Omerpaša Latas: The History of an Unfinished Novel

Introduction

The initial critical response to Ivo Andrić's unfinished novel Omerpaša Latas has been uniformly positive. The work clearly holds out the promise of a masterpiece. Separation of the "metaphysical" novel, the one Andrić intended to write, from the physical reality of the incomplete text is particularly useful in treating broad thematic and philosophical issues. Yet one cannot overlook the unique position that the text itself occupies in Andrić's fiction. Frozen in the process of creation, it is a record of a quarter century of prose writing. This work exists both as the posthumously published manuscript Omerpaša Latas (1976) and as a series of independent fragments published since 1950. The history of its writing and publication, in particular the relationship of the fragments to the novel, illuminates the evolution of Andrić's fiction in the last decades of his life. Thus Omerpaša Latas assumes its rightful place only when analyzed in its historical context.

As is true of all of Andrić's longer fiction, the conception or actual beginning of the work is difficult to date. The name of Omerpaša appears as early as 1924 in Andrić's doctoral dissertation. That he was writing a "chronicle of Sarajevo" was rumored for many years. But critics respected the writer's reluctance to speak about a work whose progress was slow and difficult. He feared quite correctly that he might never finish. Thus before Andrić's death little was written or even conjectured about his newest novel. Even in the most comprehensive study of his fiction to date, the chronicle is mentioned only briefly and a number of its potential fragments are merely footnoted.

2. Radovan Vučković, Velika sintesa (O Ivi Andriću) (Sarajevo: Svetlost, 1974), p. 542, fn. 43:
   "Jedan dan u Sarajevu krajem julja 1878" (1928)
   "Na Latinskoj čupriji" (1929)
   "Mrak nad Sarajevom" (1931)
   "Raja u starom Sarajevu" (1935)
   "Poručnik Murat" (1938)
   "Slikanje" (1950) (Omerpaša)
   "Crven cvet" (1951) (Omerpaša)
   "Na lancu" (1956) (Omerpaša)
   "Leto" (1951) (Omerpaša)
   "Murtad-tabor" (1957) (Omerpaša)
veral of these were written before World War II, the first as early as 1928. But as the editors of Omerpaša Latas noted, although Andrić originally conceived a vast chronicle of Sarajevo perhaps similar to Na Drini čuprija (The Bridge on the Drina), he clearly narrowed its scope, focusing on one moment in Bosnian history, the brutal military campaign in 1850-52 of the Ottoman commander and Christian renegade, Omerpaša Latas. This narrower work about Omerpaša is definitely a post World War II occurrence. Its first fragment, “Slikanje” (“The Portrait Painting”), which introduced the main protagonist, appeared in 1950. This year can be used as an approximate marker for the novel’s beginning because Andrić, while never dating his manuscripts, tended to publish the shorter fiction within a year of writing.

Before a closer comparison of the original fragments and the published manuscript can be attempted, several existing misconceptions about their relationship must be elucidated. Andrić published the fifteen fragments connected with Omerpaša not from 1950 to 1973, as often stated, but from 1950 to 1967. Although they appeared until 1973, any after “Livilavka” (“The Wine

“Vetar” (1957) (Omerpaša)
“Časovi crtanja” (1958) (Omerpaša)
“Predvečernji čas” (1960)
“Dva zapisa bosanskog pisara Dražeslava” (1963)
“Dolazak” (1963) (Omerpaša, 1962)
“Vucković does not separate out the Omerpaša stories, which I have noted in parentheses. “Dolazak” was published in 1962.

3. Sabrana dela Iive Andrića (Beograd: Prosveta, 1976), XVI, 311. All future references to any of the Collected Works will be cited in the text by volume and page number.

4. In a private conversation, Vera Stojić, Andrić’s secretary, identified Omerpaša Latas as a post-World War II work. On the one hand she is quite firm in her belief that it is impossible to date the individual fragments precisely. Yet she does believe that they represent the extent of Andrić’s work on the novel, particularly in the 1950s. She also verifies that Andrić tended to publish stories within a year of writing them. She herself started seriously working on typing the novel only after 1960.

(3) “Kod Sjenovitog hana,” Narodna armija, 30 April 1953.

Radovan Vucković only identified seven of the fragments. (see fn. 2., above). Editors of