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Krleža's Glembay Cycle: A Destruc
turation of the Genealogical Narrative

Krleža: The Prothesis

In the course of a private conversation which took place during the late 1960s between a literary scholar and Miroslav Krleža, a leading writer influential on the Yugoslav cultural scene for more than half a century, an essential question was raised concerning the falsifying effect of literal interpretation on the authentically fictional literary text. The problem was put to Krleža in the following way:

The most frequent sort of literary misunderstandings result from a poor comprehension of the relation between a writer's life and his work. One might say that this has particularly been the case with your Glembay cycle since its very inception. Readers and even semi-qualified critics have speculated as to whether you could really have ever met the kinds of persons, families and social groups that you wrote about in the “backward circumstances” of Zagreb’s pre-World-War-I Austrianized society. Did the Glembay family and the phenomenon of Glembayism ever really exist among us? Did they speak, behave and spend their lives in the way you portrayed them? In the final analysis, to pose such questions means to cast doubt on an author's right to create reality by fictional means. It means to look for some kind of literal correspondence in the very place where factors of imaginative transposition and subjectivization are most at work. . . .

On the surface, some features of Krleža's engage literary technique would seem to encourage the kind of critical effort that seeks to reify literature sociologically and historically. Each play of the Glembay drama trilogy has exhibited its own aesthetic integrity through a psychologically discrete dialogue that projects verisimilitude and has proved to be consummately stageable since the first performance of In Agony in 1928. The companion volume of prose includes a historical introduction and a detailed genealogical chart of the Glembay family. However much Krleža may have wished to write a Yugoslav

2. The Glembay cycle, composed between 1926 and 1930, was intended to be an organic whole comprised of eleven stories and three plays—In Agony (U agoniji, 1928),
version of either the socially incisive European family novel (in which the fate of the individual hero is guided by the obvious influence of his membership in some familial group) or the historically sweeping genealogical novel (in which the family itself is the hero whose fate is traced over several generations), the Glembay cycle which he actually produced was in fact the result of a unique attempt to apply the techniques of psychological character portrayal to the aesthetics of modern dramaturgy.\(^3\)

During his first decade of literary activity (begun in 1913)—when he created his cycles of poems, lyric verse, short stories, novellas, expressionistic plays, travel sketches, literary essays, and autobiographical prose—Krleža gave much thought to writing a novel. In his World-War-I diary he considered several extended narrative projects. From these it is clear that he envisioned the novel as a picture of the human condition on a grand scale. In December 1917, he proposed "a novel about Croatian civilization, one of a series of novels conceived within the framework of a large decorative panneau: 'Österreich-Ungarn in Wort und Bild'."\(^4\) By the middle of the twenties, he had determined to choose a new direction for both his dramatic and narrative writing. Rejecting what he termed "the completely misguided search for dramatic action in a quantitative direction" which had characterized his post-war expressionist phase, he decided to develop the concrete, qualitative line of dramatic action that could best be expressed through the psychological objectivization of individual subjects.\(^5\) This formula, in which he would find suitable approaches for his own critical stance toward the mores of bourgeois civilization, was exemplified by the Scandinavian dramatic model of Ibsen and Strindberg and by the European narrative model of the family and genealogical novels.

Yet Krleža's attitude toward these aesthetic models was ambivalent. In his critical essay, "On Marcel Proust" (1926), he discussed his main suppositions...