

yet at the same time he did not lose faith in language as a tool for describing reality. Unlike modernist authors, Bobkowski did away with the alleged antinomy between natural man and the civilized one. He testified to values rather than challenging them. He disregarded the view, so important to modernism, that emotionalism and intellectualism are each other's opposites. He was a deeply religious man, which placed him in opposition to the modern antimetaphysical currents. Nowak interestingly juxtaposes Bobkowski's Catholicism with the atheism of Gombrowicz and Nałkowska.

"It seems that Bobkowski belongs to a non-canonical, heretic, separate trend of modern literature" (134), the author of *On Andrzej Bobkowski's Way of Writing* argues, describing his protagonist as a "freak" of modernity (178). Perhaps he should be counted among the "antimoderns" portrayed in Antoine Compagnon's notable book (*Les-antimodernes*, 2005) that reconstructed within French literature a trend extending from Joseph de Maistre to Roland Barthes.

The distinctness of Andrzej Bobkowski's modernity certainly makes him a particularly relevant author, especially for the readership in Poland where modernity is still identified with secularism. Through his "life-writing," the author of *Sketches with the Quill* showed with literary ingenuity that the other modernity is possible as well. This too is pointed out in Maciej Nowak's book.

Translated by Zofia Ziemann

Trapped in the Labyrinth

***A Gothic Soul: A Novella*, by Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic. Translated from the Czech by Kirsten Lodge. Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2015. 143 pages. ISBN 978-80-86264-46-2. Hardcover.**

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More than a century after its brief flowering, it is difficult to respond to the concerns and aims of the Decadent Movement (if movement it ever was, rather than a loose assemblage of individuals, some thoroughly

demoralized by modern life and others defiantly flamboyant in their contempt for the same) without being tempted to laugh or at least smile with wry irony. "What were they thinking?" and "Much ado about nothing" are likely responses. The latter of these reactions would not be foreign to Jiří Karásek, and perhaps even approved by him. At the time he wrote *A Gothic Soul* [1900], he believed his contemporaries had been hollowed out by reality, that reality had exhausted itself. Therefore the ado about the "nothingness" of an introverted imagination that fixes itself on poetic fancies disconnected from everyday concerns, society, and history pointed, for him, to some kind of redemption. The aesthetics of decadence, its fascination with death and decay became the goal of a worthwhile life, compared to which quotidian reality and its artistic representation seemed pallid and pointless. As Karásek notes in his introduction to the novel, life and "reality" are transient and ultimately empty—perhaps because they end for the individual in death but their transfiguration through art is lasting and worthy of contemplation and indulgence. Thereby chronic anxiety caused by the prospect of death is tamed. More specifically, when it comes to intense human relationships the actual beloved may in time become as horrid and repulsive as its corpse will one day be, but love poetry will not decay or lose its allure; its artificial emotions are more affecting and more durable than the fluctuating ones of an earthly love affair. This idea—that one can read or recite an evocative line of poetry repeatedly without it ever stalling—is probably mistaken.

The stream of imagination (a term Karásek preferred to "stream of consciousness") of an individual alienated from his surroundings and believing that improvements in human beings and their social institutions are illusory is therefore a very fit subject for the Decadent writer. Such an imagination is the subject of *A Gothic Soul*, whose solitary, nameless protagonist I will call "the Troubled Man." It hardly matters whether or not the author's creation is plausible or that his emotional agonies and ecstasies lack "objective correlatives." It is the artful depiction of the wavering motion of his mind that establishes the

permanence of the transient. Morbid self-preoccupation leads to immortalizing one's disaffections by converting them into a narrative of an ego not contained by the boundaries of the possible. The shabby self, reflecting on itself, becomes a very pretty picture affixed to the wall of a timeless gallery that exhibits the residue of life, if life can be confined to perceiving and ruminating on the futility of existence (or, in other variants of Decadence, on beauty and its decay).

Commitment to this particular aesthetic and "plan of action" (mostly inaction) is esoteric and probably linked to the temperament of individuals who find reality disappointing and who refuse to accept that existing social and artistic conventions can produce anything worthy of our attention and effort. In contrast to the theoretical indolence associated with Decadence, Karásek established a Decadent movement in Czech literature, writing poetry, novels, short stories, and polemical and critical pieces, and founding and editing the *Modern Revue* (*Moderny revuë*) to showcase his writing and that of his colleagues. It cannot honestly be said that his efforts yielded vibrant or long-lasting results, yet he and some of his followers did produce several works that arrest the attention of open-minded readers for the very reason that they do not partake of the procedures and ideas of other widespread strains of literature of the period—realism, modernism, surrealism, and politically polemical novels.

As a work of literary Decadence, *A Gothic Soul* strikes the reader as something of an oddity. In Karásek's novel there is an abundance of "gothic" trimmings (e.g., a gloomy mansion, sepulchral churches, dimly illuminated catafalques and paintings of saints, dismal rainy streets, a generally cloistered atmosphere) that originated as literary tropes of the "gothic" strain of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century. During his youth, the Troubled Man's flirtations with decadence consist of solitude, disgust with humanity, and a ceaseless wandering through the ancestral mansion. In gothic mold, he is "the last scion of a noble line" (note that the author himself, a lifelong employee of the postal service, added the spurious "ze Lvovic" to his name). Whenever he encounters an object that

fixes his gaze—a folded drape, a painting, a splash of light on an embroidered surface—he begins to sense the presence of the deceased who once inhabited his home. They deliver messages from the beyond, all of them admonitory or nihilistic. There is none of the self-exhibitionism, high-spirited countercultural wit and irony, japes at bourgeois life, and amoral or immoral behavior associated with the works (and sometimes the lives) of the heroes of the Decadent Movement, men like Huysmans, Wilde, and Beardsley. With respect to this broader array of the conceits of decadence, not only does the Troubled Man never engage in outrageous behavior, he hardly has a physical existence at all. The idea of plunging into a life of sin in which he might experience carnal pleasure at its fullest, to be followed ideally by rejection and repentance, occurs to him, but he does not have the heart or energy to pursue the idea. His stream of imagination is centered on a lifelong inner struggle of a truly religious nature, a contest between a deep desire to believe in an omnipotent and merciful God and an intellectual rejection of that in which he wishes to believe.

Suddenly, in the middle of the book there is a strange interlude in which the protagonist entertains ideas about "Czechness" and nationalism as a source of inspiration and a relief from his religious turmoil; it is another path back into life that he rejects. His paragon of Czechness is the fifteenth-century intellectual rebel Petr Chelčický, in whose motto "Do nothing, contest everything" he finds great wisdom. His misunderstanding here is patent. The first part of the motto speaks to Chelčický's pacificism and his urging his fellow men to not cooperate with the powers that be, the combined entity of church and state that, in its pursuit of power and prestige, brings suffering and misery to men. To challenge the authorities who dominate life, the second part of his message follows naturally. Chelčický's recommendation of the Gospels' depiction of Christ as the exemplar of living, which entails being of service to the poor, weak, and downtrodden, is hardly a "do-nothing" philosophy. The Troubled Man believes that Czechs have been so humbled by history that they are in fact a dead people, men and women who just go through the

motions. To him their current political struggle against oppression is pointless and false. Along with this he views Prague as nothing more than a tomb for these dead souls whose worldly aspirations must prove futile.

Weaving its way through the story—not really a narrative, but a relentless portrayal of a mind—is the desire of the Troubled Man for a singular friend, specifically a man whose thinking and sentiments replicate his own. He imagines such a life partner but does nothing practical to seek him out. This is the very muffled homoerotic theme that commentators on the book have pointed out, also noting that after World War I Karásek wrote openly about the need to change the negative public attitudes about homosexuality that prevailed in the First Czechoslovakian Republic. Another aspect of the book's oddity is the author's choice to write it in the third person, which has a distancing effect on the reader. This contrasts with the immediacy of stream-of-consciousness works embodied through a first-person narrator, made famous (and infamous in the eyes of Austro-Hungarian authorities) by Schnitzler's novella *Leutnant Gustl*. On the other hand it allows the narrator (a stand-in for the author) to create a kind of hypnotic, cumulative oversaturation of details as they are observed by the Troubled Man. Here is one of many examples: "Odors were in the carpets and sofa covers, in the scattered pillows, everywhere: odors not of the present, but of the past. A bluish twilight trickled into the chamber, seemingly filled with the dance of whirling dust by the window, above a groove of gleaming metal, spilling in as the curtains permitted, and further playing only in reflections. Deeper in the chamber there were only slumbering, blurred colors—the indistinct colorlessness of everything in a single hue." Cascades of sensory impressions adorn the dumb objects that surround him so that they acquire a rather florid, reliquary life projected into them by the mind of the Troubled Man. Although not written from within his mind, these descriptions are still mimetic of the way his mind works. The story of the Troubled Man who fails time and again in his series of feeble attempts to connect with the world ends with a burst of religious mania, followed by his

institutionalization and slow and somber death. By this time nothing in the world can capture his attention, and objects that once engrossed his mind by reflecting his fantasies become empty and dead. His struggle with his Maker seems finally resolved by resignation and belief.

Twisted Spoon Press, the book's publisher, has once again put out a compact, handsomely printed and bound work, with Symbolist-Decadent illustrations by Sascha Schneider. The translator, Kirsten Lodge, should be congratulated not only for her successful effort to bring the dense prose of a fairly obscure writer into highly readable English, but also for her notes on the novel and her brief biographical afterword. These put the book into a larger literary and social context and shed light on just what an odd variant of Decadence Karásek and his Czech peers have created. The most interesting thing for the English-language reader engaged by *A Gothic Soul* would be a translation of some of Karásek's nonfiction writing from the 1920s, which would presumably explain his methods and his goals.

Literature, Exile, Alterity The New York Group of Ukrainian Poets

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The so-called New York Group of Ukrainian poets has recently been the focus of several publications in Ukraine. Maria Rewakowicz edited one anthology of the group's writings, *Pivstolittia napivtyshi: Antolohiia poezii N'iu-Iorks'koi hrupy* (2005), and with Vasyl' Gabor coedited another, *N'iu-Iors'ka hrupa: Antolohiia poezii, prozy ta eseistky* (2012). Yet another notable volume was Ihor Kotyk's monograph on the New York Group member Yuriy Tarnawsky's poetry *Ekzystentsiyni vymir v poezi Iurii Tarnavs'koho* (2009). In *Literature, Exile, Alterity* Rewakowicz offers the first English-language monograph on the subject.