

## CHAPTER 1

# The Young Bosnian

**D**IMITRIJE MITRINOVIĆ was born on October 21st 1887 at Donje Poplat, a small village near Stolac in Hercegovina, the eldest of ten children.

Throughout the nineteenth century Bosnia and Hercegovina had been in a state of continual unrest. After three centuries of Ottoman rule, under the weight of crippling taxes to the central state, religious persecution and exploitation by feudal landlords, the peasantry resorted to armed rebellion. There were frequent local uprisings which had flared up on a larger scale in 1875. Politically weakened and economically bankrupt, the Ottoman Empire had been unable to suppress the revolt. The peasant guerrillas, on the other hand, were unable to gain the support of the townspeople, with the result that by the winter of 1877 there was a stalemate between the opposing forces and no end to the conflict in sight.

The greed and territorial ambitions of the major European powers, particularly Russia and Austria-Hungary, were whetted by the power vacuum created in the Balkans by the disintegration of the Turkish Empire. Under the 'honest brokership' of Bismarck a congress was convened at Berlin in June 1878. Making no concessions to the aspirations of the Balkan peoples, the European powers at the Congress authorised Austria-Hungary to occupy and administer Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Under the Hapsburg occupation an extensive modernisation programme was implemented in the provinces. By means of forced labour the authorities built over 6000 kilometres of new roads between 1878 and 1914. Over 1000 kilometres of railways were

built during the same period. Mineral resources were exploited and heavy industries were established.

In order to safeguard this expansion of their colonial interests the Hapsburgs sought to maintain the social and religious divisions within the population. They did this by preserving the feudal pattern of serfdom that had existed under the Turks. By playing off the largely Christian peasant population against the predominantly Muslim landlords, they sought to forestall the development of nationalist feelings amongst the Slavs of the provinces. The result was that under the Hapsburgs the conditions of the peasantry in Bosnia and Hercegovina remained as bad as ever.

Divided amongst themselves and lacking any national leadership or organisation, the response of the peasantry to these conditions was the traditional reaction of subjugated groups throughout the world: periods of apathetic resignation broken by violent, but localised, uprisings and armed rebellion. As part of their attempt to sustain tribal and feudal relations in the villages, and thereby forestall any national uprising, the Austro-Hungarian authorities systematically deprived the population of any educational resources. Even by 1914 88% of the population of the provinces were illiterate. It is therefore all the more surprising that there emerged in these South Slav provinces at the turn of the century a small group of educated young people who were to form the nucleus of a revolutionary movement against the Hapsburgs. Collectively they came to be known as the Young Bosnians, and Mitrinović was to become one of their leaders.

Many of the Young Bosnians were peasant boys who had worked as servants in the richer homes in order to attend high school. Mitrinović was rather more fortunate.<sup>1</sup> Both his parents were educated and well read. His father, Mihajlo, worked as a school teacher in Donje Poplat as did his mother, Vidosava. Outside school hours Mihajlo was active as an agricultural adviser whilst Vidosava involved herself in teaching the village girls domestic skills, home management and the rudiments of health care. The house itself served as a regular meeting place for the students of the area and contained a well-stocked library of several hundred books – reflecting the enquiring mind of Mihajlo who had taught himself Greek and Latin and was also fairly fluent in German. It was from his father that Mitrinović obtained an early appreciation

of the classical literature of Europe and his first introduction to the world of science. It would appear that his relationship with his mother was particularly close, and it was she who opened up the world of music and the arts to her eldest son. It was from her that he learnt the Serbian epic poems and traditional folk music that he was to remember all his life.<sup>2</sup>

Brought up as an Eastern Orthodox Christian, Mitrinović attended primary school at Donje Poplat and later at Blagaj where his father had been transferred. Both parents seem to have recognised that their eldest child was specially gifted, and were prepared to make sacrifices in order to encourage his educational and cultural development. His brother, Čedomil, remembered an occasion when their father had to go into town to do some shopping. The young Dimitrije asked him to buy a violin. There was insufficient money for the family's shopping and the violin, but the child got his violin and the family went without the needed household articles. Another tale told by his brother was of the occasion when Mitrinović, as a small child, went for a walk with his parents. Separated from his parents, they discovered him with a venomous snake, both quietly regarding each other. To the relief of the parents the snake showed its discretion and slid away. One can safely assume that such events were not the norm during his childhood, which seems to have passed fairly uneventfully. It was, however, of extremely short duration in some regards. In later life he was to recall how, as a small boy, he was taken by his mother to visit the local Muslim women in the strict seclusion of their quarters. This practice was terminated when he reached the age of seven, deemed too old to be trusted in such situations.

In 1899, at the age of twelve, he enrolled at the High School at Mostar, the capital of Hercegovina, where he remained until his matriculation in 1907. As part of the Hapsburgs' general policy of denying any kind of political freedom to the people of Bosnia and Hercegovina, students were forbidden to organise any school societies or to participate in any public associations. This did not prevent the school children from expressing their feelings towards the Austro-Hungarian regime, however. In later years Mitrinović would tell his associates in Britain of how, as school children, they would kneel on one knee only in church when prayers were said

for the Austrian royal family, hoping that this would render their prayers ineffective.<sup>3</sup>

Given the restrictions on organising openly, the school boys began to form secret societies. One of the earliest was started at Mostar in 1904 when Mitrinović was instrumental in creating a secret library for the use of the students. Out of this library a secret student literary society, *Matica* (Mainstream) emerged in 1905. The main activity consisted of a weekly gathering at which the students would read their own writings and poetry and discuss current literary questions. It was at these sessions that Mitrinović began to develop his ability as a literary critic. It was also about this time that he began to publish his own poems. In 1905 the poems 'Twilight Song' and 'Lento Ooloroso' were published in the journals *Nova Iskra* and *Bosanska Vila*. By the time he graduated from Mostar more than twenty of his poems had been printed, usually under the pseudonym of M. Oimitrijević. In 1906 he published his first critical article on the occasion of the death of the poet José-Maria de Heredia. This appeared in the *Prijegled Male Biblioteke* (*Review of the Little Library*).

Along with his work with *Matica* Mitrinović was also engaged in a secret political society at the school called *Slobada* (Freedom). Amongst the members of this group were Bogdan Žerajić, Vladimir Gaćinović, Pero Slijepcević and others who were to play an important role in the history of the Young Bosnians. A number in the group defined themselves as Serbian nationalists and Pan-Slavists. Others, including Mitrinović, described themselves as Yugoslav federalists. Whatever their labels, the members were united in recognising the need to overthrow the foreign rule of the Hapsburg Empire and the imperative of overcoming what they saw as the backwardness of their own society.

None of them were very clear during those early days at Mostar how this transformation of their own society might be achieved. Students like Žerajić and Gaćinović advocated political assassination and a violent revolutionary upheaval. Mitrinović focused more on the potential role that a cultural and literary convergence of Serbs and Croats might play in the emergence of a Yugoslav consciousness. What they shared was an interest in the Russian revolutionary thought and literature of that period. R. Parezanin recorded how:

Chernishevsky's 'What Is to Be Done?' was passed from hand to hand. Whole pages from it were copied and learned by heart. Besides Chernishevsky, the most esteemed writers were Bakunin, Herzen, Dostoyevsky (particularly *Crime and Punishment*) and Maxim Gorky.<sup>4</sup>

They also studied the German and Italian liberation movements. Especially influential in the early formation of the ideas of the Young Bosnians was Mazzini's emphasis upon the role of the young in the liberation of a nation.

In January 1907 Mitrinović travelled to Sarajevo to assist the high school in establishing their own political society. In the autumn of that year he graduated from Mostar, and after a short holiday at the home of his parents he set off with Bogdan Žerajić to study at Zagreb. He travelled via Belgrade and during his time in the city established contact with literary and nationalist groupings, including *Slovenski jub* (The Slav South) which had its own journal. It would seem that during his stay in Belgrade Mitrinović arranged to obtain funding from Serbian sources to support him in his studies and his political activities. An anonymous report to the police in Zagreb alleged that he received more than 100 crowns a month from Belgrade, whilst an associate, Veljki Petrović, remembered him as a man gifted with an amazing ability to acquire money without any apparent effort. Certainly he dressed and lived with some style. On one occasion he provided the impoverished Vladimir Gaćinović with a complete outfit of clothes, whilst on one of his many visits to Sarajevo he treated ten students to an expensive meal at one of the best restaurants in town. He did a tremendous amount of travelling around the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Sarajevo, Belgrade, Vienna and further afield. Writing to a friend in January 1910 Bogdan Žerajić wrote that Mitrinović was in Zagreb: 'He lives very well. He sometimes goes looting to Sarajevo, then comes back loaded, lives for some time, then again ...'<sup>5</sup>

He was nominally enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy at Zagreb studying philosophy, psychology and logic, but his academic studies were secondary to his political and cultural activities. It appears that he began to attend courses at other universities apart from Zagreb, including Belgrade and Vienna. It is recorded that in 1908 he was instrumental in the formation of a cultural society called *Rad* (Work) amongst the students at the University of Vienna.

This group was particularly influenced by Thomas Masaryk and his advocacy of 'realistic tactics' as a method of political struggle. For Masaryk liberation would be achieved through the cultural reawakening of the South Slavs, and this would be brought about by the day-to-day work of individuals in cultural societies, temperance and literary groups. This focus on cultural activities lost favour with certain of the Young Bosnians, however, when the Austro-Hungarians formally annexed Bosnia and Hercegovina in the October of 1908. On receiving this news in Vienna Mitrinović and five other students immediately formed a secret society committed to fighting the Hapsburg authorities. They declared total opposition to the Austro-Hungarians and vowed never to recognise the annexation of their homelands, which, they asserted, 'represented a sheer plunder, and if Austria-Hungary wants to swallow us, we shall gnaw its stomach.'<sup>6</sup>

In their organisation of the society the founder members followed the practice advocated by Chernishevsky and other Russian revolutionaries, with secret cells formed consisting of three members, none of whom knew the membership of any other cell. To preserve secrecy the rules and aims of the society were not committed to paper, and correspondence was carried out by means of coded messages. The members argued that the people of Bosnia and Hercegovina needed to be ideologically prepared for the final overthrow of their imperialist masters. To this end they set about organising a network of groups in the provinces and establishing links between the different villages. They also decided to make contact with 'revolutionary, anarchist and nihilist organisations which exist in the world.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, one of their number left for Russia in January 1909 with the aim of establishing links with the revolutionary movement there and learning from their methods of organising.

Mitrinović's activities were interrupted during the summer months of 1909, which he spent in Hertzognovi recuperating from suspected tuberculosis. By the autumn, however, he was actively involved in the launching of a new journal, *Zora*, 'The voice of the Serbian Progressive Academic Youth.'<sup>8</sup> By 1910, according to Predrag Palavestra, Mitrinović 'held with his own hands many threads of the publishing and editorial policy of *Zora*'.<sup>9</sup>

His work was interrupted once again in the summer of 1910 when he was arrested by the authorities. His friend Bogdan Žerajić had determined to assassinate the Emperor Franz Josef on the occasion of his visit to Mostar and Sarajevo. Nothing came of this and so, a short time later on June 13th 1910, Žerajić had attempted to assassinate General Marijan Varesanin, committing suicide with the final shot from his revolver. It was alleged that Mitrinović was an accomplice and an instigator of the act. An anonymous note to the Sarajevo authorities alleged that:

This man received to our knowledge 600 crowns a month from Belgrade ... To Croatian writers he pays in advance a fee for working for Serb journals etc. ... For the better elucidation of this attempt it is necessary at once to carry out a search of the rooms of Dimitrije Mitrinović in Zagreb. We add that we have written this letter to you, because this letter has the purpose of bringing to an end the conspiracies of the dangerous Mitrinović.<sup>10</sup>

Mitrinović was arrested and his rooms duly searched. Nothing incriminating was found and he was released after a few days, although his passport was confiscated for a while in an attempt to restrict his travelling.

It seems fairly clear that even if Mitrinović had some idea of his friend's plans, he would have disapproved of such individual acts of violence. Along with perhaps the majority of those who identified with the Young Bosnian movement he believed that the overthrow of the Hapsburg empire must be accompanied by a moral and cultural revival of society and the development of a new Yugoslav culture. As part of this anticipated renaissance special attention was paid to the role of the arts in general and the particular significance of literature. The literary journal *Bosanska Vila* played a crucial part in this development.

Founded in 1885 *Bosanska Vila* had been primarily devoted, in its early years, to the collection of folklore, customs and poems.<sup>11</sup> According to Vladimir Dedijer, when Mitrinović was in Sarajevo in 1907 he became the review's 'real editor', transforming the publication 'into a mouthpiece of modernism'.<sup>12</sup> His involvement with the magazine had begun in 1905, when he was still a student at Mostar, with the publication of one of his poems. This was followed by other poems, and in 1907 by an article on 'Our Literary Work,' and a series of articles in 1908 including 'Democratisation of

Science and Philosophy,' 'The National Ground and Modernity,' and 'The Philosopher Marcus Aurelius'. During this period, according to Nenad Petrović:

Mitrinović gave *Bosanska Vila* an enormous impulse by shaking it out of a romantic verbose nationalism of fiery words and gave it a new direction, an understanding of nationalism that was modern and progressive. It thus became the advance guard of the younger generation. ... The powerful influence of *Bosanska Vila* which grew with the development of the Serbian intelligentsia in Bosnia was such that more than any other Serbian publication on that territory, it represented the expression of the spiritual life of the time. Although Mitrinović brought a new impulse to it, he too, like all the others who worked for it, was educated under its influence, and came from the spiritual ambience which it had created.<sup>13</sup>

The Young Bosnians considered the spiritual and moral plight of the people as important as their material deprivation under Hapsburg rule. They believed that the Austro-Hungarians were consciously promoting the moral corruption of their nation. The introduction of special military brothels to Bosnia and Hercegovina was symptomatic of such a strategy. They were filled with disgust by what they viewed as the decadence of the older generation, their materialism, conservatism and apparent lack of nationalist feeling. This gulf between the generations was expressed by Mitrinović in 1911 when he criticised the editorial board of the *Serbian Literary Herald* for not including amongst their members 'someone who is not an old man, spiritually old, old fashioned, old-Slav. I emphasise that what has been done in literature must be done in art: let the young speak; let them tell us what they have, let them work, let them show their artistic value, their national value.'<sup>14</sup>

This concern of the Young Bosnians with the spiritual and moral regeneration of their people followed naturally from their belief in the importance of working towards the cultural revival of a suppressed people as a necessary preliminary to any move towards a political revolution. This feeling was expressed by Mitrinović in an article he wrote for *Bosanska Vila* (issues 9 and 10) in which he proclaimed:

Our national tasks are very difficult, but urgent. Our enemies are very powerful: however our social, spiritual and physical milieu is too weak for hopes of victory to be close or sure. Our job today is to awaken dormant national energies, to make use of anything that may serve



our ends, to raise the irresolute, to goad the lazy, to educate the unconscious, to show the path, and follow it as the best example, to encourage, spur on without pausing, to assemble and organise national energies and differentiate these energies for various great and arduous tasks.<sup>15</sup>

In emphasising the importance of the exemplary action of the individual he was echoing not only the Russian populist Chernishevsky, but also the founder of Serbian socialism and one of the first to encourage the Yugoslav ideal, Svetozar Marković. One of Mitrinović's contemporaries, the literary critic Jovan Skerlić, summarised an important aspect of Marković's socialist idealism with the words: 'Particularly in small countries, ideas are worth only as much as the men who advocate them.'<sup>16</sup>

Such an emphasis on the significance of an ethical morality in the private and public life of the individual naturally led the Young Bosnians to adopt a critical stance towards political parties in general, and the social democratic parties in particular. They were attacked for their lack of principle and internal democracy, and their revealed tendency towards an authoritarian bureaucratisation. In his article, 'The Democratisation of Science and Philosophy', published in *Bosanska Vila* in 1908 when he was aged twenty, Mitrinović expressed this feeling forcefully:

The greater part of our activities, particularly in domestic party politics, have not arisen from reasonable and principled convictions, but from spite, envy, egoism, hatred and similar unworthy motives. Caprice often takes the place of principle. We shall never make any fundamental progress as long as the majority of our actions are not undertaken with serious and noble intentions ... often a naïve and sentimental enthusiasm for 'harmony' is ridiculous, but party politics should not descend from the heights of principle to the depths of petty and unworthy disputes ... In our politics there still rules a spirit of authoritarianism, so that our politics are usually not the politics of reason and wisdom, but the politics of authoritarianism and rhetoric. ... The sacred ambition to possess a conscience and intellectual integrity have almost disappeared.

Less caprice, more principle! This should be the motto of those who are able to do something to transform our swampy and senseless society into a different society, healthy and vital.<sup>17</sup>

The Young Bosnians saw it as their mission to inspire the equivalent of a spiritual or religious movement amongst the youth of the

South Slav provinces; a movement that would lead to a federation of all the national groups following the overthrow of the Hapsburg empire. In this context, Vladimir Dedijer expressed the view that:

The most positive contribution of the Young Bosnians to the South Slav struggle for national liberation was that they tried to rise above the religious and national strife which raged among the inhabitants of Bosnia and Hercegovina, ethnically the purest South Slav province but divided into various religious and national groups by its historical development.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most significant steps towards this goal of a Yugoslav federalism was taken in Sarajevo in 1911 when radical Croat and Serb students formed a joint secret society, *Srpsko-Hrvatsku Naprednu Organizaciju*. Its first president was Ivo Andrić who, a half century later, was to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. One of the first to join was Gavrilo Princip, the Bosnian who was to fire the shots that killed the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo on June 28th 1914. In a letter to his tutor written in 1912 Princip observed that the new secret society accepted 'the revolutionary programme of Mitrinović.'<sup>19</sup>

Much of Mitrinović's 'First Draft of a General Programme for the Youth Club People's Unification' was written while he was in hospital in Zagreb suffering once again from some respiratory difficulty. It embodied many of the key ideas of the Young Bosnians. In particular it emphasised the need not only to wage a struggle against the injustices of the Austro-Hungarian regime, but the necessity of fighting for the moral, spiritual and cultural rebirth of the people of the occupied lands. Its main points included:

1. To oppose everything national and antinational in the material and spiritual life of our peoples by means of:
  - (a) Radical anticlericalism.
  - (b) Radical elimination of destructive alien influence and promotion of Slavisation of our culture against Germanisation, Magyarisation and Italianisation.
  - (c) Fighting against attitudes of servility, sneaking and contemptibility and raising of national honour and pride.
  - (d) Expropriation of estates, liquidation of all prerogatives of aristocracy and all social privileges and the democratisation of political consciousness and the political awakening of people.

2. A national defence against alien spiritual and material forces; national offensive to reawaken the subjugated and half-lost parts of our people by spiritual and material means.<sup>20</sup>

Through this society the ideas of the Young Bosnians and their commitment to a Yugoslavian federation spread to revolutionary youth groups throughout the different Slav provinces. Mitrinović played a significant role in this process, travelling the country presenting his programme to various groups. In the spring of 1912 he was in Belgrade where he addressed the members of a group organised around the paper *Preporod* (Renaissance). One of their number later recalled how ‘All of us were profoundly taken by Mitrinović’s intellectual brilliance, and we wholeheartedly accepted his ideas.’<sup>21</sup>

Mitrinović had described himself as a Yugoslav federalist even when he was a student at Mostar. In an article he wrote for the journal *Vihor* in 1914 he left the reader in no doubt where he stood on the nationalist question:

We wish for the strength, honour and integrity of the national struggle of the Serbo-Croats and Slovenes, a nationalism of sacrificial and creative action instead of a patriotism of lukewarm and – within legal limits – warm feelings. . . Life is finer than death, we believe: yes, but death is more honourable than shame! And for the nationalists of Serbo-Croatia and Slovenia, for the sons of the uncreated Yugoslavia, there is nothing more exalted than the struggle, and nothing sweeter than the great victory. ... Hopes and beliefs, you nationalist youth! From the saving idea of Yugoslavia and from her unbreakable basis and the national union of the Serbs and Croats, let us set to work on the nationalist creation of ourselves, on strengthening, preparation, and perfection. Forward to our goal, to the Idea of the Nation of the Southern Slavs, and to Freedom! Through the National Union of Serbo-Croats and Slovenes let us step to their National Unification.<sup>22</sup>

The belief in the importance of working towards a moral and cultural revival of the South Slav peoples through the exemplary influence of morally strong persons led many Young Bosnians to a kind of revolutionary asceticism in their private lives. Mitrinović’s friend and contemporary from Mostar, Vladimir Gaćinović, gave some indication of this in a letter to Trotsky: ‘In our organisation there is a rule of obligatory abstinence from love-making and drinking, and you must believe me when I tell you that all of us remain true to this rule.’<sup>23</sup> Gaćinović and Mitrinović were both concerned

to establish an ethical system based on this revolutionary morality of the Young Bosnians. For Mitrinović, this manifested itself in a particular interest in the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Hence, between 1907 and 1913 he wrote regularly for *Bosanska Vila* as a literary critic and it was during this period that he developed further his belief in the moral and social mission of works of art. In 1911 he wrote in the review:

Every work of art has two values: an aesthetic value contained in the artistic form, and the ethical, national cultural value of the content within the form. The aim of art is always the expression of its theme, but not merely expression for itself. The meaning of a work of art is always contained in its subject matter, in its moral significance, moral symbols and moral value. A work is created for the sake of its purpose.<sup>24</sup>

In the same year that this appeared Mitrinović was sent by the Serbia government to report on the First International Art Exhibition in Rome. In Italy he shared rooms with Ivan Mestrovic, the Dalmatian sculptor, and enthusiastically reviewed the artist's work: praising not only the aesthetic qualities of the works exhibited, but emphasising the importance of their national value in propagating the idea of Yugoslav unity.<sup>25</sup> He was to write:

I must admit that I have never had a deeper or more fine feeling of being a Serb than before the splendid 'Malevolence' by Mestrovic. Never has my heart had such a Serbian beat and never have I felt more crushingly the sacredness of revenge which will cry out at shameless men when from our blood speak out spirits like this statue of Mestrovic's, alive with flesh and earth. Mestrovic's 'Malevolence' is silent, but terrifyingly silent, although it has no soul, made of plaster of dead earth. Mestrovic is a prophet, and he who does not understand this, does not understand him, and has no moral right to enjoy his art. And this is what he prophesies: the resurrection of our entire people, both Serbian and Croatian.<sup>26</sup>

Whenever he returned to Sarajevo he would attend meetings of the Young Bosnians, taking the opportunity to expound his ideas on the role of the arts and his ideal of Yugoslav unity. One of his associates from that period, Borivoje Jevtic, who was later to become Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, remembered him thus:

Somewhat above average height, broad-shouldered, with an energetic gait and holding a strong stick in his hand, Mitrinovic resembled some world-traveller, who by chance had fallen into this sad, gloomy small-town society, upon which he hastily and at random poured his

abundant knowledge and his vast experience of life ... While Vladimir Gaćinović, distrustful and always cautious, would always direct us in a whisper to select secret groups of essentially revolutionary conspiracy, and to Russian revolutionary literature, Mitrinović opened up to us the horizons of world literatures and taught us mutual tolerance, the need for mutual national tolerance, the great idea of the unity and brotherhood of the Yugoslav peoples.<sup>27</sup>

It was at such gatherings that he would introduce to his friends and associates the new ideas and books that he had come across on his travels. He brought to their attention, amongst others, the works of Walt Whitman, which were later translated by Ivo Andrić. With his gift for foreign languages Mitrinović was able to introduce the classical literature of Europe to the writers of Young Bosnia. According to Palavestra: 'Most of the young writers gathered around him considered Mitrinović as their intellectual leader and as a kind of teacher ... Mitrinović influenced powerfully the writers of Young Bosnia, being an almost uncontested arbiter on many issues in art and literature ...'<sup>28</sup>

He gave fullest expression to his views on art, the role of the individual and the artist, and the need for a new philosophy of culture and life in a series of articles published in *Bosanska Vila* in 1913 under the collective title of 'Aesthetic Contemplations.' It is difficult to gauge the impact these articles had on his contemporaries. Certainly they make no concessions to the reader. They read like the outpourings of an anguished soul with a troubled heart. They are filled with an undisguised disgust and contempt for civilisation coupled with a sense of sorrow at the human condition. The pain is all the more because of the recognition of the huge potentiality of humanity, and an insistence upon the moral responsibility of the individual and the creative artist in particular to work to help humans fulfil this potentiality. The writings reveal someone who was familiar with the major schools of philosophical thought of the time, but who dismissed them for their inadequacy and impotence to change the world, whilst retaining a fundamental faith in the power of ideas to change the world. This belief in the role of ideas is tempered by the painful recognition of the problems of discovering a single truth or guide for people to follow, whilst revealing a Nietzschean faith in the capacity of heroic minorities to change the world. The whole is informed by an idealist faith in the power of intuition and imagination, and the imperative that

individuals should strive to achieve a spiritual purity in the face of the smug materialism of the elder generation.

Written in a polemical style, 'Aesthetic Contemplations,' despite the many digressions and repetitions that can confuse the reader, impresses by its force and the strength of feeling revealed. Here are some extracts.<sup>29</sup> On 'civilisation' he wrote:

Mankind in civilisation is fallen. We are insulted, battered, soiled and deformed by the soullessly soulless and bestially inhuman living that shakes the earth, by the tumult and shrieking, the roar and clamour which deafens us, and we are beaten black and blue with their 'dread-noughts' and their stock exchanges. We desire Humanity, we who cry to God that we are sick with the lawlessness of the powerful and battered by the misfortune that we live in this shameless today.

The vehemence of his opposition to bourgeois decadence and philistinism could rival that of Sorel and Nietzsche.

Monsters have seized power on earth and one must live with disgust. And we hate and despise the truths and beauties that are powerless and without will to overthrow the dread rule of inhumanity that destroys man's honour and profanes his ideal. People suffer from the lawlessness of state power, of ecclesiastical power, and the evil multitude of forces that have arisen against man and who tirelessly plunge the earth into disaster.

This revulsion against bourgeois society was an essentially moral one. Whilst recognising the existence of material deprivation and poverty and the abuses of power and privilege, it was the moral and cultural degradation of humanity that hurt most deeply: 'We are accursed and cast into the dread depths of senselessness and ineffectuality.' Moreover, the sense of impotence to which so many succumbed was made worse by the realisation that there was no simple answer to the plight of humanity, no single truth which one could follow: 'Nothing on earth is clear to its utmost profundity. To the more refined intelligence things are ever more obscure ... There is no single truth. There are as many truths as there are consciousnesses certain that they possess the truth within them.'

Despite this it was imperative to commit oneself to change and the transcendence of the bankrupt order of the present. There was a need to search for a new way of living and relating, to 'dedicate ourselves to a new star with a new and redeemed salutary ideal, to take wing and again fly off into the unattainable.' But one could not look to anyone else to break the fetters of the existing order:

‘No one can lead anyone there to that place, none guide. One reaches it only on one’s own. Only he can attain this all-healing spring who finds the path within himself ...’ Indeed, according to Mitrinović, there were those few who could grasp and hold to that awareness that ‘all truths are tangled in the most contradictory mutual suppositions.’ These were the people who could appreciate and embrace all the different views of the world, of right and wrong, and who possessed a sense of an alternative order based on a new way of seeing and being informed by the realisation that ‘truths are not right or wrong, but good or evil.’

The truth of these of the smallest minority lies not in whether anything is or is not, but in whether it should be or should not be. The truth of truth consists in its perfection of our moral beauty, in its good action, in its value for good will. Truth is goodness, the beauty of the soul. What is truthful is what makes the soul better and more beautiful, the truth is what we wish ... The truth or untruth of a thing depends on our will ... The will is the endlessly powerful creator of ideas. The ideal is the highest truth ...

It was the responsibility of this small minority of individuals to create a new philosophy for living, as a necessary preparation for the construction of a new age, an age of ‘all-human humanity’. ‘We need to create a revision of values according to the criterion demanded by the soul and to build a synthesis of the whole of knowledge, creating a new philosophy, better than yesterday’s and superior to any former philosophy, which will give justice to the soul.’

But it was not enough to create a new philosophy and a new scheme of values. If ‘the truth or untruth of a thing depends on our will’ it was necessary to live out one’s ideals in public and private life. The transcendence of the old and the creation of the new must be ‘brought to life in one’s feelings and actions.’ People did not need new theories of knowledge, ‘but the power to bring to life the Ideal and cast down oppression ... We desire a philosophy of practice, a wisdom of living.’

In calling upon ‘all those of tomorrow who live in today’ to join in this task, Mitrinović allotted a special role to the creative artist. He demanded the democratisation of art, the breaking down of the divisions between disciplines and the dismantling of the barriers between creators and consumers.

For art has been too little art, too little the speech of the soul's morality through intuitive expression ... It is time to mix a chaos, to unlock exclusiveness and to link the hitherto unlinkable so that for man life be based upon man's values, upon his true being. We need the arts to be arts and not just painting, the plastics, architecture, music, literature, dancing and acting. They need to speak of the soul, the whole soul, the soul of mankind. In each of the arts and in every part of each of them there should be the whole of mankind. Beauty should sing philosophy and religion to us, speak morality to us. . . For if someone has anything to say to us moderns, he should not speak to the spirit, but with song, with symbol, with paradox and intuition. To think in concept is altogether too academic.

For our Young Bosnian the vision was of transforming our lives into projects of spiritual art, filled with moral meaning. To that extent an 'art that is empty is of no value to us, the morality that is pompous is worthless. The new philosophy must speak in the language of art, the new art with the profounder thought of philosophy.' In attributing such an important role to art and artists, he was highlighting his belief that 'cultural philosophy' is the only philosophy that can lead us out of the hellish torment which is our modern spiritual and moral, physical crisis of the soul.' But such a philosophy and such an art must permeate and inform life and practice.<sup>30</sup>

The realisation of the ideal is what the people need and what thought desires and is the only way to overthrow oppression and found humanity, to enlighten the people and strengthen thought ... Our task, our ever-present need is a vital and powerful philosophy, a wisdom in which the world is not merely mirrored but by which it is governed. It is not thought that is the work of the new philosophy but it is work which is its thought. Its skill is the making of life better and not the reflection of life as it is.

Mitrinović had begun to prepare 'Aesthetic Contemplations' towards the end of 1912 whilst he was in Rome. It seemed to mark a definite shift in his focus – from the nationalist struggle and the life of the political organiser and ideologue to a concern with individual and social change on a much deeper and wider scale. His vision was broadening beyond that of the liberation of his own people and of the Balkans to embrace the transformation of Europe and the world. This change undoubtedly reflected to some degree his growing familiarity with different cultures and world-views derived from his travels and the people he met, which enabled him



to develop a far wider frame of reference than that possessed by his friends and compatriots at home. At the same time, during the periods he spent in Rome, he intensified his own personal study of modern and ancient philosophies of East and West, which further broadened and deepened his perspective on the world. Moreover, there was a new generation of political activists emerging in the Balkans who, influenced by the example of Bogdan Žerajić, had been converted to the idea and practice of political assassination as a means of struggle against Hapsburg rule. Whilst Mitrinović sympathised with the ultimate ends of people like Gavrilo Princip, he was opposed to the means they advocated. Violence as a means of revolutionary change was a total anathema to him. The real task lay in preparing people, morally and culturally, for the new society.

In many ways, then, 'Aesthetic Contemplations' marked a new stage of development in Mitrinović's approach to the problems of the world and its transformation, and presaged many of the themes which were to dominate the rest of his life. In 'Aesthetic Contemplations' he had described the task that lay ahead in his own rhetorical style:

We must gather the riches inherited from other generations, order them, test them, distribute them, give life to them, utilise them according to justice and for the universal progress. We must digest all history and create from it an unshakeable, unchangeable, universal, single foundation beneath us ...

Some twenty years later the journalist Basil Boothroyd was to say of Mitrinović that he had a neurosis the size of Nelson's Column and it was called 'synthesis.'<sup>31</sup> Despite the irreverence, there was a deal of truth in the remark. The search for synthesis in all fields was a guiding passion of his life. He was concerned not just with the breaking down of the barriers that divided different arts and other disciplines, but ultimately with the synthesis of the world as a whole, the establishment of what he came to refer to as 'Universal Humanity'. His quest, however utopian it might seem in retrospect, was to transform the world into a true home for the human family. His vision was of a world characterised by the organic order of 'unity in diversity', within which people would acknowledge their differences but respect each other as equal members of a common human fellowship and family.

In a series of articles that appeared in the influential periodical edited in London by Alfred Orage, *The New Age*, in the early 1920s, Mitrinović was to develop the idea of humanity as a single organism with all the different groupings of people throughout the world having their own specific contribution to make in their different ways to the maintenance and well-being of the whole. The sketch of a functional ordering of the world developed in the columns of *The New Age* allowed for and acknowledged the many differences that existed between the races, classes and nationalities of the world. He built on the thesis he had developed in 'Aesthetic Contemplations' that there was no single truth, that there were as many truths as there were consciousnesses certain that they possessed the truth. Moreover, in 'Aesthetic Contemplations' he argued strongly for the uniting of theory and action, and a major concern throughout his life was with the translation of his vision into the realm of practice, at least on a small experimental scale. Thus, in the 1930s especially, he worked intensively with groups of individuals of different ideas and persuasions, seeking to create a functional order in microcosm in which the differences between people were not suppressed at the cost of individual freedom but were recognised, valued and embraced within the context of the functional ordering of the group life.

A major component of the group life with which Mitrinović was involved in the 1930s was the training of the members for a new integrating social function which he called 'senate'. In essence senators were to act as the integrating link between the individual and humanity as a whole, between the single cell and the whole organism. Senators were those who possessed the ability to view human problems and concerns in the context of the needs of the whole of humanity. Their function was to represent the interest of humanity to those with whom they came into contact. The germ of this idea was expressed in 'Aesthetic Contemplations' in his description of that minority 'whose gaze embraces the circles of all points of view and unites them all,' those for whom 'all-embracingness is their passion, the harmonisation and distillation of chaos, the formation of the formless, the putting together of the sundered, the organisation of the disorganised, the concentration of the dispersed ... (those who) cast furthest and encompass most, come closest to truth and aim closest to the centre.'

In later years Mitrinović depicted the stance that he adopted towards the world by the maxim ‘mentally scepticism, spiritually affirmation.’ This is an apt description of the impression conveyed by ‘Aesthetic Contemplations.’ On the one hand it is pervaded by a sense of idealistic optimism, as when he wrote: ‘The ideal is the highest truth ... The ultimate truth is our dream, our ecstasy, our desiring. The conception of the good in us is truth.’ At the same time this apparently naïve and extreme idealism is tempered on occasions by a quite sober sense of realism, as in the ‘recognition of the insolubility of all problems on earth’ and the claim that ‘to the more refined intelligence things are ever more obscure.’

It was perhaps in such a spirit of mental scepticism balanced by emotional optimism that Mitrinović, early in 1913, decided to begin a new life in Munich where he could continue his personal and university studies. He arrived there in the early spring of 1913 and took lodgings on Adalbert Strasse. To his friend and patron in Belgrade, Velimir Rajić, he wrote on March 4th that in Rome he had become a new person, that henceforth he would devote himself to his studies and play a less active role in the nationalist struggle, ‘because it is superfluous to rouse the world to something that is accomplished only in spirit and will and for which you still have to wait, and for which it is necessary to work.’ He continued:

Here in Munich I shall remain for only one semester for intenser studies of art history and modern art, and in the autumn I shall go to some smaller city further into Germany and shall stay there till the end. I came here without any certain view of how I shall manage for support, but anyway I shall remain. I don’t want to return without a degree unless it is demanded by those older and bigger than me; but that won’t happen. I shall take my nationalism even more strongly and deeper and more seriously later on when I’ve finished and then I shall be more useful everywhere, to myself and to my friends ... In Rome I existed well and badly, I lived splendidly and insignificantly, I worked and lost myself and wandered about seeking my soul. Now that’s finished; and nothing is left in this world but making myself ready for my real business with work which is not quite the real work and is not altogether pleasant.<sup>32</sup>

Mitrinović’s decision to leave his homeland was a difficult one for his friends and associates to understand. It seemed as if he was turning his back on the struggle to which they had devoted their lives. His younger brother, Cedomil, was later to recall that he

'simply disappeared and vanished from the public life of his country. He went away from Serbia and stayed in Rome, Munich, Tübingen. To his fellow country-men at home it seemed that he had become dead and feelingless towards his own country.'<sup>33</sup> His departure also provided welcome ammunition to his political opponents who opposed his dream of the unification of Serbs and Croats within a federal Yugoslavia. Mitrinović was philosophical about such attacks. On December 21st 1913 he wrote to Rajić:

There reached me today a letter from Belgrade which in a friendly way speaks scowlingly and gives advice; it states that I'm terribly hated and people would like to crack me. It's interesting that the snarlings are much more thunderous when I'm not there; and that few friends and innumerable enemies is a rule. I know this, and I don't get excited about it. Only if there is anything at all that materially affects life and wants to destroy me, please tell me ruthlessly; and if some rogue wants to make me an Austrian hireling or in general deform me morally publicly and privately, again don't spare me: for scoundrels can by moral rebukes make it hard and reduce success, and we don't want to lose force. As for intellectual evaluations of me, let anyone do what they must ...<sup>34</sup>

Whilst people at home felt that Mitrinović had deserted them and their cause at a crucial time, he had in fact given some indication as far back as 1908 that his constituency spread far beyond the territorial boundaries of the South Slav lands. In an article entitled 'The National Milieu and Modernism' published in *Bosanska Vila* he had written:

If one wishes to be a real poet he must be first of all a human being in the fullest sense of the word ... the utmost and eternal subject of art is the human being everywhere and eternal ... an individual is not only a member of a national group but also a member of the human race.<sup>35</sup>

## NOTES

1. Much of the detail concerning Mitrinović's early life is taken from Predrag Palavestra, *The Dogma and Utopia of Dimitrije Mitrinović*, Belgrade: Slovo Ljubve, 1977. For this chapter I have drawn upon a private translation of Palavestra's first chapter, 'Conspirator, Prophet or Preacher,' translated by D. Shillan and revised by Dr. E. B. Goy (Archives of New Atlantis Foundation, Bradford University Library). The references use the pagination of this translation.

2. According to Singleton, 'The Serbs inherited one of the richest oral traditions in Europe.' F. Singleton, *Twentieth Century Yugoslavia*, London: Macmillan, 1976, p.50.
3. This form of protest was to be adopted in 1908 at the time of the Hapsburgs' formal annexation of Bosnia and Hercegovina. A special mass was held in the Sarajevo Eastern Orthodox Cathedral to celebrate the annexation. It was recorded that: 'At the end of the mass, the Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan Letica in his gold and silver vestments, with both hands raised, asked all the worshippers to kneel down and pray for divine blessings for the Emperor Franz Josef and the Hapsburg dynasty. All went down except a group of boys from the high school. They stood firmly upright among their kneeling elders.' Vladimir Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo*, London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966, p. 208.
4. Quoted in Dedijer , p. 178.
5. Quoted by Palavestra, p. 19.
6. B. Zečević, quoted by Dedijer, p. 179.
7. B. Zečević, in Dedijer, p. 180.
8. Quoted from Mitrinović's article in first issue. Cited by Palavestra, p.18.
9. Palavestra, p. 19.
10. Palavestra, p. 20.
11. One of their early contributors was reminded that 'love poetry is excluded from *Vila*.' Quoted by Nenad Petrović, *Dimitrije Mitrinović*, Ontario: Avala, 1967, p. 3 (translated).
12. Dedijer, p. 231.
13. Petrović, p. 4.
14. Petrović, p. 6.
15. Petrović, p. 9.
16. Quoted in Dedijer, p. 208.
17. Quoted in Petrović, pp. 9-10.
18. Dedijer, p. 213.
19. Dedijer, p.217.
20. Dedijer, p. 217
21. Dedijer, p. 217
22. *Vihor*, vol. 1, 1914, pp. 81-3, translated from V. Novak, *Antologija Jugoslovenske Misl i Narodnog Jedinstva*, Belgrade: 1930. In a letter to the author (April 4th 1977), David Shillan commented that Mitrinović's use of 'Serbo-Croat' as a noun designating a people and not just a language was rare for this period, reflecting Mitrinović's insistence that they were essentially one people.
23. Quoted in Dedijer, p. 208.

24. Quoted in P. Palavestra, 'Dimitrije Mitrinović and the literature of the "Young Bosnia",' *Renaissance Bulletin*, no. 13, Spring 1967, pp. 4-5.
25. Mestrovic died in the U.S.A. in 1962.
26. Quoted in Petrović, p. 5.
27. Petrović, p. 11.
28. Palevestra (1967), p. 10.
29. The quotations from 'Aesthetic Contemplations' are taken from an English translation of the original articles, archives of the New Atlantis Foundation. No pagination.
30. Cf. Marx in *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it.'
31. Quoted in D. R. Davies, *In Search of Myself*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1961, p.140.
32. Quoted in Palavestra (1977), pp. 31-2.
33. In a message to a meeting in commemoration of Mitrinović, January 29th 1954, organised by the New Europe Group (New Atlantis Foundation Archives).
34. Quoted in Palavestra (1977) p. 34.
35. *Bosanska Vila*, July 20th,1908. Quoted by Dedijer, p. 231.
36. Commemoration meeting, New Europe Group, January 29th 1954.