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“Emina”: Text and Context of a Poem

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I will approach the poem from the angle of language. If we listen closely enough, we will hear an arrhythmia in the language, i.e., an alternation of two opposing or colliding voices. In the first stanza, the language is clean, poetic, with a touch of solemnity: one balanced sentence stretches through four lines, with rhyming Turkisms, i.e., in the privileged positions in the stanza. This makes their presence in the poem the more emphatic, underlining their meaning, both connotative and denotative: a visit to a hamam makes a man erotically more sensitive and more vulnerable (remember Bora Stanković and his hamams, overflowing with powerful eroticism), and the imam is an institution which implies a barrier to the realization of the poet’s love longing, a sort of invisible wall between him and the girl. Similarly, the jasmine with its scent goes naturally with longing for love and also with the girl in the poem.

“Emina” was first published in the magazine Kolo in 1902; six years later, the poet included it, altered, in his book Poems. In the final version, the poem became not only more concise but incomparably better: in addition to throwing out some truly weak and obviously superfluous lines, the poet also made the poem a much finer work. The changes testify to his greater craftsmanship in handling the poetic instruments and reflect his keener awareness of what he wanted to achieve.

Let us mention that the poem’s first version had not been divided into stanzas; this seemingly innocent detail is not without importance because the opposition between the first and the second stanza, which are told in different voices, reveals—or exposes—a creative principle that moves the poem: a clash of two opposites speaking about the same.

The changes the poet made in the first stanza cleaned up its language, made it more balanced and strengthened its solemn diction; in a word, its poetic quality was enhanced. That is why amam became hamam, which removed the note of spoken language, the poet probably remembering that it was not he who was telling the poem—not an Orthodox Christian, with no “h” in his speech, but a Muslim, who is the poet’s mask in the Yeatsian sense of the word. Furthermore, the imam in the first version had a name, “Abdul,” becoming “the old” in the final version. It is a change in

which two birds were killed with one stone: the realistic tone, which had been brought about by the introduction of a proper name into the poem and which lowered the level of poetic diction and thus undermined its solemnity, had been removed with the adjective “old” reinforcing now the authority of the imam, which makes the barrier that stands in the way of the poet’s achieving his longing so much the harder, so to say.

The image of the garden in the 1902 version was so crowded that the girl, the center of everything, simply couldn’t be seen. In the later version, the poet threw out the “baštu što miriše igda,” which I must say I don’t understand, and the “bulbul-song” that “never ends” as well as the “splashing of the fountain,” leaving only “in the shade of a jasmine” as the singular frame for the girl, with maximal poetic effect … . In this way, the paraphernalia borrowed from sevdalinkas were reduced to the right measure which does not threaten the poem: in the original version, the beginning of the poem was a common literary pastiche having much more sumptuous trappings of a sevdalinka wrapped around poetic emotion. Moving away from the sevdalinka through later changes, the poet gave “Emina” the needed literary independence it had not had before.

The commentary is excerpted from “‘Emina’: Tekst i kontekst pjesme,” Most 102/xxiv, 1998.

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