

Bosnian Chronicle

Travnička hronika. Konsulska vremena

Presented by: Marina Protrka Štimec

In his novel *Travnička hronika. Konsulska vremena* (*Travnik Chronicle, Times of the Consul*, 1945) rewrites the genre of the chronicle. It depicts the arrival and departure of consuls, representatives of the Austrian and French authorities, as well as the expansion and decline of Napoleonic rule in the years 1807-1814 in the village of Travnik, a remote outpost of the Ottoman Empire, the administrative centre of the Bosnian Pashalik and the seat of its vizier.

Perspectives, stereotypes and expectations of the main character, the French consul Jean Daville, collide with the space and circumstances in which he finds himself, but also with the views and behaviour of other characters: his younger colleague Desfosses, the Austrian consuls von Mitterer and von Paulich, the viziers, the people of Travnik, etc. His thoughts on professional, family and literary work reflect both the events he witnessed in his homeland during the French Revolution and Napoleon's reign and wars, to which he linked his ideas and values ("the Monarchy, the Revolution and Napoleon"), as well as the situation he found himself in Travnik: The East, Bosnia, the Orient. In an orientalist manner, he characterises the events in Travnik and Bosnia as the East, as a kind of "mysterious disease" or "oriental toxin" which came into "man's blood", making him "sapped, unnerved and embittered", "incapable of seeing reality or forming a sober judgment, and can only battle and flail with every nerve and thought against everything that surrounds him".

As a kind of escape, he writes a historical epic about Alexander the Great, inspired by the First Consul, "General" Bonaparte. Andrić's objective narrator discreetly comments on the consul's attitude towards literature and his orientalist views: „Like all writers who lack talent and true vocation, Daville was the victim of a stubborn, deep-seated illusion: namely, that a man can attain poetry through a certain conscious exercise of the mind and that the creation of poetry rewards and consoles man for the evils with which life burdens and surrounds him.” (*Bosnian Chronicle*, 1963: 72, 73)

Furthermore, his views are implicitly and explicitly questioned on several levels of the narrative. Firstly, in the novel's prologue and epilogue, the "times of the consuls", the "hue and cry" over their arrival, the excitement over "Bonaparte here, Bonaparte there" contrast with the reassuring stoicism of the respected Beys of Travnik. As they calmly reflect on political events and world historical developments over a cup of coffee, they hint that the aversion to the changes brought about by the consul's arrival is part of the general mood in the heterogeneous community. Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox Christians, Jews and Roma (in the novel: Gipsies) are united in their common disdain for the consul. Although diplomacy gradually brings about some changes, it is obvious that all sides remain distanced in mutual distrust from the very beginning. In contrast to Daville, the young consul Desfosses remains benevolently interested in its everyday life, his language and life in the community. Although he, too, is plagued by fear of "the new world of silence and uncertainty".

By revealing the universality of human suffering, Andrić places his characters in a position of dialogue with the other characters and the narrator. An exemplary episode is told from the consul's perspective with the disgusting scene of the inhuman war trophies: at the vizier's reception in honour of the victory of the Turkish arms over the Serbian uprising: after coffee, cigars (chibouks) and lemonade, the guests are shown an indescribable pile of poor human flesh - a large number of cut-off human ears and noses. The sight made Daville feel sick: "Once more, nausea welled up in Daville's throat and he felt his eyes dimming." But although this harrowing scene only confirmed his views on the cruelty of the people and customs of the East, it was actually déjà vu. His physical reaction evoked an earlier memory of the same symptoms and feelings he had experienced in his youth when he witnessed the horrific revolutionary violence in Paris. Opening the window one morning, he suddenly "had found himself face to face with a severed human head, swinging pale and blood-spattered, on the pike of a sans-culotte. At that moment, rising from his Bohemian stomach that hadn't seen food since the day before, something terrible and sickening, like a cold fluid gone bitter, flooded first his chest and then his whole body."

By confronting the rigidity of Western Orientalism and political rigidity, Andrić introduces a series of characters who epitomise the impossibility of clear identity boundaries. This "'ambiguous" fate of the Levantines and Jews, who "belong neither to the East nor to the West", is told as a counterpart to any exclusivity and binarism, as a plea for liminal position of Bosnia, the Balkans – and possibly even humanity in its border situation after the Second World War. By addressing these issues in a position between personal and political health and illness, Andrić also examines the use and effects of literature. Literature as a remedy "in verbis", in words, is presented in the central, twelfth chapter, which can be read as an autopoetic reference to the novel. The poignant significance of *Chronicle*, as well as a number of other prose works by Andrić, including *The Bridge on the Drina* (1945) and *The Letter from 1920* (1946), is that they can be read as a synecdoche of turmoil in a world recovering from the catastrophe of the Second World War.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: