurately—and to reflect that this is impossible. In this respect, the master trope of the oeuvre, its self-interpreting formation, is the scene in *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming* in which a woman photographer tries to get a picture of a young refugee boy at Keleti Station. But because of the location, the setting, selecting the wrong focus, or the light conditions, again and again the picture is imperfect.¹ Thus, the scene suggests that the tragedy is unrecordable, suffering and disintegration are unrepresentable, in the same way as the repeated attempts of narrative procedures, with varied perspectives, suggest decay.

In this respect, *Wandering-Standing*, the title of one of the texts published in the *The World Goes On* volume of short stories, describes fairly accurately the deliberately hesitant movement not only of the entire oeuvre, but also of each text.

The development of the oeuvre, which tries to show some illusory completeness through the juxtaposition of these roles, motifs, and theme-variations fragments, is in this sense reminiscent of the Jena Romanticism, in which as fragments of a future Work, the works themselves constitute and create the whole, in relation to which and in whose gravitational field they function as well. The mutually relativizing sense of the various linguistic registers (the tragic, the grotesque, the ironic, and the pathetic) can be guaranteed in a higher-level semantic whole, while the parts, by ironically negating one another, aesthetically attempt to correct the errors of the particular, and indirectly point to the unrepresentable whole.

This romantic tradition of the philosophy of poetry, that is, the insoluble combat between absence and the Absolute, the finite and the infinite, representation and unrepresentability, and the impossibility and the necessity of complete utterance, as formulated by Friedrich Schlegel, determines Krasznahorkai's narrative procedures from his very first pieces. An attempt to circumvent language, which is unable to represent the metaphysical Absolute, was already evident in the simultaneous temporal structure of *Satantango*, where the simultaneity of certain chapters or distant parts of the text, creating the illusion of the homogeneity of the course of time, portrayed the passing of time not merely as the milieu for the story, but as an essential problem within it:

1 Krasznahorkai, *Báró Wenckheim hazatér*, 119–21.

“[...] as if the whole of time were a frivolous interlude in the much greater spaces of eternity, a brilliant conjuring trick to produce something apparently orderly out of chaos, to establish a vantage point from which chance might begin to look like necessity...”²

Based on the characterization of the mystical manuscript in *War and War*, which can be seen as the novel's understanding of itself, it is conceivable that the texts of the oeuvre, adrift in time, as clarifications and variations of one another, can also be seen as a palimpsest, or an imitation thereof, created in the delight of one written onto the other.

The attempt to bridge the distance between, on the one hand, the meaning of the “Original” text, only indirectly accessible through translations, and thus interpretations, remaining invisible throughout, yet apparent in its angelic character and its metaphysical importance, and on the other hand its translations, is an allegory of the philosophy of language and art that affects the very foundation of Krasznahorkai's prose, and also a reducing mirror of the transformative textual procedures mentioned above, and of questions of the translatability of the Origin, the Absolute.

Juxtaposing different registers, the relativizing circumvention of meanings, the constant thematic and motivic mutual interreflection of the part and the whole, also incorporates into the oeuvre the philosophical problem of the accessibility (or rather inaccessibility) of the “translation” as the Original, as Absolute. And perhaps this is what stimulates each successive instance of the oeuvre, which works at its own ritual-artistic liquidation, is stifled into discreet silences, and constantly thematizes the inevitable erroneousness and the sense of the futility of the utterance. Thus, quite consistently, each individual work is the last and is followed by a new work only because Krasznahorkai tries, with a slightly shifted focus, to once more stabilize what is actually the only subject of his stories: the *common* linguistic structure of desperate metaphysical longing and the moment of disintegration, frozen into timelessness.

One of the textual procedures of Krasznahorkai's prose, which has a basis in the philosophy of language, is evident precisely in the deconstruction of binarities, in questioning their validity, where language turns its back on meaning and dissolves in the simultaneity of the contradictory possibilities contingent on concepts. However, the antipoles rest on the unspoken assumption of an invisible central field, and only *compared* to this do the concepts make sense as mutual opposites. Yet it is precisely this particular organizing centre-point principle whose existence and accessibility prove doubtful in each Krasznahorkai novel.

2 Krasznahorkai, *Satantango*, 4. “az örökkévalóság mozdulatlan gömbjében bohóckodik az idő egésze, a zűrzavar hepehupáin át ördögi egyenest csalva, és megteremtve a magasságot, a tébolyt szükségszerűségé hamisítja...” (Krasznahorkai, *Sátántangó*, 10).

Embedded in the processes of decay and failure, not only is there no guarantee that the “Origin” will be reached, but its very existence is cast into doubt. The plot arc of the novels, which bends toward discontinuation, makes a plot element of the metaphysical scepticism manifest in them, which however is counterbalanced by the endeavours of the characters, who hope with dogged persistency that their fate will turn for the better. In this diverging duality, the metaphysical anxiety operating at the deeper levels of the novels keeps hovering, unanswered.

The affirmation or denial of the apprehensibility of the origin, transcendence, the metaphysical basis, or their classification as invalid, is thus a multipolar system of reference, constantly playing into itself in the texts, to each of which phrases, consciousnesses, events, and motifs are related. Working in constant interaction with each other, they prove or, conversely, disprove the possibilities in other contexts.

Thus, it appears that what runs aground philosophically can still be salvaged aesthetically. The linguistic, semantic, and formal strategies of Krasznahorkai’s prose strive to resist philosophical, ideological, and social appropriation. Its fluidity, flexibility, and every poetic procedure generate an aesthetic that seeks to outmaneuver the demands of the culture industry: for Krasznahorkai, art is the sphere of resistance and subversion, a general stance of opposition, consistently accompanied by a deliberate embrace of marginality. His work denies the meaning and legitimacy of the prevailing metaphysical, existential, or social order—that is, the very seriousness and sober continuability of the condition of being called reality. The world of his prose renounces its alliance with official reality, offering neither redemption nor reconciliation, and refusing any identification with the order from which it seeks to liberate itself and against which it remains in radical opposition. Adorno’s idea could serve as a model for characterizing the rebellious and anxious prose world of Krasznahorkai:

“It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads.”³

The mode of writing, suggestive of the close link between the metaphysical contingency of language and the corelessness of existence was a crucial poetic invention already in *Satantango*, and playing them off against each other runs throughout the oeuvre. The constantly deleted centre, present as an absence, might prove or, equally, might destabilize expectations related to the knowability and representability of the transcendent “signified”; thus, the opposing registers of the texts are simultaneously valid in his pieces; in one and the same dimension we find all the choreographies possible in the oeuvre of salvation and damnation; attainment of the

3 Adorno, *Commitment*, 180.

goal and failure; stumbling across the answer and error. “As for the crux of it, I am perplexed,”⁴ the narrator of *The Prisoner of Urga* states in relation to this, while the lecturer in *Universal Theseus* speaks of the absence of “comprehensive meaning.”⁵

The uncertainty of the central core of meaning is emphasized by formal solutions that suggest the labyrinthine nature of the textual world (and by the motivic way the “labyrinth” is presented). As a kind of mirror image of this, it is depicted as a collapse of the world depicted, a collapse not dispensing with any metaphysical basis. In the light of the above, however, this does not merely inscribe the texts with the melancholy pathos of an infinite metaphysical farewell.

The simultaneously tragic and grotesque sense of tension in the dual dynamic of the promise of the call, of response, and the experience of loss, of the hope of being addressed and cosmic silence enriches the worlds of the novels with possibilities that continually challenge one another. The portrayal of the subject’s own helplessness as a world experience and the internal semantic movement of the texts, with the depiction of journeying, which presents movement thematically, works as both a self-liquidating and self-generating (textual) energy.

In Krasznahorkai’s texts, this is why the tormenting determination of ineluctable closure and finiteness of form and language collides time and again with the passion that desires to step beyond, to the Absolute, the precise, and with the resignation that has no choice but to admit that this is impossible. One might say that, in all this, the situation expressed on the pages of *The Prisoner of Urga*, that of a paradoxical interweaving of bondage and freedom, the experience of “being freed as a prisoner,”⁶ appears at the level of form and semantics.

And yet the constant presence of angel figures, who may be silent, ominous, or even tragicomical in their damnation, signals the impossibility of breaking free of the illusion of hope, and the ineluctability of the tragic optimism (for it is futile) glimmering despite experiences of loss.

The poles of “angel” and “evil” (Heaven-Earth, Up-Down) lose their legitimacy not only as a comprehensible pair of opposites, but they are subject to further fractures in meaning within themselves, and thus confront their own conceptuality. The collapse of “meaning” into fragments or into a relative concept results in the explaining centre of ontological-historical parables becoming scattered, and this rubble within the mesh of motifs in the texts (as a pair to the image of the “labyrinth”) appears in the symbolic, self-interpreting visuality of the “ruin”, that illustrates the

4 Krasznahorkai, *Az urgai fogoly*, 7. (“A lényeket illetően vagyok tehát tanácstalan.”)

5 Krasznahorkai, *Universal Theseus*, 217, 36. Krasznahorkai, *A Théseus-általános. Titkos akadémiai előadások*, 15. (“Egy összefoglaló értelem hiánya miatt eléggé meg vagyunk már törve.”)

6 Krasznahorkai, *Az urgai fogoly*, 8.

stories' processes of decay and also relates to the creation of the works and the contingency of language. At this point, the aesthetic and philosophical kinship between Krasznahorkai and Anselm Kiefer⁷ may become apparent.

Similarly to the world of the novels of the Hungarian writer, the German Anselm Kiefer's haunting, oppressive landscapes and vision of history become a symbol in the sense of a negative metaphysics: in both cases, the path to interpreting the spectacle lies in a retraction of the very metaphysics represented by the system of symbols used in the portrayal. In the same way as Krasznahorkai's, Kiefer's landscapes are not *real* landscapes; rather, they constitute "abandoned and dying terrains."⁸ And this also appears in the self-interpreting process regarding the cultural status of the opus, since Kiefer's mistrust of the usability of the expressive tools of painting is just as profound as the scepticism with which Krasznahorkai draws on the linguistic possibilities available to him.

Another significant point of connection between the artistic worlds of Kiefer and Krasznahorkai is their frequent reference to Dürer's *Melencolia I*, whose symbolism they interpret as foundational to their worldview. In Krasznahorkai's case, this relationship first becomes evident in *The Prisoner of Urga*, where the narrator explicitly equates the text with melancholy. (Retrospectively, the title *The Melancholy of Resistance* also gains profound new resonance.) The enigmatic stone block in Dürer's engraving transcends into being a mere symbol of melancholy. It is its tangible yet indefinable manifestation, eluding hermeneutic interpretation. Lacking context, the polyhedron remains alien, existing beyond rational comprehension. It destabilizes epistemic certainty, revealing the void beneath language and knowledge. Krasznahorkai's oeuvre can be seen as a powerful and evocative meditation on this ineffable essence of melancholy.

Kiefer's works are also deeply infused with Dürer's imagery. From the 1980 painting *Rhein (Melancholia)* to the polyhedron motif in the 1998 photographic series *Am Anfang (In the Beginning)*, and the depiction of a flying polyhedron in a 2004 painting, Dürer's motifs shape Kiefer's creations in profound ways. His fractured, eroded landscapes evoke the angel's robes in *Melencolia I*. These ravaged terrains, succumbing to the forces of Time and Decay, resonate with the oppressive soil and the bleak atmosphere of *Satantango*. Kiefer's landscapes and Krasznahorkai's novels both emanate a shared despair.

The fusion of destruction and Dürer's melancholic angel is a potent symbol of humanity's fragility. It portrays the inevitable dissolution of history and culture, the disintegration of human-made worlds, and the relentless advance of catastrophe. Together, they serve as the visual emblem of Krasznahorkai's literary universe.

7 Cp. Arasse: *Anselm Kiefer*.

8 Arasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, 214.

The notion of history as a ruin, and the constant presence of angel figures in Krasznahorkai's texts evoke Kiefer's visions of history bearing similar motifs. For on the horizon of Krasznahorkai's novels, there is the same decaying landscape and out-of-joint time appearing, as an angel turning his back on the future in dread, whom, according to Benjamin's analysis of Klee in his *On the Concept of History*, an irrepressible storm chases over the mass of ruins toward a non-existent future.⁹ Krasznahorkai's novels seem to give the details, or catalogue, the spectacle that according to Benjamin is reflected in the eyes of Klee's angel, and in Kiefer's pictures. (Throughout the oeuvre, angelic figures appear continuously, sometimes silent, sometimes menacing, and at times tragically comic in their downfall, reinforcing this connection.)

As so aptly formulated by Adorno—in a way that holds equally true for the oeuvres of Krasznahorkai and Kiefer:

“The machine angel's enigmatic eyes force the onlooker to try to decide whether he is announcing the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it. But, as Walter Benjamin, who owned the drawing, said, he is the angel who takes rather than gives.”¹⁰

Clearly, for Krasznahorkai, questions of language are inseparable from questions of existence and history. In his texts, existence can be lost or drift through time, and language and existence merge inseparably. The existential uncertainty at the heart of meaning is evident throughout his work, from the first short stories (e.g., *The Last Boat*) to his early novels. Works such as *Satantango*, *The Melancholy of Resistance*, *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, *Herscht 07769*, and even *Zsömle Feels Used Up* depict the despair of being thrust into linguistic and metaphysical existence, partly through the social vulnerability of the “self” and its separation from history.

This negates the meaning and truth of the existing metaphysical, existential, or social order. It poses the question whether the state of existence known as reality can be taken seriously, whether it can be sensibly continued, a reality about which, according to Krasznahorkai's works, we have no useful ideas. And this is the sense in which his writing can be said to always dramatize an irregular state or a state of emergency which ponders the possibilities of redeeming oneself from the alienness of history. The prevailing “state of emergency” that appears in Krasznahorkai's works tells of a historical existence within the story which is the situation of history as interpreted by the losers, the losers' own time. The characters, as they cling to illusory hopes and forge futile plans, already since the presentation of the world of self-deception and comic Messianism in the province left outside history in *Satantango*, try to restore

9 Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 253–65.

10 Adorno, *Commitment*, 194–95.

history and their own story, while Krasznahorkai's art informs us of the constant failure of this endeavour. Alongside the connection between Kiefer's artistic techniques and Benjamin's philosophical ideas, which can be related to Krasznahorkai, now I will briefly highlight a literary connection.

Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*¹¹ invites comparison with Krasznahorkai's *Satantango* not merely due to their coinciding publication dates but also because of the striking parallels in their motifs, philosophical perspectives, and poetic techniques, which often manifest in astonishingly similar narrative elements. Much like Krasznahorkai, McCarthy portrays the landscape as a symbol of the cold and inhuman indifference of existence. For McCarthy, the harsh terrain of the Mexican borderlands, where his characters endlessly wander, ceases to represent progress, personal development, or any humanistic journey. Instead, the "journey" is a realm of alien existence, inaccessible through moral categories. For both authors, wandering transcends its geographical and philosophical dimensions, emerging as a social, psychological, and metaphysical construct shaped by the interplay of their characters' inner states. The kid's remark in McCarthy's novel may be read as a metaphysical delineation of the worlds imagined by both writers:

"We got off the road someways or another." And two chapters later, the following sentence appears to respond to this: "This looks like the high road to hell to me, said a man from the ranks."¹²

One of the most profound poetic achievements of both *Satantango* and *Blood Meridian* is their ability to elevate unnervingly realistic depictions of nature to metaphysical significance. The terror of the landscape intertwines with the despair of existence, each amplifying the other. This interplay links the degradation of the individual to the eerie decay of the natural world, anthropomorphizing nature itself. It becomes an active agent in the inexorable processes of destruction, while depersonalized human existence is reduced to a helpless victim caught in the machinery of uncontrollable environmental forces.

The aimless wandering of McCarthy's protagonists encapsulates the existential disorientation central to Krasznahorkai's fiction, reflecting the plight of his characters lost without a metaphysical compass. This shared motif of seeking an unattainable home characterizes not only *Satantango* but Krasznahorkai's entire oeuvre. Furthermore, McCarthy's dance macabre scene at the end of the novel serves as a self-referential metaphor, much like *Satantango*'s portrayal of life and art as synchronized with the demonic rhythm of a murderous world order. Both writers

11 McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*.

12 McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 16, 42.

depict existence as a performance to the tune of history's victims' subjugation—a haunting representation of lost power and ruin.¹³

Thus, for the same reason, Krasznahorkai's oeuvre presents the world of the current victors, in which the threat of their construction of history, the world alien to the losers, the world that destroys them, becomes an ineluctable experience of existence. In several places in the oeuvre, the existential and metaphysical battle to snatch history and story as the booty depicts the world of a constant state of emergency as a war situation, where the Messianistic images of future redemption try to confront the catastrophe of dropping out of history. However, Krasznahorkai's visions of history desecrate theology with the narrative technique of irony and the reflexive embedding of voices of consciousnesses, and thus both redemption and catastrophe are robbed of their apocalyptic majesty, in other words, they become merely one reflected sound in a composition of voices.

Yet, the formal and semantic instability of Krasznahorkai's texts makes it possible to give a reading of the oeuvre in which the world of the novels reveals the constant operation of decay not as the desecration of theology but as the theologization of reality.

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13 "And they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces. Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. (...) He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die." McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 327; Krasznahorkai, *Satantango*, The Work of the Spider II (The Devil's Tit, Satantango), 135–64.

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