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Commentary On “A Word About Man”

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The introductory cycle in The Stone Sleeper consists of five poems under the common title of “A Word About Man,” but since each of these poems treats the same motifs in the same way, we can also read them as a single poem in five sections.

The key to these lines [in “First”] is to be found in the play of passive participles that also runs throughout the next four “Words” as a basic literary procedure of this cycle/poem. Dizdar is trying to “de-stone” the Bosnian “krstjanin,” heretic, or Bogumil—call him what you will—to revive him, to bring to life the creative forces in the texts he left us (the word “text” here has the meaning given it by modern semiotics, so it includes the stećak motifs as well). Language play in The Stone Sleeper, including “A Word About Man,” is therefore an important poetic tool: the dancing lexemes recall or call into being an entire view of the world and man’s place in it.

The pairs of passive participles, “satvoren”-“zatvoren” in the third stanza give the poem a powerful sound and a precise analysis to its structure, but they also provide the poem with a unity because each succeeding stanza begins with an echo of the preceding one; although not all readers, naturally, will experience their chain-like composition in the same way, the suggestion of a sindžir [chain] comprising different links of non-freedom seems inevitable. For it is one thing to be “zatvoren u koži” (encased in skin), which recalls the turn of speech “iz ove se kože nikud ne može” (you cannot get out of your skin), and another is to be “zatvoren u mozak” (enclosed in the brain), that is, in one’s own way of thinking, which is our solitary-confinement cell, something found in T. S. Eliot. And it is not the same to be “zarobljen u srce” (imprisoned in the heart) and “zarobljen u meso” (imprisoned in flesh): the former speaks about being enslaved by passions (to put it in an old-fashioned way), and the latter about the heavenly element which dwells darkly in earthly existence, the immortal soul in mortal flesh, which constitutes the religious conviction of the Bosnian krstjanin.

The fallen angel is, in addition to everything else, “zdrobljen u te kosti” (crushed in those bones) because his earthly venture amounts to a handful of bones. Faced with them the totality of a man’s being, which during his life seemed to be self-evident, turns out to be illusory. That is not all. Many peoples believe that the soul dwells in bones, and a hint of that belief is preserved in an oath in our language: “May not the

spirit in my bones be turned into stone." This means that man, as a fallen angel, came into being when God, as punishment, crushed up the whole and immortal soul into mortal bones. Death reveals our "crushedness"; the essence of our being is in that fragmentation.

The pairs of passive participles, which also form internal rhymes, close in a set of rings, and we cannot but experience them—to change the metaphor—as iron circles around man's existence; they, on the philosophical plane, define the passive, suffering form of existence. This is to say that man is not a subject of existence, but existence is performed upon him, as on an object. That kind of man dreams "that heaven returns and multiplies." Here, we see immediately, the poet switches the perspective around: man, as a fallen angel, should return to heaven and not heaven to him, but clearly, man, who is defined as a passive and suffering being upon whom life is performed, cannot initiate any action, even in his dream. That is why heaven has become the mountain that comes to Mohammed, not Mohammed to the mountain, to turn around the old saying.

Now, what does it mean that heaven "multiplies"? Here we are aided by the expression from everyday language: "He is in ninth heaven." Dizdar resurrects the medieval idea of nine heavens: the fallen angel, who remembers his first world, dreams for the return of the original model of that world. In short, man as a being that suffers life, a being whose existence is ringed by non-freedoms arising from his corporeality, cannot even dream to return to his former state of bliss, to his home, really, but only of his home, in its primary form, returning to him.

Dizdar's hero "in this dark pit ever dreams of the sun." What "pit"? Clearly, it is the material world into which man has been thrown as punishment. But the "dark pit" can also be his body that the poem talks so much about. The power of this line rests on an ambiguity: "dark pit" is a metaphor that at the same time captures both the world and the body. This is about a dual dream: our dream of the sun from the pit of the world is different from our dream of the sun from the pit of the body.

The first two stanzas consist of claims, while the question within the main point opens the poem toward infinity, which gives the true measure of a human being. That is not the only change. In the first two stanzas, the second person is used repetitively ("you dream"), which can be read as addressed to man in general as well as the poet's address to himself. In the third stanza, third-person singular appears ("premosti"–be bridged), caused perhaps by rhyming: the poet wanted to avoid the "impure" rhyme of "kosti"—"premostiš," but it is clear that, for a master, literary conventions are not obstacles to overcome but assistance toward fuller expression.

Third-person singular means a change in the point of view, seeing man from a new angle: in the first two stanzas, the poet addresses him intimately, looks at him from close up, peers into his brain, heart, flesh, bones, into his dreams, while in the final stanza that same man is looked at from a distance and is placed in the cosmos with an interrogative sentence: "How can this space to heaven / Be bridged"?

These verses, opening up toward the immeasurable, abolish man's enslavement, crossing out all forms of his non-freedom. The human aspiration to "bridge that space

to heaven" means reaching for the impossible. You are in chains, but you are reaching for an unattainable infinity. And it is there that man's essence lies. Comparable to the poem "Dark Blue River": "And that river we must cross"! Across that river that is "broad one hundred years" and whose depth is "a thousand summers," the river that also runs "beyond mind and beyond God"—we still must cross it, there is no way around it. Dizdar's question expresses an impossibility (how can it be bridged?—no way!) and resists that impossibility, refusing to accept it: the third-person voice, by which that resistance and non-acceptance is stated, points to the poet's gaze above man's head, over his real possibilities and his enslavement—toward infinity . . . .

[Regarding the "Third"]: In the note explaining the phrase "wrenched from heaven," Dizdar says: "Man [is] thrown from heaven to earth; man as a fallen angel, imprisoned in human body ('inclusi in corpore'), permanently aspiring to free himself from shackles imposed by the body." Then, in parentheses, he cites works that should be "seen and consulted"; these are Bogumil Legends, Religious Teachings of the Bosnian Church, Dualism in the History of Philosophy and Religion, and Credibility of Latin Sources on Bosnian Krstjans. The signals given to us by that note are important for our understanding of "A Word About Man" because this cycle/poem was written as a palimpsest over the religious teachings of Bosnian krstjans, without which we cannot properly understand the essence of Dizdar's vision. The fact that "A Word About Man" is placed at the beginning of The Stone Sleeper tells us a number of things, but first of all, perhaps, that at the core of this book lies the encounter, intersection, and dialogue between the modern and the medieval consciousness.

The first distich is based on the turn of speech "to be made of flesh and blood," which in everyday language defines the corporeal basis of the human being. The drama of human existence is not only in the friction between spirit and flesh, because in the latter there is also a struggle that is expressed by a strange future tense: "will soon gore." What does it mean? When Adam and Eve, as victims of the serpent's advertisement, sinned in Paradise, God formulated His sanctions in the future tense: "I will greatly multiply Your pain. . . in pain you will bring forth children," He says to Eve. "In toil shall you eat its [the ground's] yield all the days of your life"; "thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, as you eat of the plants of the field"; "by the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat," He says to Adam. That is why Dizdar's future tense is so suggestive. As if the Creator had said to the fallen angel: I am clothing you in flesh and blood, so "these bones your flesh will gore"—so that you would not forget you are in a prisoner's uniform.

Bread and wine do not refer only to man's earthly hunger and thirst: since he is a being "wrenched from heaven," it is clear that it is through bread and wine that a connection with that heaven is established. But, instead of bread, there is only stone, and instead of wine—only smoke. That stone, perhaps it is Herzegovinian a little (maybe it is the stone one lies down under—that is why "there is enough of it for everybody"), makes for barren ground that does not bring forth bread, and it is paired with smoke. For man is only smoke: everything that is his is smoke and everything in the world is smoke, which is a comfortless vision of existence—stone everywhere, permanently barren, and smoke, still "more permanently" transient.

The final distich is based on these words from the Bible: "Do not let your right hand

know what your left is doing." In Dizdar, however, the left and the right hands are in a blood feud; one of them (we don't know which one) is not even man's, and it brings mystery into him: both are competing for the title of someone else's hand! The verb "pobije" (kill up/kill all) is also interesting: in everyday speech, a hand can kill a hand; it can't kill it all. The poet violates a language rule against combining by putting together the verb "pobiti," which goes only with plural, thereby creating a new nuance of meaning: the conflict has been taken to a higher level. Adjusting to the context, the word "pobije" has shifted the meaning of the poem: the struggle becomes spiritual as well, a kind of philosophical duel in which opponents refute [another sense of pobiti] each one's claims.

Translated by Omer Hadžiselimović – © 2007 Omer Hadžiselimović

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