

## Getting out of Time

### Krasznahorkai Feels Used Up

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**Abstract.** The essay examines how historical time appears in the novel *Zsömle odavan* [Zsömle Feels Used Up], that is closely linked into László Krasznahorkai's previous oeuvre in many ways. The satirical depiction of a society falling out of history, and the dispelling of absurd illusions places it within the historical-philosophical framework typical of Krasznahorkai's novels, primarily creating its continuity with the novels *Satantango* and *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*.

**Keywords:** historical time, illusion of reality, pathology of society, absurd, struggle for history

As in many cases since *Satantango*, Krasznahorkai's latest novel,<sup>1</sup> in the guise of a satire of social criticism, once again makes Time the invisible protagonist. The novel presents a world in which disconnection from Time and History gelatinizes the lived present into a kind of inclusion, which, however, turns its anachronism and its isolation into virtues.

As *Satantango* and *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, *Zsömle odavan* [Zsömle Feels Used Up] depicts false illusions and the stubborn obsession of connecting to one's own story as the failure of an irrational need for reality and, more broadly, of a marginalized society falling out of time and history. But compared to the wide-panning, hilarious, carnival-esque social satire of the 2016 *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, *Zsömle odavan* focuses on a narrower social intersection by presenting the linguistic, historical, and social outlook of the almost tribal subculture clustered around the protagonist. Krasznahorkai has always consciously played with the fusion of fictional and real narrative registers, but in this text the deceptive effects of credibility and similarity are perhaps more evident than before.

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1 The title of the novel is *Zsömle odavan* [*Zsömle Feels Used Up*], where "Zsömle" is the name of the main character's dog. The story tells of their mutual ruination.

This is because the central character of *Zsömle odavan* is 91-year-old Uncle Józsi Kada, who imagines he is a legitimate Hungarian king—“József Kada I of the House of Árpád” (p. 41)—whose precisely identifiable model as the last ruler of the House of Árpád was József Daka, a pensioner in Eger famous in the tabloid media at the beginning of the 2000s.

His stories appear in the biographical tales of Kada in the novel: his family tree traced back to Genghis Khan (p. 28), his childhood friendship with Weissmüller (p. 74), his fierce and secret love affair with a famous actress (p. 25), his relationship with Horthy, his coronation in 1944 (p. 62), the rescue of the population of Szolnok during the bombings (p. 36), the sword of the International Knightly Order of St. George received from the Queen of England (p. 14), and even his litigation with his family (pp. 101–6). All these surprising “facts” are taken from Daka’s interviews and answers, which were widely amplified by the media at the time. Just as Kada’s war injury in the novel, the scar caused by a shrapnel fragment that damaged József Daka’s skull is clearly visible on his forehead in his interviews, who in his best-known interview told stories while drinking coffee in front of the old kitchen stove, just as the stove and the kitchen occupy the central place in the narrative.

The sense of referentiality is further strengthened by the fact that the “monarchists” grouped around the protagonist and trying to help him to the throne maintain relations with organizations that actually existed, such as the organization called Conquest 2000 (p. 134), which recently really demanded the restoration of the kingdom, or the far-right association bearing the ominous name: the Arrows of Hungarians. But when describing their relationships reaching to the highest circles, it is not difficult to identify the Speaker of the National Assembly referred to as “White Mustache” (p. 34), and the “true Hungarian man” (p. 24) based on these descriptions, or to find a connection between the prime minister, regularly referred to as “that Orbán” within the world of the novel, and the politician currently exercising power in our reality. (pp. 30, 72, 139, and 208).

The pervasions between reality and imagination can also be seen in narrative cuts which, breaking the apparent continuity of the text, shift the reality of the novel’s world into various further registers of fictionality.

Thus, right at the beginning of the story, there is Uncle Józsi lost in contemplation next to the old stove, while the flames are fading, and his thoughts about taking longer walks in nature for the sake of his health (p. 9) which will be repeated literally by his visitors who appear just outside the gate. (p. 21) Not only does this narrative technique mix the levels of reality and the temporal structure of the novel, but it also offers the possibility that the arrival of the group wishing to enthrone Uncle Józsi, and thus the whole unfolding story can be understood as a fantasy of a man daydreaming by the fire. Perhaps the novel is just a performance set on the stage of

the damaged consciousness of a very lonely old man, whose only contact is his dog named Zsömle, which arranges its plot from shards of contemporary Hungarian reality.

A similar shift, a further shift in the levels of reality within the novel, is felt in Uncle Józsi's imagination during the scene of a stroke attack perceived as a raid by the Hungarian SWAT team called TEK, after which he first receives a phone call from the Secretariat of the Office of the National Assembly about organizing a high-level visit. (p. 125) The absurd telephone conversation following his vascular occlusion and the subsequent meeting in the Parliament with the "President's Special Envoy" (p. 134) is perhaps once again a figment of Uncle Kada's increasingly uncontrollable consciousness, which interpretation seems to be supported by one of the motives of the telephone conversation. The lady calling from the Secretariat of the Office of the National Assembly apologizes at first for the "disrespectful" email that previously invited Uncle Józsi to a meeting, but which, as she puts it, was written by the AI and sent without verification. Just before the stroke, Uncle Józsi was watching a tv show about Artificial Intelligence (p. 123), which suggests that the sequence that follows is merely a fantasy built from fragments of memory, a confused fantasy of an increasingly uncontrollable mind fed by mosaics of reality. When, after the second stroke, the SWAT team actually attacks the king, the description of the scene faithfully repeats that of the first attack—the one that was understood only as a metaphorical description of the first crash. (pp. 123–4) The linguistically mirroring parts once again create an uncertainty in the quality of reality and fiction, but at the same time project the registers of illness and social reality onto each other.

Accused of conspiracy against the state, Uncle Józsi finds himself first in hospital, then in court, and finally—having been declared incompetent—in the "Lipót" mental institute. Once again, this scene simultaneously confirms and circumvents readers' expectations towards aspects of reality, since Hungary's best-known psychiatric hospital had been closed long before the time of the story. The difficulties of a realistic reading are further complicated by the fact that, already during the first visit, a singer named László Krasznahorkai appeared among Uncle Józsi's followers, who "sang beautifully, although sometimes a little out of tune" (p. 51).

The biographical author's name appeared (and was subsequently deleted) in several earlier Krasznahorkai novels, and the play between characters and authorial identities has always been an important element of the oeuvre's transgressional aesthetics, which triggers rich epistemological questions.

However, *Zsömle odavan* employs an ironic translation of the reader's preliminary version of reality attached to the author's name, this time assigning to the character it designates in the novel, among other things, the setting to music of Wass poems, the plucking of the emotional song about a beautiful Hungary "Szép vagy

szép vagy Magyarország”, or the heartfelt performance of the Székely Anthem, and describes him as a literature teacher who is a fan not only of János Arany, but also of László Mécs and Anna Jókai. And he would like to efficiently turn his own life experience into a rock opera. These cultural-historical emblems of Hungarian populism (authors such as László Mécs or Anna Jókai, the genre of rock-opera, and the nationalism of the nostalgic song and the Székely Anthem) stand in obvious ironic contrast to the biographical author’s views, cultural roots, and tastes.

Unlike previous characters, the “Krasznahorkai” appearing here is no longer a Don Quixote-esque, let alone a prophetic hero. Like all other characters in the novel, his figure lacks heroism and tragedy, pathos, and comedy.

He himself becomes part of the world which he sings about.

Here, the possibilities of meaning that disturb the illusion of reality create the floating of referentiality and fictionality just as much as the equally discouraging chapter set at the mental institute. However, due to the reassuring anchors of the referential codes, the world emerging from the disturbed functioning of the sick consciousness can nevertheless be easily identified by the reader and read as quite a familiar social critique. Thus, the infantilism of “reality” and feverish absurdity actually become identical in the structure of the novel.

As has already been mentioned, the ironic tone of the novel is not primarily created by the humor of the portrayal of characters and the clash of different values and registers, but by the gesture of linguistic imitation. However, this plays on the difference and clash of different values and cultural preferences, since it presupposes and expects a preliminary receptive position that culturally confronts the world depicted in the novel.

If the plot may be just a vision emerging from the imagination of Uncle Józsi’s increasingly narrowing mind, it nevertheless creates its own reality from the often sociographically presented fragments of the actual reality. By placing the story of József Kada House of Árpád in a broader social context, the novel illustrates the spirit and living conditions of provinciality, the *philosophy of parochialism*<sup>2</sup> which presents Uncle Józsi’s feverish dreams not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a sad symptom of a sick society.

In this sense, the central metaphor of *Zsömle odavan* is undoubtedly *illness*, which is blurred in the novel both as an organic problem and as a pathology of a society, showing both that what exists is incredible, and what is absurd is, in fact, real.

The mentalities that emerge in the novel draw from the experience of a mythical consciousness outside of time, thereby denying time. Unlike Krasznahorkai’s previous text formations, the fact that time empties out and is closing on itself does

2 Konstantinović, *Filosofija palanke*.

not become the subject and material of the text primarily due to the spectacular play of form and structure but is shaped as the life experience of the depicted world.

The closed minds of the characters is connected to the past in the sense of non-conformity with history and strives to create a history whose fulfilment would also mean the end of Time. The future program of the historian, who at first received Uncle Józsi's stories with skepticism and later became an unconditional supporter of the pseudo-ruler, includes, for example, "the restoration of the validity of the Blood Pact, the documents of St. Stephen, and the restoration of the forgotten significance of the Golden Bull, as well as the destruction of relevant parts of other laws, such as in particular the *Pragmatica Sanctio*, Article X of laws 1790/91 and the Acts of 1848–49" (pp. 30–1)—the many events of an enclosed national past.

In a similar way, Uncle Józsi blends the desirable future into the past, in which only program points leading back to the "world of our forefathers" such as "the traditional punitive forms of blood court and caning," the "restoration of court appointments" and the cultural work of "archery, horseback riding, folk dance, fighting games" as state commitments (p. 149), besides "the maintenance, promotion, and protection of national identity, as well as the unity and pride of the country, stability and continuity of permanence" would be guaranteed. (p. 151) The myth acting as the overarching spiritual power, as a kind of superior self, constantly reminds the characters that they have been forgotten by history, but in return, as the monarchists' visions of the future indicate, they now forget this and try to forge a destiny out of this forgetfulness. The language they use is made up of sentence, phrase, history, and personality patterns that are focused on the past and can be read and heard every day, revealing their true emptiness, banality, and absurdity through the optics of characteristic imitation.

This enclosure in the mythical past transforms the language of the characters into a kind of national museum, in which only what is already known can always be recognized, and which is thus able to inspire its users by providing continuous self-justification. The old, almost churchly pathos of "Our Lady's Kingdom" (p. 83), "blood-soaked Hungarian history" (p. 55), "the law of moral good" (p. 188), "the restoration of morals" (p. 99), "ancient law" (p. 188), and similar frequent phrases that bind and center the linguistic fabric of the characters like upholstery buttons seek to preserve in language the same past that their historical program uses in time.

The characters' rebellion against time also becomes a struggle against language, in which language, which becomes an enemy as a temporal medium of organic change, is hibernated as a victim in the course of speech. This is why the noun becomes a phatic sign in the manifestations of the characters, which, with its static nature, already suggests something out of time. The novel visually emphasizes this by capitalizing words that are considered particularly significant and truly profound,

indicating that they are pronounced with reverie, as if lifting them out of the fleeting flow of language and endowing them with a kind of sublime eternity.

This is how, among others, the “Holy Land” (p. 26), “Holy Country” (p. 83), “Holy Hungarian Land” (p. 208), even the “National Homeland” (p. 128), and the “Hungarian Future” (p. 43) as well as a whole series of similar expressions, get unbound from the constraints of time—expressions whose timeless dignity leads the speaker to the mysticism they want to possess, to the spirit they want to regain.

This plunge into the past is also recorded in texts describing the cultural identity of monarchists. Uncle Józsi and his followers naturally agree most profoundly that Albert Wass, this “extraordinarily righteous, pure Hungarian man” (p. 84) is not simply “the poet of the nation” (p. 43), but if people read him, “we can rest assured that things are going in the right direction” (p. 85).

In addition, the text summarizes in an almost pamphlet-like manner the cultural stereotypes that fit into the horizon of this tribal subculture, which considers itself universal, where visceral hatred of “incest and Attila József and other communists” (p. 111) are peacefully complemented by an emotional enthusiasm for the Székely Anthem and, say, sentimental Karády songs (p. 23).

*Zsömle odavan* is connected to the world of *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming* in the way indicated, since, for example, the Second World Meeting of the Wenckheims is mentioned, and even the original Hungarian throne belonging to Uncle Józsi is found in the pre-fab apartment of one of the Wenckheim descendants in the suburb of Békásmegyer (p. 114). The Lace Rose Mountain Forest is set on fire (p. 99), an event that evokes the burning of the Lace Bush Forest in the 2016 novel,<sup>3</sup> also suggesting the connection between the two novels.

Subtle references also imply the continuity between the social drawings of the two works: *Baron Wenckheim...* is a colourful social panorama, clinging in vain to individual hopes and illusions of redemption. It fades into a homogeneous mass in the new novel and mummifies itself as subjected to a joint ideal of salvation in time and language.

The story of *Zsömle odavan* no longer portrays personalities, it has no heroes—even Uncle Józsi is not a protagonist—because in the tribal world depicted, what becomes of primal importance over individuality is a normativity and an insistence on the closedness of the homogeneous worldview that emerges in a common language. This is how the grand, apocalyptic collapse is omitted, which in the 2016 novel could still constitute a conclusion, a worthy and logical consequence of the rich long list of sins included in the chapter titled “To the Hungarians”. In the new novel, in accordance with the nature of the world depicted, there is no tragedy, more

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3 Krasznahorkai, *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, 302.

precisely, the text implies that the absence of tragedy is a real tragedy, and instead of the irony and satire still present, this time distant compassion becomes the fundamental tone of the work: In the same way as in *Herscht 07769* Florian passes by the rundown apartment of the neo-Nazi gang and thinks: “Poor Nazis”.

This time, the novel does not end in a spectacular collapse, but in Uncle Józsi’s quiet, one might say, discreet suicide. When he jumps out of the window of the madhouse, clutching his dog Zsömlé, his only companion who represents *human* contact, he is actually stepping out of a time that he never resided in, in which he was only a victim, and against which, like so many of Krasznahorkai’s heroes, he lost the battle. The disciplined self-disappearance of József Kada is an almost Chekhovian variation of the visions of destruction in Krasznahorkai’s novels. In the words of T.S. Eliot, “Not with a bang but a whimper.”

Krasznahorkai is an anarchist author; for him, art is a field of resistance, subversion, general opposition, and consistently undertaken outsiderism. He denies the meaning and truth of the existing metaphysical, existential, or social order, that is, the seriousness and the possibility to soberly continue this state of being called “reality”, of which, as evidenced by his works, we do not have usable concepts anyway. And in this sense, it can be said that his writing always dramatizes an abnormal or extraordinary state of affairs, which considers the possibilities of ideas for salvation from the position of history, that is, that of an outsider, a stranger. The current “state of emergency” appearing in any of Krasznahorkai’s writings describes a historical existence which, as Benjamin writes in Thesis VIII,<sup>4</sup> is an interpretive situation of history interpreted by the losers, the losers’ own time. The characters, clinging to false hopes and forging futile plans, have been trying to complete the restoration of history and their own history ever since the presentation of the world depicting self-deception and comic messianism in the abandoned region of *Satantango*, and Krasznahorkai’s textual world has announced the continuous failure of this endeavor. For the same reason, the oeuvre actually presents the world of the winners of the day, in which the threat of the history they constructed, which is alien to the losers and which will lose them, becomes an unavoidable experience of existence. The existential and metaphysical struggle for the capture of history—and, for that matter, any story—as spoils metaphorizes the world of a permanent state of emergency as a state of war in several texts of the oeuvre, where messianic images of the future, of redemption, try to oppose the catastrophe of falling out of history. Krasznahorkai’s visions of history, however, secularize and profane theology through narrative techniques of irony and reflexive embeddings of streams of consciousness, so that both redemption and catastrophe are stripped of their apocalyptic emphases—or become merely one of the reflected voices of the composition—and both materialize in an infinite “now”.

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4 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 965.



At the same time, however, the formal instability of the texts naturally makes it possible for the readers to frame the oeuvre in a way that the world of novels reveals omni-present operation of destruction not as a profanation of theology, but as a theologizing of reality.

“You can blow the trumpet of the Last Judgment once; you must not blow it every day”,<sup>5</sup> Edgar Wind writes. This is because when the height of excitement repeats like clockwork, the effect inevitably becomes somewhat forced.

However, contrary to Wind’s opinion, Krasznahorkai’s novels that regularly end in images of failure, falling into nothingness and loss, do not seem “forced” because, sticking to the analogy, this particular trombone sounds different in each case: sometimes we hear the ear-piercing roar of a bell ringing by a fool, or the singing voice of an imbecile kid trying to command a canon for an empty being, or the mechanical rattling of biological decay, or the all-encompassing silence of *Herscht 07769*, written on a varied sheet music of grotesque and pathetic melodies, conveying the failure of the struggle for history.

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5 Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, 26–7.

