August Cesarec

The Fugitives

Bjegunci

Presented by: Ivana Perica

In contrast to ideologically related revolutionary novels of the interwar period, *The Fugitives*, written by a politically active writer and Communist intellectual, seemingly lacks the impervious teleological impetus and revolutionary determination to break with the old world. The novel clothes political references in vague associations and imprecise commentary. Thanks to this coded writing, behind the finely tuned psychological dimensioning of the characters, their deeds and discussions, one discovers a profoundly political, decidedly leftist question of the relationship between evolutionary, step-by-step development towards a better society and revolutionary turmoil. This tension arises from the confrontation between beauty and action, small things and great things, freedom and necessity.

The Fugitives was written in the 1920s but was not published until 1933, after several phases of censorship. It presents a tableau of social democrats, communists, revolutionary fanatics, feminists, high-ranking politicians, as well as artists, wavering intellectuals and mystics. As a novel of ideas, The Fugitives contains two prominent types of the so-called ‘optimal projection’: bourgeois idealism and revolutionary politics. While the first combines the idea of elite-led national liberation with the gradual emancipation of women, the second makes radical demands for a systemic solution to the workers’ (and women’s) question. These two optimal projections are represented, on the one hand, by Mrs Vlatković, simply called Mother, a leading bourgeois feminist from Zagreb and the mother of the novel’s heroine, Buga Vlatković, and, on the other hand, by Buga’s comrade Nikola Višnjić, who is employed in the publishing house of the Social Democratic minister Saša Majstorović, Mother’s second husband. Mother summarises the axis of conflict between the two optimal projections as follows: “we agreed that our national problem should be solved first by war, after which we could turn to the social problem… But he [Višnjić] thinks that the social problem can be solved only by force, while I prefer a spiritual and moral revival” (52). The competition culminates when Mrs Vlatković’s daughter Buga – the main heroine of the novel, who is pathologically urged by Mother to follow in her footsteps – falls in love with Višnjić and thus not only thwarts Mother’s plans for her career and marriage, but also chooses a rival to whom Mother is drawn by the force of mutual attraction and repulsion.

To keep her away from what she sees as Višnjić’s dubious political persona, and to prevent a possible amorous liaison with him, Mother sends Buga to complete her high school education in Prague. Prague is in fact Buga’s birthplace, from which she was taken soon after her birth. There, on the way back to her origins, Buga meets fugitives who have been forced to leave their homeland

for political reasons. Unbeknown to Mother, Višnjić soon joins Buga and the exiles. Although large portions of the novel focus on Buga's personal, existential concerns and her resulting suicidal crisis, the conflict between mother and daughter is firmly set against the backdrop of competing political camps in the turbulent 1920s: in addition to Višnjić, another of Buga's soulmates is Ilija Koren (Cesarec's own alter ego), a politically wavering artist torn between the imperative of social action and his aesthetic need to experience life.

In one of his climactic self-analyses in the novel, Koren reflects on his intimate relationship with Buga, wondering 'how it could be, and whether it would not be completely natural that the two would love each other' (190). However, the novel contradicts the 'natural' by urging its characters to make choices. Just as they are forced out of their hometown, they are also forced out of the comfort zones of their familiar surroundings (bourgeois society, aesthetic ideas, financial stability), pushing the more sensitive among them to the edge of survival. Both Koren and Buga struggle with health problems and are similarly tormented by suicidal thoughts. When they are simultaneously drawn to the rushing Vltava River in the very first chapter, and when the proximity of Buga's flat to the Prague waterworks (175) is emphasised at several points, Buga's eventual death and Koren's decision to participate more actively in the international Communist movement emerge as the culmination of a shared pilgrimage – a common quest to harness their imaginative natures for the revolutionary struggle.

What Buga and Koren have in common, and what makes Koren an even closer soulmate of Buga than of Višnjić, are their imaginative natures (17). Embedded in catastrophic historical and social circumstances, they are similarly plagued by the conflict between the revolutionary pressure to act and the unbounded need to fantasise: while Koren is driven by a lust for life ("He likes to experience life, maybe that's all! A writer's illness!"; 123), Buga is seized by her love for small creatures commonly ignored by big politics – birds, mice, snakes, rabbits. Koren is aware of this perhaps insurmountable gap between humanistic desires and political circumstances, asking rhetorically, "[s]hall life be but a dream? When you see an unhappy man, you should know that he is often unhappy only in his imagination: while he was dreaming, others took away the happiness he dreamed about and legally registered it in their name" (16). This is exactly what happens to Koren when he is looking for a room in Prague. The example is as ludicrous as it is vivid: after a long and nerve-wracking search he finally books a room, but while he is admiring the play of sunbeams in one of its corners, the room is taken over by another artist, who claims that very corner as a space for his piano (23).

The seemingly superficial conflict between affluent, social-democratic, evolutionary idealism on the one hand (represented by bourgeois politicians like Mother and her second husband Majstorović) and revolutionary politics on the other (Višnjić and a series of other, more radical characters) in fact constitutes the novel's central rift. This rift runs through the Communist internationalist movement itself, where, in times of accelerated historical pace, zealots, inquisitors and devoted followers challenge and condemn those who vacillate between the multidirectional possibilities of life and the historical necessity to act. With The Fugitives, Cesarec examines evolutionary perspectives not as a social democrat but as a communist internationalist. He does so in line with contemporary attempts to integrate psychological and anthropological concerns into the dialectical procedures of orthodox Marxism. So, what is the solution to the r/evolutionary dilemma, as proposed by Cesarec?

Buga's prospects of achieving the aims of orthodox Marxism are extremely limited. An unfortunate set of circumstances eventually results in Buga losing her life: exiled in Prague without a sufficient allowance, shelter, or even proper clothing, she is weak where she should be strong and indecisive where she should be resolute. She finally succumbs to Spanish flu and dies a lonely death in a city

hospital. The exact meaning of her death remains open to interpretation. At first sight, The Fugitives seems to be concerned with the unfortunate trajectory of a female heroine who is unable to find her place between family and politics; however, a deeper probing of the constellation of characters shows that Buga does undergo a transition, which is radical enough to require fatal sacrifice. On the one hand, Cesarec's narrative can be read as a synopsis of Buga's fatal inability to distance herself from the insidious emotional manoeuvres of her high-handed mother. It represents the impossibility of liberation until the identity that precedes liberation – in Buga's case, her biological body with its affective ties to the corrupt bourgeois family – is radically abandoned. On the other hand, considering that Buga and Koren appear as different sides of the same r/evolutionary coin and embody the affective nature of life and its demands for action, Buga's death emerges as the price that the multilayered movement must pay in order to free itself for action: if the group of fugitives is slowly but clearly moving towards revolutionary positions (it is not only Koren who experiences this shift, but Višnjić as well), then the movement does indeed require the death of its own reluctant, wavering and seemingly excessively humanistic elements.

This text portrait is based on the chapter "A tableau of exiles: August Cesarec's *Bjegunci* (*The Fugitives*, 1933)" from Ivana Perica's monograph *Politics, Literature and Tertium Datur: Socialist Central Europe, 1928–1968* (Bloomsbury, 2025), pp. 140–154.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: