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### The Wisdom Effect: Ivo Andrić the Storyteller

(Ivo Andrić: *The Slave Girl*, Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2009, pp. xvii-xxxix)

Although readers who read English translations of Andrić's works would be more familiar with his novels *The Bridge over the Drina*, *Bosnian Chronicle* and *The Damned Yard*, than with his stories, such as 'Anika's Times' or 'An Unsettled Year', Andrić was a storyteller rather than a novelist. Even these three important novels are composed of what can be read as more or less autonomous stories. What connects the stories about various characters is a place: in *The Bridge over the Drina* they are diachronically threaded around the town of Višegrad, in *Bosnian Chronicle* they are synchronically connected around the town of Travnik, and in *The Damned Yard* they are linked in a spiral manner around the Istanbul prison described as 'a whole small town of prisoners and guards'.<sup>1</sup> Only his fourth novel, *The Woman from Sarajevo*, has a recognizable novelistic structure, centred on one main character and narrated in a linear manner – but it has never been read much, and today seems to be all but forgotten. The difference between Andrić's three celebrated novels, and the one which is less so, is indicative of the nature of the author's imagination and narrative interest. The unity of the former three novels is guaranteed by the places in which different and numerous characters enter the stage, but the places are always the same. Only in the fourth novel does the place of action change, when Rajka, its main character, moves from Sarajevo to Belgrade. *The Woman from Sarajevo* is a study of a single character and it focuses on her psychology: this is what gives it its unity even after the place changes. That which is of the greatest importance is preserved even after Rajka's move to another place. A similar device was used only in a small number of stories, and is entirely absent from the remaining novels; it was used in his earliest stories 'The Journey of Alija Djerzelez' and 'Mustafa the Hungarian', and in one of the later stories, 'The Woman on the Rock', which are also studies of one character or one psychological trait. The majority of Andrić's stories however, and all three great novels, are not focused on a single dominant character, even if a proper name forms part of a title, as in 'Mara the Concubine'. What matters most is not individual psychology.<sup>2</sup> Andrić tried to repress the interest in psychology as much as is possible when one writes about people. It means that he was never led by the question of what made somebody do this or that, but by the fact that something had been done, and that it had effects on the lives of others. This takes his stories out of the individualistic vision of the novel genre, and leads them into the vision characteristic of traditional storytelling: people living with one another.

Nevertheless, places such as Višegrad, Travnik or the Istanbul prison are much more than just formal compositional devices which link different stories together. 'If Andrić's main character from Turkish Bosnia should be named, then it is the *kasaba*',

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<sup>1</sup> Ivo Andrić: *The Damned Yard and Other Stories*, ed. by Celia Hawkesworth, London/Belgrade: Forest Books/Dereta, 1992, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> On Andrić's reduction of psychological dimension of his characters see Jovan Hristić: 'Andrićeva pripovetka', in *Izabrani eseji*, Belgrade: Srpski PEN centar, 2005, p. 114

wrote Zdenko Škreb.<sup>3</sup> The *kasaba* is the world of merchants and craftsmen, somewhere halfway between the world of the village – and its loyalty to the epic – and the world of the metropolis with its individualism and the novel as its appropriate literary expression. Not tied to the land and freed from the chains of the collective, and the mythical, which expresses itself in epic stories about heroes, but still not in the modern metropolis, in which a mobile individual's psychology is the beginning and the end of everything, these merchants and craftsmen are for the most part, directed to one another. They are what Aristotle called *politēs*, people living in towns, the inhabitants of a *polis* – the Greek version of the *kasaba* – with all the liberties and limitations that go with it. Although there is always a tyrant whose absolute power must be obeyed, a pasha in Travnik or the sultan in Istanbul, the townspeople regulate their day-to-day life themselves. They no longer believe in the myth about Djerzelez Alija, but have not yet created their own myths about victors who can live independently of others, or even against them. In the master narrative of the nineteenth century European novel, Balzac's *Le père Goriot*, self-confident Rastignac surveys the metropolis from the heights of Père Lachaise ready to come down and to challenge it. In a similar setting, Mihajlo in 'Anika's Times' surveys Višegrad from a hill equally determined to do what he must, but instead of challenging the town he runs away. For denizens of the *kasaba*, a tiny fissure of freedom opened up between, on the one hand, the monolith-mythical rural life in which they listened with awe and terror to a poem about an epic hero who alone had the right to act freely and to make his own decisions, and on the other hand, the freedom and indifference the inhabitants of a modern metropolis enjoy and suffer. Within that fissure anything they do has immediate consequences for the lives of others. They might not be shackled by the monolithic tradition which defines every one of them in a similar manner, but it does not mean that they are free to define themselves. It is as if they can step outside of the monolith and commit a sin or an offence, but cannot ultimately live with it. Since they are no longer controlled by myth, they control one another. This *directedness* to the other, surveilling and being surveilled in return, expresses itself in the stories which they tell one another, and about one another. The best stories are always about those who step outside the order which the *kasaba* tries to establish. In *Bosnian Chronicle* a young French diplomat Des Fossés explains it in the following manner:

The existence of such outcast and isolated people, abandoned to their passions, their disgrace and rapid ruin, just showed how firm the links were and how remorselessly strict were the laws of society, religion and family in patriarchal life. And this applied to the Turks as well as to the rayah of all faiths. In these societies everything was connected, one thing locked firmly into another, one thing supporting another, and watched over by everyone. Each individual took care of the whole, and the whole of each individual. Each house observed the next house, each street oversaw the next, for everyone was responsible for everyone else, and all were responsible for everything. Each person was closely linked with the fate not only of his relations and those in his household, but also of his neighbours, fellow-believers and fellow-citizens. This was both the strength and the enslavement of these people. The life of each individual was possible only within that pattern and the life of the whole only in accordance with those conditions. If anyone stepped outside that pattern, following his own instincts and will, it was as though he had committed suicide and, sooner or later, he would inevitably be destroyed. Such was the law of these communities, mentioned even

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<sup>3</sup> Zdenko Škreb: 'Što je Andrić unio novo u svjetsku književnost', *Sveske Zadužbine Ive Andrića*, 3/1985, p.224. The Turkish word *kasaba* comes from Arabic *kasbah* – small town.

in the Old Testament. It was the law of the classical world as well. Marcus Aurelius wrote somewhere: 'Whoever avoids the obligations of the social order is an outcast'.<sup>4</sup>

Andrić's Bosnian stories are set in a time before merchants and craftsmen had succeeded in creating the myth about the invincible and self-sufficient individual, and the sentence formulated by Aristotle in *Politics* still applies to them: 'We thus see that the polis exists by nature and that it is prior to the individual. Not being self-sufficient when they are isolated, all individuals are so many parts all equally depending on the whole. The man who is isolated – who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient – is no part of the polis, and must therefore be either a beast or a god.'<sup>5</sup>

One of those who stepped outside the order and followed their own instincts is the main character of 'Anika's Times'. The narrator, however, never explicitly says which instincts Anika followed in particular, and what made her 'reveal herself to the kasaba'. All the reader is told is that she made her decision after waiting endlessly for Mihajlo to make up his mind about taking her as his wife. Mihajlo's hesitation is justified to a certain extent by what he had gone through before coming to Višegrad, but how Anika's disappointment turns into the drive to destroy the *kasaba* and herself, is left open to the reader's interpretation. The narrator's interest does not lie in the sphere of psychology, or at least not primarily. He is more interested in the consequences Anika's decision has for other people's lives. However, before beginning the story about the girl who came to believe that she could live against the others, and be 'either a beast or a god', the narrator determines the story's true place and its real dimensions. The learned Mula Muhamed recorded in his notebook all important events in the *kasaba* and the wider world. In the year of Anika's decision to step outside the order, he noted three more significant things: that somewhere in Germany a devil was born, (luckily it was such a small one that it could be captured in a bottle); that some Bonaparte challenged the Sultan's rule over Egypt; and that the rayah in Serbia rebelled. And then, closer to home:

That same year a young woman, a Christian (God confound all the infidels!), was overtaken by evil, and created such commotion and gained such strength that her evil reputation spread far and wide. Numerous men, both young and old, had gone to her, and many a youth had gone afoul there. And she placed both authority and law under her feet. But someone was found to deal with her, too, and she was crushed according to that which she deserved. And people were again put straight and were mindful of God's commands.<sup>6</sup>

Of all that happened in that year the town chronicler Mula Muhamed recorded four threats to the order: one clearly metaphysical, two political and one ethical – which all, due to Mula Muhamed's interpretation, turn out to be metaphysical rebellions against the order God implanted on the earth – with the reassuring remark that all of them had been overcome, that the world was still in its proper place, and that the order was still as God wanted it to be. This is one of the stories, contracted into a formula of several

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<sup>4</sup> Ivo Andrić: *Bosnian Chronicle*, translated by C. Hawkesworth and B. Rakić, London: The Harvill Press, 1992, p.118

<sup>5</sup> *The Politics of Aristotle*, translated by Ernest Barker, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952, p.6.

<sup>6</sup> Ivo Andrić: *The Vizier's Elephant: Three Novellas*, translated by Drenka Willen, New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1962, p.7.

sentences, which townspeople tell one another, or about one another, in order to pass on the experience of human life. 'Anika's Times' represents a development of the formula into a story about Anika, but as it is told by someone who is not a merchant or craftsman, it becomes a story about the *kasaba* as well. Contrary to its original teller Mula Muhamed, the narrator of 'Anika's Times' is never tempted to convert evil into transcendence: for him, evil is always entirely human. Much as beauty is human as well, laying down one's arms and surrendering to it is also human. As Petar says: 'We can resist any trouble, save *that*.' *That* is Anika, whose beauty owes nothing to the place that had given her life, but which 'happened' to the place much in the same way as miracles or disasters happen. However, if the merchants and craftsmen cannot resist this beauty, and thus do harm to themselves and others, the *kasaba* can:

*In the kasaba, where man and women resemble one another like sheep, it happens sometimes that chance will bring a child, as the wind brings seeds, who is deprived and stands out from the usual order of things, causing ill-luck and confusion, until it is cut down itself and the old order re-established. (p. 70-71)*

And after Anika's death,

*the (k)asaba, which had been momentarily deranged, could again sleep peacefully, walk freely, and breathe regularly. If a similar blight should occur – and it will at some point – the kasaba will again resist it, succumb to it, struggle against it, break it, bury it, and forget it. (p. 127)*

Until then the *kasaba* shall retell the story about Anika's beauty, evil and misery. Why? In order for other girls who eagerly await a proposal, or boys who come of age when they behave like the fish in the Rzav, to hear the story about Anika and learn something from it? Hardly. The *kasaba* knows that something similar will happen again despite all the warnings, and that others' mistakes and misfortunes rarely help one not to be led astray. The telling of the story has a different purpose.

This purpose is represented in 'Anika's Times' in the image we already touched upon. After he had decided to kill Anika, Mihajlo climbed the hill above Višegrad, sat there and surveyed both rivers, the houses, the roofs, the sunset behind the pine trees, and the mountain tops disappearing as dusk fell. He saw even what could not be seen from such a distance: the doors of the shops, the people, and their smiles and greetings. Despite being detached from the hustle and bustle of the town, the people's greetings and the children's voices, Mihajlo was still close enough to encompass everything in his gaze: this gaze, which encompasses everything, but which is not part of that everything itself, brought him peace of mind. 'All this is life', repeats Mihajlo three times. All this: the shops, people greeting one another, Anika's beauty, her evil and misery, children's laughter, Mihajlo's own misfortune which first brought him to Višegrad, and the seven years of happiness which he lived through in the town. Mihajlo's all-encompassing gaze and the sentence which accompanies it are the image of Andrić's poetics: they do not contain any attempt at totalizing, such as Mula Muhamed's intention in his chronicle to find the hidden law behind world events. They do not even attempt to explain everything, because not everything in the world lends itself to explanations; but they do recognize that, although inexplicable, beauty and evil, seven good years and misfortune, co-exist side by side in the world. And that all that is contained in what we call the experience of human life. The peace of mind brought about by this all-encompassing gaze resembles wisdom.

Wisdom – this word disappeared from the discourse of literary criticism a long time ago. Philosophy abandoned it as well, keeping the second part of its Greek name as one would keep one's surname inherited from a long forgotten ancestor, in whom one is not all that interested. Thus wisdom began to resemble a drought-ridden territory claimed by no one, a realm which nobody is greatly interested in. We do not consider as wisdom any specialized or applicable knowledge, such as healing or building bridges, but only deep insights into the ultimate, most important questions of human existence. Here, language already betrays us, because it does not seem possible to explain what wisdom might be without resorting to foggy metaphors of 'depth' and 'end'. The simplest way of putting it might be to say that a wise person is someone who knows true answers to the questions of the meaning of existence and of the nature of relationships between people, who has succeeded in seeing past the rough waves at life's surface and has clearly seen the calm bottom of the ocean. It seems that the idea of wisdom cannot do without the parallel image of depth. This kind of knowledge never achieves anything practicable, it does not heal the sick nor does it build bridges, but it is a precondition of all other knowledge, because it teaches us which knowledge is worthwhile and what can be achieved with it. And, most of all, wisdom is believed to bring peace of mind, and take away the uncertainty and the tearing apart which accompany every misled quest for truth, and the disappointment arising from it. 'Wisdom is the virtue of old age', says Hannah Arendt, it smells of oldness and experience, and not only of the individual but of the experience accumulated by generations.<sup>7</sup> That is why it is never to be found anywhere in the vicinity of innovation, revolution and experiment, and never at beginnings, but always at ends. Consequently, the title of sage tends to be reserved for those whose long lives are rooted in long-standing, most often religious traditions.

How can we be sure that something is endowed with wisdom, or that someone is a sage? Beauty can be recognized by those who are not beautiful themselves, but in order to recognize wisdom one has to be wise oneself. Only if we are in possession of true answers to the questions about the meaning of existence and the nature of human relationships can we declare someone else's knowledge and experience as wise. It means that the claim about someone's wisdom is always above all the demand that our wisdom be recognized and respected. This might be a reason why literary criticism shies away on the rare occasions when talking about wisdom seems to be possible.

Walter Benjamin was among the last critics to write about the wisdom of the storyteller: 'Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is nearing its end because the epic side of truth – wisdom – is dying.'<sup>8</sup> Benjamin is enigmatic here as usual. He uses the word wisdom in relation to the art of storytelling, but only after he has changed its meaning. 'Counsel woven into the fabric of real life' cannot help one overcome a specific difficulty – for instance, how to save oneself from the dangers brought about by beautiful girls who have decided to 'reveal themselves'. Counsel is 'less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story' (p.145-146) and rests on one's ability to tell the story in the first place. Wisdom, then, has nothing to do with 'depths', 'meaning' or 'old age'; it is the ability to tell a story which communicates human experience, whatever it might be. Wisdom has as its content

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Man in Dark Times*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1970, p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin: 'The Storyteller', in *Selected Writings*, Vol 3, ed. by H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings, the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 146.

no true answers to ultimate questions, but only 'the fabric of real life'. It is, following Benjamin, the ability to transform life into the experience laid out in the form of a story, and it belongs to a storyteller as much as to every reader or listener who accepts the storyteller's proposal and continues the storytelling – who takes over the storyteller's ability to see real life, his own and that of others, as experience communicable by means of a plot and characters.

Nevertheless, there are many storytellers whom no one would consider wise, although their ability to tell a story is never questioned. It is said that Goethe and Tolstoi are wise, but never Gogol' or Proust. Again, Thomas Mann is considered wise, but not Joyce or Beckett, although no one questions their abilities to rebottle life into experiences exposed in the form of a story. In order to deserve this honourable title, a storyteller has to offer something more than this ability. That something can be called, similar to the reality effect described by Barthes, the *wisdom effect*.<sup>9</sup>

As for Andrić, the wisdom effect is produced by characteristics of his narration which largely correspond to the characteristics commonly found in the popular idea of wisdom. In his novel and stories one hardly ever finds traces of the great literary experiments and artistic revolutions which unfolded during his lifetime. Although classifying Andrić as a realist writer would raise eyebrows, no one would protest against the claim that his work belongs to that broadest narrative tradition in European literatures in which Flaubert and Chekhov, but also Gide and Thomas Mann feel comfortable. As in the novels and stories of Thomas Mann – a writer whom Andrić admired more than all his other contemporaries – in Andrić's works that which is specifically modern is achieved by a means which cannot be detected at the language level.<sup>10</sup> Both of them drew upon the accumulated experience of that long tradition, which in their works leaves an impression of living its last splendid days – the impression of old age and sunset. They leave such an impression even in their earliest published works: in 'Death in Venice', and in 'The Journey of Alija Djerzelez', Andrić's first published story. What is felt as old and experienced in these stories, written by relatively young people, is the old age and experience of the tradition, not of the authors.

What is more, more than any other writers of the same tradition, Mann and Andrić seem to be authors whose stories come from the depths of memory (these depths again!), from legend and history. Mann's medieval and oriental stories, the Biblical paratext of *Joseph and His Brothers*, the modern version of the legend of Faust, Andrić's story about the Muslim epic hero Djerzelez Alija, his transformations of the legend of two brothers in *The Damned Yard*, historical wefts in *The Bridge over the Drina* and *Bosnian Chronicle* – are all the result of reliance on what has already been told in the past. In the case of Andrić, this distancing of the subject in the past is accompanied by a cultural distancing, as in the oriental exoticism of 'Torso' and 'The Story of the Vizier's Elephant', or in all other stories from Ottoman Bosnia, which was already a distant past in his time. In 'A conversation with Goya', in which the foundations of Andrić's poetics are formulated, 'the old gentleman' Goya says that 'it is useless and mistaken to look for sense in the seemingly important but meaningless events taking place around us, but that we should

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<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes: 'The Reality Effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 141-148.

<sup>10</sup> On Andrić's appreciation of Thomas Mann see Ivo Tartalja: *Put pored znakova*, Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1991, pp. 74-90.

look for it in those layers which the centuries have built up around the few main legends of humanity. These layers constantly, if ever less faithfully, reproduce the form of that grain of truth around which they gather, and so carry it through the centuries.’<sup>11</sup> So not contemporary life, but what is distant in time, or made to look distant because it is felt as culturally different, offers a basis for a story which can achieve the wisdom effect.

A legend is something that comes to the storyteller as already transformed by previous storytelling. *Mythos*, a story, is what someone has already told to someone. Andrić does not narrate from the tradition of folklore storytelling, which was very rich among the south Slavs, but he fully embraces the tradition of oral narration. The story about Anika is a story about what the old people of the *kasaba* have remembered from the tales of even older witnesses. In ‘Torso’, the narrator retells what he heard from Fra Petar, who in turn had heard the story from Hafiz Chelebi’s servant, who could not have witnessed the events in Syria himself, but must have learnt about them from someone else’s story. Fra Petar is Andrić’s archetypal storyteller; old and ill, lying on his deathbed:

(...) Fra Petar was still able to tell long and beautiful stories, but only if he could find listeners whom he liked. No one could say what the beauty of his stories consisted of exactly. In everything he said there was something ‘smiling and wise’ at the same time. But, in addition to that, around every word he said there hovered a special overtone, as a sound nimbus, which, missing from other people’s speech, remained in the air and flickered even after the words he uttered died away. This is why every word that Fra Petar said, meant more than it did in everyday speech. This is now lost forever.<sup>12</sup>

Through travelling the world, and living a long life, wise Fra Petar had seen ‘good and evil’, but the narrator of ‘Torso’ does not say what his wisdom consisted of exactly, save his ability to transform Benjamin’s ‘fabric of real life’ into experience exposed in the form of a story. In doing this, Fra Petar would draw upon what he had experienced himself, as well as what he had heard in stories told to him by others. In *The Damned Yard* every character has a story to tell: at times a simple one, such as the athlete’s, at other times a false one, such as Zaim’s, and also profound and wise ones, such as Kamil’s. Fra Petar listens to them all, and says:

For, what would we know about other people’s souls and thoughts, about other people and consequently about ourselves, about other places and regions we have never seen nor will have the opportunity of seeing, if there were not people like this who have the need to describe in speech or writing what they have seen or heard, and what they have experienced or thought in that connection? Little, very little. And if their accounts are imperfect, coloured with personal passions and needs, or even inaccurate, we have reason and experience and can judge them and compare them one with another, accept or reject them, partially or completely. In this way, something of human truth is always left for those who listen or read patiently.<sup>13</sup>

Fra Petar is a listener and a storyteller at the same time: in the Istanbul prison he listens to stories, and upon his return to his monastery in Bosnia he retells a story composed of Zaim’s, Haim’s, Kamil’s and his own stories. Since *The Damned Yard* is narrated as a recreation of Fra Petar’s story by a young monk Rastislav, the ‘counsel’ of

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<sup>11</sup> Ivo Andrić: *Conversation with Goya. Bridges, Signs*, translated by Celia Hawkesworth and Andrew Harvey, The Menard Press, 1992, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ivo Andrić: ‘Trup’, *Žedj*, Belgrade: Prosveta, 1967, p.135.

<sup>13</sup> Ivo Andrić: *The Damned Yard*, p. 174.

which Benjamin wrote seems to have been taken. A chain of storytellers was created, a chain in which the next listener accepts the storyteller's proposal and continues the storytelling by taking over the previous storyteller's ability to see real life, his own and that of others, as an experience communicable by means of stories. It would be possible to say that what they pass on further is the tradition of storytelling, which in any event is already implicit in the other: a tradition, that which is given over or handed down, is possible only thanks to the act of continued storytelling, and the other way around – storytelling is the effect of inserting oneself into tradition, into the chain of storytellers and listeners who, when their time comes, become storytellers themselves.

It is thus fully comprehensible why the central narrative consciousness in Andrić's stories is always repressed into the background.<sup>14</sup> The voice which tells the story – if it is not individualized as one of the characters – remains concealed in the background, for the story is not about him, but about us, and it is not his, but ours, everybody's and no one's. If we are to continue with spatial metaphors, it would be better to say that the narrator is high above the level of events: like Mihajlo in 'Anika's Times', the narrator also seems to be up on the hill above a town, from where he can see everything, but remain detached from it, calm and tranquil – in a word, epic. He can also say, as Mihajlo does, 'All this is life': passion and ecstasy, but also the downfall which follows afterwards. This calm of the narrating voice contributes to the wisdom effect as well. From his elevated position, the voice is able to tell of things that surpass the individual position of those included in the events. Since he narrates from the tradition in which the memory of other events is preserved, he knows about similar or even identical occurrences, which happened before the one which is narrated. This is how the story about Pop-Vujadin in 'Anika's Times', 'before it had completely disappeared into oblivion, provoked memories of other disasters and other times which have been long forgotten', and the story goes back to Anika, and in conjunction with her even deeper in the past to 'Tijana's riot'. The storyteller knows about them all, and he also knows that Anika's story is far from being unique: sooner or later, it will all happen again with some other girl in the *kasaba*. However, the storyteller also knows that both Anika's and Tijana's times are in the past and forgotten. At the end of the story we see how the veil of oblivion falls on all events. Mara in 'Mara the Concubine' begins to be eclipsed while those who attended her funeral are still returning home from the cemetery. Rifka in 'Love in the Kasaba' was remembered only until the following spring, when a new beauty appeared in the *kasaba*. Only a few months after her marriage, no one mentions the beautiful Gypsy girl Gaga ('An Unsettled Year'). The memory of a story resists the oblivion of humans: a story can recognize a pattern and a rule in the constant cropping up and disappearing of everyday life, the calm bottom of the ocean under the turbulence above. Marta L., the opera singer in 'The Woman on the Rock', resurfaces from the sea 'powerful as the world, which constantly changes but remains the same.'<sup>15</sup> Those who insert themselves into chains of storytellers and hand down what they receive, who shun individual perspective in order to carry through what has endured for centuries, are entitled to such claims. Who else, apart from them, could pretend to have grasped what was and what will be, and to have understood the dynamics of change and sameness in it?

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<sup>14</sup> On the narrative voice in Andrić's novels and stories see Zdenko Lešić: 'Ivo Andrić- pripovjedač. Između naratologije i hermeneutike', *Novi izraz*, Vol.7, No.30, 2005, pp. 25-39.

<sup>15</sup> Ivo Andrić: 'Žena na kamenu', *Jelena, žena koje nema*, Belgrade: Prosveta, 1981, p. 225.



When they write such a sentence, it does not sound gnomic in the way that a formula which sums up individual experience does, but as a universal truth. By sounding as a universal truth, it achieves the wisdom effect.

But what exactly have we determined about the world by establishing that it constantly changes but nevertheless remains the same? What the storytellers hand down to one another, and what reaches us as if from the depths of the past, lacks any specific content. It is not the shaping of individual experience in a novel, which no matter how polyphonic it might be nevertheless tends to follow a handful of lives, consciousnesses and worldviews, and thanks to that does achieve a specific meaning. And, contrary to religious traditions, which also come from afar and for the most part remain oral, the storytelling tradition claims neither this nor that about the nature of the world and human relationships. Instead of advocating any specific content, the tradition of storytelling merely validates itself as an ability of shaping human experience in stories. If the 'story of the human condition [...] that men never weary of telling one another'<sup>16</sup> has any content, message or counsel, then it can be expressed only by the sentence which Mihajlo silently tells himself while surveying houses, people, smiles, hills, children's laughter, pine trees, Anika, beauty and evil: 'All this is life'. All: the paradox of the character in 'A Letter from 1920', who escapes Bosnia, 'the land of hate', only to find death in the Spanish civil war (which is one more version of the old oriental folk story 'Death in Samara'). It is also the madness of Mustafa the Hungarian, who disgusted by people and by himself begins to kill everyone who happens to come his way, until he is killed himself; the suppressed erotic desire of Alidede in 'Death in Sinan's Tekke', which still surfaces as a bitter regret in his final hour; the comedy of a struggle with an elephant which accompanies servitude to the elephant's master in 'The Story of the Vizier's elephant'; the decision of Vizier Yusuf to leave the bridge bereft of any inscription in 'The Bridge on the Žepa'. And most of all, it is the destiny of beauty, which harbours the seed of destruction and tragedy in 'Mara the Concubine', 'Anika's Times' and 'An Unsettled Year': beauty and evil stay side by side, as extremes which touch one another.<sup>17</sup> This simultaneous and contiguous existence of beauty and evil prevents the storyteller from passing final, unambiguous judgment on the world. Instead of giving the world closure, as religion does, the wisdom of the storytelling tradition opens it up to the multitude of its phenomena, and to the irreducibility to a closed and final meaning. 'Truly wise', wrote Andrić in his notebook, 'would be a man who would on every occasion and in every moment keep before his eyes the infinite and immeasurable multiplicity and diversity of phenomena in human life and social relations, and who would be constantly and consistently guided by this knowledge in his thinking and acting.'<sup>18</sup> It is almost as if someone whom you approach for advice, counsel, guidance, and an answer to the question of why we are here and where we are heading replies: open your eyes wide and you will see wonders, as I saw them.

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<sup>16</sup> Ivo Andrić: 'O priči i pričanju', the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in *Istorija i legenda*, Belgrade: Prosveta, 1981, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> On female beauty in Andrić's stories see Radmila Gorup: 'Women in Andrić's writing', in *Ivo Andrić Revisited. The Bridge Still Stands*, ed. by Wayne S. Vucinich, Berkeley: University of California Press, especially p. 165, and Dragan Stojanović: *Lepa bića Ive Andrića*, Podgorica/Novi Sad: CID/Platoneum, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Ivo Andrić: *Znakovi pored puta*, Belgrade: Prosveta, 1977, pp. 167-8

The ability to see humans simultaneously as innocent, beautiful beings, such as Mara the Concubine, and as embodiments of monstrous bestiality, such as Mustafa the Hungarian, was crucial in Andrić's choice of Goya for a figure of an artist with whom to identify. What was it that Andrić could see at Goya's centennial exhibition when he visited the Prado in 1928? An artist of unrivalled success, who rose up from a modest background to the position of King's Painter saw the misery of the hovels of the poor, and the splendour of the Spanish court, the sensuous joys of life in Madrid, and the horrors of famine in the war from 1808 to 1812. Two of Goya's paintings, both still in the Prado, illustrate the breadth of vision which both Goya and Andrić shared. Both paintings share the same subject: the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, the day of St. Isidro, the patron saint of Madrid. On that day the Madridians crossed the Manzanares and went to the spring of healing water. However, the two paintings represent two very different visions. On the one hand, *La pradera de San Isidro* (St. Isidro's Meadow, 1788) portrays a splendid spring day, with white Madrid houses across the Manzanares, and under the blue sky a bridge over the river, resembling the one in Višegrad. Closer to us we can see houses, roofs, people going about their business, and Andrić's Mihajlo might add 'and people's greetings and smiles'. In the foreground a group of young men and women sit on the grass, in elegant, graceful positions. A girl pours wine into a young man's glass; the others exchange a kind word, or a smile – and this binds them together. This is a world without suffering, fear or evil. On another wall hangs *Peregrinación a la fuente de San Isidro* (The Pilgrimage to the spring of St. Isidro, 1821-1823) which portrays the same landscape, but plunged into a darkness which conceals the sky, Madrid and the river. Out of the darkness crawls a long column of weary and tormented people. They are crowded together, one on top of another, as if shackled together. And in the foreground, we see human faces disfigured from suffering and evil, their own and that of others. Both visions belong to the same painter.

In that exhibition Andrić could also see Goya's beautiful *Majas*, nobly relaxing in the anticipation of sensual pleasures; the smile of the beauty in *El quitasol*; the demure beauty of his *La aguadora* (The water seller), who might easily have been a woman from the bazaar in Sarajevo; the Duchess of Alba, a self-conscious beauty who seems to be wondering why her orders have yet to be obeyed. And at the same time and on the same walls he could see the spectacles of madness in *Corral de locos* (Yard with Lunatics) or *Manicomio o Casa de locos* (The Madhouse); a man just about to stab a helpless woman lying on the ground; humour emanating from the grotesque scenes of *Los caprichos*; and most importantly, *Los desastres de la guerra*, the scenes of violence, suffering and death with title-commentaries such as *Yo lo ví* (I saw it), *Y son fieras* (And they are like wild animals), and *Porque?* (Why?). On one of them, *Popolacho* (Mob), one sees a man lying on the ground being beaten to death by a man and woman, while the mob cheers them on; on another, parts of a dismembered body hang on a tree; on yet another, a group of men and women being shot by an invisible firing squad. And finally *Saturno devorando a su hijo* (Saturn devouring his son): *mythos* – a story which people have been telling one another different versions of – comes in at the end to give the final comment on the meaninglessness of horror, violence and death. Those beautiful girls, and these horrors, all this is life.