

Kolakowski: How's the Ontology of Literature? The Tragic Meaning of "Fairy Tales"

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ABSTRACT

As a philosopher and thinker, Kolakowski's literary creation practice in the 1960s had a profound meaning of exploration. He hoped to achieve two goals in the Lailonia world he created: one is to show the modern alienation and the absurdity of the world in his vision, and the second is to seek the resolutions of human spiritual liberation: not only philosophical criticism but also laughter and humor are important elements of it.

Keywords: Fairy Tale, Future, Tragic Narrative, Utopia.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As a significant Marxist thinker in the 20th century, Leszek Kolakowski (1927–2009) was not only famous for studying the history of Marxist thought but also tried in literary writing. *Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia* and *The Key to Heaven* (1963) is his first attempt at literary creation. It shows Kolakowski's deep reflection on the crisis of modernity and exploration of future utopias in a tragic style. While within the atmosphere of tragedy and hopelessness, "fairy tales" have shown modern tragedy's pursuit of the future. Seeking to reach the future in the tragic aesthetic experience is the fundamental purpose of Kolakowski's writing of "fairy tales". In general, Kolakowski's creative practice has a unique style. His criticism and reflection on the issue of alienation and redemption in the tragedy of "the world of fairy tales" confirms his humanitarian literary thought background. Although "fairy tales" with a tragic tone are still immature works during transformation, the sense of a search for the future and utopia contained in them is deep and conscious.

Along with Lukács (1885–1971) and Schaff (1913–2006), Kolákovski is one of the theoreticians of Eastern European Marxism, and his work in the fields of the history of Marxism, religious studies, and humanist studies discourse was well established, with *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976), *The Alienation of Reason* (1968), *Religion: If There Is No God* (1982), and *Toward a Marxist Humanism* (1968). But in contrast to Western Marxist thinkers, who were almost exclusively contributed to theoretical construction, Kolakowski not only opposed the creation of a rigid and massive theoretical system but also advocated thinking in the smallest details (Yi, 2012. p. 89) and was himself involved in the process of literary production. *Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia* and *The Key to Heaven* (1963) is Kolakowski's representative masterpiece of literary production and had a worldwide impact.

In *Main Currents of Marxism*, Kolakowski begins with the statement "Marx was a German philosopher" (Kolakowski, 1976.p. 1), which is both the overall impression Kolakowski wishes to give his readers and Kolakowski's self-expression - Kolakowski's literary discourse is full of philosophical searching and questioning, even in what essentially should be the simplest of "fairy tales", there is a substantial sense of searching and questioning.

II. SHOCKS AND DILEMMAS: THE CONTEXT AND MOTIVES OF WRITING "FAIRY TALES"

Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia ("Fairy Tales") is a collection of short stories written by Kolakowski in the early 1960s, and it is reasonable to believe that Kolakowski, a Marxist, concentrated on a number of literary texts with highly relevant themes and threads in the early 1960s, while Kolakovski's commitment to "fairy tale" was also linked to the de-Stalinist movement in Soviet in the 1950s and the subsequent events in Poland. It can be argued that the writing of the "fairy tales" is a reflection of Kolakovski's spiritual journey from an orthodox follower of Marxism to a revisionist and an

outcast. In the theoretical dilemma of the 1960s, instead of using rationalism as a tool to bridge the two periods, Kolakowski chose to use "fairy tales" to complete a questioning of the rational world of modernity, perhaps for several reasons.

First, after Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin at the 20th congress of the KPSS, many Marxists began to rethink dogmatic Marxism, but the overall landscape was of theoretical confusion, lack of direction and disorder. In Poland, "Open Marxism" was combined with the theoretical traditions of linguistics and semiotics in the country, resulting in the formation of numerous neo-Marxist currents in Eastern Europe. Faced with the profound and serious situation, Kolakowski was acutely aware that classical Marxism was in crisis and undergoing interrogation, and that, in the midst of the deconstruction of modernity, the use of theory to refute or construct theory was undoubtedly ineffective, if not defeated, it was the reality what forced Kolakowski to "abandon" it for the time being, forcing Kolakowski to "abandon" theory but to turn to the "Lailonia" world of his own personal creation.

Second, there is something unique about Kolakowski. Unlike Marx, Lukács and other scholars who were accustomed to building up a large and elaborate system, for Kolakowski, no matter his philosophy, religious theory or aesthetic thought are characterised by their simplicity, fragmentation and fragmentation, which is not unrelated to Kolakowski's emphasis on returning to "daily life". In the preface to another important critical work, *The Presence of Myth* (1972), written in the late 1960s, Kolakowski claims "As a reflection on freedom from chains, I wanted this book to be concise enough to discard excessive examples, historical allusions, commentaries, obscure proper names, as well as numerous quotations, insertions, linguistic material, and the subconsciousness", (Kolakowski, 1972.p. 1) since then, "lower court of ritual" is evident in Kolakowski's thought, or rather, it is evident here. Kolakowski even declares that he doesn't organize philosophical structure (Yi, 2012. p. 89), so it is clear that Kolakowski is not a thinker who is traditionally keen to build up a theoretical edifice so that the literary world of metaphor naturally becomes a virgin territory for him to open up when the theoretical world is in crisis.

Moreover, the focus on 'everyday life' is often considered to be a major symbol of Korakowski's transition from orthodox Marxist to the exodus. As for him, the realm of everyday life is not only a field of criticism but also a field of redemption for modern humans from the dilemma of alienation, thus, the "fairy tale", in which "daily life" is the narrative background can be seen as his first foray into the realm of everyday life – in the "daily life" of the many characters in the kingdom of Lailonia, the shrouded modernity and the problems of daily life that Kolakowski is concerned with are thrown up, shown and questioned once and once.

III. THE METAPHOR OF LAILONIA AND THE MODERN TRAGIC DISCOURSE OF THE "FAIRY TALE"

The question of modernity is one of the massive questions of human survival and existence that have confronted humans in the aftermath of the industrial society – "fairy tale" is based on the taken-for-granted nature of daily life, but it is could more likely be thought of as the interrogation of many highly abstract questions of modernity.

What is "Lailonii"? The author throws out this term without explaining it throughout. The doubts about "what is Lailonia" and "where is Lailonia" are not dispelled as the story progresses, but become more and more confused.

Kolakowski seems to use it only to refer to a place name, "Lailonia" becoming a seemingly accessible destination, and the first story, *Looking for Lailonia*, seems to conform to the logic of reality, to a certain degree, bridging the sense of detachment and alienation. A so-called reliable meaning (as a naming land, even though, it's just surface meaning) of "Lailonia" is not too evanescent, but it is clear that in Kolakowski's metaphor it means much more than that.

The seemingly unresolved "Lailonia" forces readers to look at the reverse communication. A contemporary narrative view is that the text's ability to "expres" is motivated by the absence of a certain part of meaning ("absence", Zhao Yiheng, 2009. p. 3), that only the absence of meaning can be understood. "It is only the absence of meaning that generates the impetus for interpretation. In semiotic discourse, it is only when meaning leaves the field that the active refers to meaning. Following this line of thought, the question "Why is Lailonia's meaning unresolved" can be understood – Kolakowski plays a proper joke on readers, here, in that the author seems to give "Lailonia" the meaning of a place name, but in fact removes its meaning, thus making it subservient to the readers, who does not understand the author's humour for a moment, and thus, "Lailonia", a temporary void of meaning and desolation came.

Despite, the readers are not entirely to blame for the gap in the meaning of "Lailonia", for "Lailonia" does appear too suddenly, but its meaning is not visible till an overview of the whole collection.

In this way, the meaning of the existence of "Lailonia" seems distinct, but it is after all the meaning of its existence, not its own meaning – "Lailonia" becomes a lingering shadow, existing behind every "fairy tale", either hidden or visible. Although the meaning of "Lailonia" remains unexplained after all this

discussion, since the shadow of Lailonia looms over the whole story, its meaning can be traced in the particular story itself. We have therefore chosen a few short stories for specific analysis.

Looking for Lailonia, the first story in this collection tells the story of two brothers who have spent most of their lives searching for the "Kingdom of Lailonia": two brothers who, for some unknown motive, have spent their entire lives searching for the location of Lailonia as their entire goal in life. The story comes to a climax when, perhaps as a result of the hallucinations of two brothers spending decades poring over maps, or perhaps as a result of the reality, the two brothers inadvertently see the Kingdom of Lailonia on a map and are so excited that they run out into the street shouting - only to turn around and find that the map is nowhere to be found. Disheartened and at the end of their tether, they receive a letter stamped "Lailonia" and try to find out the location by asking the postman and going to all levels of the post office, but no one knows where it is. Finally, the two return home exhausted, open the mail, and discover that the sender is a resident of Lailonia, who has somehow learned of their efforts over the years, and thanks to them for their enthusiasm, leaving this collection of fairy tales "to show all people" Lailonia – this is how the book came to be. As the wedge of the book, this story is distinguished from the others in that "I" appears both as the narrator who introduces the readers to the world of Lailonia and as part of the narrative (explorer of Lailonia) – this setting allows the temporal dimension of the narrative to be crossed, the reference and the act of narration to become simultaneous, the "self" to become the "other", the "foregone" event to become the "current" event. The real and the imaginary are created, creating an artistic effect of falsity and falsehood. Undoubtedly, the story of two brothers who spend their lives searching for a Lailonia whose existence is uncertain, and end up in a mess, is tragic and hopeless. But fortunately "we" do not give up until we are old and still cry out "We will never see it, it is a foregone conclusion, perhaps some of you readers will be lucky enough to enter Lailonia one day. When you arrive, please offer the Queen of Lailonia a bouquet of golden lotus flowers in our name and tell her that we had longed to go, but failed". Kolakowski is known for his critique of alienation and modernity, and with this in mind, it seems that the deeper meaning of this wedge could be resolved as follows: "we" are looking for some kind of good world that is impossible to reach this stage (and whose existence may even be in doubt), and the enlightened people in the alienated world have spent their lives in searching of it. Most of them end up like the seekers of the utopia, but the title of the story is an affirmation of the search - the two brothers, though trapped by the strong contradiction between their weakness and their search for a future faraway land, are still convinced that the reader will complete their unfulfilled task and find the good world of the Urantia World – this is what sets modern tragedy apart from ancient Greek tragedy. Also, as the introduction to the collection, this piece depicts the undercurrent of frustration without despair, and tragedy without hope, which characterizes the whole collection of fairy tales.

Coming to the story of *The Hump*, a stonemason, Ajio, is struck by a strange disease, a sarcoma that has to be eradicated in order to restore health, but the sarcoma deliberately "turns against" and, step by step, takes over, destroys and replaces him. The sarcoma then uses every means to bewitch and mesmerize all humans, making them willingly nurture the sarcoma, which eventually orders the city and humans no longer exist, and there is nothing anyone can deal with it. But there is only one person who survives the bewitchment, the young son of Ajio, who is considered "not very intelligent" and "no better than an adult at distinguishing truth from falsehood", he eventually escapes from the tumor-ridden city and plots his revenge. Here that can be shown, that while the adults, who have always been known for their rationality and wisdom, are frightened by the tumor, only the child, who does not possess these characteristics, is able to distinguish between the tumor and the real human – not on the basis of sophisticated theories or advanced technology (which are the products of the instrumental rationality of modernity), but on the natural emotional intuition about his father. The author's tendency is already evident – the judgment of beliefs should be guided by rationalist norms – is where the problem arises (Kolakowski, 1999. p. 100). Kolakowski incorporates into his critique of modernity and alienation, the idea that it would be tragic to rely only solely on rationalism toward the better world (utopia), and that the natural attitude of going back to the basics and the spiritual consciousness of looking inward is precisely the essential part of this process that is missing in modern society. This is where Kolakowski's mind of the salvation of mankind through myth and spirituality can be seen for the first time.

How the Divine Maior Lost His Throne and *The Story of the Greatest Quarrel* are the two most similar stories in the collection, recounting the journey of individual human beings as they consciously discover their essential power and seek their own liberation. The former tells the story of the great divine Maior, who rules over the inhabitants with a seemingly nonsensical decree that whatever is below for the people is above for great Maior, and vice versa, and that if someone violates it, he/she will be dropped to hell after death; and that whoever does not make a fault in life will not make one after death, and whoever makes a fault in life will not be corrected after death. The people lived in the shadow of the horror of the great Maior's decree, depressed and desperate. Until one day, Aobi, who is under the order of Maior, suddenly woke up and realized that this absurd decree is meaningless. Aobi's awakening sparked a great debate throughout the city, and eventually, the inhabitants agreed with him, realizing the absurdity of the

decree, smashing the shackles of the decree, the inhabitants were no longer under the rule of the great Maior. The latter describes a story about a quarrel – three brothers, Eino, Aho and Laje go into the city in search of opportunity, but no one has the conception of the "best city", and where it is, after a quarrel at a crossroads, the three finally come to a compromise, with Aho and Laje following Eino to his chosen city, in deference to their elder brother, but soon afterward they disagree again. After another argument, Eino stays in his current city and the other two go in search of a better one. Aho is eventually eaten by a wild bear on his way, but Laje does not back down when he learns of this and sets off in pursuit of his ideal city with even more determination. Neither the ordinary inhabitants under Maior's rule nor Aobi, the awakened, nor the three brothers are heroes, on the contrary, they are ordinary people in modern society, living in a world of alienation and modernity, but there are elements of utopian quest among them, a quest for "the realization of all human capabilities", and for human spiritual freedom, the quest for human spiritual freedom, that is, the spiritual emancipation of mankind.

Kolakowski's "fairy tales" have a serious theme but without the cynical tone and warnings of an omniscient perspective. It depicts a world of alienation where people are enslaved by objects and their values are obscured. The tragic situations in which one is slowly strangled and abducted by the collective unconscious – each person is placed in one or more collectives, showing both identification and the inability to conceal the subconscious of alienation and struggle – but the individual is forced into the situation of struggle is unable to think deeply, in the end, the individual consciousness is often abolished by the group consciousness, leaving only the person as "group" (or "category") of people (Wang, 2015, p. 29). Kolakowski's concern with the totality of an alienated world is evident. But Kolakowski's "fairy tales" do not stop at the depth of criticism, rather, in the construction of this tragic world lies a sense of the search for a "future world". The two brothers who search for Lailonia, Ajio's young son, Aobi, Aho, and Laje can be seen as the author's hope for a future world free from the tragedy of alienation, a breakthrough that Kolakowski tries to shape.

IV. THE MOVEMENT OF THE OPPOSITE: THE POSITIVE FUNCTION OF THE "FAIRY TALE" TRAGEDY

First of all, although the "fairy tales" are almost exclusively anti-utopian "fairy tales", it does not follow that Kolakowski is a complete pessimist. For in the midst of a tragic and alienated world occupied by powerlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, objectification, and irrationality, Kolakowski embeds *The Story of the Greatest Quarrel* as one of the few glimmers of hope in the whole collection – a reflection on the "already" and "future" of modern tragedy, implying the ambivalence of being content with reality while being endlessly curious about the unknown, which is what constitutes the possibilities and richness of daily life. The search for the "best city", which is nowhere to be found, is a gap opened by Kolakowski for a desperate Lailonia, where the future is unknown but there are still sober people like "Aho" and "Laje" who have not yet sunk into the alienated world, who are actively groping for a possible or impossible Utopia, for redemption.

Secondly, in the writing of the "fairy tales", Kolakowski succeeds in using black humor to deepen the tragedy of the seemingly absurd and farcical fairy tales of "Lailonia". Kolakowski's theory of black humor is directly derived from the French literary psychologist, Henri Bergson (1859–1941). Bergson attached great importance to the role of the comic, believing that the source of laughter was the result of the antagonism between life and matter, the inner personality and the external contradiction and that the comic and humorous effect arose when external forces overwhelmed the movement of life. Humour and laughter are in Bergson's case corrective devices for the awakening of a numbed sense of self. Kolakowski focuses more on its social value in an alienated society and the evocative and corrective significance of black humor in the face of the objectification of modernity. In the practice of "fairy tales", Kolakowski uses black humor to perfection – "Rich people tend to be famous, so how can I get rich? The answer is to be famous" "I can be the youngest of all people older than me, or the oldest of all people younger than me" (*The Famous One*); Tate's mechanical rendition of the way to become "famous" again and again (*The Famous One*); the way the lemurs repeat their arguments over and over again like rhetoricians (*Lemurs War*); the way people spend their days doing nothing, punching one eye after another on the earth (*A Tale about Children's Toys*); the way the inhabitants under Maior's rule say the same thing and repeat it forever and pointlessly (*How the Divine Maior Lost His Throne*); the way "rationalization" is found for excuse gardening obvious absurdity but the pretense of seriousness (*Five Reasons of Avoid Gardening*)...Kolakowski embellishes his fairy tale world with this dark humor "in a small way", making a comic appearance, implicitly or explicitly, to awaken in the readers a sense of transcendence and redemption. Kolakowski's use of black humour in his absurd "fairy tales" not only does not compromise the nobility of the content and themes but also serves as a gaping hole in the world of tragedy that Kolakowski explores.

The ubiquitous and pervasive "Lailonia" in Kolakowski's "fairy tales" is projected as modernity that

has been de-valorized, de-sensitized, and highly alienated into the "Lailonian tragic life of everyday life" created by Kolakowski, unifies each presumed personality behind each story. Although the presumed personalities are fictional to the reader, they are real in the dimension of the frame of the story, so the frame-personality dichotomy of the narrative is also applicable to our daily life (Zhao, 2016. p. 203). In this sense, this "fairy tale" collection is a series of complete pictures of modernity.

V. UTOPIA AND THE RETURN OF THE "FUTURE"

Although Kolakowski's exploration of the "fairy tale" presents the modernity of tragedy and ends in tragedy, the fundamental direction is always towards a better world in the future, a utopia where people can be free and liberated. This idea is expressed in the tragedy as a forward-looking one, and the future is what utopia is all about (Mannheim, 1979. p. 23). There are two channels of reaching the utopia, namely, the "future" (speculation): by traveling (i.e., by the fictional narrator going on an adventure) or by waiting - waiting for something to become real that cannot be achieved now - clearly, Kolakowski's "fairy tale" falls into the former category.

For Kolakowski, what human beings must accept is an inescapable unconditioned reality, manifested in the Lailonia world as a dystopian and alienated world of modernity (in which the tragedy of humans is enacted), showing the very unjustifiability of the world of modernity - human fall into the "banal evil" in disorder and unconsciousness, gradually sinks into the slavery of external objects and the paralysis of the ego spirit, wallowing in the present, the extended, endless world of alienation, in Kolakowski's view, the only resolution to redemption, is to withdraw from it, to leave behind the confusion of the present and to pursue the beautiful utopia of the world to come. And what is the inevitability of this search for the utopia of the world to come? For the Marxist Kolakowski, it is the progressive view of history that emerged from the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

In other words, it is in the present-future dimension that the construction and transcendence of Kolakowski's Lailonia world unfolds. The future is a utopian ideal society, a "better city", in which people are trapped in a quagmire of alienation, in a contradiction between what Engels called "the inevitable demands of history and the temporary impossibility of realizing them" (Wang Jie and Wang Zhen, 2019. p. 23), but are still convinced that the goal will one day be realized, and they pursue it with great emotion and vigor. This is how Kolakowski understands and interprets the Marxist concept of tragedy.

Furthermore, a rather romantic view is that, when practice (the adventure of a literary avatar in pursuit of utopia) points to the future, then the author's narrative is associating "future" and "real", and even practice itself becomes the future (Mannheim, 1979. p. 89).

The practice of shaping the contradictory conflicts of modern Marxist tragedy is also in line with Kolakowski's humanist aesthetic, which is also evident in the humanitarian concern in his quest for a "future" utopia in a "fairy tale world" full of alienation and absurdity (Peng, 2019. p. 35). According to Terry Eagleton, the true liberation of the self presupposes and is conditional upon the liberation of the other. This is the essence and core of the modern Marxist conception of tragedy. This humanitarian concern is expressed in the "fairy tale" by the attention paid to and the writing of the individual's senses, as in the representation of Dito's psychological process of perseverance and renunciation against objectification (*The War with Things*), and the port Lajel of Laje's ideological struggle to find a better city in the face of Aho's death (*The Story of the Greatest Quarrel*), all of which are humanitarian reflections at the individual level.

It is honest that the heroes and the runaways of Lailonia are tragic figures, but as individuals, they are charged with the quest for a future utopia rooted in the community, which is in line with the essence of Marxist modern tragic self-emancipation and the liberation of all humanity. In other words, in a world of tragedy and dystopia, the individual can only be redeemed through the emancipation of the group, and the ultimate goal of that redemption is the utopian "future", the inaccessibility of which is what makes the future world of modern tragedy so fascinating.

VI. CONCLUSION

As Ernst Cassirer has claimed, it is not the paucity of the material of our experience which is most perplexing and disturbing, but its overabundance. The overly complex and alienated world of daily life raises the amount of pressing questions about the affirmation of value, moral identity, and ultimate concern for "human being". In his "fairy tale world", although Kolakowski manifests pessimism, absurdity, decadence, emptiness, and hopelessness, he still does not give up the pursuit of a utopia of the "future", the constructivist, and "strangeness" character of modern tragedy is brought to the fore. In the tragic "fairy tale", Kolakowski enriches the themes of modernity criticism such as the general alienation

of daily life, the weakness of the human individual, the "banal evil" and the reflection on the escape from a tragic fate. Although the writing of "fairy tales" was still in the immature period before the transition between the two periods of Kolakowski's thought was completed, the tragic world of most of the "fairy tales" had already bred a consciousness of the future. Kolakowski's "fairy tales", as a scene from the Polish intellectual camp of the 1960s, are a unique perspective on the transformation of Kolakowski's thought and a vivid model for examining the emergence of modern tragic ideas in Eastern Europe during this period.

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