REVIEW ARTICLES/CRITIQUES EXHAUSTIVES

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Slavs on Slavs: A Recent Polish View of Ivan Gundulić's Osman

As a non-Slavic Slavist I most enjoy those books that allow me to exercise my linguistic and literary "muscles" in more than one Slavic language at a time, especially if none of the languages involved is Russian. I not only value the constant reminders such books furnish me: that each Slavic language has to be learned per se, yet that each Slavic culture must be examined in conjunction with all the others. I also prize the awareness they show growing among specialists and lay admirers alike that "Slavic" does not equal Russian, that indeed Slavic studies may be pursued without Russian intermediacy. Such a praiseworthy book, which allows me to practice my languages and ignore for a while my Russo-centric training, is Joanna Rapacka's excellent study, "Osman" Ivana Gundulica: Bunt świata przedstawionego.1

This slender book submits to careful analysis the Weltanschauung of South Slavdom's most famous poet, Ivan Gundulic (1588/89-1638), as it is enunciated in his unfinished epic poem, the Osman (ca. 1622-1638). Continuing the tradition of Polish scholarship on the Osman, a tradition which stretches back to the nineteenth century, Mme. Rapacka has drawn upon extensive material, not only from Polish and Yugoslav, but also from German, Italian, Russian and other sources, to produce an interesting new interpretation of the significance of Gundulic's often confusing opus. Her arguments and conclusions are worthy, I think, of our close attention; I propose, therefore, to review them here, and to add a few comments of my own on what I see as their merits and shortcomings.

Rapacka's introductory chapter concludes with the following statement of intention: "We wish to lessen the narrator's monopoly on interpreting the fates of his heroes and allow the principles governing the reality depicted in the poem to have their say, so that, through their account, we might try to uncover the Weltanschauung [płaszczyzna światopoglądowa] imposed upon the work."2 The key to understanding so many of the obscurities in the poem, she says, can be found precisely in a clear formulation of the author's ideological motives. A fresh appraisal of what is really happening in the poem might further reveal the "treasures" concealed inside the Osman's labyrinthine structure.

Thus she places herself squarely in the camp of the Osman's defenders, or at least, so it would seem.3 These scholars (Luka Zore, Franjo Marković, Miroslav Pantić,

2. Ibid., p. 23.
Dragoljub Pavlović, Milan Rešetar, and especially Alfred Jensen and Vsevolod Setschkareff have acclaimed the Osman’s originality and esthetic worth in the face of attacks by the poem’s numerous detractors (Armin Pavić, Roman Brandt, Antun Barac, Albert Haller, et al.), and they have devised ingenious theories to explain the poem’s peculiar structure. Setschkareff in particular has made, I think, the definitive case for viewing the Osman as two separate works, the “Osmaniada” (Cantos I and XVI-XX) and the “Vladislaviada” (Cantos II-XIII), which were written at different times and under different poetic impulses. The blemish of the work, which prevents its complete appreciation, he says, lies in the lamentable fact that Gundulić died before he could tie the two halves of his work together (he presumably would have done the “tying” in the fourteenth and fifteenth cantos, which were planned for but never written).

Rapacka accepts the dual origin of the poem, agrees with Milan Rešetar, Setschkareff, and other authorities that the “Osmaniada” was probably composed earlier than the “Vladislaviada,” and posits the integrity and discretion of the “Osmaniada,” while she considers the “Vladislaviada” to be dependent and incomplete.

I particularly applaud her second chapter, which she entitles “Tancredi in Istanbul,” for she suggests there valuable insights into the underlying sense of the “Osmaniada.” First she maintains that all of Gundulić’s interests lay with Dubrovnik and its fate. The depiction of Osman’s fall, although, to be sure, an event in itself most significant for the small republic, was actually intended as an allegory for the Ragusans. Osman, in this view, stands for any legitimate ruler, and the chaos that ensues after his rebellious subjects overthrow him, is meant as a warning to the citizens of Dubrovnik to respect their own authorities, lest they too invite chaos into the city. To a degree Osman represents the knightly ideal as well (hence, I assume, the title of the chapter); his tragedy lies in his inability to perceive that the time for knightly virtues has already passed. This, too, she construes as a warning to Dubrovnik to eschew principle and adhere to expediency in its dealings with the world. Yet, as Rapacka quickly points out, the espousal of such a Machiavellian notion ran counter to Gundulić’s grain. Osman, the Moslem, could not properly represent the positive moral of a poem entirely given over to the superiority of Christianity in its struggle with the Moslem world. Nor could expediency and convenience be the only principles for which the author was propagandizing. The “Vladislaviada” was created, therefore, after the “Osmaniada,” to provide a proper example of Christian rectitude in the figure of Prince Władysław, and to assuage Gundulić’s Christian conscience with the thought that principled behavior, if it could not practically exist in Dubrovnik, at least was to be found elsewhere, in far-off Poland.

Indeed Rapacka’s next chapter is appropriately entitled “In Poland; That is, Nowhere.” In her opinion, Gundulić was unable in the “Vladislaviada” to write a successful sequel which would have embodied a positive, Christian, knightly Weltanschauung. Instead the “Vladislaviada,” with its “three axes” (Ali paša’s trip to Poland, 4. Die Dichtungen Gundulics und ihr poetischer Stil (Bonn: Athenäum Verlag, 1952), p. 69.