CHAPTER 6

ANDRIĆ’S RESISTANCE: TESTIMONIES OF HISTORICAL CONFLICT

The historical co-existence of two very different religious and cultural traditions in the heart of southeastern Europe is a matter of public record, rather than a political assertion. Hence, from the standpoint of a history that may not be over, the works of Ivo Andrić, creative writer and Yugoslav diplomat, testify to the presence of an alien tradition in a specifically Western context as well as the history of an unending conflict between two traditions that seem to be fundamentally opposed in their theological implications. In this chapter, we shall examine Andrić’s monumental novel, *The Bridge on the Drina*, in terms of the delimited discourses that constitute the world of this artistic work. Our analysis will begin with aesthetic reflections on the bridge as both a symbol of constancy and a metaphorical expression of cultural memory. The discussion will then move to the role of narrative in organizing the novelistic text as the product of multiple discourses. In conclusion, the older notion of hegemony will be challenged when the reader is invited to imagine cultural destruction as both a traumatic event in its own right and as a confirmation of what can be conceived in historical terms.

Aesthetics in *The Bridge on the Drina*

Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline is generally associated with ahistorical accounts of art and privileged horizons of meaning. Accordingly, one might question how an aesthetic approach to a specific modern novel can be justified when the reception of literature is strongly influenced by cultural factors. Ivo Andrić’s most famous novel is impossible to read as an exercise in aesthetic formalism. The image of time that this novel projects is ultimately traumatic insofar as it carries the reader through many periods that culminate in an irrevocable break with the past. And yet, both the appearance of
constancy and the event of rupture are communicated through the figure of the bridge on the Drina itself, which allegorizes what remains concealed and also serves as a reminder of what has occurred over the course of many centuries. If the bridge always appeared in the same way, it might function as the mere sign of an unchanging order. And yet, the changing appearance of the bridge suggests that aesthetics could play a role in both pointing to what cannot be revealed and in clarifying the historical meaning of this cultural figure.

At the same time, whatever we learn about the bridge is initially communicated in the mode of history, rather than in the guise of aesthetics. The narrator reminds us early that immortal works have historical resonance and that the bridge on the Drina embodies the history of the people who have made use of it and whose lives are inscribed with its meanings:

The life and existence of every great, beautiful and useful building, as well as its relation to place where it has been built, often bears within itself complex and mysterious drama and history. However, one thing is clear: that between the life of the townsmen and that bridge, there existed a centuries-old bond. Their fates were so intertwined that they could not be imagined separately and could not be told separately.¹

The narrator immediately suggests that the bridge has the symbolic value of defining the people historically. The people have an organic relationship to the bridge, which, like other immortal works of art, preserves a relationship to the past, and testifies more importantly to a reality that permeates everyday existence. Whatever can be said of the people of the bridge cannot be envisioned or told apart from the stories that bring together human fate and physical design in a manner that invites thoughtful reflection.

From this standpoint, we might still contend that the symbol of the bridge places us in an aesthetic framework, rather than in the more fluid setting of history. Among modern philosophers, Kant was the first to clearly formalize the aesthetic as a communal site of disinterested satisfaction. According to his classic formalization, beauty bears a symbolic relation to the good and therefore functions as