

BYZANZ
UND DAS ABENDLAND VII.
Studia
Byzantino-Occidentalia



BYZANZ UND DAS ABENDLAND VII.
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Natasja Čičić

Transcending Borders – Initiation of the Hero in the Epic Romance *Digenis Akrites**

In the example of *Digenis Akrites* we can clearly see the emergence and development of a heroic character. Just to better understand its nature and the procedures that result from it, we should first go back to the very beginning, address his origins and see how a heroic personality is created and what, in fact, is the birth of a hero?¹

As we see, reading the epic of *Digenis*, a key term in relation to the birth of a hero is the birth of self-awareness. It is, therefore, a moment in the life of a man in which he becomes aware of his exceptionality and his dissimilarity from others. He realizes that he is different from other members of the community; with the awareness of this, in order to prove his heroic position in relation to other members of the group to which he also belongs, he must partake of a series of socially established procedures, which, if performed in a standardized manner, will prove his heroic position. It is important to emphasize that what sets him apart from the rest of society is a feat at a time when no other community member is able to do the same; this is precisely where the apparent difference is established.

At the beginning of the piece, immediately after the hymn to *Digenis Akrites*, we read about the emir, *Digenis*' father, the great hero who conquered many cities and performed many valiant deeds. Of such a hero a son is born, able to be worthy of him, but who also has the ability to overcome him if he is able to achieve it. So the story of the emir introduces us to the main story – the story of the hero *Digenis*. The story hints at a hero who is yet to be born. The hero

* This paper represents adjusted parts of my master thesis, defended at University of Philosophy, Department of Classics, in Belgrade in April 2015.

¹ For the analysis of the hero *Digenis Akrites*, *Grottaferrata* text was used as edited and translated in: *Digenis Akritis, The Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions*, edited and translated by ELIZABETH JEFFREYS, Cambridge 1998; *Digenes Akrites*, edited with an introduction translation and commentary by JOHN MAVROGORDATO, Oxford, 1970. All translation of the text given in quotes is by Elizabeth Jeffreys from her work mentioned above.

needs an origin, he needs firm roots, a stronghold from which he can draw his strength. Thanks to his noble parents, father hero and mother from a respectable family, Digenis was born with the necessary predispositions to become a hero. On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that he was born only as a potential hero who is yet to realize his full potential. In his book on literary archetypes, Jelezar Meletinski says of a mythical hero that for a long time, it was considered that only the mythical character of semi-divine descent is someone who has sufficient free initiative to become a hero.² In the epic, we see, in order for the potential hero to realize the capacity gained by birth and become an actual hero, he himself has to possess sufficient initiative and thus the potentiality of the future becomes the actuality of the present.

Let's look at the following verses in which Digenis, after turning twelve, addresses his father:

A desire, my lord and father, has entered my soul
to test myself by fighting wild beasts:
and, if you love Basil your son at all,
let us go out to a place where there are wild beasts,
and you will certainly see the thought that is always troubling me.³

The father replies to him:

Do not, my sweetest child, set your heart on this,
do not pluck your fair roses before their time;
when, by God's will, you have come to full manhood,
then indeed without argument you may fight wild beasts.⁴

Self-awareness has awakened in Digenis and, crying, he tells his father:

If I do valiant deeds after I have reached manhood, father,
what benefit do I gain from that? This is what everyone does.
It is now that I want to achieve renown and to shed lustre on my
family,
and I tell you, my benefactor,

² Мелетински, Ј., *О књижевним архетиповима*. Нови Сад 2011, 21.

³ *Dig.* 4,73–77.

⁴ *Dig.* 4,87–90.

that you will have in me a great servant, your bravest,
and an associate and assistant in all your wars.⁵

In this example, we see a pivotal moment in the life of a potential hero. Digenis has awakened to the realization that he has the ability to become a true hero. He also gains insight into how he can achieve what he wants. We said above that Digenis wants to put himself to the proof, to test his abilities. But he equally needs to prove himself to others. He wants to impress his father, who is a hero himself, and get confirmation from him. Raising self-awareness is the first step, as epic tells us, in actualizing one's heroism. The second step is to have a sufficient dose of entrepreneurial awareness to realize one's ability. The third step is a way to achieving one's goal – to become a hero. For Digenis to become a hero, he must go through a rite of passage – an initiation. All that Digenis excitedly tells his father that he wants to do, he must successfully complete.

Meletinski says that initiation is more about socialization than about awakening personal awareness.⁶ Meletinski does not agree in certain respect with some scholars who have taken only a psychoanalytic approach to analysis, such as Campbell, who views initiation as immersing an individual in his own soul in search of new values.⁷

In Digenis' case, we would rather agree with Campbell's opinion and apply it to the very epic that it is really about awakening of one's personal consciousness and the individual immersing himself into the depths of one's own soul. Why are we taking this approach is because Digenis makes it clear to his father that he is ready to fight the beasts, and that in case he waits for a mature age to do such feats, he will be no different from others who are able to do the same. Digenis was born to the self-awareness that what makes a real hero is acting in an extraordinary moment. Going through the initiation, that is, through the rite of passage at the moment when other members of the community also do so, would mean the disappearance of a person in the collective, or merging into it. But Digenis Akrites does not listen to his father who tells him to wait to become mature for the transition into the adult world, he, with the awakened awareness of himself, decides to make initiation ahead of time. As Meletinski stated – the hero has enough initiative to put his desire and will into action. The works that Digenis does to confirm his personality need not in themselves

⁵ *Dig.* 4,94–99.

⁶ Мелетински (п. 2) 22.

⁷ Мелетински (п. 2) 12.

be extraordinary. Digenis is extraordinary and different in that he performs feats at an extraordinary moment. He dares to go beyond the boundaries of society with all its rules and to choose himself the moment of action.

We are now coming to a paradox. On the one hand, the hero is lonely, that is, he wants to be singled out from the world of ordinary people, to stand apart and watch it from the outside, which he succeeds after a successful initiation, and on the other hand, he needs this world because, if there was no such a world, the community against which he stands and differs from, he would not have something against which to stand as a hero, and consequently would not be able to receive its recognition. We have now come to the last step of becoming a hero. Others are the ones who have to make a final judgment and experience Digenis as a hero. The hero and the society are in an interdependent relationship. The community is needed by Digenis to formalize his heroism, and the Digenis is needed by the community because the community can project all its ideals in him.

So Digenis successfully defeats wild beasts, society admires him and in the scene that follows, the great emir offers his son to wash his feet. It is a symbolic act that foretells the end of Emir's rule. Meletinski calls it a shift of generations, an act by which a son inherits a father.⁸ Emir's time is slowly running out and the moment when a younger hero takes the stage is maturing. The Emir is now fully convinced of the maturity of his son, who has undergone initiation, and, according to Meletinski, initiation also symbolizes the maturity of the hero and surrendering power to the younger generation.⁹ The Emir has no worries about Digenis anymore and his trust in his son is established. By the symbolic act of washing his feet, Digenis' father recognizes his son as equal to himself. He performs this act publicly, thus showing to the others the respect he cherishes for his son, this being the end of the process of the hero formation.

The hero has proved his independence by initiation; thus, as Meletinski says, he proves that he is capable of marriage, freeing himself from the parental sphere of influence.¹⁰ The hero is thus formally ready to seek beauty. Different temptations stand in the way of her acquisition and the hero must go through them. By going through them, the hero will, on the one hand, reach the desired goal and gain beauty, and on the other hand, the path to the goal is itself extremely important. The temptations themselves serve as a way to develop a

⁸ Мелетински (п. 2) 22.

⁹ Мелетински (п. 2) 75.

¹⁰ Мелетински (п. 2) 11.

higher form of heroic personality. In the epic about Digenis, the hero is tempted by his father-in-law. Digenis must fight a powerful enemy in order to save the girl. From the moment of her abduction, the girl's father, a strategist, sends numerous troops in pursuit of the hero. Just as with his victory over the wild beasts Digenis proved his heroic relevance, the victory over her father troops proves his worthiness to his future father-in-law.

Thus Digenis, after one initiation proving his prowess, through the fight with the girl's family and the victory goes through another acquiring the right to the girl.

The hero is also able to cross the existing borders of the world and venture into the realms of others. But how is a hero actually able to cross borders and go beyond?

Who is Digenis Akrites, actually?

To try to answer this question, let's look more closely at the meaning of the hero's name. The hero's name consists of two words: Digenis and Akrites. It is a typical "sprechender Name". The first part of the name talks about the origin of its bearer. Digenis is someone who is born of two different genera. In this piece, the particular character, Digenis is a person born of a Christian mother and a Muslim father. In the first part of the name we see the opposite that the name carries with and the potential character of the hero full of opposites. If we look at the second part of the name, we see that Akrites means a border guard in translation. And who is the border guard and what is his role? He is first and foremost a person living at the border and acting as guardian of that border. The second part of the name, therefore, tells us about the function of its bearer. Based on this, we note that the meaning of a personal name indicates the (potential) character of its bearer.

Digenis Akrites is so a person born of the marriage of two people of different religious and tribal background (the personality of that person, therefore, includes the characteristics of both parents), whose life role is to perform the work of a border guard.

By its potential nature, the hero is the embodiment of both sides of the border, and by potential function he stands on the border and keeps one side.

But what are all the borders and limits in a hero's life? Let us try to find them and illuminate the different relationships that the hero goes through, from a borderline standpoint.

The first border on which the hero stands is physical. Digenis resides at the borderlines of the empire and protects it from invading enemies. He is

the guardian of the border of two worlds, two completely different cultures, and he takes care that these worlds do not collide. The hero is the protector of the Christian, Byzantine world against which the Arabs stand. He himself is the embodiment of that world, and at the same time is his guardian. In the epic, the Arabs appear as enemies, as *the aliens* easily overcome by the hero. And yet, by its nature, the hero belongs in part to the Arab world because his father was an Arab emir. But his border function is not to allow the penetration of those on the other side of the border into his territory.

The other frontier the hero preserves is the one within his own world. A world whose hero is the protector of, rests on certain rules, certain codes that are its structural fabric. Digenis' world is based on the Christian faith. It contains notions of sin and morality, right and wrong, good and bad, pairs of opposites that lie in the minds of every inhabitant. The hero is therefore here the guardian of morality, the guardian of good and right. That is its boundary function. But since he is Digenis Akrites, things are much more complicated. The 'Digenis' part of his personality always represents both sides of the border, forcing him to constantly cross them. The hero thus gets to know both sides. He is the guardian of morality and his embodiment, but because of the other part of his personality, he must also know what stands opposite to the right. Thus Digenis will commit adultery when he encounters a crying girl in the wilderness whom he rescues from the Arabs and then uses her, but in doing so he will realize all the gravity of sin and pangs of conscience, and after that he will return to his previous state, the state of the guardian of morals and its embodiment. Digenis brings the girl to the young man who abandoned her, taking advantage of her innocence, forcing him to marry her, and then the hero, returning to his wife, faces the full weight of pangs of conscience. The difference from the previous situation is that Digenis will now be more conscientious and pure; repentance after committing an act is a purification that finally ends with our forgiveness for what he has done. Thanks to the 'Digenis' part of the personality, he is enabled to realize this knowledge. Knowing good and evil brings out the experience of the good. It is thanks to such a character that Digenis gains the potential for development, for deeper and deeper self-realization. After slipping to the opposite side, the hero returns to his territory, that is, to the border of that territory, more developed and more powerful.

We come to the third border related to the hero. As Meletinski says the hero is the organizer of life and the protector of order from the forces of chaos.¹¹

¹¹ Мелетински (п. 2) 111–112.

Further, Meletinski says, community, which subjectively corresponds to the whole of humanity is personified in the character of the hero. Alien forces, which hero is opposed to, are representation of chaos and that which belongs to the hero represents the cosmos.¹² In the very epic those alien forces occur in different forms.

Here, the enemies are embodied in humans, robbers, soldiers, Arabs that Digenis easily defeats. Various animals then emerge, the most notable being the archetypal dragon. Digenis fights a dragon, disguised as a handsome young man trying to seduce Digenis' wife. Digenis defeats him and goes through another initiation.

In these cases, the hero fully performs his "Akrites" function, he protects *those that belong to him*, embodied in the beauty of the girl from the *aliens*, embodied as different enemies. The meaning of these victories and encounters is not only motivated by the protection of beauty and that which belongs to him. In these battles the hero develops his nature and symbolically each fight represents a new initiation after which the hero is more conscious and powerful.

The fourth border can symbolically be transferred to the personal plane. Namely, it is a complex relationship in the hero's personality between the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious also represents the whole orderly world, the cosmos that the hero protects (which has its own boundaries), and the unconscious is something unknown, dark and wild. Therefore, Digenis' relationship with the Amazonian Maximo is probably the most interesting one. In the epic, we see bandits calling for the help from the beautiful Amazonian Maximo to fight Digenis. The warrior and the hero meet, Digenis defeats her, after which she offers him the gift of her virginity. Digenis cannot resist her wild beauty and a physical connection occurs. The union of Digenis and Maximo can be interpreted not as cheating, but as the hero's complete possession of the loot of war. Looking at their relationship on the psychological plane, Amazonian Maximo represents that wild, unconscious part of human nature that resides beyond the boundaries of the conscious. In this sense, Maximo would be the representation of the archetype of the Great Mother, to which Neumann gives, between others, attribute of a virgin, of a creative force independent of men.¹³ Due to its "Digenis" nature, the hero is able to cognize that which is alien to him, far, unconscious. Being with Maximo, he is fully

¹² Мелетински (п. 2) 72–73.

¹³ Нојман, Е., *Velika majka*. Beograd 2015, 323.

aware of himself, thus experiencing the pinnacle of his transformation, but this flash of insight into his whole being lasts briefly. We can also look upon their union as a $\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma$ $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\mu\omicron\varsigma$ which hero performs when, as Joseph Campbell says, he had already gone through all the other adventures and defeated all the demons. This last adventure of his is the union with the Goddess of the world.¹⁴ Digenis goes then to his wife, feels the remorse, returns afterwards to Maximo and cruelly kills her. Why is it so? He is also *Digenis*, and so is he *Akrites*. His nature allows him to taste the unknown on one side, and the other side of his character, that which he has to perform, his function, brings him back to his starting position. However, with each crossing of the border, the starting position is strengthened and expanded. Thus Digenis cannot stay long in the position of complete realization of the unconscious, but has to return to the bordering position.

Apart from these clearly defined boundaries, Digenis' border position is reflected in other relationships, as well. If we look at the way Digenis is viewed by the community and other people who belong to his domain, we see that he is contradictory. On the one hand, what fits in with the "acritic" part of his personality is the hero's desire to be separated from the community, to live alone on the border as their guardian, while to the "digenic" part of his personality, the solitude is not sufficient. He needs to experience the recognition of society and to be reflected in their eyes as a hero. Then comes the epic problem of the hero's inability to have children. Probably this problem is also conditioned by its borderline nature. If we look at the hero's outward appearance and heroic courage, we see that he is harmonious and beautiful. But on the inside, there is a constant struggle between crossing borders and returning to the starting position (although, as we said, the quality of that position has been improving with each new crossing). The epic says that Digenis and Eudocia could not have children and that they suffered daily because of this, and yet they thank God being aware that the probable cause lies in their own flaws. If we recall Plato's words that giving birth in discord is impossible, the situation may seem somewhat clearer. This may cause the hero to be prevented from creating children. His personality is complex and represents for the most part beauty and harmony, but with a tendency to taste the opposite sides. Let us not forget that he is a hero and mediator between humans and gods, he is the frontier guardian of the two worlds, and because of his complex personality he did not receive the gift of the ordinary people to participate in immortality through birth.

¹⁴ KEMBEL, DŽ., *Heroj sa hiljadu lica*. Novi Sad 2004, 100.

The last frontier we come to is the boundary between life and death. Let's look here again at the way Digenis is dying. After a brief cold gained by bathing, the hero falls into his deathbed. In addition to the apparent similarity to the Alexander tradition, it is possible that there is more symbolism in the verses. Due to its contradictory character, the torn state of Digenis' spirit is reflected in the body as well. The slightest cold affects the body's withering and the hero dies. But before his death, he leaves verses about his entire life seen from his perspective.

It is interesting that the hero failed fully to cross any border during his life and to remain on or embrace the other side forever. The verses come to our minds about the river Euphrates as the last abode of the hero. He is a medieval hero and a Christian hero and therefore, with the death of the body, his soul does not die. The Great Euphrates River will help him cross over to the other side forever. At the end of the epic we read that the congregation from which the hero sought to separate, directs him to Christ. After death, the hero will experience another birth and will be enthroned next to Christ in eternity. In a symbolic way, the people who sing the last verses to God pay Digenis a final acknowledgment of his heroism and release him from his frontier position that he has successfully performed throughout his life. They are now the ones who mediate between the hero and God and lift him to heaven.

As complicated as Digenis Akrites is, he successfully fulfils the given character. All his life he has been fully Digenis and Akrites, thus fulfilling his destiny. He is not trying to escape from his destiny, but is completely indulging in it. By realizing his potentials, Digenis Akrites fulfils his purpose – being what he really is to the maximum, while living through his entire complex character.

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