

THE POETIC TECHNIQUE OF AESCHYLUS AND F. VIŠNJIĆ

I

At the end of the sixth century B. C., and in the first half of the fifth, there broke out, over Hellas, fierce revolts and tempestuous winds of various liberations which carried away the tyrannies and strengthened democracy in Athens, abolished the rule of the Pythagoreans and their narrow ways of life in Southern Italy, kindled into a flame the struggle of the Ionians for liberation in Anatolia, dispersed the Persians from Hellas and her waters, as well as Carthaginians and Etruscans from the Hellenic countries, overthrew the tyrants in the towns of Sicily and limited the power of the ancient state authorities—Archontates and Areopagus—diminished the power of the Spartan hegemony which had caused the uprisings of Messenians and Helots, and, at last, brought Athens the hegemony which was to die out at the end of the fifth century.

The Hellenic victory over the Persians was of decisive importance not only for the growth of Aeschylus as a dramatic poet but also for the development of the Hellenic political and spiritual life in general, and particularly for the growth of Athens, for, after the conquest, she also appeared on the Hellenic literary stage with the most important type of poetic art, the drama. Whereas the victory at Marathon was won thanks to the proved tactics of the hoplites, which was perfected by Miltiades, the victory gauned off the coast of Salamis was due to the united Hellenic navy which was helped by the genius of Themistocles who, like the Spartan ephors, was well acquainted with the weak cohesion of the imperial navy and with the developed heroic consciousness and the better warlike equipment of republican Athens. The ships of Hellas, three hundred and eighty in number, were lighter and faster; they were the first to attack the Persian navy which consisted of more than a thousand ships that, in the narrow straits of Salamis, owing to their large size and clumsiness, were unable to develop all their powers—for which reason the Hellenes, in the unparalleled exertion of their patriotic enthusiasm, were unable to defeat them:

At first the long-drawn Persian line was strong
And held; but in those narrows such a throng
Was crowded, ship to ship could bring no aid
Nay, with their own bronze-fanged beaks they made
Destruction; a whole length of oars one beak

Would shatter; and with purposed art the Greek
 Ringed us outside, and pressed, and struck; and we —
 Our oarless hulls went over, till the sea
 Could scarce be seen, with wrecks and corpses spread
 The reefs and beaches too were filled with dead,
 And every ship in our great fleet away
 Rowed in wild flight

(*The Persians*, p. 412—423. Translated by Gilbert Murray, p. 39—40, Allen and Unwin, London, 1948).

A similar thing happened also in England after 1588. The Spanish navy, the so-called Unconquerable Armada, consisted, as did the Persian navy, of 130 huge and clumsy galleys, real floating fortresses, manned by numerous crews of 30000 soldiers and equipped with 2630 guns. The English navy consisted of 80 smaller but well trained and fast-moving ships that were distinguished, as had been Hellenic triremes, by their extraordinary skillfulness in manoeuvring. Much better equipped, the English fleet, under the command of Lord Howard and Admiral Francis Drake, caused, at Graveling, great damage to the slow Spanish navy, the charge of which had been given by Philip II to the inexperienced Duke Medina Sidonia. Drake's fierce attacks forced the Spanish navy to run away, and it was not till a few months later that they reached their harbour after having been reduced in number by tempest, hunger and illness. Having won his victory, Themistocles said: „It was not we who did it, but the gods and heroes who could not tolerate that one man should be the emperor of both Asia and Europe.“ (Herod. VIII 109, orig. and VIII 37-39, 64-65, Paus. I 36,1); and the English Queen Elisabeth, after the Armada had been destroyed, had medals coined with the following inscription: „Deus adflavit et dissipati sunt“.

Himself a hoplit, Aeschylus fought in the battle of Marathon, and, as a fighter in the navy, he was also present in the battle off the coast of Salamis protecting the liberty not only of his native land but also of the whole of Hellas, and it was just this participation which made the most important chapter of his biography.

As Fra Angelico, in his epitaph, laid more stress on his Christian love than on the works of his brush („the second Apelles“), as Wolfram, in his *Parsival*, put more emphasis on the chivalrous deeds than on his political work, so did Aeschylus, in the inscription he composed for his tomb in Gela, avoid mentioning his poetic fame, referring only to his taking part in the battle of Marathon and his pride in protecting the freedom of his country which had been threatened by the power of the whole enormous Persian empire.

II

In the year 476, the ancient Phrynichus, the most famous among the tragic poets before Aeschylus, chose the battle of Salamis for the subject of his tragedy *The Phoenician Woman*. In the victory of the Hellenes he saw the catastrophe of the Persians; he transferred the stage

of the drama to Susa, and for the chorus he took the Phoenician women who came to the capital of Persia to gather information about the destinies of their sons and husbands, the warriors in the Persian army, and who, instead of being told the news about their victory were told about their defeat and death. Even at the very beginning of the drama, a eunuch brought the news about the defeat of the Persians. Judging by all the appearances, there was no real action to be found in the tragedy: its basic tone were outbursts of grief and lyrical complaints.

Four years later, the Persian defeat at Salamis was elaborated by Aeschylus in *The Persians* which—judging by the didascaly that survived as a hypothesis—was performed in the year 473-2, i. e. seven years after the battle of Salamis, and was awarded the first prize. It is the only extant Hellenic tragedy the subject of which was taken neither from a myth, that inexhaustible mine of Hellenic tragedy, nor from the rich table of Homer—which usually provided the material for the dramas of Aeschylus—but from the national history of the late incidents in which Aeschylus himself took part as a disciplined naval fighter; therefore, to a historiographer who is in search of the soul of the historical incidents, this drama provides the best key towards comprehending the moral strength of the freedom-loving Hellenes who, thanks to it, were able to repel the invasion of the Persian imperialism.

For the stage of his dramatic events Aeschylus, as did Phrynichus, takes the imperial palace in Susa, the capital of Persia, to which Xerxes, the emperor of Persia, is returning in rags after the defeat of his army caused by his own imperialistic arrogance. To the understanding of an Athenian of that time, Susa seemed to be situated in an almost mythically distant space which, together with the distance of the time, gave the recent historical incidents the non-historic atmosphere of a myth. The main hero of the drama, the enemy, is represented not only by one person, as usually, but by a number of persons, in fact by all those who are coming to the stage as representatives of the Persian nation. The enemy, however, is not repulsive, for the audience is supposed to sympathise with him, although the war is still being led against him. He is elevated through the character of the King Darius and his wife, the Queen Atossa. Not even Xerxes is hateful: he is a sinner and a silly man who cannot understand the limits of human power. Dark thoughts and fatal misgivings of the distinguished old men of Persia—who, in this drama, are taken as substitutes for the Phoenician women of Phrynichus—the ghastly dreams of Atossa, the dramatic account of the messenger, the appearance of the ghost of Darius who, being an interpreter of the catastrophe as well as its judge, accuses his son and dissuades him from the invasion; the complaint, the lamenting and moaning of the chorus,—all these things gradually fill up, more and more powerfully, the gloomy atmosphere, so that everything that is happening on the stage looks like the lightning which forecasts the coming of a dreadful storm, the storm which breaks out at last with the arrival of the emperor Xerxes himself. In a peculiarly artistic way the poet introduces the moment when Darius points to the approaching defeat during the decisive fare-

well at Platea when the Hellenes, headed by the Spartan king Pausanias, were to defeat the Persians and at Mycale where the Hellenic navy was to win a splendid victory over the Persian army. An even stronger impression among the Athenians must have been caused by the background of the people which the poet knew how to deepen through Atossa's enquiries about the whereabouts of Athens, about the number of the soldiers her citizens had, about the amount of wealth they possessed, about the kind of arms they carried and about their chief and leader, when the chorus answers that the citizens of Athens are nobody's slaves and nobody's subjects.

III

The tragic atmosphere which is to be found in the drama by Aeschylus can also be traced in the poems by Filip Višnjić, particularly in *The Beginning of the Uprising against the Dahias* and in *The Battle at Mišar*. In the same way as Aeschylus knew all the war chiefs although, in his drama, he mentioned none of them—omitting even Themistocles whose military strategy won the naval victory, for he was not praising the deed of a brave individual but the deed of collective heroism, as did Višnjić, the poet of the liberation war during the First Serbian Uprising, know all the main heroes and their struggles against the Turks, and therefore his poems are rich with the historical facts; as Aeschylus composed his verse drama as a participant in the struggle and its eye-witness, so did Višnjić move in the Serbian camps, trenches and battlefields near Drina listening to the noise of the Turkish bullets and the clang of the swords; he enquired about the details of the fatal battles, and thus, at the very source, he was collecting the material for his poems.

Beside the historical facts, the poems by Višnjić possess also artistically beautiful details that correspond to the artistic treatment of Aeschylus in his *Persians*.

The dreams of Atossa about two women harnessed to a Persian cart—one of whom, a Hellene, throws away the yoke whereas the other, the Persian woman, remains submissive—about an eagle who, running before a hawk, finds a shelter on an altar where the hawk comes to beat him with his claws, finds an equivalent counterpart in *The Uprising against the Dahias*, in the chiro-mantic scene on the top of the tower of Nebojša. While the dreams of Atossa reflect the fate of the Persians, the metal dish symbolically shows the tragic doom of the Turks: when the Dahias looked at their own faces in the dish as in a mirror,

„On their shoulders no heads were to be seen“.

The scene where Darius who, when called out of his grave, accuses his son of the enormous violence he did in Hellas, and rightly explains the Persian defeat as the realisation of the earlier prophecy which had been misunderstood, can be paralleled, in Višnjić's poem, by the visionary speech of „the old prophetic books“ (Indžiele) and by the clever political testament of King Murat which was recorded in these books: the arti-

stic effect both of the speech and of the testament consists in the fact that the conquerors—the Turks themselves—confess that they are trampling upon the honour of the conquered people whom they have burdened with every kind of tax and distress—and that that is the reason why they are going to lose their empire. In a similar way as Darius points to the near defeat of the Persian army, as well to the fatal battle of Platea, „the old prophetic books“ preasge the horrible fate of the Turks on the Balkan Peninsular:

„The roads will long to see at leats one Turk,
But then the Turks there will be found no more“.

As the Hellenic tragedian sings about the Persian catastrophe—and not about the victory of Salamis—,about the way in which it was received in Persia, in the palace of the emperor—and not about the effect it had in the victorious Hellas—,so does the poet of *The Battle at Mišar* when treating his subject. In the same way as Aeschylus sings about the battle of Salamis, Višnjić sings about the victory of Mišar, i. e. retrospectively; he describes the atmosphere it caused—not in the Serbian tents but in the palace of the enemy—in the heart of the Turkish Atossa, the sorrowful widow of Kulin the Captain.

While referring to a Scottish national ballad on two ravens that are standing by the corpse of a fallen hero and talking about their lunch, Miss Isidora Sekulić declares: „In our (the Serbian) epic poem *The Battle at Mišar* there is also to be found a detail about ravens that know the names of fallen heroes as well as the place where they are lying dead. The detail is dramatic to such an extent that it could not be inserted into a ballad: the widow of Kulin the Captain and the ravens—it is neither lyric nor epic; it is a dramatic dialogue of an incredible power“ (*Speech and Language, the Cultural Review of a Nation*, Beograd, 1956, p. 75).

If, long ago, the ravens of Kosovo brought the Serbian mothers the chopped-off hands of their sons killed in the battles—thus closing the doors of our medieval state with their news of defeat—,their descendants of Mišar, on the contrary, bring the news about the defeat of the Turks, thus ushering in the dawn of a new fame which illuminated the paths of Višnjić's poetical career.

As the messenger gives the widowed wife of Darius the roll of the sonorous names of the military chiefs who were killed, so the ravens give the Turkish widow a catalogue of the resonant names of the Turkish dukes, together with the account of their death, when they fall one after another, „one better than the other“.

After having heard the messenger's news, Atossa sighed:

Woe for a mighty army sunk so deep!
Thou vision of my phantom-haunted sleep
Most clear thou didst foretell some evil thing!

(*The Persians*. Translated by Gilbert Murray
v. 518—520, p. 44),

and the widow of Kulin, after she had heard the raven's intimation

A bitter cry she uttered up to God
 And threw the curse upon the hated foe;
 While thus she spoke, her soul and body strove,
 She stooped and fell, she never rose again:
 Her heart did break, for she was killed with pain"

(From *The Battle at Mishar*. Translated by
 D-r Ranka Kuić)

As Aeschylus turned the shouts of joy, uttered by the victors of Salamis, into the lament of the whole of Persia, so Višnjić changed the victorious list of the heroes of Mišar into the bitter cry of the widowed Turkish woman. The artistic effect of this treatment consists in the fact that the despotic fury of the invader meets with the defeat which is as dark as the victory of the defenders of freedom is bright. Let us add one further detail: the poet of *The Battle at Mišar*—so similar to the author of *The Persians*—never tramples upon the principle of *man*, neither does he fall into dazzling rhetorics when singing about the heroism of the victors. This is the highest artistic flight of the congenial Muse of the last European bard, as Filip Višnjić was called by Gerhardt Gesemann: she sings as if she had sat close by Homer and near the great Athenian tragedian while still a child, and then flew over Ida, rich in springs, Helicon, Šar-Planina and Kosovo up to Majeвица, her dwelling-place, and finally arrived at the battle-field near Drina, at the time when

„The saints started reigning in the Heaven“,

and breathed inspiration into the poet who, at last, saw Justice coming to the world, the justice which was to uphold both the country and the cities.

Beograd.

Miloš N. Đurić.