

Glorious Dust

Divota Prašine

Presented by: Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković

Divota prašine (*Glorious Dust*) is a novel by Croatian author Vjekoslav Kaleb, published in 1954 (I am using the Polish edition entitled *Przydrożny pył*, 1957). At the time of publication, it was one of many stories emerging about the fate of partisans and their victorious march to freedom under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito. The protagonists formed a kind of pantheon consisting of representatives of the peoples of Yugoslavia, who, like divine heroes, first defeated their fascist opponents. Later, already battle-hardened and proven as individuals devoted to their country and communist/socialist ideology, they became members of different echelons of the state authorities. In Yugoslavia, the cult of partisans was part of socialist propaganda, alongside the cult of Tito and the “brotherhood and unity” (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) of all nations and nationalities within the common state.

A significant portion of Yugoslav novels about the fate of partisans were written as part of the socialist realism movement. However, socialist realism was a short-lived phenomenon in Yugoslavia compared to other socialist countries in Central Europe. The final departure from the doctrine is associated with the Third Congress of Yugoslav Writers, organized in 1952, marking the end of the literary conflict between supporters of social literature and surrealism (*Sukob na književnoj ljevici*) and the speech by Miroslav Krleža, considered a definitive break with the poetics of socialist realism.

Although Kaleb’s novel exhibits certain characteristics typical of socialist realism—such as a black-and-white outlook, a clear and transparent message, and a protagonist who serves as a role model, exemplifying proper behaviour, firmly convinced of the rightness of his choices and consistently striving to achieve his goal—its composition aligns much more closely with modernism. This novel also bears characteristics typical of Croatian and Yugoslav war prose of the 1950s, placing obstacles in the way of those striving to accomplish their goal, but not allowing them to stray (as was the case in the 1950s). *Glorious Dust*, like other novels of the type, breaks the rules of realism; the characters possess superhuman powers which not only help them surmount every weakness but also to overpower forces of the enemy far superior in number.

The historical facts referred to in the novel concern the consequences of the Battle of Sutjeska fought in south-eastern Bosnia from 15 May to 16 June 1943, in which Tito’s troops incurred substantial losses (a third of their strength) yet succeeded in escaping the encirclement of the joint Axis forces (German, Italian, Croatian, Bulgarian). The objective was to break the Yugoslav communist Partisan movement, and the failure of the operations – referred to as the Fifth Anti-Partisan Offensive – became a turning point for Yugoslavia during World War II.

The protagonists of the novel are two nameless soldiers: Dječak (Boy) and Goli (Naked) with a goal

of reaching a brigade scattered after a battle, but also defeating all supporters of fascism and tyranny, and ultimately co-creating a new socialist/communist country. First, Boy's lonely struggle is presented, followed by Naked joining him, which arises from the didactic purpose of the novel and the fact that it is directed primarily at a young readership. We do not know the characters' names, but we do know that Boy comes from Split, while Naked comes from Banija (Banovina). Their "nicknames" are related to what is apparent at first glance: Boy is simply young, 16 years old, while Naked is wearing only a jacket, having lost the lower part of his clothing while crossing the river. The author does not give names to the other characters, either. Similarly, they are described based on their appearance (Starac/Old Man, Starica/Old Woman, Djevojka/Girl, Brko/ Moustached Man, and others) or the circumstances of their joining the wandering soldiers (Novi/New, trojica novih/three newcomers). In multi-ethnic and multi-religious Yugoslavia, an individual's first and last name easily revealed their origin, nationality and even religion, whereas in wartime circumstances, what mattered was which side you were on, and the ranks of the partisans were open to everyone. Clearly, it is just as easy to recognise someone by their language/dialect/local speech characteristics, but Kaleb did not individualise his characters in terms of language. Little is also known about the characters' physical appearance. We see Naked through the eyes of Boy (only halfway through the novel), and his appearance is shaped by his consciousness; apart from his external features, his face also reflects his submission to the law and specific experience: "It was a young face. He couldn't have been more than twenty five years old. From his gaunt, sunburnt face, with blue, deep-set eyes and perhaps prematurely fixed youthful wrinkles, radiated self-assurance that revealed the experience he possessed. [...] Perhaps it was simply a compilation of everything he had heard, read and experienced in connection with the revolution, or perhaps it was a completely independent experience. In any case, Boy remembered his firm decisions, his balance of mind, his strong will, or rather, his submission to the law of struggle and his insistence on a position that was the only right and possible one." (117).

Even when they are alone in the field, Tito's partisans, and therefore also the protagonists, they fight against the Germans, Italians, the Chetniks and the Ustasha. This power of a child and of nakedness, and therefore the power of sincerity, innocence and truth that lie behind their "nicknames" (appellatives), is closely linked to their convictions, their belief in a bright future that will follow the victory of the Yugoslav army and which is associated with the rule of the nation/ the people: "The nation will take power into its own hands and govern itself. We suffer so that we can take a bigger step towards the future." (57) This political and ideological stance seems surprising, especially in the case of Boy who decided to join the partisans as a fifth-grader and, during the events covered by the narrative, assumed the "duties of a political delegate of the platoon." (147). No doubt it is the belief in the righteousness of the chosen path that draws others to the wandering duo, who then enlist in the partisan ranks to pursue together the vision of socialist prosperity. Achieving the goal is associated with the growth of the community, increasing the number of people who act and think alike: "Imagine that on your farm, everything is done by machines and motors [...] to make human life easier; imagine that our trucks are driving along this road." (168).

Boy and Naked fight against the enemy, the terrain (rivers, ravines, high peaks), they fight against weakness, hunger, extreme exhaustion, lack of sleep, disease, but they also fight for an idea – they are politically aware, although the term 'communism' never appears, nor does 'socialism': "Our road is clear, even though we do not know where our troops are." (37) The political tone of the piece intensifies as the story draws to a close and the circle of characters expands. At first, the sole gesture, but one of great significance, is Boy's care to keep his cap with the red star on his head: "He drew the cap from his bosom - though it was soaking wet - and set it on his head, carefully positioning the red star in the middle of his forehead" (10). Other significant signs of ideological

characterisation include the use of a characteristic greeting: “Smrt fašizmu, sloboda narodu” / “Death to fascism, freedom to the people”, a characteristic phrase: ‘comrade’; emphasising affiliation with the people’s army (partisans)/ Yugoslav Partisans / the National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia.

Glorious Dust is classified as an existentialist novel, and a road novel (the road is sometimes compared to the Way of the Cross). Its characters wander constantly, all the time finding themselves in limit situations (Jaspers). Kaleb (himself a member of the partisan resistance movement) sets them on a path along which they walk “upright, like two prophets” (134), a road “the world has never seen before” (99), along the “glorious path” (100) which culminated in the triumph of Tito’s forces and the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a state that endured until 1991. In this clearly ideologically charged novel, scholars emphasise universal themes, seeing them as the reason for the book’s continued relevance. The novel did not fade into obscurity with the end of its era, having seen 13 editions published. Chances are that this is Vjekoslav Kaleb’s best work, considered by Krešimir Nemec to be one of the greatest achievements of contemporary Croatian literature (*Povijest hrvatskog romana*, vol. III, Zagreb 2003). The search for a brigade – identified by Boy as a search for a home – is most often interpreted by scholars as a search for the meaning of life, and novels give it allegorical significance (Aleksandar Flaker, Vjeran Zuppa, Krešimir Nemec, Velimir Visković, Pavao Pavličić, Jagna Pogačnik). However, we should bear in mind that the goal pursued by the protagonists is elusive and undefined, and the brigade is moving away: “In the distant, distant horizon before them they perceived something indistinct, toward which they walked, and this imprinted itself in their minds as the sole reality” (138–139).

The title *Glorious Dust* expresses the delight of weary travellers at the prospect of walking on a smooth, dusty road. After the hardships of crossing rocky mountain passes, dust seems like a balm for their wounded feet. The partisan acts are glorified in a scene at the end of the novel, in which a group of female partisans weave stretchers to carry exhausted and wounded soldiers. However, their journey does not end there; they continue onward to meet their own brigade. Kaleb effectively shows a utopia, a happy ending in a situation of subordination to History and ideas.

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By: Ivana Perica