

The First Man among the Ruins. On A Novel of London by Miloš Crnjanski

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Abstract. Born under the Habsburg Empire in 1893, Miloš Crnjanski entered diplomacy after fighting in World War I on the Galician-Russian and Italian fronts. In 1940, having obtained various posts in Portugal, Germany, and Italy, he decided to prolong his exile in England. He returned to Belgrade, despite his aversion to communism, in 1965. Then, from 1972 to 30 November 1977, the day he died a slow and voluntary death, he would write no more. Almost all of Crnjanski's mature work was conceived and written as an expatriate in a foreign country, on the fringes of the Yugoslavian political and literary debate, on the fringes of English literary society, and even on the fringes of the Serbian community in London itself. Probably because of this, his posthumous glory never reached that of his great compatriot Ivo Andrić, who won the Nobel Prize in 1961. For Crnjanski and his wife Vida, the years in England were lightless. His last novel, *A Novel of London* (2020 [1971]), recounts this absence of light.

Keywords: England, Habsburg Empire, World War I, Communism, Serbia.

Abstract. Nato sotto l'Impero asburgico nel 1893, Miloš Crnjanski entrò in diplomazia dopo aver combattuto nella Prima guerra mondiale sul fronte galiziano-russo e italiano. Nel 1940, dopo aver ottenuto vari incarichi in Portogallo, Germania e Italia, decise di prolungare il suo esilio in Inghilterra. Tornò a Belgrado, nonostante la sua avversione al comunismo, nel 1965. Poi, dal 1972 al 30 novembre 1977, giorno della sua morte lenta e volontaria, non scriverà più. Quasi tutta l'opera matura di Crnjanski è stata concepita e scritta da espatriato in un Paese straniero, ai margini del dibattito politico e letterario jugoslavo, ai margini della società letteraria inglese e persino ai margini della stessa comunità serba di Londra. Probabilmente per questo motivo, la sua gloria postuma non ha mai raggiunto quella del suo grande connazionale Ivo Andrić, che vinse il Premio Nobel nel 1961. Per Crnjanski e sua moglie Vida, gli anni in Inghilterra furono senza luce. Il suo ultimo romanzo, *Romanzo di Londra* (2020 [1971]), racconta questa assenza di luce.

Parole chiave: Inghilterra, Impero asburgico, Prima guerra mondiale, Comunismo, Serbia.

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Born under the Habsburg Empire in 1893, Miloš Crnjanski entered diplomacy after fighting in World War I on the Galician-Russian and Italian fronts (on Miloš Crnjanski, see Mihailovich, 1995; Norris, 1988; Neubauer & Török, 2009; Raicevic, 2010, pp. 109-119; Savić, 2014, pp. 1-4; Cox, 2017, pp. 25-40; Hamović, 2022, pp. 1-10). In 1940, having obtained various posts in Portugal, Germany and Italy, he decided to prolong his exile in England. He returned to Belgrade, despite his aversion to communism, in 1965. Then, from 1972 to 30 November 1977, the day he died a slow and voluntary death, he would write no more. Almost all of Crnjanski's mature work was conceived and written as an expatriate in a foreign country, on the fringes of the Yugoslavian political and literary debate, on the fringes of English literary society and even on the fringes of the Serbian community in London itself. Probably because of this, his posthumous glory never reached that of his great compatriot Ivo Andrić, who won the Nobel Prize in 1961. For Crnjanski and his wife Vida, the years in England were lightless. His last novel, *A Novel of London* (2020 [1971]), recounts this absence of light (on Crnjanski's novels, see Norris, 1989, 1990).

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Poverty, frustration, and nostalgia are the goddesses that visit the tiny flat in Mill Hill, on the outskirts of London, where the main characters live: Prince Nikolai Rodionovič Repnin and his wife, Nadja. Having fled Russia in the aftermath of the October Revolution and civil war, they arrive, after years of vicissitudes across Europe (Athens, Lisbon, Milano, Prague, Paris), in London, still devastated by World War II. Here, the couple lives in hardship. Both struggle to save the other from the shipwreck. Repnin, despite his pride, his knowledge of languages and his culture, struggles through a thousand difficulties: clerk in a shoe shop, trainee in a bookshop, helper in a horse riding stables. While Nadja goes around London selling dolls made by herself.

The way the two understand this salvation is different. Constantly absorbed by the memory of his lost homeland, Repnin harbors no illusions, contemplates suicide, and wants to convince his wife to join an aunt in America. As for Nadja, younger and more cheerful than Repnin, she desperately tries to distract her husband from his suicidal thoughts. A holiday in Cornwall does not have the desired outcome. Repnin will juggle to the last between people attracted by his exotic charm and those politicians, philanthropists and charitable noblewomen who would like to save him. After Nadja leaves for the US, Repnin slides towards the irreparable. He has as an imaginary interlocutor an old comrade-in-arms who died by suicide; he swears against Napoleon and, at the end of his lonely days, leafs through a picture book about St Petersburg: “the last joy of his life.”

3

With *Migrations* (1998 [1929, 1962]) and *A Novel of London*, scholars have pointed out that Crnjanski represented, as perhaps no other European writer did, the eternal drama of exile (See Moravcevič, 1978, pp. 369-379; Lazarevič, 2006, pp. 121-129; Zorić, 2016; and Asimopoulos, 2018, pp. 9-28).

In the *A Novel of London*, Repnin the exile, the refugee, the émigré, is, above all, a *displaced person*, a person who is *moved*, who is supposed to be ‘replaced’, and who is consequently asked to make the sacrifice of adapting to a different way of life, language, and habits. Is this not what society demands of an exile? Be man enough not to be what you were before! Society asks him, after all, to commit suicide, an act that Repnin, unable to become another person, performs at the end of the novel. However, before committing suicide, Repnin leaves behind a testament that the reader finds scattered in Repnin’s daily accounts of wandering through the slums of London. In *A Novel of London*, there is a relentless description of what individual existence left in the ruins of war to keep up with the times, to become a monad open to the constant sirens of progress.

Here are a few examples.

The second chapter, “On the hill of windmills”, discusses death. Mr Green, a neighbour of Repnin and Nadja, visits the couple. As a clerk at the funeral parlour, he offers Repnin to pay in advance for his funeral, including the cremation. According to Mr Green, every good husband and English citizen must discharge the spouse from certain obligations in advance. Repnin, who always thinks of suicide, refuses with a shrug. Mr Green continues to greet him every day: “Hello!”

The third chapter, “Much ado about nothing”, discusses paedophilia. Repnin has a good relationship with children. Repnin thinks that because they understand better than their parents how to speak English. One day, he hugs a child in the park and offers him candy. An older woman nearby, seeing the scene, rushes up to him and orders him to leave. What are you doing? This child does not know you. Nevertheless, “kindness”, is an act that the English demand from everyone. Always.

The fourth chapter, “Buried alive”, has several themes. The first is loyalty. The day is over and Repnin and Nadja talk, tired, about their day. Why are the British, Nadja asks, who seem so loyal to

their wives, not so loyal to their allies in the war? Repnin replies: By now, only primitive peoples respect officers; civilized peoples like the British only respect money. Besides, it is not even true that they are so faithful to their wives. In London, they say that all prostitutes are French. The English cannot believe that there are English girls who sell themselves for a few pounds. According to Repnin, English society is now one big company: they do not mix. Suppose they belong to the same bank or company. In that case, they prefer to cuckold each other in some little hotel in Paris: their proverbial puritan loyalty only makes them more false and violent.

The second topic of the chapter is culture as something that could be more serious. Nadja tries to convince her husband to publish one of his books on hunting in Siberia, specifically an ethnographic study. Repnin has no illusions. He has tried several times to publish but knows that in London, “spinsters, ministers and general daughters write”. Some publishing houses proposed Repnin, the new job of “ghostwriter”.

The third is education. Repnin asks a locksmith for work. The locksmith replies that he can only hire him because Repnin has to enroll in a locksmith course. But first, he has to be hired by a locksmith to take the course.

Chapter five: *A boat in Versailles*. The theme is the power of mass media. One evening, Nadja and Repnin wanted to relax by listening to an opera. They search for an Italian radio station to listen to it. After a while, they find a radio station with some music. Suddenly there is a connection from the UN headquarters. It is Mrs. Roosevelt. She is declaiming human rights: personal freedom, freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom of gain. Repnin, having heard this last freedom, lashes out with all his might at the apparatus, which changes the radio station. It transmits an opera from La Scala in Milan.

Chapter sixteen, “Sex is the basis for everything,” discusses sexual emancipation. Repnin is now working as a salesman in a shoe shop. He sits on a park bench during lunch to watch the pelicans in the pond. A young nurse, who works in a clinic for the blind, approaches him. She speaks to him, saying that she is divorcing. Since the war ended, men are no longer the same. On the other hand, the blinds are full of life’s joy. This causes her several problems. “Sex is the basis for everything, isn’t it?”. Repnin is “stunned for the girl’s way of being, youth, stature, unashamedly cheerful and sensual laughter.” That same day, after finishing work, Repnin waits in the shoe shop for Nadja, who returns late from her walk around the city. He does not know what to do. He starts leafing through some women’s magazines. There are advertisements for widows asking to share their flats. Others are willing to receive paying guests. Then, pictures of beautiful girls attract him; they are all wives of duchesses or commanders. He reads an interview with a singer, a teenager Londoners idle. A committee of scholars, doctors, canons and old ladies asks the singer what he thinks about sex. At the age of twenty-two, he still has not practiced it. “He believes in the beauty of love.” Repnin, after his encounter in the park with the young nurse, does not know what to think. “*C’est drôle l’Angleterre*”. A few pages later, the author dwells on a married couple: a young woman of hypnotic beauty and a toothless, bald older adult with huge ears. Repnin laughingly asks: “is sex the basis of everything in this case too?”. Immediately afterwards, Repnin switches to images of a social event. The heir to a lord, already divorced and with four children, is about to marry a young model with a perfect body. Unfortunately, the model, Repnin reads in the article, was, until recently, a man. The operation, it seems, took place in Casablanca. Repnin concludes that everything can turn into everything, not only in nature but also in human life; that a prince can turn into a shoemaker’s clerk and an artisan’s son into a model; that if it is to be considered, everything must be shown, like the shoes in the window of the shop where he works; that London, the world, is all display; that the collapse of modesty, discretion, eroticism and ownership of our bodies, of which all those people photographed seem to be so proud, is a purely commercial fact.

4

Disoriented in the post-World War II London metropolis, Reprin, haunted by his demise, watches the multitudes busy as ants make sense of their going. Reprin observes people in an Adamic spirit. The spirit of an ironic, polemical, sometimes sarcastic Adam, guilty of having known his Eden and, for this reason, able to fathom the new world offered to him as if he were the first man to set foot in it. "None of these people go where they want", Reprin repeats. This continuous movement is the only law he bitterly conforms to as a displaced person. Despite his disgrace, or perhaps because of it, Reprin looks at society in the second half of the 20th century with wonder. A society in which the frontiers between public and private, work and entertainment, culture and advertising are about to be destroyed forever; a society in which orders and commandments are no longer necessary to attract the endless mass of disillusioned people that London, like a giant magnet, holds back every day. Because Reprin cannot betray his noble roots, his feeling for his homeland, the friendship of his old comrades, and his sense of honour, he cannot stop committing the original sin of remembering. Reprin wishes to remain himself. To do so, he must remain in the past. Reprin wishes to remain himself, but by observing, a society that is making the Change a religion while it is still filled with the ruins of war. As if from the ruins of war, a man constantly at war against time was born. Reprin seems impatient to start to rebuild but even more inclined not to look back. Nothing nor no one can define him, and he seems eternally condemned to rebuild not on ruins but on their absence. Although free to go wherever he wants, he is a "displaced person" who cannot go where he wants but knows where he comes from. Liberal society, consequently, does not find it useful for its functioning. The liberal society in which Reprin lives seems to be a society in which the difference between freedom and liberation disappears forever. This seducing and capturing society determines millions of people's destinies, desires and pleasures in advance. It is not only for the love of his wife Nadja that Reprin kills himself. Not even to free it from him, who feels he is a burden. The burden of being stuck at the lowest level of the social ladder. Reprin realized that the only way to be free is to shut himself up in his past. From this vanished past but which Reprin impersonates with authority, announces to us, the readers of the 21st century, a wish and a warning: Take a step back!

5

A Novel of London is a vast work divided into two books and divided into many chapters whose titles each refer to an element of the story. It may be, as in "On the Hill of Windmills," a place, Mill Hill, where Reprin and Nadja live and where once, as the name indicates, there were mills. Of the same type are "Meliboun" - a name that traces the English pronunciation of Marylebone, a London Underground station - or "A hotel called Crimea", where Reprin spends his holidays in Cornwall. Otherwise, as in "The Evening Hat on the Head," it is an object: an old top hat that Reprin wears one evening, nostalgic, looking at himself in the mirror. Alternatively, the title refers to a phrase in "They say goodbye to their dog," which Reprin, exasperated by hypocritical English politeness, utters after visiting the dog cemetery in Hyde Park. The title can also refer to the name of a character, as in "Mustafa" and "Mrs Peters-Petreev," or to a gesture, as in "Buttoned up to the neck." For instance, in this chapter of the second book, Reprin, after the separation from Nadja, sees a mother buttoning her daughter's little coat. The gesture reminds him of his wife when, every morning before he left the house, she would button his jacket and coat in the same way while smiling at him. The question is: what do these titles mean? They do not determine the thematic core of the chapters, and the actions always occur episodically, as rapid series of situations, encounters, dialogues, and reflective digressions that often can be found even far apart in the novel. However, these titles reflect something: the existence of randomness, this faithful ally of the novel since picaresque and Cervantine times. Aware that "nobody goes where they want," and astounded that all those white and blue collars accept it, who is Reprin if not a wandering picaroon in the great London metropolis?

6

A “strange metamorphosis” took place in Repnin. The novel’s narrator, a kind of Virgil who accompanies, in silence, sometimes in dialogue, the pilgrim’s journey through the circles of this hellish city, is aware of this metamorphosis since the first chapter (and the title of the last chapter is “The Styx”). “Metamorphosis” is also the title of one of the chapters in the first book, but strangely enough, not the one in which this ‘metamorphosis’ actually takes place. This happens because randomness always decides. Repnin’s metamorphosis consists of explicitly accepting the randomness as its polar star.

7

In another of the first chapters of the first book, entitled “The Chimney Sweep”, Repnin presents himself for the umpteenth time to the Ministry of Labour seeking employment. In the waiting room, there is a wide-open window. Attracted by the void, Repnin is tempted to commit suicide. A few minutes later, Repnin speaks to a plainclothes major in the employment office. Having learned Repnin’s nationality, the major begins a lengthy linguistic dispute. The major is especially interested in understanding how the “consonant r” can “also be a vowel” in Russian. Job hunting takes a back seat. Once the controversy is over, Repnin hears voices: first Nadja’s, immediately afterwards that of an admiral he had known during the war years. A few moments later, to escape the acoustic hallucinations, he immerses himself in reading a long list of vacancies. In Birmingham, for example, they are looking for a barber. In Reading a chimney sweep. At this point, he starts shouting, “What a strange metamorphosis!”. Reading remains etched in his memory. Ah, of course! His father, as an Anglophile, had entrusted him to a governess to learn English. He had to read, repeat and memorize some words twice a week. He remembers a “young hanged man,” soldier of the “Irish Guard,” in his “red uniform.” Only much later did Repnin learn that those words were lines from Oscar Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Thus, Reading has been in his memory since childhood. Is this a coincidence? Or does this mean that the past and the present have a “mysterious relation”? Yesterday a poet sang about a hanged soldier; today, Repnin, in that same town, would like to be a chimney sweep. What a “strange proximity”. Does this mean that Reading was inscribed in his destiny? But no, that’s impossible: St. Petersburg, his childhood, his governess, and his father have all disappeared. The narrator says: “Everything changes, but he is incapable of change, not even enough to be hired as a chimney sweep in Reading”. Repnin, “the hero of our novel”, as the narrator often calls him, is not an epic hero: he has no destiny. Or, at least, the epic phase of his existence has long since ended. Repnin, ‘the hero of our novel’ as the narrator often calls him, is not an epic hero: he has no destiny. Or, at least, the epic phase of his existence has long since ended. That is since he left his burning homeland from the Crimean port of Kerč’. And Nadja, his great love? He has always loved her, but he has decided to drive her away from him to commit suicide, although these two events occur at the end of the novel. And Nadja, his great love? Chance will determine this. Chance, of which Repnin has become an adopted son. Faithful to his whims.

Repnin’s “strange metamorphosis”, the man who is “unable to change” while everything around him changes, represents his refusal to transform himself into that individual, as terribly kind as he is indifferent to others, whom he sees disciplined in the streets and subways of London every day. Once the “strange metamorphosis” took place, Repnin stopped caring about what he does, whom he meets, and the places he goes. However, this does not mean that everything has become alien to him. Although he remains embedded like a medallion bearing the effigy of his hated Napoleon on the wall, he stops living in the past. In other words, Repnin turned into *the man of the past*, making his past a

privileged observatory. Sadness has turned into openness to the infinite variety - crazy, phantasmagorical, ridiculous, unfair - of what surrounds him. The narrator says: "There is nothing left in the world to sadden him. If he walks around London like this, it is only to see it, hear it, auscultate it." That is why he can explore, like an Adam among the ruins or a curious picaro open to every adventure, the *unknown land* of his present.

Post scriptum

The exile often has only one face: the epic-nostalgic one.

No one should be forced to live and die in a foreign country; the novel's protagonist says it is not "logical." At more than fifty years of age, what is logical about finding oneself working in the basement of a cobbler's shop and living in a London "dormitory" after being raised as a prince in a Russia erased from history? Nothing, of course. However, as the narrator states, since the first chapter, this is not only the story of Repnin, Nadja and all the Russian refugees who came here before and during WWII. It is, above all, the "novel of London"; it is the novel "of that immense city whose embrace has been deadly for so many men and women" who ask, "Where is happiness?". In the novel, the answer to this question is always the same: everything would have turned out for the best if Repnin and, with him, all the other displaced persons, had turned into an Englishman, into a democratic and liberal person, into an adaptable, replaceable individual, able to conform to any change. In other words, in a "useful" person. Hence, the "strange metamorphosis" of the exile and his ironic and fictional gaze. Hence another question, which Repnin asks incessantly from the beginning to the end of the novel and which no one can answer: who can tell another person what in human life makes sense and what does not?

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