

Confessions of an Amoral Man

Ispovijedi nekarakternog čovjeka

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The novel was published in 1996, in the aftermath of the Croatian War of Independence, during the Tuđman era (the first president of the independent Republic of Croatia). It belongs to the picaresque tradition and it marks a revival of the genre in Croatian language. The story is told by a first-person narrator Fabricije Viskov and recounts his life from school days in a small Dalmatian village to watching a crowd in Zagreb on the day of proclaiming Croatia's independence from former Yugoslavia.

The narrative is linear and episodic in nature, as a typical picaresque novel, consisting of 5 parts further divided into chapters. All chapters are prefaced with a sentence-long summary of the upcoming events in the episode, in a manner typical of 18th-century novels and reminiscent of Henry Fielding. The protagonist is an antihero struggling to find his place in the world, which is becoming increasingly complex as he gets caught in the midst of political upheavals. Firstly he is disillusioned by the local clergy and tries to find another way for social climbing. His side-hassle makes him look for refuge with a local gang and he is recruited by a notorious rebel gang called ORJUNA. Then he attempts to leave this precarious life of on the margins of society by enrolling in a university. He opts to study the Croatian language and literature and finds great pleasure in the company of artists and other bohemians. However, as is always the case with Fabricije Viskov, fate messes up with his good intentions and transforms his life into chaos. He joins the partisan movement against fascists, but soon he is forced to play a double game in order to preserve his life. After WWII he reluctantly becomes an agent of the secret service UDBA and a prominent member of the communist party, only to realize that every totalitarian ideology he has believed in so far misuses and abuses the very same methods that made him want to break from the former community. This leads him to conclude, "And who or what I am as a matter of fact, I do not know. Perhaps the very fact I am unable to be anything willingly and with conviction is my true nature." (p. 366).

Fabricije Viskov is a typical picaro in that he leaves home at a young age, swaps masters he has hoped to help him improve his social status, and embodies the role of an actor, always adapting to the circumstances at hand. Since his place in the world and historical change is uncertain and precarious, he is focused more on avoiding pain than pursuing pleasure. His down-to-earth approach to life ridicules or critiques the existing dominant ideology, as well as larger-than-life characters, who are put on a pedestal by the people they cease to represent once they have secured the coveted political positions.

What the novel imports from the picaresque tradition is, to use a Bakhtinian term, a specific chronotope: the plot takes place on a large world stage (Fabricije Viskov occasionally returns to his hometown, but his travels take him all over Europe) and over a long period of time (not only did

Fabricije survive two wars, but he has lived through the turbulent pre- and post-war changes). The story is linear but abundant in plot twists and unexpected decisions by the protagonist. While these structural components put the novel in the proximity of the adventure novel, historical events Fabricije gets entangled in provide the novel *Ispovijedi nekarakternog čovjeka* with distinctive features of the historical novel. Since Fabricije as a picaro is not fundamentally changed by the events he has taken part in, the novel does not take advantage of the Bildungsroman, its interest lies elsewhere.

By revealing other characters' hypocrisy and hunger for money and power, disguised behind ideological beliefs, Fabricije Viskov pinpoints what is fundamental to all ideological constructs, namely the human will to exploit and take advantage of the situation. He embodies a character of no core beliefs, trying to survive in a world of injustice and inequality. Since his artistry consists of taking off the masks of others by using a number of suitable masks, the only mask he is unable to shake off is that of the storyteller, who has proven not to be trustworthy and honest.

However, in this silent pact between the narrator and the reader, Fabricije Viskov is part of a long lineage of picaros, as opposed to morally corrupt characters typical of the realist novel. He subverts all political systems from within, laying bare their fake virtues. This is why he remains autonomous and unchanged to the end. No historical upheavals have left any mark on his character due to the picaresque, rather than political or moral corruptness.

LANGUAGE: Croatian / Hrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: