

Andrić's Strategy of Redemption

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When asked what Andrić's novel *The Bridge on the Drina* is about, most readers would say that it is about the entire history of the bridge and the city of Višegrad, from the time when Mehmed Pasha Sokolović decided to have it built to the destruction of the bridge at the beginning of the Great War. Nevertheless, if we want to be precise, we should notice that as many as sixteen chapters, out of twenty-four, are devoted to the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. More than two-thirds of the novel deals with this relatively short period, the period of social modernization in Bosnia, initiated after Austria-Hungary occupied the province.

The occupation created a dynamic new landscape around the eternally constant, unchangeable bridge. The foreigners brought with them hitherto unheard-of plans, immense and incomprehensible: to build and rebuild, to dig up and put back again, even to change the outward appearance of the bridge, and to encompass all aspects of life in a web of laws, orders, and regulations. They were never at peace, nor did they allow anyone else to live in peace. Puzzled by the change, Višegrad Turks ended every conversation with questions that contained a critique of progress: "Where is all this leading and where will it stop? Who and what were these strangers who, it seemed, did not know the meaning of rest and respite, knew neither measure nor limits? What did they want? With what plans had they come? What was this restlessness which continually drove them on, like some curse, to new works and enterprises of which no one could see the end?"¹

The foreigners' restlessness, in which the old inhabitants of Višegrad saw a premonition of doom, is the most obvious sign of the social modernization undertaken by a Faustian power. Its primary law, utterly incomprehensible to all who regard "sweet tranquillity" as "the main aim of existence and the most perfect expression of public and private life," says that nothing can be created without the destruction of what already exists, and that the new creation will be eventually destroyed to make way for the next one. In the world of social

¹ Ivo Andrić, *The Bridge on the Drina*, trans. Lovett F. Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 137.

modernization, stability of any kind means entropy and slow death. Goethe's Faust, the first modern cultural hero and at the same time the first hero of social modernization, impelled by the vital force of his desire for development, must never utter the words "Stay, thou art so fair," for his contract says that holding up in a moment of delight would for him mean death. Social modernization is a process capable of everything except stability and solidity. It turns deserts into gardens, but cannot answer the question asked by the Višegrad Turks about limits and measure. Everything it creates must be destroyed for the process to be continued forever. It knows no result in which it could peacefully rest, for its desired result is the process of change itself. The foreigners in Višegrad, as Alihodža understands them, are moved to clean, order, fix, and reshape everything, only to dismantle everything the very next moment, with a kind of "pernicious endlessness."

Social modernization, as has been said many times, is constructed by its machines. One of these machines, the train, succeeded in changing the geography of the city and reducing the importance of the bridge on the Drina. This is not only to be understood literally. By running along the river, says the narrator, the train defeated the bridge. On a higher level of meaning, this victory bears witness to the most essential part of the relationship between social modernization and literary modernism.

Trains have only structural, never substantial, existence. When we say that we travelled from Višegrad to Sarajevo on the 5:30 train, we do not refer to a specific locomotive or car, for these can be changed, but to the departure time of any locomotive specified by a system known as the railway timetable. The train we arrived on is not defined by the number of cars or the shape of the seats in them, and even less by the fact that the very same locomotive might have helped us make the same journey last week. The train is defined by the fact that its departure time is not 7:30 or 9:30, which is to say, by its difference from other elements within the same system. Even if another locomotive makes the journey the next day, with a different number of cars behind it, the only thing that matters is that it departs at the same time, for this is how we identify it as the very same train.

A bridge, on the contrary, is specified by its materiality and uniqueness; by the shape and number of its arches and the colour of its stone. What it is made of is not irrelevant to its function. The bridge on the Drina is unique not only because there is only one other bridge like it in the whole empire, but also because one cannot imagine anything that could replace it without becoming a different thing altogether; another bridge at the same spot, or next to it, could serve the same purpose, but it would still be a new bridge and not the same one. The second reason for the bridge's uniqueness is the absence of any system in which its replacement would be imaginable. Trade and traffic

go over the bridge, but the bridge is not part of a communication system in the same way as is a train. The bridge is specified by its substantiality; trains are specified by their place in the system to which they belong.

As the train deprived the bridge of its significance and function in Višegrad's life, so the phonograph replaced singing at the *kapia* "between water, the sky and the mountains." In this replacement, the same opposition between the substantial and the functional-structural can be traced. Quiet singing at the *kapia* is unique: one evening can be like another, but it cannot be the same. There is always something personal in a song sung by a human voice. Phonographs, on the contrary, "ground and churned out Turkish marches, Serbian patriotic songs or arias from Viennese operettas, according to the tastes of the guests for whom it played." A phonograph is impersonal and indifferent toward the music it performs: for this machine, music does not exist substantially, but only structurally.

The key system of this world is the stock market. The stock market does not recognize the intrinsic value of the goods bought or sold. It homogenizes every substance into its universal code of index points and universal replaceability. In the economic domain, the stock market is the empire of the structural game of differences. Goods acquire value not according to their intrinsic worth, but according to their relationship to other goods: a drop in the price of one causes a rise in the price of another. In short, value is the result of relationships between things, not of the things themselves. In one such shift of values, Lotte loses her life savings. "Lotte's stocks and shares began to play like dust in a high wind," says the narrator; "she would weep with rage when she read the most recent quotations each week in the Vienna *Merkur*."² If success or failure has nothing to do with the merit of the person who works and saves, or with the value of what has been saved; if in this world something akin to the substantial value of a person or thing can be neither created nor sustained, then Lotte's ultimate economic strategy is fully justified as the only rational move in a world that resists rationality. If everything is lottery, then buying a lottery ticket seems to be all one can do.

The defeat of the substantial and the consequent triumph of the structural and functional can be traced everywhere in literary modernism. In Proust, for example, it informs a number of inversions and underlines all of *The Remembrance of Things Past*. For Marcel, his gaze concentrated on the discovery of the essences of everything that appears in his world, the lady in the train does not differ essentially from the owner of a brothel. He is wrong, nevertheless, for structurally, in the aristocratic system, the lady is a princess. Madame Verdurin, the very embodiment of vulgarity and banality, becomes

² Andrić, 260.

the Princess de Guermantes, thanks solely to the change of her position in the system, but this change is not accompanied by a corresponding substantial change. The owner of the public restroom, refusing to let “common people” in, shows that she is not interested in substantial differences between her customers, only structural ones. The fall of the old world, nostalgically portrayed in Proust’s novel, takes the form of a series of small victories of the structural over the substantial. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the substantial has ceased to exist in the world. There is still a character—the narrator’s grandmother—who represents the substantial and sets up criteria of value. In Kafka’s world, on the other hand, this difference is much stronger, for the substantial has withdrawn beyond reach. No one can say what the castle is; all we can be certain of is that it is a structural place of power and authority. The plot of *The Castle* consists of a series of fruitless attempts by Kafka to define the castle in a substantial way.

One of the consequences of the opposition between these two principles is the resistance of literary modernism to the process of social modernization. The nostalgia for various forms of the substantial, as a reflection of the decay of values in Herman Broch’s novels, or as the search for essential time in Proust’s, fundamentally defines and animates literary modernism. The modernists’ understanding of time rests on this opposition as well. The watch and the calendar are the main instruments of the world in which the principle of structural and functional has been victorious. The first sign of the resistance to universal quantification in the world of modernization is the replacement of the watch and the calendar with “inner” measurements of time. This is a fairly superficial device in literary modernism; in the most important works of literary modernism, in the novels of Mann, Proust, and Joyce, as well as in T.S. Eliot’s poems, the opposition between measured and “inner” time is joined by a third dimension: that of eternity. The attitude of the great modernist writers towards the inherited conception of time, shaped in the Renaissance and still dominant today, is too complex to be elaborated here. Suffice it to say that all of their attempts can be described as resisting the idea of time as an endless line of steadily growing dynamism, and that they tried to find a way around this interpretation by weaving visions of the timeless or the mythical. Hans Kastorp’s dream in snow, Proust’s attempts to create eternity in an oscillation between past and present, or Joyce’s and Eliot’s mythical patterns—these are all forms of “good eternity” as opposed to the “pernicious endlessness” of the Faustian everlasting and self-devouring movement. If the substantial or essential has been lost in the dynamism of social modernization, in the triumph of the structural and functional, then the chain must be broken and the encounter with the essential must be made possible again.

This is one of the most important aspects of the historical and philosophical notions of literary modernism, shaped in confrontation with the process of social modernization. Andrić follows it only to a certain point, and this makes his attitude contradictory. The bridge on the Drina appeared in its beauty, strength, and substantiality at the end of almost every chapter in the novel. The bridge is stronger than everything time and men can do, lasting and unchangeable as a symbol of a modernist's "good" eternity, and at the very end of the novel it is shown destroyed in a war started by the power of social modernization. The novel portrays other wars as well, those that preceded the Great War, but in none of them was the bridge threatened with destruction. Even defeated by the train, the bridge on the Drina stood intact and glorious in its substantiality. However, the comprehensive changes brought by the process of social modernization deprive it even of its symbolic presence. Andrić agrees on this point with the great literary modernists, who envisage the Great War as the end of the long and gradual disappearance of traditional humanistic values. But the ending of *The Bridge on the Drina* lacks a modernist strategy of redemption, be it aesthetic, revolutionary, or oneiric. The triumph of Faustian dynamism and its "false eternity," which European literary modernism attempted to cure or alleviate in a variety of ways, has acquired an irrevocability rarely found in the work of other modernists. The novel ends with Alihodža, the guardian and protector of the bridge and the most articulate critic of social modernization. Alihodža awaits the arrival of the Faustian power with his right ear nailed to the oak beam on the bridge. Austrian soldiers, enemies from Alihodža's point of view, release him from this humiliating position and tend to his wound. This kind of punishment is unimaginable in the new world of social modernization, for Faustian power respects human beings. Social modernization is, in fact, a process set in motion for their benefit: it is the power that *wishes good*. Nevertheless, it always *does evil*: for so many years Alihodža

... had seen how they had always been concerning themselves with the bridge; they had cleaned it, embellished it, repaired it down to its foundations, taken the water supply across it, lit it with electricity and then one day blown it all into the skies as if it had been some stone in a mountain quarry and not a thing of beauty and value, a bequest. Now one can see what they were and what they wanted. He had always known that, but now, now even the most stupid of fools could see it for himself. They had begun to attack even the strongest and most lasting of things, to take things away from God. And who knew

where it would stop! Even the Vezir's bridge had begun to crumble away like a necklace; and once it began no one could hold it back.³

Protected from humiliating pain and torture, granted the dignity that he, as a human being, deserves before his death, Alihodža sees the consequences: it has started and nobody knows how to stop it.

Andrić's answer or, to put it differently, Andrić's strategy of redemption, can be found in Alihodža's last thought. The fact that the final perspective of the novel has been formulated not by the narrator but by one of the characters is itself a warning sign. "Anything might happen," thinks Alihodža, "but one thing could not happen; it could not be that great and wise men of exalted soul who would raise lasting buildings for the love of God, so that the world should be more beautiful and man live in it better and more easily, should everywhere and for all time vanish from this earth. Should they too vanish, it would mean that the love of God was extinguished and had disappeared from the world. That could not be."⁴ That could not be because the love of God is still with us, and for its sake the great and wise men of exalted soul would raise lasting buildings. The final perspective of *The Bridge on the Drina* is ironically reversed and conditioned. It rests on a character's faith in the presence of God's love on earth. If we bracket faith in God's love as the guarantee of redemption, the narrator's irony disappears. Then the final perspective reads: "Anything can happen. It would mean that the love of God was extinguished and had disappeared from the world. It could be that great and wise men of exalted soul who would raise lasting buildings for the love of God, so that the world be more beautiful and man live in it better and more easily, will everywhere and for all time vanish from this earth. Anything can happen."

³ Andrić, 313

⁴ Andrić, 314.