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Musa Ćazim Ćatić

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This year marks the 110th anniversary of the death of Musa Ćazim Ćatić, one of the founders of modern Bosnian-Hercegovinian poetry. He was born on 12 March 1878 in Odžak, five months before the Ottoman Empire's occupation yielded to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his short life ended in 1915, three years before the fall of the latter monarchy.

Ćatić spent his childhood and began his schooling in Tešanj. Here he attended the medresa (religious school) and studied Turkish, Arabic and Persian. He then served in the Austro-Hungarian army in Tuzla and Budapest. He continued his education in Constantinople, but financial difficulties led him to return to Sarajevo and enroll in the School for Sharia Judges. There he was expelled from the dormitory due to his Bohemian lifestyle, but nevertheless completed the school. He next went to Zagreb, where he studied law. Here he befriended the Croatian writers A. G. Matoš and Tin Ujević. 1910 saw him again in Bosnia. Besides writing poetry, he was active in translating, wrote for numerous periodicals, and edited the magazines *Behar* and *Biser*. By his count, he translated twelve books, but not all his translations have been preserved. He translated from Turkish, Arabic and Persian. His translations include poetry, short stories, essays, scholarly studies, novels, dramas, poems in prose, epigrams, and newspaper articles. In the view of Lamija Hadžiosmanović, "Ćatić still today holds a leading position as a translator of Turkish poetry, both in volume and in quality." He is an essential figure both when speaking of the beginnings of modern Bosnian-Hercegovinian poetry and when considering the beginnings of Bosnian-Hercegovinian *orijentalistika* (Near Eastern studies).

In 1914 he was drafted and sent to Hungary. Once, coming back to his barracks semi-drunk, he fell down in the snow and was later found half-frozen. Afterwards, suffering from tuberculosis, he was sent home to Tešanj, where he died and was buried on 6 April 1915. The headstone of his grave bears an epitaph written by Safet-beg Bašagić: "Here lies a poet of great talent, who sought neither honor nor profit, but led a Bohemian life and sang full of feeling, until fate took him to this grave." The fact that his grave is now in the center of town should not mislead us. As Amir Brka writes in his poem *Pjesnikov grob* (The Poet's Grave), "Our great poet's grave / is here / close to the street / in the midst of the city / though in his own time/ the settlement had not reached here – / here where they used to bury / renegades / and all kinds of vagabonds."

If we take seriously Ćatić's famous line ***Ja nijesam sanjar*** (I am not a dreamer) and consider his personal situation and the global events of the time, that is, that in 1914 he was in Hungary in the uniform of the *K. und K.* (Austro-Hungarian) army, we may doubt the accuracy of the claim in the Bosnian Wikipedia article on Ćatić (that he suffered an accident when "returning from a party semi-drunk"). I won't say that it looks more like a "voluntary departure", but everything suggests that at that time and in those circumstances Ćatić would not have felt attracted to parties.

Though he published only one collection of poetry during his life, *Pjesme: od godine 1900 do 1908.* (Mostar, 1914) [Poems: from the year 1900 to 1908], it would be hard to find another poet in Bosnia and Hercegovina who had so many books published posthumously. How much he was read and understood is another question. Today in Bosnia there are schools and streets named after him, a literary prize bears his name, and his portrait wearing a fez is on the 50 konvertibilni-mark banknote. When we remember the "financial difficulties" that dogged him all his life, this truly looks like an irony of fate.

In his poem *U gladnoj noći* (In a hungry night), Musa Ćazim Ćatić writes: "Look! As if in a fog I now see not books but bread! / Ah, I am hungry, hungry! … and the land-owner's dog is well-fed." And he continued: "People scorned me, God forgot me / Three days I have eaten not a crumb."

Thus wrote Ćatić. And if by some trick of fate – if, just the way he was, he were living and working today – in a country where schools and streets bear his name, it's a question what situation he would be in. It is hard to imagine that someone who fraternized with Matoš and Ujević, someone who "sought neither honor nor profit, but led a Bohemian life and sang full of feeling", could be to the liking of the politicians who so vociferously invoke his name.

The reception of one's literary work depends heavily on numerous non-literary circumstances. Here the photograph of Ćatić with a fez on his head, the one on the banknote, has played a notable role. His verses might not be understood, but the human need for symbols is strong.

Forty-eight years after Ćatić was buried in Tešanj, the poet Amir Brka was "banished from every direction" into the same city. No one ever seems to have befriended Ćatić as much as he has. In collection after collection, Brka has held dialogues with the departed Ćatić, devoting an entire book of poems to the hundredth anniversary of his death: ***Čuvar groblja: Pjesme sa Ćatićem*** (Tešanj, 2015) [The keeper of the graveyard: Poems with Ćatić].

From this unusual friendship I would also cite the long poem ***Sa pjesnikova odra*** (From the poet's catafalque) published in 2020. Brka made Musa Ćazim Ćatić his main character, and thus enabled us to hear the dead poet's confession after more than a hundred years.

Enver Kazaz's epilogue to this book correctly brings out that the problem Amir Brka describes is much more complex. It concerns not merely one "misunderstood" poet but the system of values of a social community. As Kazaz puts it: "Ćatić is lifted in this

poem into the pantheon of lasting, eternal poets, where the once misunderstood and rejected writer indeed belongs, and where he is beyond the reach of today's shallow and ideological manipulations of his name and work. These manipulations seek to relegate him to an ideological sign, useful for the makers of the reductionist and ghettoizing, archaizing and clericalizing concept of Bosniak cultural and total national identity. Such an identity is the creation of the same sort of people who anathematized and condemned Ćatić during his short life and even at his burial, held outside the consecrated religious ground alongside the worst of renegades who had violated all social norms. Hence this Tešanj graveyard is called *Obješenica* (the hanged one), where the name itself suggests a burial place for those who have committed the greatest possible sin."

If someone, correctly, comments that the same thing happens elsewhere, that it is a global problem, this does not mean that nothing can be done with these value criteria on the level of our local community. Musa Ćazim Ćatić himself expressed the same thought – only in verse – in the poem *Pred smrt* (Before death): *Moja mala izba – moj veliki svijet* (My Small Chamber — My Great World). In keeping with it, the Tešanj Center for Culture and Education reprinted Tin Ujević's essay on Ćatić as a separate publication.

Even though Ćatić's verses are like sparks that fly up from the clash of East and West, from where Bosnia has existed as if between the hammer and the anvil for centuries, it seems to me that Ćatić has become the symbol of Tešanj only through the poetry of Amir Brka. This is, as far as I know, a unique example in the history of literature: that a poet becomes the symbol of a city thanks to the verses of another poet.

tr. W. Browne 2025.01.04-08

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