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MILOŠ CRNJANSKI AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

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This study explores the poetic and intellectual development of Miloš Crnjanski, focusing on his engagement with Mediterranean cultural spaces and the legacy of classical antiquity. Crnjanski's early experiences in the multicultural Adriatic city of Rijeka, combined with personal loss and his polyglot education, shaped a literary voice that challenged the nationalistic narratives of early 20th-century literature. His seminal poetry collection *Lirika Itake* (*The Lyrics of Ithaca*) reimagines the Odyssean return not as heroic triumph but as a traumatic reckoning with modernity, exile, and the collapse of traditional values. Deeply influenced by classical literature, European modernism, and Mediterranean history, Crnjanski developed *Sumatraism*, a poetic-philosophical vision grounded in cosmopolitanism and the transformation of suffering into aesthetic transcendence. Through works such as *Dnevnik o Čarnojeviću* (*The Diary about Čarnojević*), Crnjanski destabilizes fixed identities, employing fragmented narrative structures and psychological complexity. His engagement with cultural plurality - linking Pannonia, the Adriatic, and the broader Mediterranean - positioned him as a cultural mediator between East and West, North and South. Crnjanski's poetic geography, spanning from Galicia to Sumatra, blends memory, trauma, and myth to articulate the modern subject's dislocation. His late reflections, including a 1967 speech in Italian, affirm his belief in poetic internationalism and the indestructibility of the cultural past. Misunderstood by many contemporaries, Crnjanski's opus anticipates postmodern concerns with hybridity, exile, and the crisis of meaning.

KEY WORDS:

Miloš Crnjanski, Mediterranean, cultural hybridity, Sumatraism, poetic geography

1.

Miloš Crnjanski (1893–1977), born in the Pannonian basin of Vojvodina, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, published his first poem *Sudba* (“Destiny”), in 1908 at the age of fifteen. Late in life, he summarized its essence as follows: “U toj pesmi, u prvoj strofi polazi na pučinu jedna lađa. U drugoj strofi diže se bura. U trećoj plove na pučini samo olupine broda”¹, and he remarked, “Danas mi se čini da bi to bilo dosta”² (Crnjanski 1993: 168)³.

“Destiny” was likely inspired by Propertius’s *Elegy XXVI*, one of many classical texts Crnjanski encountered at the Piarist lycée in Timișoara. These classical foundations would foreshadow the many heterotopias in his later work (Foucault 1984: 49)⁴. For Crnjanski, the sea was first and foremost the Adriatic: the South Slavic corner of the Mediterranean, once known as the *Golfo di Venezia*. Even before he physically encountered the sea, he had read the poetry of Mirko Korolija, a Dalmatian poet who “hummed like the Adriatic”⁵.

In his youth, he frequently traveled with his mother to visit relatives in Fiume (now Rijeka), which until 1918 was a major Hungarian port. This created a symbolic and literal link between the Banat region and the Adriatic. Fiume was a vibrant, multicultural city inhabited by Italians, Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Hungarians, and Jews. It was also physically and administratively divided into an Italian part (Fiume) and a Croatian part (Sušak). The Bay of Kvarner, with its steep wooded coasts and islands, presented a stark contrast to his native Pannonian landscape.

By the time he reached Fiume, Crnjanski had already endured considerable trauma: the loss of his father, sister, and younger brother. He alluded to this painful past only once, in 1920, when commenting on a poem. He revealed that his younger brother Mirko had “[...] died after falling out of a pram, which I was responsible for”⁶. Despite these early experiences of grief, Crnjanski was already a polyglot, fluent in Serbian and Hungarian, proficient in classical languages, and

¹ “In the first stanza of this poem, a sailboat sails out into the open sea. In the second stanza a storm develops. In the third, only the remains of the shipwreck sail out into the open sea.” All translations into English are by the author.

² “Today I feel this (was) sufficient”.

³ First published in a Sombor youth magazine *Golub*, 5 (1908: 76).

⁴ Besides the sea and the open sea, cemeteries are another feature of Crnjanski’s heterotopias: village cemeteries with the graves of his brothers, cemeteries in the Italian San Vito al Tagliamento, the grave where Rajić’s mother was buried, the graves of Serbian soldiers buried at Corfu, Sustipan cemetery in Split.

⁵ „kao Jadran šumeo“ (Crnjanski 1993: 172).

⁶ „[...]umro posle jednog pada iz dečjih kolica čemu sam kriv bio ja“ (Crnjanski 1993: 260).



having learned French and some English during his schooling in Timișoara. It was his encounter with the Adriatic, especially the Kvarner Bay, that awakened in him a deep awareness of hybridization, cultural layering, and assimilation, experiences that would inform his later literary treatment of cultural intersections. At nineteen, he went to study in Fiume (though he failed to gain admission to the Marine Academy) and immersed himself in the local atmosphere: multilingualism (he also learned Italian), Mediterranean multiculturalism, and a growing sensibility for the region's landscapes. It was during this period that he wrote his early poems, formed lifelong friendships, traveled to Trieste and Venice, attended the theater and Carnival, took up fencing, and played football.

The Adriatic Sea represents a distinct subregion of the Mediterranean: multicultural in spite of centuries of Venetian domination. As Fernand Braudel describes, the eastern Adriatic - lined with mountains - maintains a metonymic relationship with the Mediterranean at large (Braudel 2002). Local and regional perspectives have produced varied interpretations of the Adriatic, each constructing its own cultural imaginary. The eastern coast, historically inhabited by Illyrians, Greeks, and Romans, and, from the 7th century, by Slavs was shaped by successive waves of cultural and political change. During the Ottoman incursions, the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) thrived, preserving its autonomy until Napoleon's conquest in 1806. From the 13th century onward, Venetian influence left a deep cultural imprint along the coast. After the fall of Venice in 1797, Dalmatia became part of Napoleon's Illyrian provinces until 1815. This period saw notable civilizational advances: new roads, institutions, and the rise of publications in vernacular languages, all of which contributed to the burgeoning of national consciousness. Italian, the region's official language, fostered a bilingual civil and intellectual class, while the rural population - depicted as *Morlacchi* in Alberto Fortis's *Viaggio in Dalmazia*, 1774 (*Travels into Dalmatia*) - were viewed as custodians of an oral tradition comparable to Homer's. In fact, 18th-century Dalmatian texts even discussed "Homer's Morality," inspired by Giambattista Vico's reflections on Homer in his *Principi di Scienza nuova*, 1744 (*Principles of the New Science*). For Crnjanski, *The Odyssey* was the first significant book he owned, and the Adriatic was the place where he first experienced love and erotic awakening. He felt at home in Fiume/Rijeka, a city to which he returned often, and where the Italian *koiné* enabled him to move freely across the Adriatic world—including the Ionian and Tyrrhenian regions of the Mediterranean.

In 1914, at the time of the Sarajevo assassination, Crnjanski was in Vienna. There, he was conscripted and sent to the front. His wartime path took him through



Segedin, Bečkerek, Šid, Vukovar, the hospital in Fiume, back to Bečkerek, then to the Galician front, a hospital in Vienna, and again to Segedin, Komoran, Ostrogon, San Vito near Udine, Abbazia, and Komoran once more. By September 1918, he was stationed in Vienna to complete his studies.

Amid the chaos of war and the proximity of death, Crnjanski, deeply influenced by Futurism, Expressionism, and the Theatre of the Grotesque, began to write *Maska* (“Mask”), the poetry collection *Lirika Ithake* (“Lyrics of Ithaca”), and sections of the uniquely titled novel *Dnevnik o Čarnojeviću* (“The Diary about Čarnojević”). These works were published in quick succession: *Mask* in Zagreb (1918), *Lyrics of Ithaca* in Belgrade (1919), and *The Diary about Čarnojević* in 1921.

2.

The Lyrics of Ithaca was not the first slender volume of poetry to transform the literary landscape of a culture. More than a century earlier, Ugo Foscolo’s *Sonetti* (1803) had already done so in Italy, imbued with the same Mediterranean sensibility, proving that even within the constraints of a tightly structured form like the sonnet, great innovation is possible. Crnjanski’s *The Lyrics of Ithaca* was first published as a compilation of 36 loosely rhymed poems. In later editions, the author restructured the collection, omitting and adding pieces, and eventually dividing it into three cycles: *Vidovdanske pesme* (“Vidovdan Poems”), *Nove senke* (“New Shadows”), and *Stihovi ulica* (“Street Verses”). The *Prolog* (“Prologue”) and *Epilog* (“Epilogue”) remain as dramaturgical bookends. In the *Prologue*, a modern Odysseus, returned from Ithaca, from war and killing, speaks in a voice that still belongs to wartime and postwar lyric poetry, yet is stripped of traditional identity. Here, who the author is - or will be -, is irrelevant. Trauma eclipses genealogy. As early as 1917, Crnjanski wrote to a Croatian editor declaring, “Ja sam uvek bio sam sebi predak”⁷ and “sin Don Kihotov”⁸ (Crnjanski 1993). For him, writing was a form of healing, an exorcism of pain, akin to Dante’s *Commedia* - which he often quoted in Italian - and Petrarch’s expressions in *Canzoniere* XXIV, though Petrarch remains unmentioned. Crnjanski’s conception of literature transcended national borders; he actively questioned, even dismantled, the myths and canons upon which Serbian literary identity was built. When Serbian poets, critics, and editors praised

⁷ “I am my own ancestor”.

⁸ “the son of Don Quijote”.



the widespread popularity of *The Lyrics of Ithaca* (Raičković 1981: 19), they recognized that this young man from the Banat region had become a cultural mediator between Mediterranean and European sensibilities, and, eventually, between these and elements of the distant Orient. One can argue that it was in Fiume, reading Leopardi, that Crnjanski first encountered the concept of “cosmic pain”, while in Vienna he discovered Morgenstern’s melancholic verses about the gallows, merging the earthly with the transcendent.

Crnjanski’s early poetic attempts at such cosmological connections can be seen in poems like *Vetri* (“Winds”), *Jadran* (“The Adriatic”), *Himna* (“Anthem”), and *Serenata* (“Serenata”), which appeared in subsequent editions of *The Lyrics of Ithaca*. He admired the speech of the Adriatic coast, particularly the Croatian Chakavian dialect, and wished to sing the Adriatic using words born of that geography while also recalling the uprisings of the Boka Kotorska sailors and the Usocchi pirates of Senj.

In *The Adriatic*⁹ the poem begins with a dramatic invocation, turning the sea into a conscious interlocutor: “Zaboravio si bijesne i grozne gusare? / I galije od Neretve, crne i krvave?”¹⁰ (Crnjanski 1993: 22) This Adriatic is a place of loud and harsh voices, “never to relent, unhappy, but ferociously joyful”, drawn from “the bloody banks of a whole nation, which uplifts death, for one was being killed for a handful of sun.” In later commentary, Crnjanski wrote compellingly about the suffering of Adriatic fishermen. The poem was first published in Croatian, in the Zagreb literary magazine *Savremenik*¹¹, along with *Winds*. In a 1918 letter to editor Julije Benešić, Crnjanski explained: “Hoću moj jezik tako da izmešam da ne bude u njemu ničeg što bi ga dalo nazvati ekavski, štokavski, bosanski itd. To su igračke. Lepota jezika je u znaku, u mističnoj boji reči a ne u čistoti – i ja ću do smrti radije pisati tica – no ptica”¹² (Crnjanski 1993: 725).

The poem *Vidovdan*¹³ references the historical 1389 Battle of Kosovo canonized into a Serbian national myth which, after 1989, was weaponized as ideological fuel for nationalism. In Crnjanski’s work, however, this symbolism is transformed by the events of 28 June 1914 (also Vidovdan by the Orthodox calendar), when the

⁹ See Šeatović (2019: 112-114).

¹⁰ “You forgot the angry and horrifying pirates / And galleys from black and bloody Neretva?”

¹¹ *Savremenik* 12, 1917: 186-187.

¹² “I want to mix my language so that it doesn’t have anything that can trace it to Ekavian, Shtokavian, Bosnian etc. Those are toys. The beauty of language is in its sign, in the mystic color of the word and not in its purity – and I will always, until death, choose to write *tica* rather than *ptica*”.

¹³ Vid = Vitus, dan (Serbian, Croatian) = day.



assassination in Sarajevo drew Europe into the cataclysm of World War I. By the 1918 peace, his poetic speaker confesses: “neither God nor ruler remain”¹⁴; his “God is blood”¹⁵ (“Anthem”), the world is reduced to “blood, ashes and dust”¹⁶; and toasts are raised “to the life of the grave!”¹⁷ (“Toast”).

In *The Lyrics of Ithaca*, the lyrical “I” is a solitary, bloodstained survivor a soldier repulsed by tradition, patriotic fervor, and national myths. A young Austro-Hungarian officer of Serbian descent from Vojvodina, he miraculously survives what Crnjanski would later call a “comedian case”, singing of “the pain and sin of bloodshed”¹⁸ (*New Shadows*). Strikingly, the original version of the collection is almost unrecognizable compared to its later iterations. The poems were also serialized in *Dan* in 1919 (Crnjanski 1993: 553), nearly simultaneous with the book publication.

Crnjanski’s polyglot background (Serbian, Croatian, Hungarian, German, Italian, French, Spanish, English) and his geographic imagination stretched from Pannonia through Austria and Hungary to Galicia, and along the Adriatic - Trieste, Venice, Corfu -, extending as far as Brittany, Finistère, and Tuscany, and even into the imaginary: Sumatra, Hyperborea. The trauma of war, juxtaposed with his exposure to cosmism¹⁹ in the work of his Dalmatian friend Sibe Miličić and to Leopardi’s infinite melancholy, laid the groundwork for *Sumatraism*. This poetic vision transforms nightmare into dream, pain into shadow, silence, exoticism - a refuge from trauma. Crnjanski’s *Sumatraism* incorporates not only the visual and auditory, but the tactile (the recurring silk motif), and the olfactory (scents of the sky, acacia, white roses). A historian by training, he studied in Vienna and graduated in Belgrade in 1921, believing that every modernist must have a firm grasp of history. His use of archival material was, in his own view, evidence that journalism need not obstruct true literary creation (Crnjanski 1992: 17).

In 1920, the critics of the Belgrade literary magazine *Srpski književni glasnik* branded *The Lyrics of Ithaca* immoral, too corporeal, too nihilistic, and thus a threat to the soil-based ideology underpinning the nascent Kingdom of Serbs, Croats,

¹⁴ “Nemamo ničeg. Ni Boga ni gospodara”.

¹⁵ “Naš Bog je krv”.

¹⁶ “Još je veseo narod jedan / u krvi, pepelu i prahu”.

¹⁷ “Da živi groblje” / Jedino lepo, čisto i verno”.

¹⁸ “U bol i greh i krvoprolića”.

¹⁹ Miličić’s joy is closer to the feeling of “Joy of Shipwrecks”/*Allegria di naufragi*, is the title of Ungaretti’s collection of poems which like the *Lyrics of Ithaca* evolved during WWI. Ungaretti lived in Paris in 1912, before our poets, it is interesting that in the old days he would read Ulysses on tv, in order to reach the broader public. Crnjanski said that he read it in the original and that he liked it (Crnjanski 1992: 41, 273). Unlike “Joy” Crnjanski found solace from traumas in his own created poetic of Sumatraism.



and Slovenes. Yet the younger generation embraced the collection as a vital new voice, one articulating the moral ambiguities of war, individual sorrow, and the dark omens haunting the modern subject. “Zarekli smo se ostat nesretni, / bar ja i Ti”²⁰, Crnjanski wrote to Ida Lotringer in the poem *Mizera* (Crnjanski 1993: 58–59). Notably, the word *mizera*, clearly of Latin origin, does not exist in standard Serbian or Croatian languages.

A defining step forward in Crnjanski’s poetic modernism came with his 1920 poem *Sumatra*, published alongside a rare authorial commentary (Crnjanski 1993: 287–293). Filled with distant islands, exotic names, and a yearning for the unknown, the poem acknowledges a world whose connections are forever severed. Yet it still imagines a different life, strange, joyful, and healing. In Serbian and Croatian, the word *java* (waking reality) contrasts with *san* (dream), and this opposition reflects the poem’s central tension: between harsh reality and the dreamed Sumatra. Crnjanski’s style here becomes increasingly hybrid: lyrical interwoven with dramatic and discursive modes, erratic punctuation, a breakdown of rhyme schemes, and a syntax that seems to mimic mental disarray. His prose characters also begin to exhibit dissociative identities, a phenomenon seen in European literature but newly introduced in South Slavic writing. In *The Diary about Čarnojević* (1921), a novel he conceived in 1920, the protagonist Petar Rajić speaks of his shadow self, Čarnojević, who embodies the poetics of *Sumatraism*. Čarnojević, a lighthouse keeper’s son, inhabits monasteries in Fruška Gora, travels by ship from Singapore to Cairo, and passes through Malta on the way to Thessaloniki, his identity shaped by dislocation and poetic transfiguration. Crnjanski believed in the mystical, poetic, and cosmic interconnectedness of all things. He developed Miličić’s cosmology, celebrating the Mediterranean and its intimacy with “sister Earth,” just as the Croatian poet Tin Ujević, in *Lelek sebra* (1920), evoked “brotherhood among persons in the universe”. Crnjanski’s admiration for both was forged in shared experiences in Belgrade and Paris. Sumatra became, for him, the third point of a spiritual triangle with China and Japan, cultures he studied during his Paris years. At the *Bibliothèque nationale* he read, translated, and later published *Anthology of Chinese Lyrics* (1923) and *Poems of the Old Japan* (1928). He had likely already encountered the travel writings of Nicolò de Conti from Chioggia (Marvulli 2004: 9–47) which would later serve as intertexts in *Journey to Tuscany* (1921).

In that travelogue, Crnjanski connects his northern homeland with Renaissance

²⁰ “We pledged to remain unhappy / at least you and I”.



Italy, once again forging ties to the Mediterranean. The geography here is mostly real, only occasionally veering into the exotic. Yet, unlike his early books, *Journey* was met with controversy in Serbian cultural circles. It seemed, paradoxically, that peace was harder for Crnjanski than war. In his poem *Stražilovo*, written in Fiesole near Florence, he denies death and links the hills of Tuscany with those of Fruška Gora. In his travel prose, he openly sought to transplant the influences of Tuscany into his native soil. Yet parts of the Belgrade literary world misunderstood him, humiliating and rejecting him, just as his ambivalent characters (Rajić/Čarnojević from the *Diary*, Bebe/Branko Radičević from *The Mask*) were doomed to tragic solitude.

Crnjanski's Modernism was deeply rooted in classical education, historical understanding, and a linguistic-cultural synthesis. He was convinced, despite Heraclitus's claim that war is the father of all, that modern poetry could still emerge from postwar ashes. In the *Prayer* that concludes *The Lyrics of Ithaca*, he addresses the Father in layman's language, not with reverence, but with desperate blasphemy: for the Father's son, the poet, has only one hope left - death.

3.

From the earliest stages of his poetic reflection, Miloš Crnjanski grasped the dual nature of the Mediterranean, a region that gave rise to classical literature and preserved the legacies of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, but also a crossroads where one listens to others and defines oneself in relation to them: the Dalmatians, the Bokeljans (people from the Bay of Kotor), and, of course, the Italians. The literature of Greece and Rome formed the foundation upon which he would build a distinctly modern, mature poetic voice, one attuned to the cultural complexities of his time.

Unlike the Italian poet Ugo Foscolo, born between the Ionian and Adriatic seas, who began his literary journey in the wake of personal trauma (the death of his father), and who anticipated his own exile in the sonnet *To Zakyntos*, Crnjanski's origin lies inland, in the heart of the former Pannonian Sea. Yet he reimagines this space as his personal Ithaca. Just as Foscolo foresaw an eternal estrangement, so too would Crnjanski later experience exile in England. His protagonists, modeled on Ulysses (Zani 1992: 72), are perpetually drawn back to this symbolic homeland. The Mediterranean, in his writing, is not just a setting, but a metaphor for journey, dislocation, and survival.



By the late 1920s, Crnjanski turned increasingly toward the theme of migration, especially the northeastward movement of Serbs toward Russia. Even in his youth, he was remarkably open to ideas of decolonization, equality, and cross-cultural solidarity. His imagination was shaped by Ithaca, Chios, and Corfu; by Tuscany, Dante, and Michelangelo; and by Renaissance humanists, particularly Poggio Bracciolini, through whom he discovered accounts of travels to Sumatra (Marvulli 2004: 12). Equally influential were the psychological theories of Freud and Jung, and these cultural and intellectual influences found expression in the fictional characters he created.

Crnjanski courageously embraced the cultural plurality of the Balkans, unlike many intellectuals today, who remain entrenched in nationalist insularity. From Banat to Srijem, Rijeka, Zagreb, Belgrade, the entire Adriatic coast, from Opatija (Abbazia), Rijeka (Fiume), and Split to Dubrovnik²¹ and the Slovenian mountains and lakes, he saw a continuum of shared histories and identities.

In 1923, he traveled to Corfu, an island of great symbolic and historical importance during the Balkan Wars (1911–1912), and there he composed the poem *Serbia*; similarly, in Tuscany he wrote *Stražilovo*. His work substantiates the thesis that the Mediterranean serves as both center and confluence of diverse literary traditions (Đurašin 2000: 32–33). Identifying himself as the “son of Don Quixote” (also the title of his lost early novel), Crnjanski shaped *Sumatraism* as a poetic mode of evasive cosmism: rejecting ancient myths and sanctities while acknowledging that happiness itself may be a form of humiliation. For him, personal tragedy leads not to a rapturous union with nature, as in Leopardi’s early verses or Miličić’s cosmic optimism, but toward a remote, evaluative void. *Sumatra* and *Hyperborea* emerge in his work as ideal poetic landscapes, allowing him to transcend the boundaries between poetry and prose (Tešić 2009: 305–310). Through these symbolic geographies, Crnjanski processes both personal and collective traumas, most notably those stemming from the First World War. His literature bears witness to loneliness, impermanence, and agnosticism. Ithaca, Tuscany, Fruška Gora, Corfu, and Serbia are thus woven together into a poetic cartography, culminating in *The Diary about Čarnojević*, where the Mediterranean meets Galicia in a haunting symphony of memory and dislocation. This short novel, written as if by the spectral hand of a divided consciousness, tells the interlaced stories of Čarnojević

²¹ Dubrovnik plays a very important part in Crnjanski’s literature, from youthful texts about Dubrovnik’s baroque poet Ivan Gundulić, which was unfortunately stolen, to the poem “Summer in Dubrovnik” (1927) and the baedeker of the city published in 1930.



and his double -an Austro-Hungarian soldier - infused with complex psychological and psychopathological implications. These dimensions, though critically relevant to modern European literature, were largely misunderstood or dismissed by Crnjanski's contemporaries.

4.

Crnjanski's final recorded public statement was delivered in Italian in 1967,²² in Opatija on the Kvarner Bay. Invited by the editorial board of the cultural journal *La Battana* to a gathering of Yugoslav and Italian intellectuals, he declared:

[...] le lingue sono sempre differenti; il mondo è una torre di Babele. Credo che nuovi valori potrebbero ritrovarsi forse in una internazionale poetica: non voglio dire della canzone op e pop, ma nel conoscere altri popoli, altre lingue. La sperimentazione linguistica nella poesia contemporanea è, credo anche oggi, il più visibile intento dei poeti: è quasi la caratteristica della poesia d'oggi. Ma mi pare una cosa del tutto diversa dalla grande riforma di Dante. Io non sono un filologo, tuttavia è veramente stupendo vedere quanto il popolo italiano, anche quello che si chiama il popolino, conosce i versi di Dante e li usa come proverbi. Dopo 700 anni, la lingua non è cambiata. Non conosco niente di simile, altrove, oggi. Questo voglio dire: il passato è indistruttibile (Crnjanski 1967: 22-23)²³.

And so, this professor of history, former soldier, civil servant, and twice-exiled writer concluded his address, with the same Dante he had once invoked in 1921. In his old age, he returned to the Kvarner Bay, the confluence of Slavic and Roman worlds, convinced that in Italy, nearly everything could be traced back to the *Schiavoni*, the name Venetians gave to Slavs (Crnjanski 1966: 154). Despite the many misinterpretations of his public stances, most notably his 1930s justification of war, framed in the futurist rhetoric of journalistic dispatches from Spain and

²² It was third meeting of the Italian and Yugoslav authors on the topic "Funzioni e strumenti della critica" (Functions and instruments of critique), which took place on the 29th and 30th of September 1967 in hotel „Ambasador“ in Opatija. On that occasion, Crnjanski was controversial, as usual. The text was transcribed, but unfortunately no audio record was kept. It was published in the literary magazin of Italian community in Yugoslavia *La Battana* (1967).

²³ "Languages are ever more different; the world is a Tower of Babel. I believe that new values might be found in a kind of poetic internationalism—not in pop or op music, but in truly understanding other peoples and languages. In my view, linguistic experimentation is still the most visible goal of contemporary poets. It has become the hallmark of today's poetry. But this seems something quite different from Dante's great reform. I am no philologist, but I find it extraordinary that even ordinary Italians still know Dante's verses and use them as proverbs. After 700 years, the language has not changed. I know of nothing comparable elsewhere today. What I want to say is this: the past is indestructible."



Berlin, this should be read not as ideological allegiance, but as a tragic misreading of modernism itself, and a reflection of the fractured self dramatized in *The Diary about Čarnojević*. At that moment, many of his closest allies disavowed him. His penance came in the form of a 20-year exile, twice as long as Odysseus's, before he too returned, once more, to his Ithaca.



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Miloš Crnjanski and the experience of the Mediterranean

SUMMARY

Miloš Crnjanski (1893–1977), born in the Pannonian region of Vojvodina, began his literary journey at 15 with the poem *Destiny*, which already foreshadowed themes of loss, fragmentation, and longing. Educated in classical literature, Crnjanski was influenced by Latin poets and would later weave classical motifs into his modernist works. His deep connection with the Adriatic Sea, particularly the Kvarner Bay and the multicultural city of Fiume (Rijeka), profoundly shaped his literary and personal identity. Despite early personal tragedies, including the deaths of close family members, he became a polyglot and a keen observer of cultural hybridity. These experiences culminated in his poetry collection *The Lyrics of Ithaca* (1919), a landmark of Serbian modernist literature. Crnjanski's early poetic voice emerged amid the trauma of World War I, where he served as an soldier. He drew upon Futurism, Expressionism, and classical lyricism to process the horrors of war and loss. His poetry challenged national myths and literary conventions, promoting a cosmopolitan and introspective worldview. *The Lyrics of Ithaca* reflected a modern Odysseus figure - disillusioned, wounded, and uprooted - who rejected patriotic idealism. Crnjanski's sense of identity was fluid, resisting strict linguistic or national definitions, and he famously declared himself "his own ancestor". Influenced by the Adriatic's history of cultural confluence—from Illyrians and Romans to Venetians and Slavs - Crnjanski embraced multiculturalism and regional interconnectedness. His admiration for the Adriatic's linguistic and historical richness informed his poetic experimentation, as seen in poems like "The Adriatic," "Winds," and "Anthem." He developed a poetic philosophy known as Sumatraism, which transformed trauma into mystical, cosmological expression, blending European and Asian influences. This vision is evident in both his poetry and prose, especially in *The Diary about Čarnojević*, a fragmented novel reflecting war, exile, and psychological duality. Crnjanski's travel writings, including *Journey to Tuscany*, linked his inland homeland with the Renaissance

KEYWORDS:

Miloš Crnjanski, Mediterranean, cultural hybridity, Sumatraism, poetic geography



Mediterranean, further affirming his transnational aesthetic. He believed literature should transcend nationalism, and his writing sought to connect history, geography, and personal memory. Though criticized by conservative critics, younger readers embraced his modernist, emotionally raw voice. His literary references ranged from Dante and Petrarch to Chinese and Japanese poetry, exemplifying his global outlook. In his later years, Crnjanski revisited the Adriatic coast and delivered his final public statement in Italian in 1967, emphasizing poetic internationalism and the enduring power of the past. Despite political misreadings of his wartime journalism, he remained a deeply humanist writer, shaped by the interplay of memory, history, and geography. His works navigate a symbolic cartography where places like Ithaca, Tuscany, Corfu, and Fruška Gora become metaphors for survival and exile. Ultimately, his literature reveals a restless search for belonging, identity, and reconciliation across cultures and time.



Miloš Crnjanski e l'esperienza del Mediterraneo

RIASSUNTO

L'articolo si prefigge di esaminare lo sviluppo poetico e intellettuale di Miloš Crnjanski, concentrandosi sul suo rapporto con gli spazi culturali mediterranei e l'eredità dell'antichità classica. Le prime esperienze di Crnjanski nella città adriatica multiculturale di Fiume, unite al dolore personale e a un'educazione poliglotta, hanno formato una voce letteraria che sfida le narrazioni nazionalistiche della letteratura del primo Novecento. La sua raccolta poetica seminale, *Lirika Itake* („Le liriche di Itaca“), reinterpreta il ritorno omerico non come un trionfo eroico, ma come un confronto traumatico con la modernità, l'esilio e il crollo dei valori tradizionali. Profondamente influenzato dalla letteratura classica, dal modernismo europeo e dalla storia mediterranea, Crnjanski sviluppò il sumatraismo, una visione poetico-filosofica fondata sul cosmopolitismo e sulla trasformazione della sofferenza in trascendenza estetica. Attraverso opere come *Dnevnik o Čarnojeviću* („Il diario su Čarnojević“), Crnjanski destabilizza le identità fisse, utilizzando strutture narrative frammentate e una complessità psicologica. Il suo impegno con la pluralità culturale - collegando la Pannonia, l'Adriatico e il più ampio Mediterraneo - lo posiziona come mediatore culturale tra Est e Ovest, Nord e Sud. La geografia poetica di Crnjanski, che si estende dalla Galizia a Sumatra, fonde memoria, trauma e mito per esprimere lo sradicamento del soggetto moderno. Le sue riflessioni più tarde, tra cui un discorso in italiano del 1967, confermano la sua fede nell'internazionalismo poetico e nell'indistruttibilità del passato culturale. Incompreso da molti contemporanei, l'opera di Crnjanski anticipa le tematiche postmoderne della ibridazione, dell'esilio e della crisi del significato.

PAROLE CHIAVE:

Miloš Crnjanski, Mediterraneo, ibridità culturale, sumatraismo, geografia poetica

