

**Where is a gently abandoned Christ looking? The Presence of the Sacred in Laszlo Krasznahorkai's *Seiobo There Below***  
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I

Although he has been writing novels and other prose work for 30 years, it is only in the last 10-15 years that the Hungarian novelist Laszlo Krasznahorkai's work has become well-known in the English-speaking world. This is due in part to the popularity of Bela Tarr's film versions of Krasznahorkai's novels *Satantango* and *The Melancholy of Existence*, but also and more to the point because of the powerful and rich and compelling style and content of Krasznahorkai's work. His novels take us into the souls and relationships of the broken and drab, the dirty and hurt and hopeful and misled, and set these characters in worlds at once recognisable and fantastic, everywhere confined and yet everywhere muddily dreamy, with doorways through which madness and escape equally beckon and are condemned to finally frustrate. Krasznahorkai's concerns, writ large, transcend the rural and provincial realms of Hungary where they first found expression, and more and more clearly have come to encompass the open question of human nature now: as one critic has phrased it, like Dostoevsky, Krasznahorkai is occupied with "the question leading toward the truthfulness of life" (Isenschmid 179); he is concerned with where we find ourselves now, in this time and this place, and how the question of the past plays into and deepens or diminishes the present. Construing Krasznahorkai's work as a kind of prosaic question about the "truthfulness of life" is apt: for a question begins somewhere—it has a ground, however dimly seen or understood—and opens up toward what is not yet known but what may prove decisive or determining. In a short essay entitled "About a Photographer," Krasznahorkai writes: "Something is constantly whispering to us that we have been abandoned in this awful vastness of which we have no knowledge but can only ponder with a wild, eternal surmise, a surmise full of longing [for] the possibility of discovering, once and for all, what the whole is like, that is if it exists at all" (11). This longing for the whole, if and however it exists, variously animates Krasznahorkai's prose, but he is not given to staying with abstract questions and struggling in the arena of philosophical musing; rather, the strong and steady great flow of his prose leads us into the quotidian as it embodies or confronts the great questions, and when it gestures toward the whole—toward what is meaningful, sacred, and perhaps salvific—it does so with a kind of reluctance, an unwillingness to reach too far beyond the human to find the gods. His novels stay consistently with the parts and registers of life that remain within the measure of the human, within what is available to the person in his own particular environment. In the same short essay, Krasznahorkai writes that "from our point of view, the sought-for whole cannot be separated from that which can be experienced [...] the whole, should it exist, has to be in the details, and [...] this is not an altogether hopeless place to start from" (12-13). The examination of the details of human experience, or what is near and may be touched by a person, is central to Krasznahorkai's novels, and this is particularly true in the case of his latest novel to be translated into English, *Seiobo There Below*. This novel takes its title from the Japanese goddess who condescends to the human world once per millennium and confers an immortal blessing,

and is an episodic work that depicts various experiences with the nearness of the divine and sacred—encounters that often trouble more than benefit the persons involved. It is a work about the possibility of the sacred being real for us, now and in time; here, the sacred retains its power and its presence, but is for the most part nearly inscrutable and often unintelligible; it affects the myopic—the spiritually partially-sighted—and it often devastates or, at least, occupies a devastated place. The novel concerns persons in time, in whom the (external) presence of the sacred inspires a measure of apprehension—a measure of the urge for apprehension—and this in turn depends on the endurance of the sacred in the world and the enduring in the world of the sacred by the persons involved. In the novel, comprehension is rare, but the beginning of the ongoing struggle of the process of comprehending has a place. The world depicted in *Seiobo There Below* is not (so much) the world bereft of gods—this has been done variously in Krasznahorkai's other work, particularly *Satantango*, and in different Modernist novels and poetry which claimed and projected the death of the gods—rather, the world of *Seiobo There Below* is one in which there is a slow, partial recognition and apprehension of the reality of “gods bereft of their world” (Sandor Radnoti's phrase); that is, the gods and the sacred are left alone in their truth, and the question of reality is shifted to here, now, and the possibility of human (personal) appropriation, participation, enaction, and realisation of what is sacred. We might ask: to what extent may the persons in Krasznahorkai's novel partake of the reality of the sacred they encounter?

To this end I will look briefly at two chapters of *Seiobo There Below*, both containing images with which we will be at least somewhat familiar. The first, titled “Where You'll Be Looking”, is about a museum guard at the Louvre and the statue of the Venus de Milo; the second, “Christo Morto”, is about a visitor to the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice and a painting of a dead Christ there. One encounter is marked by longevity and a multitude of people; the other is marked by brevity and is experienced in large solitude. The chapter “Where You'll Be Looking” is the story of the museum guard M. Chaivagne's patient and enraptured experience watching over the statue of the Venus de Milo as she is gawked at and photographed by groups of temporary admirers. Obsessed with her figure and story from morning to night—an obsession that is essentially a neurotic fixation—Chaivagne feels palpable anguish at the completely inappropriate “museum” space which the Venus occupies: by night he contemplates her mistaken beauty, surrounded by images of her on the walls of his flat, and by day he proves a willing evangelist to anyone who will stay and listen to his account of her origins and her involved and yet simple identity, or muses inwardly on her strange being-here-now. Krasznahorkai writes: “she, the Venus de Milo, in Chaivagne's opinion, did not belong here, more precisely, she did not belong here nor anywhere upon the earth, everything that she, the Venus de Milo meant, whatever it might be, originated from a heavenly realm that *no longer existed*, which had been pulverised by time, a moldering, annihilated universe that had disappeared for all eternity from the higher realm, because the higher realm had itself disappeared from the human world, and yet she remained here, this Venus from this higher realm remained here, left abandoned” and he “understood this abandonment to mean that she had lost her significance, and that all the same here she stood because that Yorgos dug her up, and that d'Urville had brought her here and that Ravaisson put her together and exhibited her,

and yet she *had no meaning*, the world had changed over the past two thousand years” (336-7). Krasznahorkai’s style is importantly—and not atypically—evident here: the long phrases without full stops, replete with heightened and even hyperbolic commentary and imagery and yet resting on none, “spoken through” the character and yet rendered with a level of articulation that we are uncertain the character may actually possess, in a tone at once comprehensive and yet at the same time so clearly lamenting its own boundaries and—at a certain level—inadequate enaction of that which it seeks to bring into life. The diction proceeds from registering a lack of belonging, to a felt and purported abandonment on the part of humans, to indicating the Venus de Milo’s unquestionable presence in this place. But her presence is complex and not of a piece: for as she is out of time—her own time, that is—her presence in the “now” of the museum is somehow unreal and impossible; and though her physical presence is indisputable—Chaivagne gives us her trajectory to her current resting place—her presence in this space seems ill-suited to her essence, far from the “heavenly realm” in which her meaning “originated.” She is physically near but metaphysically distant, and her material presence belies her estranged provenance. This is expressed beautifully and sadly in a passage where Chaivagne notes dully the uselessness of her divinity in this time and place, the consequence of which is her face turned somewhere else, and her being—her sacred truth—being located elsewhere, inaccessible. Chaivagne thinks: and there “the Louvre stands, and inside it is Venus, as she looks at an inexpressible, mysterious, distant point, she just stands there, they put her here or they put her there, and she just stands there, holding up her head proudly in that mysterious direction, and her beauty emanates, it emanates into nothingness, and no one understands, and no one feels what a grievous sight this is, a god that has lost its world, so enormous, immeasurably enormous—and yet she has nothing at all” (337)—not even the constant tourists, her obvious admirers, were able to actually apprehend and appreciate her, and so “...but no, nothing happened—and well, really, nothing happened even with him, nothing, the days came and went, the crowds flooded in every morning and flooded out every evening, he stood in the inner right-hand corner, observing the eyes and the face of Venus high above, but never where the eyes and the face were looking” (338).

This haunting image—the presence of a sacred being, but one whose face is turned away and whose eyes are looking elsewhere—is wonderfully echoed in the chapter “Christo Morto”—but in this chapter the echo resonates differently. “Christo Morto” is an account of the return visit of a certain man to the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, after an interlude of 11 years, to see again a small painting of Christ that had marked and stayed vibrantly with him since his first accidental visit. We come to understand that both the divine and the human coincide in this image of the dead Saviour, and yet despite this magnificence the sense surrounding the painting is one of neglect: the man notes that “it is not possible, inside [the gallery] there is a picture, a body of Christ, with the head bent to one side, a gentle *abandoned* Christ” (117)—a Christ, moreover, whose eyes seem to flutter open and fix themselves upon the man in a gripping way. This grip is not feeble; indeed, the man reflects that his earlier experience with this painting has proved to be more or less the basis for a renewed meaningfulness for his “whole life”—and yet it is an involved ground for meaning, one that has turned the man not into a follower of Christ but rather into one who seeks for the gaze of Christ

to alight on him once more. The stirring power of the presence of Christ in this image has a kind of parallel in the most famous of modern stories involving an image of the dead Christ: Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (II, iv). In the Russian novel, Prince Myshkin sees Holbein's painting of the dead Christ in his acquaintance Rogozhin's house and is deeply unsettled by it, remarking that one could lose one's faith by gazing at it for too long. Rogozhin agrees: the image of the lifeless, derelict body of Christ seems to disprove the vitality of God incarnate, the revelation on which Christian faith stands. The painting prompts a potential loss of faith, for if the finite and corruptible body exhausts the spirit, the Resurrection is denied by Nature, and all that remain are hopes and morals. Unlike the painting in Dostoevsky's novel, Krasznahorkai's dead Christ, in which the "hypostatic union between the divine and man's dual nature is untouched and untouchable" (Radnoti 190), holds the potential for salvific presence. But this is not how He is experienced. In the flickering eyes of Krasznahorkai's Christ, the man sees rather a reflection of sorrow, vast and unassuaged. He observes that "a dark obscurity lay in these eyes, and it seemed unbearable that this dark obscurity was emanating such an endless sadness, and not the sadness of one who suffers but of one who has suffered—but not even that; [the man] got up, and then leaned back in the chair; it is not a question here of suffering but only of sorrow, a sorrow impossible to grasp in its entirety, and entirely incomprehensible to him, an immeasurable sorrow, he looked into Christ's eyes and saw nothing else there, just this pure sorrow, as if it were a sorrow without cause, he froze at the thought of it, SORROW, JUST LIKE THAT, FOR EVERYTHING, for creation, for existence, for beings, for time, for suffering and for passion, for birth and destruction" (124-5). The countenance of the dead, living God enfolds the world, and yet it is the world as immense sorrow that Christ takes unto Himself—"as if it were a sorrow without cause" (Krasznahorkai nears Dostoevsky and Kafka with his use of "as if" in his prose)—for He too is a god bereft of a world—His world—but this bereavement is not spatial, and not even to do with place—it is profoundly temporal. Krasznahorkai writes: "for [the man] was ashamed that it had occurred like this, that here was Christ in the fullest and most horrible sense of the word—an orphan—and here is Christ REALLY AND TRULY, but no one needed him—*time had passed him by*, passed him by, and now He was saying farewell, for He was leaving this earth, he shuddered as he heard these sentences in his head, and oh my God what now, what horrible thoughts" (125). The "orphan" Christ opens His eyes onto a world that—unlike that of the Venus—ought to recognise Him, but doesn't ... and there is something strangely passive in this world: instead of time being a constituent aspect of the world, it seems to constitute the world, to be the active element that predominates in human beings and determines their presence—and it is this world to which Christ bids farewell, His world in time proceeding past what is real in a wretched by-passing of reality because of fear and innate preoccupation elsewhere. This Christ prompts no response of faith—neither loss nor gain—for the God-man manifested in this painting has become powerless in time—at least in general. The man observing Him, however, outside of time and beyond himself, finds himself caught up in this Christ—so much so that even as he understands himself to be leaving, to be in the process of "escape from Venice, [escape] back to where he came from, yes, he saw how he really set off down the familiar steps—only he didn't know that for him there would never be any exit from this building, not ever" (125)—for he has been drawn into this dead, living Christ who exists out of time—of necessity—and who lacks all appropriate recognition from the world

whose mission was His. In contrast to the Venus de Milo, who is outside of place due to the procession of time, the Christ in “Christo Morto” is out of place not because of time but despite time—needed, whole, “REALLY AND TRULY” there, His human counterpoint (in this chapter) cannot gather himself to attend to and make sense of this strange god in a small frame in a corner of the Scuola Grande. Christ is looking gently out onto a world with which He is out of joint; and instead of using power or miracles to convince of His existence, He bids farewell, and makes to depart in His essence.

The question of humans apprehending the sacred or the divine brings to mind Emmanuel Levinas’s great insight into the divine and persons: Levinas suggests that perhaps certain eras aren’t worthy of—or ready for—the advent of the divine. This question remains open in Krasznahorkai’s book, but there is one thing that is clear: rather than setting up a kind of religion of art (i.e., taking up a common thread in Western literature at least since the great Romantics), Krasznahorkai observes and depicts the question of the sacred by distilling it into one of the only forms in which it is still recognisable to a large number of people: works of art which express the sacred and partake of it somehow. In doing this, Krasznahorkai associates a positive experience of the sacred—what he calls in one place the “transcendental”—in tradition with a stance of “un-knowing, that is, of humility” (“Acropolis” 53)—a stance that has a ready openness rather than a drive for comprehension at its centre. He writes that “participation in a tradition [that partakes of the sacred] does not mean that the path to the comprehension of the transcendental [or sacred] will automatically open up as well” (“Acropolis” 54); that is why *Seiobo There Below* is phenomenological rather than exegetical—why Krasznahorkai depicts, rather than interprets, a chronotopic novelistic image of the often fraught confrontation of the sacred and the human. The sacred may prove near, but it is yet ineffable, despite its materiality. Krasznahorkai writes about the dimmed soul, wandering in the vast unknown, reaching out in vague surmise—and yet in *Seiobo There Below* he still gives us images of what the encounter with the sacred in tradition might be, if the appropriate comportment is assumed and the face turns in the right way. His novelistic worlds contain little hope, but through his diagnosis of our spiritual ills there shines a glimmer of what is and could be and this, as he says elsewhere, is “not an altogether hopeless position to begin from.”

## II

In *Seiobo There Below*, time is the most obvious troubling aspect of the relationship between humans and the sacred. Events in time become dissonant; time prompts rather than encompasses antinomic utterances, and aspects of temporal necessity prove the thick fence beyond which lies what may be real. Given that our sense of the world may echo some of the various worlds of *Seiobo There Below*, with their frequent mistaking of time, we ought to be wary of assuming too readily what is hope. For hope considered temporally, as an expectation or anticipation of something to come that will ease or justify the present, is often unuseful and always dangerous. It is not good enough to understand hope merely in this way—for hope in time leaves an abstract space between ‘one’s own’ and that which conditions one’s own (i.e., what is hoped)—and in this abstract space, as in the simple ornate wooden mask in *Seiobo There Below*, lurk demons who will ill for others.

To overcome anything abstract in hope, we may rather think of hope as a form of care. Care first for the self, as one ought to continue to live and love what is one's own, but also care from the self, as a directing outwards of the ongoing living and loving of what is present in one's own. These two acts are apart from selfishness; indeed, they may instead unconceal the extent and ethos of the self, which is the condition for the appropriate apprehension of what is real. And just as hope in time is grounded in abstraction, hope as care forgoes all abstraction—it is rather an in-gathering of what is near to the place of intimacy (one's own), and as this drawing near into intimacy denies the opportunity for abstract projection of one's self, hope transfigured into care become something gentle, a deep 'letting be' of what is—even as one engages with it and is augmented by it.

This model of hope as care helps us to understand why the sacred may not be properly apprehended or comprehended without tradition. For tradition takes the caring form of hope, and it is the way that the sacred is removed from an abstract register to the concrete world of prosaic life. One must be clear: as Krasznahorkai states, participation in a tradition is not enough to necessarily guarantee us the sacred—but, significantly, it is the only ground on which the sacred stands. The sacred and tradition do not mutually assure the presence of the other; but they are mutually necessary for the reality of the other, and cannot be figured disjoint. We see this as we strive within a tradition for an intuitive ethos of being present and drawing near. The cultivation of this ethos is what grants us openness to the sacred—so that when the goddess comes, we may be able to recognise her and be blessed.

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