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Missed Encounters in Ivo Andrić

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Dragi Damire,

Ovaj mali proizvod iz mojih poslijesarajevskih dana nadam se da s opravdanjem dobiva svoje mjesto u profesionalnom Festschriftu u Tvoju čast. Podsjeća me živo na naše zajedničke dane kao mladih anglista, te zgode i nezgode iz tog vremena. Svaka sličnost je naravno slučajna, ali ako mi se u sjećanju na naše doživljaje jave neke analogije s Andrićevim slikama i konstatacijama, mislim da za to ima razloga.

In most of his important works Ivo Andrić, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1961, displays a fascination for the coexistence and interplay of different ethnic groups or their representatives. Bosnia, in particular, through its position between the Ottoman East and the European West provides a rich pattern of problems on its painful way towards a rational mutual rapprochement and cultural harmonization of its inhabitants.

Although Andrić's works were written many years before the recent war, they present the atmosphere of mistrust and separation between communities which has culminated in the violence and hatred of the 1990s. Andrić's scepticism concerning the future of human relationships is not devoid of hope. Yet his main late work, *Devil's Yard*, which encloses individuals of many nations, implies the ultimate faltering of man's plans to master his condition.

"I don't think that in these days there can be another country in Europe as roadless as Bosnia", remarks Daville, the French consul at Travnik, in a famous passage of Andrić's chronicle-novel. While Napoleon's administration in Dalmatia tries to build roads in order to make communication between Dalmatia and Bosnia easier, the Turks are suspicious. In fact, both Turks and Christians, though for different reasons, are equally against the opening up and maintenance of traffic lines everywhere. The priest in the village Dolac says confidentially to the other French diplomat, Desfossés: "The



worse the road is, the less often we have Turkish visitors... We're used to bad roads and every kind of difficulty. In fact we live on difficulties... [A]s long as the Turks rule at Travnik, we don't need a better road. Between ourselves, whenever the Turks mend it, our people break and hack it up at the first rain or snow. At any rate that helps to discourage unwelcome guests." On the other hand, Desfossés himself muses, "that's one reason why the roads are no good. A second reason is the Turks themselves. Every line of communication with Christian foreigners means opening a door to the enemy's influence, giving him a chance to work on the people and to threaten Turkish domination." And also, it occurs to him, "those countries we have not yet occupied look with suspicion on the roads which bring our armies to their frontiers".

This image of an isolated country divided within itself while its various communities share suspicion, fear, and antipathetic indifference to others, appears to express one of the dominant themes of Ivo Andrić's (1892-1975) literary *œuvre*. It is pertinent to any study of interconnections in the Balkan Peninsula, but at different times analogous divisions have existed in other parts of the world and have been dealt with by authors from different regions. At our moment in history the Balkans offer the most characteristic model of this kind in Europe, although the way it is described by Ivo Andrić belongs to an earlier epoch. The population of Bosnia belonged to all the main religions of this part of the world even before the crystallization of national awareness. Its position between the Ottoman East and the European West provides a rich pattern of problems on the way towards a rational rapprochement and cultural harmonization.

At another point in Andrić's *Travnik Chronicle*, the young diplomat, Desfossés, tells his friend friar Ivo:

How is it possible... for this country to become peaceful and orderly and acquire at least that degree of civilization possessed by its neighbours, when its people are segregated inside it, as happens nowhere else in Europe? There are four religions living in this cramped, hilly, starveling patch of ground. Each of them is exclusive and keeps strictly apart from the others. You all live under one sky and by the same earth, yet each of these four groups has the centre of its spiritual life far off in foreign parts, in Rome, Moscow, Constantinople, Mecca, Jerusalem or God knows where – in any case, not where these people are born and die. And each of them considers that its own welfare and advantage are dependent on the ruin and decline of the other three religions and that the other three can only advance at its own expense. And each of them has made intolerance the highest virtue and looks for salvation from somewhere else outside, each from a different quarter.

In a short story entitled "A Letter from 1920" (published in 1946) Andrić presents this problem through yet another image. A progressive young man of foreign origin explains why he has left Bosnia for good: "Who in Sarajevo lies awake at night in bed can hear the sounds of a Sarajevo night. Heavily and with confidence strikes the bell on the Catholic cathedral: two after midnight. More than a minute passes (I've counted: precisely seventy-five seconds), and only then, with a somewhat weaker but penetrating sound, the Orthodox church makes itself heard – and strikes *its own* two o'clock after midnight. A little later the



clocktower near the Beg's mosque strikes with its hoarse, distant voice and strikes eleven, the ghostly Turkish eleven o'clock after the strange counting of far-away foreign parts! The Jews have not got a clock of their own that would strike out the hours, but God alone knows what time do they have now, what after the Sephardic and what after the Ashkenazy reckoning. So at night, when everything is asleep, in counting the empty hours of the dead time at night, the difference is alert which divides those sleeping people who, awake, enjoy themselves and are sad, feast and fast according to four different calendars mutually at quarrel, and who send their wishes and prayers to one heaven in four different church languages. And this difference, at times visibly and openly, at times invisibly and slyly, always resembles hatred, and sometimes is identical with it."

These hard words lend themselves easily to a pessimistic interpretation: a state of permanent rift, of a break of communication without any desire from any side to bridge it and to establish an active give-and-take between communities. Yet is it not possible to take an alternative view and to envisage this zero point of relationships as a ground on which to start positive and necessary developments?

Since his earliest works Andrić was always fascinated by the coexistence and interplay of different ethnic groups or of their representatives. The *khan* (inn) where his first story, "The Journey of Ali Djerzelez" (1918), begins is a rich symbol of coexistence in the Turkish Balkans:

The people who interrupted their journey here at the *khan* were of all kinds. There was Sulaga Dizdar, accompanied by three tax collectors, on an official trip. Two Franciscans from Kreševo, on their way to Istanbul to lodge some complaint or other. A Greek monk. Three Venetians from Sarajevo, with a beautiful young woman. Rumour had it that the latter were delegates from Venice taking the land route to the Porte; they had a *laisser-passer* from the Pasha in Sarajevo and a constable to assist them. Their manner was reserved and they looked distinguished, though there was a troubling air of mystery about them. Then, there was a Serbian merchant from Plevlje with his son, a tall, silent young man with unnaturally flushed cheeks. A couple of merchants from Livno and their drovers; some begs from the lowlands near the Sava River; a pale-faced cadet from the military academy at Istanbul, with his uncle; three Albanian vendors of sweetmeats; a knife peddler from Foča; a degenerate who claimed he was a *hodja* from Bihać but who apparently roamed the world wherever his dark and morbid instincts took him; an Arab who sold medicines and prescriptions, coral ornaments and rings on which he engraved initials to order; and a whole crowd of drovers, horse traders and petty merchants, as well as Gypsies.

"Beside these travellers, there were also the local youths, idle and well-to-do Muslims who lounged around the coffee room all day long. And throughout the day one could hear laughter and the clapping of hands, sounds of a flute or a string instrument, the rattle of dice in a game called *šešbeš*, the yelling and shrilling of wanton folk who had nothing to do. The Franciscans never even came out of their room, while the Venetians emerged only for brief strolls, and all three of them together.

Djerzelez himself, the glorious, belligerent folk hero of the Bosnian Moslems, is comically debased in this story through his painful sensuous longing for a series of



women foreign to him – Venetian, Gipsy, Jewish, Croatian (of the “Latin” faith). A Western circus artiste has a similar effect upon the poor but serene one-eyed Ćorkan in another story and so has the Habsburg army officer upon the little provincial Sephardic girl Rifka in yet another. To Djerzelez those women mean Romantic beauty or love, or ideal perfection. But the newcomer from afar can also mean evil, as so many sadists and perverts among Ottoman dignitaries and their staff suggest in the stories, or again stand for an incomprehensible system of power alien to the people. Such is occupying Austria, which maintains the Turkish system of property and puzzles and ruins the former serf Siman who expected to be liberated from his feudal dues to his petty aga. On the other hand, the foreign visitor or settler may be full of benevolence and undergo a trial of horrifying insight: the woman who listens to the moaning of the thirsty captured outlaw, or the two Austrian young ladies eager to help the little peasant girl bitten by a snake and perishing because of the ignorance and poverty of her onlooking kinsfolk.

The full pattern of meetings and confrontation between foreigners and Bosnians of different nationalities or religions, as well as, by implication, the non-meeting of the various Bosnian groups is displayed in the *Travnik Chronicle* (published 1945). It deals with a period of seven or eight years early in the nineteenth century, when Napoleon succeeded in compelling the Turkish Empire to allow a French Consulate to be opened in Travnik, which was the capital of the province of Bosnia. Accordingly the Turks, being neutral, had also to consent for an Austrian consulate to be opened too. As Midhat Šamić has shown in his work “Historical Sources of Ivo Andrić’s *Travnik Chronicle* and Their Artistic Transformation”, the book is based on authentic documents which it follows discreetly without detriment to fictional unity and coherence. It follows the experiences of the French consul Daville, his desperate dealings with successive Turkish viziers, all elusive yet each in a different unaccountable way, and his senseless professional underhand fight with the Austrian consuls on the hill on the opposite side of the Travnik valley:

Often they fought bitterly and without regard, forgetting everything else and giving themselves up entirely to the instincts of battle and survival, like cocks with their blood up, loosed by unseen hands into this cramped and bewitched arena... Yet at the same time there was a great deal, after all, which brought the two consular opponents closer together and linked them with each other”, since they were “obliged to struggle and endure in this alien, unfriendly country, each grimly holding on and imitating in their own movements the great gestures of their distant, unseen and often incomprehensible masters...” In short, “they had to live in an atmosphere which begins by exhausting a westerner, then makes him morbidly irritable and tiresome to himself and others, and at last, in the course of years, completely absorbs and transforms him and buries him in a dull apathy long before his death.

But if in Daville’s mind Bosnia is enthralled by this metaphysical unpredictability, his secretary Desfossés’ healthy curiosity informs a mind willing to learn and to know. He



interviews people about ancient necropolae and after a landslide looks at the remnants of what was once a Roman road. With equal interest he studies men and women, silent and unsmiling, asking himself where they come from? What do they yearn for? What do they believe in? How do they love and hate, how do they grow old and die? He observes injustices of officials in the market place, is present at a cruel execution, knows bravely to stand up to a violent crazy bully in the street.

Among the native population of Travnik hardly any figures appear in the novel as self-standing individuals. Except for some odd entertainer and eccentric, they are represented by Moslem government functionaries or Catholic priests – except for persons from the Jewish minority who associate the French with human and civil emancipation. These groups of anonymous subjects never appear to constitute a unity: they live side by side and among each other but never mix or coalesce. Bosnia is a country many times split within itself. The vizier himself complains to Daville that “you can’t bring three Bosnians together without their squabbling as to who is first and neither is last, of course”. And he has only his own Moslems in mind!

A particular fate is that of first-generation Levantines, of people with Western blood who have lived in the East and have formed uneasy connections there while not quite maintaining their links with the homeland. Apart from international riff-raff and the odd isolated artisan, such people, of French or Italian extraction mainly, are epitomized in the Austrian Consulate’s surgeon, Cologna:

Nobody knows what it means to be born and to live on the margin between two worlds, knowing and understanding both, yet unable to do anything to help them to explain or draw nearer to each other, loving and hating both, wavering and following another’s lead one’s whole life long, having two homes and yet none, being at home everywhere, yet always remaining a stranger; in short, living torn apart, yet as victim and torturer in one.

If individuals feel this ambiguity so fruitful for the creation of dramatic fiction, the land of Bosnia is ultimately envisaged from the narrator’s distance as remaining unchanged in spite of temporary flurries. The epilogue of the book is an echo of its prologue. The Beggars, who seven years before were amazed and disconcerted on hearing about the arrival of European representatives, have now heard that both consulates are again to be shut. “Everything will be just as, by God’s will, it has always been.” The unmastered strangeness of Bosnia is to continue, and its contact with a different world will be forgotten as a trifling, irrelevant and ephemeral disturbance.

Within the Bosnian complex Andrić does not always distinguish for the reader the native Moslem population from the Turkish administrators, rulers and soldiers. He obviously shows this world through Slav Christian eyes. And yet he stresses the arbitrariness of governmental force, the violence which hits people of all religions, finding its victims often only among the privileged ones high up in the hierarchy of power: local beggars, or even pashas sent from Istanbul but fallen into disfavour.



In his fiction Andrić has created many interesting characters but he rarely shows them develop through a sequence of interconnected actions. His long works are rightly more often called chronicles rather than novels. In *The Bridge on the Drina* (published 1945) there is a character, Alihodja, whose life spans crucial events in the lives of several generations. This Bosnian Moslem takes a reasonable stand against fanatics at the time of the Austrian arrival in 1878 and in 1914 refuses suicidal pseudoheroism. He stays tolerant, in opposition to murderous anti-Serb thugs, though he sees his world inevitably being shattered to pieces. In a minor way Andrić succeeded in creating a positive Bosnian symbol, a character dignified and sensitive, who, if belonging to a passed era, gives hope for a future of mutual understanding and of living in common. But Andrić's more impressive images of widest purport are buildings rather than people. The bridge over the Drina at Vishegrad unifies not only the many periods and detachable narrative episodes of his book, but also provides a meeting point for people of all nationalities – for natives and settlers and temporary residents whom history, wars and commerce have brought to the city on the two shores of the Drina. Another bridge, this one over the Zhepa, is the subject of a short story (1925). The bridge was erected by a Grand Vizier who as a child had been taken to Turkey from Bosnia. The master builder is Italian, the masons and stonecutters from Herzegovina and Dalmatia. Who can think that the following description is not symbolic of the spanning of gaps psychological and human, and not merely topographic:

Just Before St. George's Day, the masons returned and work was resumed. And exactly at midsummer the bridge was finished. Gaily the workers took down the scaffolding, and from behind the maze of beams and boards there appeared a white and slender bridge, spanning the two rocky banks in a single soaring arch.

Few things would have been harder to imagine than such a wonderful structure in so ravaged and bleak a place. It seemed as if the two banks had each spurted a foaming jet of water toward one another, and these had collided, formed an arch, and remained thus for a moment, hovering above the chasm.

A monument to constructive coexistence, one might say, resistance to tensions and hazards of nature, a brave attempt to achieve a precarious union of separate parts constituting one single landscape.

On the human plane there are attempts in Andrić's works to achieve such union; contacts at least, but also more substantial mutual help. In his early stories a friar tries to fight for a Moslem's soul – to save it, at his own mortal peril, from eternal perdition. In a Turkish prison a friar and an Orthodox priest laugh together in their two separate cells. In *The Bridge on the Drina* during a catastrophic flood, eminent Moslem, Serb, and Jewish community leaders sit and talk together in their refuge. Later, priests of the three religions meet the commander of the Austrian occupying troops at the approaches to the town with similar caution and restraint, feeling the excitement of a shared apprehension. When he comes to more modern times, the author points to the first interethnic attachments, emotional and intellectual.



Andrić's sceptic philosophy makes for images of human coexistence that do not only signify solitude and mutual exclusiveness, but are also open to a complementary interpretation: whatever the differences, conflicts, material and metaphoric walls, people in one region are destined to live together. Andrić's work is full of episodes revealing that we can and must do so. In spite of reversals, since the times during which Andrić's stories take place, life has amply justified this belief.

But Andrić has never been unproblematically assertive. In fact, his most concentrated, powerful work, the short novel *Devil's Yard* (more accurately *Accursed Yard*, 1956) brings people together – in an enormous prison. And it brings them together only to separate them again, to let them go each to his own side. *Devil's Yard* is located in Constantinople, the meeting point of the Near and Middle East: of Turks and Bulgarians, Albanians and Arabs, Greeks and Armenians. Yet the names do not matter. Karagioz, the chief warden of Devil's Yard, suggests quite openly where we really are:

Whoever comes here is guilty or was scratched by someone who is... I've let enough men go free, by order or on my own; but every one of them was guilty. We've no innocents here. But there are thousands of guilty ones who are not here and never will be. If every culprit were to come here, this Yard would stretch from sea to sea. I know people; they're all guilty, only it is not fated that all of them shall eat their bread here.

The Yard is a symbol of the world in the shadow of its own manifold unspecified guilt. This closed-in unstructured agglomeration of thwarted individuals occupying a sprawling township of over fifty buildings, is interconnected by rumours, guesses, alarming news – truthful, invented, exaggerated, distorted. These are transmitted to the Bosnian friar Peter by a Jew from Smyrna. The most fully developed story concerns a tragic dreamer of Greek and Turkish origin, Djamil, who identifies himself with a character from a book, namely Djem, the half-brother of the fifteenth-century sultan Bajazet. According to historical tradition as it is presented in the story, Djem was manipulated by all of European politics, from the Sultan to the Pope, from Egypt to France, from Italy to Hungary, in the planning of their mutual relationships and diplomatic moves. Standing at the centre of the intricate narrative composition of Andrić's work, the story of Djamil and Djem contains a vision of the labyrinthine unity of a universe in which worldly ambitions take the form of self-projection into others and of identification with another's fortunes – as well as of the ultimate faltering of man's plans to master his condition in the world. The limits of individual control over fortune are transcended in Andrić's work through the very act and process of narrative. The telling of stories is seen – as in his 1961 Nobel Prize speech – to be a universal and timeless form of communication. The narrator creatively mediates between reality and the imagination of his audience, and it is therefore, we should conclude, that scholarship devoted to research into the culture of a heterogeneous region of a highly intricate structure would do ill to disregard the testimony, however oblique, of its great



authentic narrators. For who better than an Andrić will mediate between the profoundest concerns of his native land in its outstanding human complexity and the ordering, shaping, inquisitive spirit of literature and the humanities? For this reason his discourse concerning splits and divisions as characteristically constitutive of Bosnia and other areas of the Turkish empire finds its analogy in a wide range of literary production including a variety of writing in English. Postcolonial texts are bound to invite pertinent comparisons. Yet in earlier modernist fiction one will easily discover parallel cultural distinctions and rifts in the South-East Asia, the Congo, and the Latin America of Conrad, the India – Muslim and Hindu and their misunderstandings with Europeans – of Forster, the racial conflicts and assertion of hegemony from the point of view of Faulkner and its contrast in the presentation of the American South offered by Toni Morrison. Each of these great artists deserves study from the wide perspective offered, in this part of the world, by Ivo Andrić.

PROMAŠENI SUSRETI U DJELIMA IVE ANDRIĆA

Ivu Andrića su uvijek duboko zanimali suopstojnost i odnosi etničkih skupina i njihovih pripadnika, osobito u Bosni. U mnogim njegovim književnim djelima predočena je atmosfera nepovjerenja i međusobne razdvojenosti, koja je do svog vrhunca došla za nedavnog rata (koji on nije doživio). Njegova skepsa prema budućnosti tih odnosa ipak nije beznadna, makar njegovo glavno kasno djelo, *Prokleta avlija*, u kojemu se javljaju pripadnici brojnih naroda, ukazuje na konačni neuspjeh čovjekovih nastojanja da zagospodari vlastitom sudbinom.