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The Greek Spirit in the Poetry of Mak Dizdar

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Outside of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the poet Mak Dizdar is relatively unknown. Modern anthologies from Croatia and Serbia seldom include the poet. While Dizdar is included in the anthology, Contemporary Yugoslav Poetry, he is refered to as "a Croatian poet." Dizdar was born in 1917 in Stolac, Bosnia-Herzegovina and died in 1971. His pen-name, Mak, meaning "poppy," is a pseudonym, which he used during World War II as a Partisan fighter. Within Bosnia-Herzegovina Dizdar is known best by the collection, Stone Sleeper. In 1967 Muhamed Filipović argued that with this publication Dizdar became Bosnia's premier poet and established a canon of distinctively Bosnian literature. Through his verse, Dizdar re-captures the spiritual significance of the mysterious Bosnian stecaks––the immense limestone tombs from the 13th and 14th centuries, many eloquently engraved, scattered throughout the countryside and several collected at the National Museum in Sarajevo. With gripping verse Dizdar mimes the sublime character of Bosnia's material culture and resurrects the puzzling legacy of this enigmatic period from Bosnia's medieval history, as Rusmir Mahmutćehajić and Amila Buturović insightfully explicate. Another collection of poetry, Modra Rijeka, published a year after Dizdar's death, confirmed Dizdar's place as Bosnia's finest modern poet, as recounted by Vladimir Premec.

Despite Dizdar's relative obscurity, there are secondary sources on his poetry. Essays in English by Amila Buturović, Muhamed Filipović, Omer Hadžiselimović, Francis R. Jones, and Rusmir Mahmutčehajić are some notable examples. The unanimous consensus of this extended literature is that Dizdar is a poet who profoundly and beautifully captures the essence of the Bosnian soul. Hadžiselimović concludes his commentary on Dizdar's work this way: "At its best, Dizdar's poetry makes a leap from the dated and the factual to the timeless and the metaphysical." In the words of the great Bosnian writer, Meša Selimović, Mak Dizdar "has managed to establish a true link with tradition without doing violence to it, to restore the old language by discovering in it totally new connotations; he has succeeded in building on the meaning of medieval inscriptions the thoughts and feelings of modern man."

This literature, however, never mentions nor discusses the ways in which Dizdar's verse resonates closely with the literary traditions and philosophical worldview of the ancient Greeks. Many of Dizdar's poems exemplify a mimetic relation to Homer's Odyssey. Without denying Dizdar's identity as a Bosnian poet and without colonizing this identity, this essay explores Dizdar's relation to the ancient Greeks and why this

relation is a compelling one for appreciating his work.

The following poems––"Calypso," "Penelope," "Polyphemus," and "Circe"––draw intimately, and not only by their titles, upon Homer's Odyssey. To turn first to "Calypso," Dizdar captures the trenchant lament of Odysseus while stranded with the goddess, Calypso.

CALYPSO

> I cry
> Because of your love that makes a slave of me
> Because love is unable to free me
> You cry
> (Modra rijeka 109)

The pathos of this romantic relation is stated curtly. Calypso and Odysseus are entrapped in a double bind; what is positive for one is negative for the other. The intensity of the goddess's love is a curse for Odysseus; Odysseus's faithfulness to Penelope is an irresolvable frustration for the goddess, Calypso. Dizdar transforms Homer's romantic fable into a poignant trope for the estrangement of modern relations. The poem does not minimize the fable's substance; rather, it grounds the fable's existential character.

Consider the same mimetic pattern in "Penelope":

PENELOPE

> About you have all the songs been sung and there is
> nothing more about you to be sung
>
> About you has everything been spoken and there could be
> nothing else to be said about you
>
> Your linens have remained as mysterious as the night
> your suitors as transparent as the morning
>
> And still nevertheless I must place you in this circle of unclear
> being, things, and circumstances
>
> Oh, Penelope, Penelope, Penelope, Oh Penelope
>
> (Modra Rijeka 129)

This poem exemplifies the irresolvable angst of not knowing one's beloved, that is, the problem of knowing the other in the context of intimacy. When is our knowledge of another an authentic understanding of the other and when is it a figment of an overAn reaching imagination? The narrator seeks a complete knowledge of another's fidelity.

In the flux of circumstances and the shifts of conditional knowledge, the narrator, however, questions Penelope's faithfulness. The narrator seeks an account of what is unaccountable.

Dizdar's poetry is a tribute to Homer. In projecting, indeed stealing, a misgiving from Homer's verse, Dizdar's poetry achieves a certain ancient status. When making a difference vis-à-vis the ancient Greek no longer seems possible, Dizdar makes a difference. That is, the difference between Homer's ancient writing and Dizdar's modern verse becomes an inessential difference; the similarity between Homer and Dizdar becomes instead what is essential.

In this relation, Dizdar does not envy Homer. He does not wish to supplant Homer. There is not here what Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence. Bloom's revealing theory on the rhetorical relations between different world poets does not at all explain the unique relation between Dizdar and Homer. With Dizdar and Homer we feel the souls of the two poets merge. Friendship is the trope. We imagine that if today Homer were to read Dizdar's verses, he would smile; he would feel he had been understood and his verse was indeed timeless.

Consider a third poem, "Polyphemus," which further exemplifies this relation between Homer and Dizdar.

POLYPHEMUS

> You are huge
>
> Terrible
> In your
> Immensity
>
> You are
> Strong
>
> Nearly a god
>
> But I
> Am no one
> And nothing
>
> That is the key
> For you
>
> But
> Nevertheless
> You are mine
>
> That I would not
> Be
> You

> That is
> the key
> For me
>
> Human
> Your
> Long arms
> Will never reach to
> My small frightened heart
>
> (Modra Rijeka, 49-50)

Odysseus's fear is transformed; his fear becomes his passion. That he is no one, nothing, comes to signify that he is some one, human. Despite the terror of the Cyclops eating his men daily every morning, Odysseus experiences the sheer joy of knowing who he is. When Odysseus says to Polymachus, "That I would not be you // That is the key for me," it confirms the profound confidence of Odysseus.

We find the same affirmation with respect to self-knowledge in the conclusion to Albert Camus' The Stranger:

> With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. No one, no one in the world had any right to weep for her. And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe.

The epiphany upon the closing of Camus's The Stranger resonates with character of Dizdar's Odysseus. Just as the awakening of the self makes Odysseus unassailable to Polyphemus, the opening of the soul toward the world allows Camus's protagonist to transcend his impending death. Their awareness of their self makes them tantamount to gods, not as gods, but as humans.

The last stanza of the poem, "Your long arms // Will never reach // To my small frightened heart" cannot imagine any reason to be self-pitying. Pity lacks self-knowledge and is paralyzed by fear. For the ancient Greeks, principled self-knowledge takes not only the form but also the content of irony. Alan Blum and Peter McHugh write, "A principled relation to knowledge is essentially ironic and is depicted in the figure of the actor who relates with confidence to the whole, and so to the problem of the place of man (of discourse) within the whole" (Self-reflection 142). Consider how Dizdar's following poem exemplifies this conviction.

CIRCE

Still she sings boisterously there for a long time

And we do not really know who she is or what she is

And when we eat these well-baked tasty cakes
Which for us she herself prepares and serves
We will be transformed into lions, wolves, boars
Wild animals without their wildness

We will retain all that otherwise adorns us
Human propriety instantaneous Courage
Soft backbone And also this wretched hope

We will be transformed into sniffers
Without significance or pleasure
Who will be called by our name
Which exists in the present

But it needs to be known that this is the land
Upon which we too just emerged

In the grasses growing underfoot is strength
It needs to be known

That the heavy seeds live for a flower’s blossom
Not only for death

Let us gird ourselves strongly with these grasses brothers
Because we are deep within them

And in the sword whose lush roots
Birthed the same
Land
In the sword when drawn at the right time
And with the right purpose

And so all this
Mixed with the right measure of cunning
Leads the attack barely noticed
But considered well and certain
Leads the retreat with excessive perfection
For which you know that perfection is excessive

Comes the oath of one who is conquered
And life is unexpectedly beautiful such that
Even the gods envy those who are most wise
and most sinful
Upon the end
(Modra Rijeka 52-53)

With delicious sweets, the goddess Circe transforms Odysseus's men into wild animals. Their loss, however, is not the loss of their lives. They remain alive, albeit as wild animals. Their loss is the loss of who they are, and this loss dramatizes the question of who they are.

Odysseus's men are humans. Like animals, they, too, spring from nature. Odysseus's men, however, are different from animals, who they have now become. How are Odysseus's men different and how do they show this difference? Odysseus's men have lost their relation to discourse, "Who will be called by our name // Which exists in the present." Since discourse distinguishes them and distinguishes them from both gods and animals, the silence, in which they now find themselves, is terrifying. Odysseus's men are alive but inhuman.

Why, though, would gods envy humans who are utterly wise and utterly mistaken? If gods indeed envy humans, then gods must be lacking something. If gods are lacking something, gods must be incomplete. If gods, however, are incomplete, they are not truly gods. Gods, after all, are ultimate, and what is ultimate has no need of anything but itself. By definition, the ultimate is without need. What, then, do the gods need? Why would they ever envy humans?

> This much seems clear: If it is ultimate, the truth is subject to nothing. Yet, it has to be grasped and expressed, and so, in this respect, it is subject to the need to grasp and express, i.e., to discourse. We can appreciate the irony of: the ultimate truth is subject to discourse (its majesty must be adapted to human needs of grasping and expressing). (Blum and McHugh, Self-reflection 143)

In light of this citation, consider this statement: Gods are subject to nothing, but gods are subject to the need to be grasped and expressed. The ultimate needs to be grasped and expressed. Odysseus understands this irony, and as he does, life becomes "suddenly wondrous." Odysseus is grasped by the ultimate's need to be grasped and expressed. The neediness of the gods grips Odysseus; it defines him; it affirms who he is absolutely. The irony amazes Odysseus. The gods are subject to the need to be grasped and expressed, and this knowledge makes Odysseus wise.

The character of Odysseus's irony is not judgmental, exposing a subject's inferior relation to the whole. Nor is it critical, revealing a subject's deficiency as a part within the whole. Irony––which Dizdar's poetry fervently exemplifies––is compassionate toward the life-world. For the ancient Greeks, irony is neither condescending nor arrogant. Nor is it self-effacing. Irony is held fast by one fundamental principle, namely, the ultimate is subject to the need to be grasped and expressed.

Dizdar reflects with the Greeks a vision of what life is. Alan Blum explains, not the historical and not the empirical tradition of the Greeks, but the metaphysical and moral heritage of the Greeks, to which Dizdar is heir.

> The Greeks are not first in time, but exemplary in their treatment of what

> is first. All who follow the Greeks are not second, third … but equal with respect to the opportunity to raise the question of what is first. All who 'follow' the Greeks then face the choice between conversation and barbarism. Now, 'first' does not refer to the Greeks, but to what is beyond both them and us as that which induces (indeed compels) us to raise the question of what is first. We no longer relate to the Greeks in the way that followers contingently come after predecessors (however flawed or glorious these predecessors) for that is not the real difference; rather, we relate as co-speakers to that which is truly Other than our discourse. (5)

Although Dizdar champions Homer, he also stands equal to Homer in this fundamental way: he is co-speaker "to that which is truly Other than our discourse." Dizdar understands this relation as well as its responsibilities. Dizdar is Greek in that, in his treatment of what is first, he is exemplary. Dizdar follows the Greeks, not because the Greeks were first, but because the Greeks were exemplary in their treatment of what is first.

Consider the poem MORE.

> SEA
> On the palm of a hand a flower
> On the palm of a hand a shower
> On the palm of a hand a hailstone
> And you
> You only worry
> about your worry
> Without worry
> (Modra Rijeka 20)

The poem's antagonist is the worrier. What does the worrier do that is antagonistic within the pathos of the poem? The worrier worries about what is second, what is third, what is fourth–the temporal order. The worrier does not worry about something but about nothing. Anxiety fixates the worrier to the here and now; stress binds the worrier to the conditional and circumstantial character of life. Without heeding what is first, without heeding the principled character of the ultimate––that is, the need of the ultimate to be grasped and expressed––the worrier shows no care. The worrier is profoundly impious. To hold a flower, to feel a shower, to clutch a hailstone turns one to what is first. A subject is gripped by concern for the ultimate. The worrier is not yet a subject because the worrier does not heed how one is subject to what is first, "And you // You only worry about your worry // Without worry."

With incredible fierceness, Dizdar bears witness to the life-world and mindfulness that the Greeks exemplify; his poetry depicts thought not for its utilitarian value but as goodin- itself. While thought is dependent upon discourse, in Dizdar's verse thought retains its purity.

RAIN

> It must be that we learn again to listen how the rain falls falls
>
> It must be that we are brought out of stone and stride without turning through the arch of the town
>
> It must be that we find again the lost paths of that blue grass
>
> It must be that in the richness of seeds we embrace the fearful poppies and ants
>
> It must be that we cleanse our faces anew and dream in the clear dew-drops of the dawn
>
> It must be that we faint away in the dark blades of some grassy hair
>
> It must be that we suddenly stop with our own sun and with our own shadow swell
>
> It must be that we finally meet with our long since fugitive hearts
>
> It must be that we are brought out of stone and pass without turning through the stone arch of that stone town
>
> It must be that we will And wake the whole night listening how the just rain falls falls falls (Kameni Spavač 84-85)

At this point, it is worth citing the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclites, because this poem adheres to this philosopher's writing.

> Of the Logos which is as I describe it men always prove to be uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and when once they have have heard it. For although all things happen according to this Logos, they [men] are like people of no experience, even when they experience such words and deeds as I explain, when I distinguish each thing according to its constitution and declare how it is.

Rain in Dizdar's verse is a trope for the logos. The verse needs the trope to represent what the trope itself is not; the trope never consumes what it is not, what is ultimate. Dizdar is an apostle of Heraclites; his verse echoes Heraclites, "Listening not to me but to the Logos it is wise to agree that all things are one."

"The difference between responsible and irresponsible speech is the difference between conversational speech and barbaric speech," write Blum and McHugh (Introduction 15). At whatever the cost Dizdar chooses conversation over barbaric speech because only conversation affirms who we are. Dizdar challenges as well those who choose barbaric speech. Dizdar converses with the barbarians who choose not to converse, and in this sense Dizdar demonstrates the courage of the Greeks. Consider selected stanzas from the following poem.

PATHS

You have resolved that I shall not be and at all costs
You come towards me and in your assault
Laughing and weeping
You sweep
And destroy
All before you

You have resolved to destroy me at all costs
But you cannot find
The true path
To me

Because
You know the well-worn and the deep-cut paths
And no other
(And indeed they are narrow and barren
Moreover
For you
The strong and proud
They are hard
And
Long)

……

So you don’t know that you are the least evil
Amongst my
Many
Great
Evils

You don’t know who
You have to deal with

You know nothing about the map of my paths

You don’t know that the path from you to me
Is not the same as the path
From me
To you

You know nothing about my riches
Hidden from your mighty eyes
(You don’t know that
Much more
Than you think
Was bequeathed

> And
> Given to me
> By Fate)
>
> You have resolved to destroy me at all costs
> But you cannot find the true path
> To me
>
> (I understand you:
> You are a man in one space and time
> Who lives only now and here
> And knows nothing about the infinite
> Space of time
> In which I am /
> Present
> From distant yesterday
> Till distant tomorrow
> Thinking
> Of you
> But that's not all)
>
> (Kameni Spavač 41-46)

The poem's closing is an epitaph for the barbarians who attack Bosnia: it scorns the positivism of the brute; it mocks the vulgarity of modern man; and it exposes the shallowness of the utilitarian actor. Note, though, that it is a mistake to say that the barbarian is the enemy, the evil one. Dizdar's attitude toward evil is Greek. While the barbarian murders, the murders result not in the death of the victims' souls, but in the death of the barbarian's soul. The barbarians are their own enemy and nobody else's, and it is important for the likes of Ratko Mladić, Radovan Karadžić, and their loyal followers to hear Dizdar's decree.

As the secondary literature on Dizdar passionately argues, Dizdar is a great Bosnian poet. His poetry captures the cultural history, social character, and moral fiber of Bosnia in a wondrous way. To recognize and place Dizdar in the canon of world literature, however, it is necessary to understand as well Dizdar's mimetic relation to the Greeks. Dizdar exemplifies the Greek spirit perhaps as deeply as any modern poet, and it is this achievement that grounds the recognition of Dizdar as an eminent poet in the canon of world literature.

The matter is not dichotomous. Dizdar is Bosnian without sacrificing his relation to the Greeks. He is Greek without betraying his Bosnian identity. The contemporary writer, Dževad Karahasan, explains this dialectic in the following way:

> Bosnian culture has not accepted the "dictatorship of the subject"––a relationship in which one subject, say a person, defines another subject, strictly in its own terms––perhaps precisely because of its internal pluralism … . In a culture composed of four co-equal monotheistic

> religions and their respective paradigms. . . a cultural quartet, in which others repeatedly confirm me while I continuously confirm them, a "strong subject"––the one that turns everything it deals with into a passive object––is not possible. (64-65)

Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Catholism, and Judaism stood co-equal as monotheistic religions and interacted as a cultural quartet. While each was exemplary in its treatment of what is ultimate, none turned another into a passive object. Each was excellent, but none the best. This principle deepened the spirituality of each faith tradition because each became ironic in relation to the ultimate and each other.

Dizdar's most "Bosnian" poem discussed in this paper, "House of Mile," dramatizes of how the dictatorship of the subject is antithetical to the Bosnian soul.

HOUSE OF MILE

> The hiža of our djed was founded here
> To fix virtue more strongly
> In the hearts of men
>
> May it ever be open wide
> For welcome visitors
> And for the great of heart
>
> For guests for elders and other believers
> For all good people for all good Bosnians
>
> For all warriors in the war
> That is waged
> Against war
>
> . . . .
>
> But if someone in love of himself
> Shuts that door of virtue
> May the hiža of our djed crumble
> To its foundations in my soul
>
> Into a heap may it be crushed
> May it turn into bare soot and black ashes
> May hot scorpions and snakes breed
> In it as in the den of Satan
>
> (Forgive you
> who are condemned and cursed
> in this slander of the slanderer
>
> But the hiža of our djed

> Without the welcome traveler
> And the dear guest
> Is no more the hiža of our djed
>
> (Kameni Spavač 159-63)

In ancient folklore, the traveler is welcomed. It is a sacred matter to receive the traveler. The traveler could be a god in disguise or, in the Benedictine tradition, a visitation from Christ. The Benedictine rubric is, “Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for He is going to say, “I came as a guest, and you received Me.” The fact that it is not known whether the traveler is indeed a god is an essential mystery. The possibility exists; the reality is never known. Hospitality renders this fable real; the traveler’s visit provides the host with the opportunity to serve not the visitor per se, but the possibility that the visit is from god. The host makes a human reality sacred. Dizdar articulates this rubric not in a religious or classical way, but in an earthy and pagan way. The rubric does not turn anything “it deals with into a passive object”; instead, it turns both the other and the self into active subjects. The host recognizes the neediness of the gods, the neediness of the gods to be needed. Dizdar, a great national poet, asks Bosnians to remember this principle, to re-collect their essence; he asks Bosnians to remain themselves and shows the path from which to do so. The rubric becomes the basis for the eternity of a culture.

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