

**A Crusade... With and Without a Cross
– A Review-like Essay on the Hungarian edition of Florina Ilis’s Novel¹ –**

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There might be some who find it “relaxing”, or, what’s more, even hopeful that in our shallow and uninspired age of philosophizing – as the “philosophy” increasingly cultivated nowadays as a “profession”, a “craft” is nothing else than a dilettante “**professionalism**” *without* a **thinker** – well, in this age there might be some who find it relaxing that the arts and literature, at least at their best, keep on doing their respective jobs. And these jobs are still keeping up their special, artistic relationship to freedom and the truth.

Ever since I remember, I have always been concerned, and troubled indeed, by the complicated, intricate, and most revealing mechanisms of mankind’s reproduction from generation to generation, by which our highly valued species ensures not only its subsistence, but also its sprawling, calling it of course “evolution”.

Such an enterprise in the world of man called “society” happens by the efforts and attention paid to procreate, nurse, and rear their progenies called “children”. Such things are so “important” and “essential” that they can only be left in the care of reliable and on all sides well controlled (!) institutions. No doubt, these are always thoughtful of the interests and “values” of both the child and the society or community – outlined, defined, and validated of course in all cases by their very selves. Evidently, in the name of a highly outlined freedom, which – in modernity especially – greatly subserves man’s turning into packs – called “individualization” –, that is, his becoming a specimen (out of sheer habit and mostly quite unthoughtfully), – called an “individual”.

The networks and institutions that serve the human species in bearing and rearing their progenies – making them useful, reliable, and profitable “members”, specimens of the “society” – are historical, and at the same time they are also history shaping factors. These institutions are nowadays: the family (if there exists), school (if it is attended), circle of friends (to leave behind in view of interest relations), the church (which, just for safety’s sake, has long been present in schools from the beginning to the end), and all kinds of media. These mediate, through a meeting place called the market, the so-called mentality- and behavioural patterns and rules

¹ Florina Ilis, *Gyerekek háborúja* (Children’s War), (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2009), 566 pp.

to the young generation. That is, the “patterns”. S/he is – directly or indirectly – trained by these patterns, or (as it seems to happen most of the time), s/he will end up training him/herself by these. The training is an instruction where the pattern, the “image” – no matter how much of it – is always predetermined. And in such a miraculous way that sooner or later the ductile trainee seems to have “freely” chosen these “images” for him/herself. Now, to ensure the undisturbed operation of the machine, the children must be taught from the very beginning that they are not born merely as “questioning” (brrr!!!), *individual* “humans” – as one self (an individual) – but they are born directly as Hungarians or Romanians, Gypsies, Arabs, Catholics or Protestants, Muslims or Buddhists, etc.; and in one specific family- and material environment... As a result of this they must attend this or that school, and must make adequate friends, with the many kinds of corresponding patterns, models, desires, “dreams”, faiths, questions, and frames or cages of freedom.

Florina Ilis’s outstanding, multidirectional, and staggering novel speaks about something similar, yet in a historically – in want of a better word, let’s say: – “transitional” age and world. That is, not only in one single country, Romania, but in a maimed-whole age and world. A special importance is conveyed in this world to children. Hard-workers, entrepreneurs, employees, tax-payers, and first of all: voters of the future. With the supervising attendance of their teachers, they are just leaving by an off-schedule train from the railway station of Cluj to spend their holiday on the Romanian seaside. On the station and in the train, however, there are other kids as well besides school children, who have no family, nor home, and attend no schools. The children of the street, the sewers, tunnels, and railway stations. They are not shown out by parents or grandparents, nor are they inventoried in catalogues, but they fumble in garbage bins, they beg or steal things from careless travellers, while they are involved in intricate and extensive, and sometimes even life-threatening relations with their peers. They simply sneak onto some train and get off wherever their sniff, their interest, or simply their mood tells them to. In a word, they are an untrained, boorish bunch of kids.

“Vacation” is the name of school holidays.¹ That is the time when there is no systematic, explicit, and specific teaching-training activity going on. It is all the more interesting that in Hungarian the name “freedom” (*szabadság*) refers exactly to that period when we are not working, and also where we are temporarily “leaving to” from the real, perspectival places of our work and career – of course, not just everybody and not just anywhere. So we are only “free” in an explicit sense when we leave the state in which we basically exist and are determined to succeed... Now, however problematic and yet more symptomatic such a label might be, the opportunity of – albeit organized – leaving that it comprises supports still the dangers of a mass of unpredictabilities! Whereas a serious educational-social system – especially with regard to children – cannot afford treating such a thing with irresponsible superficiality. No matter how “transitory” it may be. What’s more, this “situation” is the opportunity itself, the pretentious, dangerous opportunity. So then

¹ The collective name of school holidays in Hungarian is “*vakáció*” (‘vacation’). The collective name of holidays for adult workers is “*szabadság*” (literally meaning ‘freedom’). (Translator’s note).

Mrs. Constantinescu, a prototypical teacher of Romanian language and literature and leader of the body of teachers accompanying the children (one can almost see her typical towerish haircut made of stuffed-cabbage-like windings...) can clearly state during an off-hand punishing meeting in the teachers' compartment that: "True, we are on holiday, but the holiday isn't about not keeping the rules, but about keeping them in a less formal way!"¹ Therefore: "Everybody will be punished!"² (The punishment happens because of a usual "revenge"-fight among some boys at the beginning of the journey).

However, the children feel, due to their experiences, that "everybody" will be punished. And with good reason indeed, since on the off-hand meeting another teacher hurries to add that "... our task is to make them accept the presence of adults, *to get them accustomed in due time to the operation of the adult world...*"³ And thus "... as adults they will fit in into **our** world..." and there won't be any problem with them. (Emphasis mine, I. K. V.) And a third teacher comments – on a "high school level" of a schooling system deprived of the study of evolutionism due to the influence of the church – that the relationship of the children's world and the world of adults "...is similar to what goes on in the evolution of the cell, the world of the children *gives the impression* that, similar to a cell, it has an *identity of its own*, but at the same time it is connected to the whole, to which it organically pertains." (Emphasis mine, I. K. V.) Therefore – the fourth teacher goes on – "We cannot let them out of our hands, and we cannot allow them to dissolve in systems alien to their human constitution..."⁴

However, the children do not have one single world, but at least two. One is the world of the children who are "socialized" as a payback investment in their mostly superficial, formal, and often insincere family-, nursery school-, or school environment –as for example in the mutual usage of parent and child –, decisively confined to the ensuring of material circumstances and the training and observance of their connected rules bringing to a promising future. The other world belongs to those children who are either not given such things, or do not wish to accept it, as it is elementarily unliveable. And these distinct worlds of children do not really have any linkage points. However, this is exactly what happens in Florina Ilis's novel. These two, usually quite distinct worlds of children are not only linked, but they repeatedly meet in the novel. Calman, the street child, sneaks up on the regularly organized holiday train of – by the author's special care only – 4th to 7th grade schoolchildren (who therefore do not even possess an ID card yet). Although he would have a regular home, as his grandmother is a well-known and respectable, well-off gypsy healer woman in Bucharest, the blond and blue-eyed Calman – whose crippled mother has already died – still chooses the hectic and dangerous fate and world of street children wandering all over the country. He has a considerable authority already in this world, although he is not the leader yet.

¹ Florina Ilis, *Gyerekek háborúja*, 192.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 193.

⁴ Ibid., 194.

Stirred by Calman's idea, long used to unruliness, the children awaiting their punishment revolt against their teachers, and "hijack", seize control of the train. They use knives to force the engine-drivers to obey them, and lock up their teachers in their compartments with a universal key stolen from the conductor. From this point on the train itself becomes irregular, since it does not stop in the railway stations any more, it does not obey its schedule, and thus turns upside down the circulation of other trains as well. Consequently, it also confuses the operation of the Romanian Railways, and the entire world of the police, of politics and the media is also diverted from its "usual track". Let alone the fact that the organized, curricular world of training is again, for the second time, decisively crossed by the – this time – underground world of disorder. The children somehow manage to stop the train exactly at the spot where a shipment of weapons of a band involved in woman-, drug-, and arms trade is caught in an accident. This way the children get in the possession of weapons. Which are then tried out too, with the excitement of curiosity enhanced by film experiences, and under the spell of the power enforced by them. There are casualties as well – both injured and dead. This of course perplexes and misleads the authorities, who "naturally" think of an international terrorist action. Meanwhile the media also swings in.

It is at this point that it occurs that not everything is lost yet... These children were not only trained and "socialized" in the family, the school, or the church, but also by the media. So: "The happiness of the nice summer holiday wavers above the reality of the children's train as a flag, while nobody told them what to do! they are embraced on all sides by actors, stars, novel heroes, the tender and ruthless daydreams of their childhood, the green canopy of the sheltering forest enwraps them, and raises boundaries impossible to transgress between the children and the rest of the world..."¹ So they begin making claims towards the adult world, and it is again Calman who gives a concrete direction to these demands influenced by films, virtual games, malls, star-making production lines of media and television, and harrypotter-like readings by suggesting them to claim that the children living in an institution in nearby Sinaia should be set free. His sister is also locked up there.

However, in the meantime Calman's sister escapes from the institution under dramatic circumstances, while the gangs of street kids and tramps from all over the country start out towards the hijacked train. As they arrive, the story receives a new, confusing impulse – and new victims. The action is getting loose and confused again... and then, buried up within itself, it winds up. This, in its turn, lends not only reasons, but also opportunities for all kinds of retrospective analyses, which ensure, of course, that yes, everything remains as it was.

With a deep sense of sincerity and insight, Florina Ilis fabricates no kind of "happy end" in the novel, and offers no "solution" for the "reality" of their/this world. Instead, she draws the attention – with a questioning exclamation mark of nearly six hundred pages – that this seemingly new world is in fact very old. The novelty is only the mutation by which this world is indeed such, in reality and appearance alike, that this appearance and "reality" can indeed no longer be distinguished in it any more. The reality of appearance and the appearance of reality

¹ *Ibid.*, 371.

are hopelessly intertwined, further generating, exchanging and replacing each other, this whole ... whatever. Meaning the “reality” and its analytical and phenomenological-cognitive constitutions and interpretations...

In spite of all those said, as one puts down the book but keeps thinking over it, the message of the novel is clear nonetheless: something should be done radically differently about this extended reproduction of our human world and its world-like and world-creating foundations! Like, for instance, childrearing-growing, and education.

The lack of absent thinkers – no matter how fashionable it is today to study e.g. “cognitive educational philosophy” – covers up nonetheless the silent and barely alive, yet not completely lost history and tradition of thinking.

True, as it is, this is a *dangerous* history and tradition, which, nevertheless, has been a suggestive and essential supporter of philosophy, at least up to a not very distant past. Because one should ask: does it not mean anything that at the dawn of philosophy Pythagoras urged his disciples to *ask questions*? And Socrates did the same? Just like Plato, Aristotle, and others following them!?

As I have said, such things have always proved dangerous. Pythagoras was forced to flee, Socrates was condemned to death, Plato nearly ended up a slave, and Aristotle, sensing trouble, managed to escape in time... All of them – if they still lived – would have had to face some similar fate ever since... The authorities – as well as the “public opinion” moved by them and educated by all kinds of images – keep accusing them of the same things: they are the perverters of the young, and subverters of the authority of gods (and secular power). That is – so it is proclaimed – they are “nihilists”, and of the worst kind too.

But all they did was to consider and point out that questioning and the free-autonomous examination deriving from it was the essence of the problematic human freedom and connected search for truth. To which – in their opinion – the *paideia*, the *paedagogia*, that is, the education of youngsters, must be attached. And attached in a way that it should be – not the pattern, the model, the image, but: the *modus*, the measure. Such things are quite difficult to be turned into “currents” or “trends”. As this is not a matter of imitation or reproduction, so it cannot be something quickly sellable and profitable.

However, the autonomous man, who freely questions the responsibility of truth and creates, communicates, and builds communities while situated in the meaning of these questions cannot be the object or subject of any kind of training. He can only be the mobile medium of his self-searching encounter with the world, in which he meets and responsibly faces the other and the others as an individual, a unique self.

It is not an “easy” task, by all probabilities, to take the verticality of the “human” world upon the history-bound spine of all-time individuals. What’s more, it is much more difficult than leaving it all on Kosmodisk or the so angelic... Angels. Yet, Florina Ilis silently asks by her novel: is there, could there be some other way out?

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The (original) title of the book is thus not an external emblem, attached to it, say, as a marketing strategy, which could even be misleading as it may imply for many the expectation of a historical novel, as a literary adaptation of perhaps one of the most problematic phenomena of the history of Christianity, the crusade of children. On the contrary, the title comes into being within the flow of the book, as one of its organic elements, and it works as a label marketed in the media- and web-campaign initiated by newspaper-, TV-, and radio-reporters and webpage designers, some stupid and petty-minded, others talented and unscrupulous, eager for sensations. This is how it occurs to the children that what they are doing is a “(present-day) crusade of children”. And they accept it on the spot. All the more so as one of them has some unclear knowledge about the similarly unclear history of the crusades. Thus the two “wars” are still linked somehow by the bridges of history and legends. So it should be mentioned – and it is probably also worth some cultural or symptomatic analysis – that the original Romanian title of the book is *Cruciada copiilor*, which would have deserved to be translated as such into Hungarian as well.¹ It is quite interesting, however, that the “coquetry” with the cross in the title of the repeatedly award-winning book did not present any problem for its Hebrew, French, or Spanish editions... But in our regions the case is completely different, and the cultural power relations connected to this issue are also quite special.

That said, it is intriguing to note that all too little is known about the 1212 children’s crusade. Perhaps understandably, Christianity conceals, rather than advertises it. The sources, the documents were lost or hidden to such an extent that – just like the Holocaust, only without the pain of punishment – its very existence can easily be questioned too...

Suffice it to say that at that time the Pope who took on the name of innocence for the third time (Pope Innocent III) urged the organization of a new crusade for the liberation of Jerusalem, albeit with little success. At least among Kings, Emperors, and Knights. Priests however eloquently proclaimed the news, preparing the faithful for the crusade. This is how it reached the ears of Stephen, the 12 year old, spiritually troubled peasant boy from Cloyes. And so deeply it nested in there indeed, that soon he received a clear and reassuring call from Christ himself that the world saving task of re-conquering the holy city of Jerusalem was bestowed upon him in the highest heavens. The message claimed that the success of this crusade was ensured by the very fact that the soldiers were conducted by “innocent” children. (“Innocence will save the world” – the conviction is repeatedly voiced and spreads at once all over the world via the internet in Florina Ilis’s novel!)

Of course, the illiterate Stephen from Cloyes could hardly meditate extensively over the notion of “innocence” as a highly problematic concept of Christianity. Because so it happens that it is questionable whether the holy water – even if poured on the person at a very young age – can indeed wash off the burden of the original sin (and other inherited sins). (If so... then how could God himself punish without blame young babies with, say, deadly diseases?) And so the inspired boy turned directly to the French King Phillip, telling him the news which was to

¹ The original, Romanian title of the book translates into English as *Children’s crusade*. The Hungarian title translates *Children’s war*.

save the West. But the king, with a sense of reality that is power's own, declined the issue, and – instead of putting him under the care of his doctors – he sent the boy off. On his way the boy started to preach, and gathered around him some 30,000, mostly very poor, orphan, or vagrant children and young people. Of course, the crowd did not consist of children alone, as many clerics and women joined in as well. The church neither blessed, nor banned it officially, so the procession – or rather whatever was left of it during the march – slowly arrived in Marseille. Here – with help of “well-wisher” merchants – they were shipped on six or seven ships and sailed away... and were lost trace and fame. (There is a later record that, except for two ships, the rest arrived in Africa, where the children were sold for a right price – obviously not by the magnanimous merchants who selflessly let them onto their ships, but by some pirates – as slaves).

It also happened by chance that at about the same time in Germany, near Cologne another boy, the 10 year old Nicholas had a similar vision and commission. But he was not summoned with arms and war, but with the power of conversion to regain Jerusalem. His weapon was the Cross, as he also lacked the knowledge of reading and writing – just like that of fighting or leadership. Nevertheless, Nicholas did not waste his time on gaining the approval of kings or princes, but hurried “directly” to Italy, and nowhere else than Rome, to gain the blessing of the pope. His “flock” of about 20,000 was also not made up entirely of children, but of bands of “adult” wandering poor, adventurers, tramps, and prostitutes as well. What's more, Nicholas's way led through the dangerous Alps, and it was a “costly” journey accordingly. Many of them died, and others, changing their minds, returned home. However, the rest arrived in Rome, where they met with the Third Holiness bearing the name of Innocence, who, responsibly and paternally, advised the company to leave off their venture. Most of them returned indeed, so they arrived to the Kingdom of Heaven on the very same road – once trying Hannibal himself – that had led them to Rome. Despite this, a third of them – because of an unclear discontentment – decided to continue their journey, so they marched to Pisa. There they somehow also embarked on ships, being lost on the often blessed silent and salt-disinfected waters of the sea.

Anyway, the sacrifice of all these people could not remain unrewarded. Three years later the Pope of Innocence on the Fourth Lateran Council restarted his initiative for a new Crusade, according to his earlier plans, with new vigour and more success. This may also serve to our greater glory, if you like, as the Hungarian King Andrew II, although returning empty-handed, took part in this crusade, allowing us Hungarians to show some satisfaction. However, it proved to be more of a failure and a raider's war. Misleadingly of course, just like the rest of them. So most of them are now places of worship and miracles. So much so that the “crusade” has become a “subject”, albeit censored, of the everyday and direct broadcasts from, let's say, the Gulf War. With neither too much, nor too little, but just the right amount of blood and corpses...

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So, I can say: everything's right, and can stay as it was – thanks for it! And the – as I said, very problematic – issue of “innocence” still looks good and presents itself as good in our world trained and instructed for the con-figuration and representation of “images”, in which only the picture, the *image* is what counts, and how it “looks like”. In conclusion: “how well we are looking indeed in and through them!”

Translated by Emese G. Czintos