

The World of Literature

THE PENITENCE OF (NON)WORK

Pascal Bruckner: *La tyrannie de la pénitence — Essai sur le masochisme occidental* (*The Tyranny of Penitence — Essay on Western Masochism*)

This book tests the consciousness of the Western man, namely, it encourages the reader to awareness and consciousness. PASCAL BRUCKNER's sentence flows interestingly, sharply, cruelly and challengingly. In it, he invokes the consciousness of his own power(lessness). The translator IVANA ŠOJAT KUČI excellently transposes long French expressions into a more solid and concise fluency of the Croatian language.

The "tyranny of penitence" is a syntagm which eloquently describes the state of mind of the Western European and Northern American man. However, the countries from the former Soviet Union and Southern America should also be included, which is not done by the author. The geographic region that is Christian particularly bears the stamp of penitence, the stamp of the earthly rotten life that will acquire its meaning only in the otherworldly one. As the author correctly concludes, the Western world repents. But, much time is spent in that repentance, which is why it is incapable of true action. At the same time, the United States of America uses its resources much more efficiently, the author maintains, while the Old World, or Europe, uses nothing or it merely imperceptibly tests its own originality. The Old World, primarily France — which is the author's first preoccupation — still lives in its glory days and dreams about the great battles of the past. The author bears grudges against France mostly, he critically humiliates it in order to make the potential French reader understand how silly and what a caricature he is.

When he discusses other nations and religious confessions, he tries to understand the problematic nature of as much guilt and sacrifice as possible: from the Jews, Armenians, Algerians, to today's immigrants' children from the former colonies, as well as the citizens of today's free countries. They all share, the author maintains, self-pity and penitence owing to their ancestors' mistakes, but they also share the utmost laziness, helplessness, inertia

and a lack of enterprising spirit. He views the today's youth — which seeks excuses for its own ineffectiveness — with disgust, he views the Islamic countries and people with fear and loathing since they deprive a great majority of its citizens, i.e. women, of fundamental human rights.

However, the citizens of the West and their leaders deserve the greatest loathing. Unwilling to look up — in many respects — to its younger brother, in other words, America, they insist upon self-pity, upon their being either a victim or a culprit; their governments do not want to apologise to the victims and move on, thus assimilating — in the present as well as the past — the true values of the once persecuted. While America complacently does not want to admit its mistakes, or it admits them and learns a lesson from them, the Old World *admits* making a mistake. According to the author, it even derives pleasure from its own sinfulness, instead of burying its own and other's wounds and instead of moving on, turning around and activating its own economy.

Countries — the former colonies do that even more successfully. Now that they are devoid of the protectorate of the Western countries, they miss the "autocratic boot", unwilling to move on and shape their own future.

The author should be criticised for his attitude towards Islam. Although it is difficult — particularly to the females — to believe that the Islamic countries will mature and develop in their adaptation of the social values to the present day world, one should not forget that Christianity took two thousand years to even initiate the ecumenical dialogue. Let us patiently wait for — although painstakingly — the Islamic awakening from its own isolation and let us have more faith in its power of judgement. Certain of the Islamic countries have already shown positive examples of social maturity.

The author should also be criticised for failing to mention the South-eastern Europe, or as the

French call it — the “Balkans in the plural form”. He only mentions Bosnia and Herzegovina twice, while other Slavic nations do not deserve any attention. It is true that Eastern and South-eastern countries did not have the development of consciousness that is equal to the one in Western Europe, but they are much closer to it than the author suggests. The fact is that the former socialist countries today show as much penitence as the more developed France or Germany. They are penitent owing to socialism, owing to the nationalistic movements during the Second World War; they condemn each other for various known and unknown crimes; the “Balkan countries” are penitent due to the war in the 1990s. They are all penitent more or less, but they do not take any action. We are faced with the general inefficiency and politicians' immaturity, lack of national production, accelerated migration to Western countries, non-investing in one's own resources — as if we all in the Old World were waiting for the Messiah to come again and deliver us from our own laziness and self-oblivion. Unfortunately, none of this is noticed or mentioned in Bruckner's essay.

One thing is certain: the author clairvoyantly invites us to consciousness. No country can make any progress without being conscious about its own power, without burying its dead and without its own forgiveness for its sinful past. No country can make any progress remembering forever its own sacrifice in the past. Penitence and accusations should stop, while work and action should start and be taken.

For every reader, this book analyses the mistakes of “major” countries and “major” religions, while for every woman reader this book is proof that she also belongs to this man's world and that with her own emancipation she acquires new commitment in accord with which she will be creating a new, common, humane future. For every Christian, man or a woman, this book invites one to the confession of the ecumenical error, the one about salvation in another life.

In every human being, regardless of colour, religion and sex, Pascal Bruckner's book should provoke awakening and alertness, which is why it is very useful that it has also entered the Croatian discourse and shown the extent to which certain intellectuals ponder the world. Nevertheless, local patriots would agree that SILVIJE STRAHIMIR KRANJČEVIĆ, a twentieth century Croatian poet, stated it very concisely, honestly and thoroughly, much earlier than the conscientious Western European intellectuals: “Mrijeti ti ćeš, kada počneš sam / u ideale svoje sumnjati!” (“You will die, when you yourself commence / doubting your ideals!”). I hope that Croatian publishers will recognise yet more of such conscientious books which will be introduced into the Croatian language and culture through translation, and that their ideal will be and will remain to educate people so that they will repent as little as possible and create as much as possible.

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