

Emperor's Kingdom

Careva kraljevina

Presented by: Zrinka Božić

The novel *Careva kraljevina* (*The Emperor's Kingdom*) was written between 1923 and 1924 and first published in full in 1925 by Vinko Vošicki in Koprivnica in 1925. It was published in the Ekavian dialect, with the subtitle *Roman o nama kakvi smo bili* (*A Novel About Us as We Were*). The second edition of the novel, published after the war as part of the *Selected Works of August Cesarec* (*Sabrana djela Augusta Cesarca*, vol. I, NZH, Zagreb, 1946), was edited by Ladislav Žimbrek. Žimbrek not only translated the text into the Ijekavian dialect, but also applied unconventional and atypical editorial principles by changing, rearranging and modifying the authorised text to an extraordinary degree.

The novel unfolds over the course of a single day in the Zagreb remand prison in 1912 and is divided into three sections: *From Dusk to Dawn*, *From Dawn to Noon*, and *From Noon to Evening*. Set in Croatia, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and governed by a royal governor, the narrative is framed against the backdrop of unrest caused by an attempted assassination of the governor. Shortly thereafter, in October, the distant rumble of cannon fire from the Balkans breaks the silence. A diverse array of characters moves through the narrow confines of the prison: from the guard Burmut to the student and would-be assassin Jurišić, the corrupt lawyer and politician Pajzl, Petković—his brother-in-law and the victim of his scheme—the swindler Rašula and his accomplices, Mutavac, his former assistant, and Mutavac's pregnant wife, who comes to visit. Among the characters is also a pregnant pocketbook, writhing in filth in an upstairs cell, alongside teenage murderers, rapists, and arsonists.

The narrator's account captures the painful coexistence of these characters within the prison. Their movements, interactions, and complex emotional landscapes—characterised by fear, deceit, intrigue, apprehension, hope, and memory—are skilfully depicted. The narrative thus offers a profound exploration of the psychological and social dynamics within this confined space. Literary critics and historians, such as Ivo Frangeš and Antun Barac, have recognised Cesarec's technical innovation. Within the constrained space of a prison and the limited timeframe, all these characters "had to express their individual and national attitudes, to be declared as personalities, in less than twenty-four hours" (Frangeš 532). This is why Antun Barac remarked, upon the novel's publication, that it would struggle to reach a wider audience: "Despite the sharpness of observation and the skilfully interwoven plot, many passages are difficult to read for those who prefer narrative to soul analysis..." (qtd. in Frangeš 533).

Instead of following Frangeš's thesis on a specific dramatic technique within the novel, a more useful approach here is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the novel as an unfinished genre, which, unlike the epic, is always in contact with the "inconclusive present" (27). It is precisely this "point of contact with the inconclusive present" where the narrator functions both as the authority responsible for all

narrative levels and as the medium through which the voices of the characters in the diegetic universe are articulated, that forms the novel's fundamental organising principle (Božić 84). The possibility of reproducing a character's idiolect through their speech and thoughts within the narrator's discourse makes free indirect discourse a suitable technique. This technique allows Cesarec's narrator to seamlessly incorporate other speakers and their viewpoints into his own narration. Dialogues between characters alternate with extradiegetic narration and free indirect speech as the narrator strives to depict, within this limited space and time, "the cramped, tense, and strained situation in which Croatia found itself at the time" (Frangš 529). The varied cast of characters in the remand prison represents a microcosm of Croatia: from idealists to corrupt politicians, from big-time criminals and their accomplices to mentally disturbed dreamers, from murderers and rapists to journalists, and from arsonists to thieves. These characters exist side by side, with their voices and languages heard directly or indirectly; the novel hums with the differing voices, speeches, and attitudes. There is nothing inherently dramatic about this, it is an artistically organised social heteroglossia (see Bakhtin 263). In other words, *Emperor's Kingdom* is a political novel that "has captured and intertwined the socio-political discourses marked by conflicts, thus becoming a document of its time, i.e., a document of the unstable state, entangled with terror and violence, just before the outbreak of World War I." (Car 69)

Cesarec's political commitment has often been enough to categorize his literary work as politically didactic, without deeper analysis. In the introduction to *Arguments for revolution (Argumenti za revoluciju – August Cesarec, 1982)*, historian Zorica Stipetić states that in socialist Yugoslavia at the time she published her monograph, Cesarec was a value that was "taken for granted rather than known and researched." (1). So, despite his extensive body of prose (which includes eight novels, four of which were published during his lifetime), Cesarec's identity as a communist and revolutionary led many Croatian and Yugoslav literary critics (Marin Franićević, Krešimir Nemec, Dubravko Jelčić, Slobodan Prosperov Novak etc.) to reject his writing as overly political. In regard to his novels, critics contended that this political focus hindered the natural development of the prose structure, with ideology and politics directing his artistic approach, often at the expense of its aesthetic quality.

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