

The Proof Is in the Pudding: Ivo Andrić and His Bosniak Critics

Bogdan Rakić
Indiana University

Upon the completion of the Višegrad Bridge in 1571, a big white plaque was embedded in its central pier, with an engraved inscription that praised the farsightedness, generosity, and benevolence of the donor, Mehmed Pasha Sokoli, “the greatest among the wise and great of his time.”¹ Andrić utilized this detail in *The Bridge on the Drina* to show how a literary text may acquire a number of different meanings due to the idiosyncratic perspective of the reader. Considering the implications of the following passage, it is hard to believe that Andrić’s irony is aimed only at a few fictional characters of semi-literate Višegrad “scholars” who are shown interpreting the meaning of the Turkish text to their less enlightened listeners:

Because of their literary shortcomings, their thick heads and lively imaginations, each of the local scholars read and interpreted in his own way Badi’s *tarih* on the stone plaque which, as every text once revealed to the public, stood there, eternal on the eternal stone, always and irrevocably exposed to the looks and interpretations of all men, wise or foolish, evil or well-intentioned. Each one of these listeners remembered those lines which best suited his ear and his temperament. So what was there, engraved on the hard stone in the sight of all men, was repeated from mouth to mouth, often changed and corrupted into nonsense.²

The paragraph can be easily seen as Andrić’s self-protective move against the possibilities of misinterpretations of his own texts. This is not something unexpected: parallel to the almost universal critical acclaim with which Andrić’s work met both in its original Serbian and in translation, a different, very negative opinion regarding his literary output was formed as early as the mid-1950s. Spearheaded by the Sarajevo magazines *Vox* and *Valter*, the at-

¹ Ivo Andrić, *The Bridge on the Drina*, trans. Lovett F. Edwards (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 68.

² Andrić, 68.

tacks on Andrić intensified especially during the political turmoil a few years before the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. This was not a coincidence, since the magazines served as loudspeakers for some of the most powerful players in the Bosnian political game.³ The literary war continued even after the armed hostilities in Bosnia ended in 1995: the literature textbooks used in elementary and high schools in the Bosniak-Croat Federation contain numerous negative comments regarding Andrić's work and personality.⁴

Andrić certainly did not mince his words when he talked about the "literary shortcomings," "thick heads," and "lively imaginations" of Bosnian "scholars" responsible for nonsensical interpretations of literary texts. Judging by the tone of some of the negative critical responses, his opponents paid him back with the same coin. But niceties are not to be expected in literary polemics, especially not in the Balkans. Therefore this "battle of books" is interesting insofar as it reveals much of the present political reality of Bosnia. Despite their claims that their only intention was to challenge the myth of literary greatness that sycophants created around Andrić, his critics' attacks exposed some of the myths they created themselves—the myths that disguise their own ideological position.

The first text in which Andrić's works were interpreted as historically false, artistically dubious, and, most of all, ideologically harmful was written by Šukrija Kurtović, probably in the mid-1950s. Kurtović was a proponent of the so-called "nationalization" of the Bosnian Muslims, i.e. of the differentiation between their religious and ethnic affiliations. He entered politics before World War One, as a high school student in Mostar, when he embraced the idea of Yugoslavism. In World War Two, Kurtović took an active part in the People's Liberation Movement, led by Joseph Broz Tito. His political ideas and ideological perspectives are clearly reflected in the title of his essay on Andrić: "*The Bridge on the Drina* and *The Chronicle of Travnik* by Ivo Andrić in Light of Brotherhood and Unity" (*Na Drini ćuprija i Travnička hronika* od Ive Andrića u svjetlu bratstva i jedinstva).

The essay sets the tone of other major attacks on Andrić that followed its publication in 1963, therefore deserving a more detailed consideration.

³ See, for example, an interview with Smail Balić, the former editor of *Bosanski pogledi*, published in the 21 August 1990 issue of *Valter*; see also texts by Nihad Kreševljaković and Alenko Zornija, entitled "Ivo Andrić: Markiz De Sad naše književnosti" and "Ko pisne ... stisne," published in *Vox*, September 1990, 6–8, 9. The two authors repeat the same accusations against Andrić made by Šukrija Kurtović in the 1950s and Adil Zulfikarpašić in the 1960s. Zulfikarpašić returned to Bosnia from exile in 1990 and formed the Muslim Bosniak Organization (MBO). He was actively involved in the publishing of *Vox*, and Balić was his close associate from the émigré days.

⁴ See Branko Perić, "Mržnja i uvrede," *NIN*, 4 February 1999, pp. 24–26.

Kurtović begins by accusing Andrić of anti-Muslim bias. He objects to Andrić's consistent references to Bosnian Muslims as "Turks," ignoring the note which Andrić always published with his novels, pointing out the fact that this is not a racial or ethnic term, but an erroneous, although traditionally accepted, label.⁵ Analyzing a scene from *The Chronicle of Travnik*, in which the French consul is shown some dubious trophies won by Muslim soldiers in a raid against Christian peasants from a church procession, Kurtović insists that all Muslim characters in Andrić's novels "are ridiculed and shown in an ironic light; they are all presented as idiotic and degenerate; they are all villains; they are depicted as intolerant, sly, and uneducated [...]; they are portrayed as murderers; they are, in short, real savages who enjoy cutting off the noses of the infidels and committing other most heinous crimes."⁶ Kurtović also supplies the reasons for Andrić's negative attitude towards Muslims: his two novels were written in Serbia under Milan Nedić's political regime, in an atmosphere imbued with anti-Muslim sentiments.⁷ Consequently, Andrić's intentions were to kowtow to the authorities.⁸ This remark leads to a personal attack on Andrić. Kurtović characterizes him as "evasive and unmanly,"⁹ "slimy as an eel,"¹⁰ and "cynical";¹¹ he is called "a chauvinist"¹² and "an archenemy";¹³ finally, he is equated with "Goethe's Mephistopheles—the demon of mankind."¹⁴

In order to provide his essay with some sort of theoretical framework and prove his accusations on literary grounds, Kurtović quotes Friedrich Engels as his leading literary authority and discusses Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina* in light of Engels's remark that "literature is as important as the social sciences insofar as it facilitates the transfer of scientific truths to the largest number of ordinary people."¹⁵ In Kurtović's opinion, *The Bridge on the Drina* cannot pass this test: as a historical novel, it does not present a unified whole, it does not offer any insights into history or other social sciences, and it is

⁵ See Šukrija Kurtović, "'Na Drini ćuprija' i 'Travnička hronika' od Ive Andrića u svjetlu bratstva i jedinstva," *Sveske Zadužbine Ive Andrića* 9–10 (1993–94): 389.

⁶ Kurtović, 390.

⁷ Kurtović, 390.

⁸ Kurtović, 428.

⁹ Kurtović, 404.

¹⁰ Kurtović, 404.

¹¹ Kurtović, 409.

¹² Kurtović, 416.

¹³ Kurtović, 416.

¹⁴ Kurtović, 418.

¹⁵ Kurtović, 420–21.

entirely devoid of literary realism as well as detached from historical reality. Kurtović's final verdict is interesting: he concludes that Andrić's novel is simply a product of the author's imagination!¹⁶

However, Kurtović's main concerns are neither literary nor historical. Andrić's works are not just untrue and faulty—they also pose a serious political threat. According to Kurtović, the bottom line is that Andrić “endeavors to separate Muslims from other people in Bosnia, although it is a well-known fact that in no other [Yugoslav] province is the population more homogenous than it is in Bosnia.”¹⁷ And as an illustration of this homogeneity Kurtović—apparently forgetful of some of his earlier accusations regarding the terminology used by Andrić—quotes an old saying that describes the people of Bosnia as “*Turks* who practice three different religions.”¹⁸ Consequently, he accuses Andrić of “sowing intolerance, not to say hatred, among the brothers of one and the same blood.”¹⁹ In short, concludes Kurtović, finally revealing his own ideological position, Andrić's works are “anachronistic in our present-day society, they have a very negative impact on the idea of brotherhood and unity, they are in fact dangerous with regard to that idea, which—considering the horrible events from the not-so-remote past—has to be persistently propagated.”²⁰ Kurtović's message is clear: Andrić does not like Bosnian Muslims and he destroys the country's unity by depicting it as too diverse, with too many sharply opposed religious, cultural, and ethnic perspectives. Kurtović may have been a well-meaning individual whose intention was to promote ethnic and religious tolerance, but the central problem regarding his criticism of Andrić is that the basic suppositions of the idea of “brotherhood and unity,” as he sees it, imply annihilating cultural diversity and leveling out all the differences that characterize life in Bosnia. Given the fundamentals of Kurtović's political vision, it is only too natural that his idea of how Bosnia should look is at odds with the colorful cultural variegatedness of the country as described by Andrić.

Through an intermediary, Kurtović's essay was published in 1963 in a journal in which Kurtović—with regard to his Marxist views—would probably never have considered publishing it himself. The journal, *Bosanski pogledi*, was edited by Adil Zulfikarpašić, an anti-Communist political émigré who lived in Austria at the time. However, the idea of the creation of a unified Bosnian nation, despite the different religious affiliations of the three main

¹⁶ See Kurtović, 421.

¹⁷ Kurtović, 390.

¹⁸ Kurtović, 390; emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Kurtović, 402.

²⁰ Kurtović, 434.

ethnic groups in Bosnia, had (and still has) a high priority on Zulfikarpašić's political agenda. In his editorial introduction to Kurtović's text, Zulfikarpašić feels obliged to distance himself from some of Kurtović's ideological beliefs, pointing out that "the author of the essay still suffers from some delusions from his youth, which are such that I cannot help denouncing," but he also adds "that this does not diminish in the least the outstanding value of this essay or the moral stature of its author."²¹ What is it that earned Kurtović so much respect from a man who, as an anti-Communist, stood at the opposite end of the political spectrum? Zulfikarpašić apparently praises Kurtović for "never failing to speak up in defense of the Muslims from Bosnia-Herzegovina."²² However, one suspects that Kurtović's idea of Bosnia's cultural homogeneity, albeit presented in the form of the communist concept of "brotherhood and unity," was something that Zulfikarpašić, a supporter of the idea of a unified Bosnian nation, finds even more appealing than the moral integrity of his Marxist opponent.

Considering Kurtović's and Zulfikarpašić's preference for uniformity over diversity in Bosnia, it is small wonder that they share almost identical opinions with regard to Andrić's literary output. In addition to the points made by Kurtović, Zulfikarpašić insists on the following: Andrić's novels, especially *The Bridge on the Drina*, represent his endeavors to justify the massacres of Muslim civilians by certain *chetnik* units in Eastern Bosnia in 1942;²³ his high literary reputation is not due to the artistic merits of his works but to plentiful bribes distributed by Yugoslav diplomatic representatives among foreign literary specialists;²⁴ the Nobel Prize for Literature that Andrić received in 1961 should be revoked on the basis of plagiarism—the well-known impaling scene from *The Bridge on the Drina* is in fact a word for word rendering of the account of the heroic death of the Egyptian martyr Suleiman el-Halebi, which was first published in *Sarajevski list* of 7 May 1915.²⁵ Despite these innovations by Zulfikarpašić, the end verdict remains unchanged—in his opinion, as in Kurtović's, Andrić is guilty of writing nov-

²¹ [Adil] Zulfikarpašić, "Umjesto predgovora," *Bosanski pogledi* (London: Stamaco, 1984), 134.

²² Zulfikarpašić, 134.

²³ See "Komunisti guše kritiku pisanja Ive Andrića," *Bosanski pogledi*, 121.

²⁴ See "Komunisti guše kritiku pisanja Ive Andrića," 121.

²⁵ "Nobelovac-kompilator," *Bosanski pogledi*, 335.

els “full of religious hatred and nationalistic poison,”²⁶ the main purpose of which is “to turn the Serbs against the Muslims.”²⁷

The same attitude—couched in the abstract terms of a literary-philosophical treatise—is echoed in Muhamed Filipović’s article “What Is Bosnian Spirit in Literature,” published in the Sarajevo periodical *Život* in 1967. Filipović is an interesting public figure. He began his career as a Marxist philosopher and a prominent member of the Commission for Ideological Issues of the Central Committee of the Bosnian Communist Party. However, after the demise of communism in 1990, Filipović first joined Alija Izetbegović’s Party of Democratic Action, but then sided with the more secular Muslim Bosniak Organization, founded by Zulfikarpašić. Filipović’s political vacillations could be said to bridge the gap between Kurtović and Zulfikarpašić and to symbolize the reconciliation of some of their opposing political views. In any case, despite his predilection for changing political colors, Filipović retained one interesting ideological feature. Just like Kurtović and Zulfikarpašić, Filipović is a supporter of the idea of the Bosnian melting pot that would assimilate members of the three major ethnic groups in the country—Serbs, Croats, and Muslims—and thus create some sort of supra-national Bosnian nation. In fact, Filipović sees Bosnia as a country characterized by a “Bosnian spirit,” a rather mystical phenomenon which he defines as a “subjective expression of comprehensive circumstances in which a nation exists,” and as a “specific attitude towards life that constitutes a nation as a historical entity.”²⁸ According to Filipović, Bosnia only appears heterogeneous, while in its essence it is firmly united by its “spirit.” However, Bosnia’s unity has been constantly threatened since roughly the 1870s, when new literary trends appeared among certain groups of the Bosnian population. These groups no longer identified themselves in cultural and ethnic terms as Bosnians, but rather sought their national identity outside the country, that is, in Serbia and Croatia. In Filipović’s opinion, two Serbian writers from Bosnia, Petar Kočić and Svetozar Ćorović, are the creators of this devastating literary trend, which is directly opposed to the unifying “Bosnian spirit” and thus responsible for the consequent fragmentation of the country, but the entire movement culminated in the novels of Ivo Andrić. In Filipović’s words, Andrić’s works have caused Bosnia “more harm than the many foreign armies

²⁶ Zulfikarpašić, 134.

²⁷ This is a remark by Hajrudin Filipović; Zulfikarpašić published Filipović’s text “Još neka mišljenja u emigrantskoj štampi o Ivu Andriću,” in *Bosanski pogledi*, no.15 (May 1962) (see *Bosanski pogledi*, 206).

²⁸ Muhamed Filipović, “Bosanski duh u književnosti—šta je to,” *Život*, 16, no. 3 (1967): 3.

that have marched through it, spilling the blood of its people.”²⁹ He is directly opposed to the idea of “unity and togetherness, which has painfully emerged throughout the one thousand years of Bosnia’s difficult history.”³⁰ He is destructive and harmful, subversive and dangerous, because he does not see the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic population of Bosnia as Bosnians, but rather as Serbs and Croats, who constantly disturb the country’s unity, insisting that their own national “spirit” has its roots somewhere else.

However, since none of the above-mentioned critics of Andrić’s work is a literary specialist, the most authoritative attack on Andrić came from Muhsin Rizvić, a professor of Yugoslav literatures at the University of Sarajevo. As a young man, Rizvić joined the underground political organization Muslim Youth, whose prominent members were Alija Izetbegović and Omer Behmen, the current political leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Rizvić later gave up politics and became one of the leading experts on the literature of the Bosnian Muslims. His almost seven-hundred-page volume entitled *Bosnian Muslims in the Works of Ivo Andrić*, published posthumously in 1995, while the civil war in Bosnia was still raging, analyzes Andrić’s work using some of the methodological tools provided by the literary theories of reception and psychoanalysis. But despite all of his sophisticated theoretical equipment, the specialist Rizvić does not carry his criticism of Andrić beyond the point reached forty years before him by the amateur Kurtović. In short, according to Rizvić, Andrić is openly anti-Muslim in his attitudes; he falsifies history in order to denigrate the Bosnian Muslims; he sees only examples of interethnic and interreligious friction, division, and hatred in Bosnia. In Rizvić’s opinion, the reasons for such antagonism on Andrić’s part are twofold. First, his negative attitude is caused by his attempt to court the readership of those with a Serbian cultural orientation. Second, it is an outcome of Andrić’s “suppressing his own dark impulses, his homosexual sado-masochism.”³¹ Thus Andrić becomes accused of everything a man can be accused of in the Balkans: he doesn’t love his non-Christian neighbor; he’s a liar and a myth-maker; he’s responsible for bloodbaths and atrocities; he’s a spineless opportunist and a political turncoat; he may even be gay!

At this point, it would be interesting to compare the views of the above-mentioned critics—all of whom have been directly involved in the Bosnian political conflict—with the opinions of the relatively politically disinterested American and British reviewers and literary experts. The first American and British reviews from the late fifties and the early sixties immediately recog-

²⁹ M. Filipović, 6.

³⁰ M. Filipović, 6.

³¹ Muhsin Rizvić, *Bosanski Muslimani u Andrićevo svijetu* (Sarajevo: Ljiljan, 1995), 635.

nized the religious and ethnic mixture as one of the central features of Andrić's works, but they also described him as a writer who offers his readers a "historical perspective free of racial or religious bitterness."³² Consequently, *The Bridge on the Drina* was announced as "a book of singular compassion written by a Serb who understands and loves the Turkish 'hereditary foe.'"³³ In these first reviews, Andrić is repeatedly referred to as "a philosopher and moralist [who] preaches: do not hate!"³⁴ and "a man of compassion, warmth, calm, and wisdom,"³⁵ who "loves humanity [and] understands its suffering."³⁶

The same attitude prevails in later, more comprehensive critical approaches that appear in the West. In the first book-length study on Andrić published in Britain in the mid-eighties, Celia Hawkesworth insists that Andrić's endeavor to bridge the ethnic divisions of his native Bosnia is reflected in thematic patterns and clusters of images that recurrently surface in his works: "For West Europeans, whose attitude to 'The Turk' was for centuries hostile, Andrić represents one of the brightest aspects of this meeting [between the Muslim East and the Christian West] in his positive fusion of features of each culture. His experience led directly to the emergence of one of the most important symbols of his work: the bridge."³⁷ A similar opinion is voiced in some of the most recent literary analyses, based on the principles of post-structuralism and written in the mid-nineties, during the civil war in Bosnia. In an attempt to find out how Andrić's "major literary texts actually function to create the imagined community that was Yugoslavia,"³⁸ the American critic Andrew Wachtel focuses on "the elements that remain con-

³² Belle Pomer in the October 1959 issue of *The Canadian Forum*, p. 166; quoted in Peter Horwath and Naomi Lindstrom, "The Critical Reception of the Works of Ivo Andrić by the Press in the Americas," *Delo Ive Andrića u kontekstu evropske književnosti i kulture* (Beograd: Zadužbina Ive Andrića u Beogradu, 1981), 838.

³³ Richard Winston in *The New York Herald Tribune* (28 June 1959, p. 11); quoted in Horwath and Lindstrom, 837.

³⁴ Stoyan Christowe in the *New York Times Book Review* (28 October 1962); quoted in Horwath and Lindstrom, 842.

³⁵ Ernest S. Pisko in the *Christian Science Monitor* (2 January 1960); quoted in Horwath and Lindstrom, 840–41.

³⁶ Michael Ginsburg in the *Saturday Review* (24 November 1962); quoted in Horwath and Lindstrom, 843.

³⁷ Celia Hawkesworth, *Ivo Andrić: Bridge between East and West* (London: The Athlone Press, 1984), 1.

³⁸ Andrew Wachtel, "Imagining Yugoslavia: The Historical Archeology of Ivo Andrić," in *Ivo Andrić Revisited: The Bridge Still Stands*, ed. Wayne S. Vucinich (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley Press, 1995), 83.

stant despite the differences” between the texts.³⁹ One of these elements is Andrić’s frequent use of first-person plural narration. This narrative device, insists Wachtel, introduces Andrić’s narrator as “the sum total of the Yugoslav historical process,”⁴⁰ and “a supra-individual storyteller, the modern-day incarnation of the *guslar* (bard), perhaps, and it should not be forgotten that *guslari* were to be found among both Christians and Muslims.”⁴¹ Ronelle Alexander points in the same direction with her discussion of *The Bridge on the Drina*, the novel which “is meant to have both literal and metaphorical import.”⁴² Consequently, the town of Višegrad “represents not only itself, but also all of Bosnia; in turn Bosnia represents not only itself, but also all of Yugoslavia; and finally, the ill-fated union of Yugoslavia itself represents the entire historical convergence of East and West.”⁴³ In this way, continues Alexander, it is

up to Andrić’s readers to decide, at any point in the narrative, when and to what extent they are included. In this regard, it is significant that Andrić uses first-person plural marking to develop a sense of community *that only rarely carries national or ethnic identification*. Thus it is possible in nearly every instance for his readers (especially those who are inhabitants of the former Yugoslavia) to choose to read him inclusively—if they so wish.⁴⁴

It is obvious that Kurtović, Zulfikarpašić, Filipović, and Rizvić do not so wish. Why? A possible—although indirect—answer can be found in one of Rizvić’s most severe objections to Andrić’s work. Rizvić seems especially offended by what he sees as Andrić’s attack on the Bosnian Muslims as “embodiments of the abnormal forms of sensuality, as mentally deranged, hostile maniacs whose traumatic instincts and abnormal impulses are viciously directed against other people.”⁴⁵ In other words, Rizvić objects to Andrić’s interest in perverted sexuality and in psychotic behavior, the features that are—according to Rizvić—shown as typical of the members of only one

³⁹ Wachtel, 90.

⁴⁰ Wachtel, 91.

⁴¹ Wachtel, 92.

⁴² Ronelle Alexander, “Narrative Voice and Listener’s Choice in the Prose of Ivo Andrić,” in *Ivo Andrić Revisited: The Bridge Still Stands*, ed. Wayne S. Vucinich (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley Press, 1995), 214.

⁴³ Alexander, 214.

⁴⁴ Alexander, 214–15; emphasis mine.

⁴⁵ Rizvić, 580.

ethnic group in Bosnia, the Muslims. Although incorrect, this observation is interesting in light of Rizvić's thorough knowledge of Bosnian literature. Namely, Rizvić does not seem to have a problem with the same preoccupation with eroticism and insanity that characterize works of some other prominent writers from Bosnia, particularly Nedžad Ibrišimović or Meša Selimović. The reason for Rizvić's inconsistency is not difficult to find. As the American critic Henry Cooper noted with regard to Selimović's novel *Death and the Dervish*, there is one major difference between Andrić and Selimović:

Selimović's Bosnia is extraordinarily uniform. In this regard it bears no resemblance whatsoever either to the colorful variegatedness of Andrić's Bosnia, or to the reality of the country, which once was celebrated as a multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious society and now is being punished for it. Selimović's Bosnia is precisely what the ethnic cleansers, the sectarians, the fundamentalists, the dogmatists hope to achieve: one people, under one code, bowing to one authority.⁴⁶

Of course, Selimović's Bosnia is so uniform not because of his own ideological preferences, but because of the central problem his novel deals with—the horrors of a totalitarian system that is based on one ideological code prescribed by one form of authority. But Cooper's comparison between Selimović and Andrić still points at the heart of the problem some Bosnian intellectuals have with the latter. The same problem is visible in one of Wachtel's critical observations. Discussing the particularities of Bosnian and Yugoslav history that Andrić's novels uncover, Wachtel notices dynamic interchange between different ethnic groups as its only historical constant:

Ultimately in Višegrad, as in Travnik and Sarajevo, and as in Andrić's own Yugoslavia, the only truly permanent force was the constant interchange among the different peoples who lived in this same, contested territory. This is what makes up the country's peculiar historical value. And these interrelationships are complicated, irrational, and maddeningly permanent. The imagined community of Yugoslavia can exist only by including these competing, inimical, yet closely related groups, and it is ultimately the passion of their static

⁴⁶ Henry R. Cooper, Jr., introduction to *Death and the Dervish* by Meša Selimović, trans. Bogdan Rakić and Stephen M. Dickey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), xvi.

yet ever-evolving relationships that appears in all of Andrić's work, cutting across the chronotopic lines of his fiction.⁴⁷

It is this historical continuum of the “competing, inimical, yet closely related groups” that seems to bother Andrić's Bosniak critics the most—Andrić's Bosnia is obviously too diverse for their political purposes. Of course, it may appear a paradox that the very people who accuse Andrić of the crime of diversity—like Zulfikarpašić and Filipović—still pretend to be staunch supporters of the idea of Bosnia's multiculturalism. That, however, should not come as a surprise, considering that the most outspoken promoter of the idea of a multiethnic Bosnia is also the author of the ideas articulated in the notorious *Islamic Declaration*. The discrepancy between the two sets of ideas is obvious—of course, only to those who want to see it.

⁴⁷ Wachtel, 98.