JANKO POLIĆ KAMOV

(Rijeka, 17 November 1886 – Barcelona, 8 August 1910), Croatian poet, narrator and playwright.

Croatian Modernism

Janko Polić Kamov is a Croatian writer who belongs to the period of Croatian Modernism (through the 19th and 20th century). Modernism includes stylistic features of impressionism, art nouveau, decadentism, symbolism, realism, naturalism and neoromanticism. Writers are focused on their inner self and want to express the unfathomable, subconscious and unexplored. Common features are resistance for tradition, inclusion in middle-european cultural and literal circles, critical mind and freedom of artistic creating.

CV and his work

He was born in a respectable and wealthy family. His father Ante was from the island of Hvar (of a Politeo family from Stari Grad) who moved to Senj, where he earned his commercial training. Then he moved to Rijeka. He was working in commerce.

Janko Polić Kamov finished his primary school and grammar school in Sušak (one of the most famous Croatian high schools). In 1902, the family moved to Zagreb where he continued his schooling. He never finished grammar school.

Janko`s father had a rich home library so Janko had a chance to read the most famous Croatian and world literature from the early age.

After his formal education he lived an unconventional, bohemian life.

In 1904, he suddenly disappeared with travelling companions and travelled to Dalmatia, Bosnia, Montenegro and Slavonia. In the companionship he was a whisperer and supporting actor, and on the tour his bohemian lifestyle ruined his health.

In 1905, he went back to Zagreb where he started his own literary work (he wrote *Psovka, Ištipana* *hartija, Na rođenoj grudi and Tragedija mozgova*). That year he also started writing for the magazine *Pokret,* which he continued until his death.

The same year he also started travelling abroad. First in Venice, where he visited his brother Milutin, recognized and genius musician, who attended the vocal academy. Then Janko continued visiting theaters and libraries. He takes a pseudonym Kamov, a name taken from the Bible`s story about Noah and his sons. (Noah`s son Ham saw his father naked and told his brothers to cover him up. Noah woke up and cursed Hamov`s son Canaan to eternal slavery.)

In 1907, he spent some time in Rome, Torino, Geneva, Firenza and Marseille. He was delighted with foreign culture in general: with opera and concerts in Marseille and the gallery in Trieste. He wrote a drama *Čovječanstvo* and studied psychology and sociology. He suffered from diseases in lungs, eyes and fingers.

In 1909, he spent some time in hospital in Zagreb. A year later he finished *Mamino srce* and travelled through Geneva to Marseille and Barcelona. Spain attracted him with industry, commerce, political life, cultural pluralism, contrasts, riots and mass movements, and Barcelona with painting and traditional literature. On the 10 of August, he wrote to his brother that he suffers from gastro-intestinale, and nine days later he died in a hospital Santa Cruz in Barcelona, where he was buried in a nameless hospital graveyard.

***“…constricted was my lifetime, and so magnificent my soul.”*** *(J. P. Kamov, Ice Harlotry)*

Janko Polic Kamov, The Beard (Brada)

Summary of "The Beard"

The novel starts with the fact that the writer shaved his beard. Everybody considered him older than he actually was, serious and old looking and that he must be a painter or a professor. Girls did not pay much attention to him . He travelled widely, spoke very little and read always. He never joked.

After he shaved his beard, he was relieved. He decided to turn to his studies. In a train he met a girl whom he immediately liked. After a while, they separated. He found a flat and fell in love with the owner’s four daughters. Shortly after he ran out of money and was abandoned by everyone. He considered that his identity depended on a shaved or unshaved beard.

The beard was the essence of his life.

“ I shaved my beard. You see, I used to have this thick, pointed, reddish beard. Why did I have it? That is a question of great importance and interest! The human soul is most touched by those trivial things that play an important role only in their lives of the great and make them more interesting than their work. Our soul is not economy and science. It is literature , for it is very elastic, random, eccentric, original. Someone might have lived quietly , honestly and decently for years and years; suddenly he looses his temper and kills; or looses his temper and rapes; or looses his temper and robs.

Nowhere are miracles, coincidences and religion as obvious as in crime ; nowhere is the invisible spirit as visible as in murder, drunkenness and sexual excess. To wit, the divine and spiritual always enter where our soul wants to protest against modern society or to express its intimate , insentient, animal instincts. Ignorant apostles learned several languages overnight, the legend says; our young talent committed suicide overnight states the chronicle. One single holy ghost entered all those souls and brought the closer to the deity that evokes all who cannot find their way and settle down in our social order. The faith in a moral being that is above humans- that faith is the same in believers and in anarchists. Moreover, Christ spoke of a God above us and within us and vindicates the anarchy of the past and of the future. A student spoke perfect German when he got drunk, and he had gotten drunk out of despair and sadness for getting an F – in German.

Thus an older man threatened all his life to kill his neighbor and – naturally – he didn`t kill him; whereas the neighbor always expressed only good wishes for his enemy, and then one night set his house on fire... The dog that barks won`t bite, because he is barking and because the nature of humans and animals is similar in contradictions, absurdities and miracles.

So I too finally shaved my beard. Hitherto I was a very serious, hard-working, decent man. I lived for science and had no need for binges, pastimes or love-affair. „You are surely at least 30“, people used to tell me, „you look so serious and mature. “ I was just 20. „You must be a painter“, others said. I didn`t know the first thing about painting. Generally, they thought that I was something I wasn`t and that I was older than I was. Girls didn`t see me as a potential „boy-friend“. None of them thirsted for my lips, sought my company, thought of my embraces. One time I took my little nephew for a walk, and everyone thought he was my son. Another time I went shopping with my 40-year old aunt, and the grocer say: „Oh, so that`s your wife. “

In a word: girls didn`t exactly fight for my favors, I had my peace. I wasn`t expected to return looks on the promenade, to follow flowing skirts at night, to buy the barmaid a drink with such ulterior motives. So I live and studied; I received no sexual stimuli from the world, for – I didn`t turn them on and they didn`t turn me on.

But even thought I didn`t turn on and wasn`t turned on, I provoked just the same. Skinny, tall, with a long, dry beard, semi-scornful and dry lips, a hunched and learned bearing, a long nose on which glasses wearily rested – I could not pass unnoticed. Strange man, they whispered, and naughty young people of both sexes exclaimed, nudging each other: „What a monster! “ One girl had actually screamed when she suddenly ran into me, and the other, next to her, laughed out loud. The others, when I stared at them, turned their backs. My aunt begged me every day to shave my beard; everyone turned to look at me on the street and in public places, as a new guest, I could neither sit down nor have a cup of coffee. So, strictly speaking, I didn`t really live in peace. But the fact that I had such a conspicuous position worthy of smiles, nudged and malicious comments caused me to gain inner peace while loosing my peace in the streets. “Among people I am funny, but what use do I have for people? I make my living and my work, I live for myself and my work.” A logical, convinced and icy misanthropy developed in my feelings which simply could not flow, surge and spill youthfully, nobly and warmly among people. It suited me, i.e. my beard, to stand aside from the street conversations of the young, to take patriotic declamations and statements with a scornful, pitying smile and to pass disinterestedly by the street adventures of dogs, high-school girls, cats and students. (…)

I linked those two images- serious and funny- myself, and hence my misanthropy turned to cynicism. I grew even more cold and scornful. I would stand in the street and watch the masses bow, pass by dandily, and I was most repulsed by neat, beautiful, elegant people. “It’s all moisturizer, lipstick and perfume for our noses, lipstick for our eyes and moisturizer for out touch…” I disliked young men most; I connected love with youth, stupidity and clipped mustaches. Flirting reminded me of a caricature of monkeys, love was a caricature of flirting, and parties, walks and dances caricatures of caricatures. On the contrary, I came to like bearded people and when I met one of them , I grew all soft and sentimental, as if I had found a kindred and noble spirit. No. I was not normal. I knew that girls didn’t see me as a twenty year old because of my glasses, my beard and my serious lifestyle. When the looked at me from affair, they smiled wantonly and insentiently. But if I came closer and started a conversation , the wantonness turned to depression, and the insentience to- fright. From affair, I struck them as funny; from close up- I seemed strict; in other words, I made the same impression as a professor makes on a student!

Didn’t I ,because of that, almost rape a girl, beating her because she laughed at me; and become attracted to boys? One paradox was obvious: if I hadn’t had the beard, with my long face and nose, my solemn gaze, I would look like a Jesuit.

But I was fed up with everything, I turned to my studies and wanted absolute peace. It wasn’t in my best interest to provoke strangers: someone would ridicule me, I’d respond and get a beating.

For that reason and no other, I shaved my beard. I was overcome by a strange feeling. I touched my chin and it seemed unusually tender, small and childish. I looked at myself in the mirror, I exclaimed, got confused, paid the barber and ran home. Everyone rejoiced. My mother kissed me like a lost son; my aunt`s eyes came to life and she embraced me without thinking, and my little niece clapped her hands, blushed and ran away yelling. I immediately felt lighter; I straightened up; I went walking in the streets, looked at the passers-by and seeing girls smiling, I became wanton, merry, childish. I had succumbed even to my mother`s kiss like a baby, to my aunt`s embrace like a little boy, to the gazes of the girls like a young man. These gazes couldn`t possibly express scorn now; I felt it, I knew it. Thus I passed the day wondering around the streets and coffeehouses. Moreover, I suddenly felt the need and desire for kisses, as if my mother`s and my aunt`s kiss and my little niece`s joyful leap had sent me back to boyhood, when all pranks are forgiven and condemned with the same mildness, the waving of a finer and benevolence. Now I looked younger than I was; somebody said “like a high-school student!” I looked at a photograph from elementary school, and the same spoilt, malicious expression dug itself into the corners of my mouth. I remembered my first love from kindergarten – a slight, slender little girl with a button nose and one lip curved over the other. I had even kissed her, and she had cried and bashfully dug her face in her skirt which only reached to her knees. My little niece ran away today and I saw the same expression in her eyes, burning over her full cheeks. I began to notice all the these colors and shapes of youth with gusto. I broke from my aunt`s and mother`s embrace totally confused and excited. I had experienced the same feeling of being lost, of luxurious resignation six years ago when a woman in a bar had embraced, kissed and tickled me with expressedly intimate intentions. And I walked out of the barber-shop and my home with the same satisfied, light gait, as if, loosing my virginity, I had gained the same thing I gained today by shaving my beard.”

(translated by Ljiljana Šćurić)

Rijeka/Zagreb, 1997.

THEMES OF THE NOVEL „BRADA“:

* the position of the individual in the world
* „mask“ – a beard as a protection against the world, against the callousness of the environment
* when the „mask“ falls it reveals the bare man – vulnerable, thirsty for love
* a great dilemma is whether to live behind a „mask“, protected and isolated or to take a risk, live a transparent life and deal with the consequences.

Interesting facts about Kamov:

* his works were printed in all famous magazines in America, such as ‘’Grand Street’’ (New York), ’’Partisan Review’’ (Boston), ’’Corner’’ (Oakland),
* he is mentioned in American history of Hispanics vanguard,
* Kamov's works were translated to English, Spanish, Italian, Catalan and German language
* the book *Selected Short Stories and Poems* by Mladen Urem can be found in all libraries in Barcelona (there are more than 70)
* in 1998, the Ministry of Culture in Spain decided to support the printing of his work in Spanish (Madrid) and Catalan (Barcelona)
* in 2000, a large Internet survey in America examined a few thousand publishers and more than 300 universities chose Kamov as one of 300 most underestimated people of the millennium
* a replica of his statue is placed in the park of the Hospital de la Santa Creu and Sant Pau in Barcelona. It’s a replica of a sculpture that has been in Rijeka since 2000; the sculpture in Barcelona was a gift from the town Rijeka, because the writer spent his last years living in Barcelona.