Miroslav Krleža

The Banquet in Blitva

Banket u Blitvi

Presented by: Zrinka Božić

Miroslav Krleža's *The Banquet in Blitva* (*Banket u Blitvi*), written between 1935 and 1964 and ultimately published in three volumes, occupies a distinctive position within his oeuvre. First announced in 1935 alongside *Europe Today* (*Evropa danas*) and *The Book of Prose*(*Knjiga proze*) as part of the *Library of Current Books*, the novel had a long and complex publication history. While only *Europe Today* appeared that year, *The Banquet in Blitva* was announced again in 1938 as a "social novel in two books" and as a jubilee edition marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of Krleža's literary career. The first volume was published in 1938 and the second in 1939, both bearing the designation "a novel in three books". Although conceived as a three-volume work from the outset, the third volume remained unpublished until 1962, when it appeared in two issues of *Forum*, before being incorporated into the complete edition of 1964 together with numerous revisions and additions made by the author in December 1962 and January 1963 (Flaker).

The novel is therefore marked by several historical moments at once. Conceived, as Krleža himself noted, "in the time of the attack on Ethiopia, the Spanish Revolution and Munich (1935–38–39)", and shaped by allusions to the political circumstances of royal Yugoslavia, it was completed in a Europe transformed by the Second World War and by the emergence of new forms of totalitarianism in both Eastern and Western Europe (Flaker). The long process of composition and revision profoundly altered the horizon of the novel. What may initially have been envisaged as a political intervention into the crises of the 1930s gradually developed into a broader reflection on dictatorship, ideology, intellectual responsibility, and the historical experience of twentieth-century Europe.

Krleža characterised *The Banquet in Blitva* as a "melancholically orchestrated variation on a political theme", a "symbolic vision of European political reality", and "an attempt at a political pamphlet" in which "political, moral and aesthetic tyrannies" are elevated to the level of symbols, while the protagonists are presented as embodiments of particular political, moral, and intellectual programmes and world views (Flaker). Such remarks have strongly influenced the novel's critical reception. From its earliest readings, *The Banquet in Blitva* has been defined as a political novel. Yet the novel continually exceeds the limits of that designation. The historical allusions that may have appeared transparent to readers in the late 1930s gradually widened their semantic field, transforming a text initially rooted in a recognisable political context into a broader meditation on power, ideology, and the fate of the intellectual in history (Flaker).

The action unfolds in the fictional states of Blitva and Blatvia, situated somewhere between the Baltic and the Adriatic. Although critics have repeatedly sought concrete historical referents behind this imaginary geography, the significance of the novel lies precisely in the impossibility of reducing it to a single political reality. Blitva may evoke interwar Poland, Yugoslavia, Lithuania, Romania,

Hungary, Bulgaria, or several of these simultaneously (Możejko 28). Rather than disguising an existing state, Krleža's imaginary geography condenses diverse political experiences into a symbolic configuration. As a result, the novel offers what Edward Możejko describes as "a splendid analysis of dictatorial systems in general" (28). *The Banquet in Blitva* may therefore be understood as a novel of imaginary time and imaginary space which draws upon the experience of the historical novel while synchronising different historical periods and political realities within a single symbolic structure (Flaker).

The novel opens with *A Form of Prologue or Sentimental Variations on the Blitvinian Question through the Ages*, a chapter that simultaneously presents the history of Blitva, establishes its political mythology, and introduces the principal antagonism around which the narrative is organised. The narrator describes the emergence of the new state in unmistakably ironic terms: "Thirty European nations slaughtered one another for four years, and out of this bloodletting emerged Blitva, like a child's tin rattle with the inscription *Blithuania Restituta*" (Krleža I 3).

The plot proper begins with *An Open Letter from Dr Nielsen to Colonel Barutanski* and the exposition of its two central figures: Colonel Kristian Barutanski, commander and dictator of Blitva, and Dr Niels Nielsen, a "neurotic, European-educated intellectual" (Krleža I 13) who emerges as his principal adversary. Their opposition structures the entire narrative. Yet what is at stake is not merely political conflict itself, but the relationship between power and conscience, ideology and historical experience, political action and intellectual reflection.

At first sight, *The Banquet in Blitva* appears to be a novel about dictatorship and resistance. Yet Nielsen is neither a revolutionary hero nor the bearer of a coherent political alternative. Like many protagonists of Krleža's interwar fiction, he remains trapped within the contradictions of his own intellectual and social position. Although he recognises the mechanisms of violence, nationalism, political myth, and ideological mystification, he struggles to formulate a position capable of transcending them. The Prologue announces his trajectory as the transformation of a "sentimental bungler" into a man who "knows what he wants": "This, how Dr. Nielsen changes from a sentimental bungler into a man who 'knows what he wants' and how, on his path, like a burning fuse, he becomes the fatal destroyer of human lives, will be shown in this story" (Krleža I 13). The note accompanying the third volume subsequently describes the conclusion of the novel as the protagonist's political and moral catharsis (Flaker). Nevertheless, the novel never completely resolves the tensions that define Nielsen's position. Rather, it foregrounds the predicament of an intellectual who understands the world yet remains unable to discover a satisfactory political solution.

One of the most distinctive features of *The Banquet in Blitva* is its narrative organisation. The narrator appears as an observer speaking from "a distant and misty foreign land" (Krleža I 18), but simultaneously functions as a demiurge who anticipates events, determines their sequence, and adopts towards the characters an attitude marked by irony, sarcasm, and grotesque distance (Flaker). He resembles a director who carefully arranges scenes, gestures, and movements upon a stage. Particularly in the third volume, the "Blitvo-Blatvian comedy" is viewed retrospectively from a distance of two or three decades. The perspective of historical hindsight profoundly alters the meaning of events. What once appeared as an immediate political conflict is reinterpreted after the experience of the Second World War and the totalitarian catastrophes that followed. Through this retrospective perspective, the novel acquires many characteristics of the historical novel, even though it remains situated within an imaginary geography. Theatricality occupies a central place in this process. The world of *The Banquet in Blitva* is repeatedly organised according to the principle

of *theatrum mundi*. The metaphor is introduced already in the Prologue, where the conflict between Barutanski and Nielsen is described as a medieval play featuring two principal actors (Krleža I 13). Throughout the novel, politics appears as spectacle, performance, ritual, and staged representation. This logic reaches its most concentrated expression in the puppet-theatre episode at the end of the second volume, where a performance entitled *The Puppets* presents a miniature humanity suspended from the strings of an Invisible Director (Malić). The episode functions as a condensed image of the novel itself. Political reality emerges as a theatre populated by actors, masks, and marionettes whose actions are governed by forces they scarcely understand.

The novel's political concerns are inseparable from its aesthetic ones. Questions of literature, painting, monumental sculpture, theatre, and artistic creation occupy a central place within its structure. The debate surrounding Rajevski's monumental sculpture, the opposition between monumentality and experimentation, the references to Flemish painting, and the recurring discussions of artistic form reveal the extent to which questions of aesthetic representation are intertwined with questions of political power (Flaker). Art does not appear as an autonomous sphere detached from politics. Rather, it becomes one of the principal means through which the novel reflects upon the mechanisms of authority and domination.

This becomes particularly evident in the third volume. The world of dreams enters the narrative through *Requiem for Karina*, introducing a lyrical and oneiric dimension into what is conventionally understood as a political novel. Here political questions intersect with memory, desire, melancholy, and imagination. The dream sequences are marked by a poetics of metamorphosis which also appears elsewhere in Krleža's later writing (Čale Feldman). Nightmare, fear, exhaustion, disgust, hopelessness, and absurdity become dominant motifs. In this respect, the novel moves beyond political satire and historical commentary towards a more complex exploration of consciousness itself. Political experience is no longer represented solely through institutions, ideologies, and conflicts, but through dreams, anxieties, and psychic dislocations. For this reason, *The Banquet in Blitva* cannot be reduced either to a political allegory or to a *roman à clef*. It is a novel of imaginary time and imaginary space which draws upon the tradition of the historical novel while suspending straightforward historical referentiality. Different historical periods, political systems, ideological conflicts, and cultural traditions are synchronised within a symbolic universe that transcends any single historical situation. The interaction between the historical-political sphere and the intimate psychological sphere gives the novel a complexity that exceeds both pamphleteering and the conventional designation of the political novel (Flaker).

The culmination of the novel is Nielsen's famous conclusion: "All that remains to us is a box of lead letters, and that is not much (...) yet it is the only weapon mankind has invented in defence of its human dignity" (Krleža III 414). More than a statement about literature, this conclusion may be read as the final formulation of the novel's governing problem. Political violence, ideological conflict, historical upheaval, and changes at the summit of power fail to resolve the fundamental questions that the novel raises. What remains is the word itself, understood as a fragile yet indispensable defence of human dignity. In this sense, *The Banquet in Blitva* emerges not simply as a political novel, but as a symbolic vision of European political reality, a meditation on dictatorship and history, and an exploration of the possibilities and limitations of intellectual resistance in the modern world.

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