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Political Reflection on Đorđe Balašević's Ballad, "Ne Lomite Mi Bagrenje"

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"Don't Break my Locus Trees" is a popular ballad frequently heard today in cafes and on the radio in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. Listeners from different ethnic communities, young and old, identify with Đorđe Balašević's bitter-sweet song. The pathos of the ballad's moral lament rings true for the inhabitants of the poly-ethnic society of former-Yugoslavia.

Vinko Tadić and Goran Đurđević (2017) survey the longevity of Balašević's impressive career. His ballads intermingle angry politics and bitter love, offering sharp critiques of nationalism with a nostalgia for Yugoslavism. The story-telling lyrics charm and bring together a cohesive group from different communities that are humanistically minded and yearn for an open society. What is odd is that Tadić and Đurđević do not mention the ballad, "Don't Break My Locust Trees," one of the most famous and most listened to of Balašević's ballad, except in their essay's title. That is, the authors borrow the title of the ballad to title their excellent essay, but the ballad itself is not discussed.

I will focus on this iconic ballad from the rich corpus of Balašević's career. First, I will do a close explication of the ballad, "Do not Break my Locust Trees." Then, I will analyze the sense of justice exemplified in the song through the lens of Judith Butler's work, A*ntigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. Butler's work provides an insightful reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*. At the end, I will revisit Hegel's analysis of Sophocles' Antigone to place the notion of justice that both Antigone and Balašević's ballad poignantly and tragically express.

"Don't Break my Locust Trees" is a plea, a plea for justice. The plea is made to an honorable, esteemed judge, but the principle of the justice for which the ballad pleads resides outside the court and the law. The narrator wants justice, but a justice independent from and even unintelligible to the honorable judge. It is important to recognize what Mikhail Bakhtin (1984:143) would call the double-voiced discourse of the narrator. The narrator describes the judge as honorable and distinguished. The narrator speaks within the judge's own discourse, embeds himself in it. At the same time, the narrator insults the judge behind his respectful platitudes. The narrator's actual position is directly opposed to the judge's. Although the ballad's narrator flatters the judge, his obsequious manner is intentionally offensive. The narrator says

that law is law and I respect it, but he clearly does not.

The judge fails to grasp the narrator's understanding of justice. Natural justice, justice unrecognized and unknown to the law, is more authentic than the law itself, which is formulaic, mechanical, and lifeless. The fallacy of the law is that its authority is grounded in nothing more than in endless tautologies: law is law, order is order, authority is authority, ice is ice, the owl the owl, the wolf the wolf. The narrator mocks these tautologies throughout the ballad. The narrator is insulted by the world order the judge represents and humiliated by its necessity (Balktin 1984:236)

What then is the moral sentiment that connects listeners in the different ethnic groups in former-Yugoslavia with the ballad's indignant narrator? What is the understanding of what is right and what is just that is persuasive with Balašević's trans-ethnic audience? Listeners embrace the ballad's ineffable grasp of justice. The respect to the judge and the state is feigned, a simulation, not unlike the mocking narrative of the underground hero in Fyodor Dostoevsky's work, *Notes from the Underground*.

From what standpoint then does the contemptuous narrator insult the honorable judge? The authority of natural justice is oral and illiterate., "Leave them (the locust trees). They must protect my one secret gold like ducats." Here the foundation of justice is concealed rather than revealed, esoteric rather than exoteric. For this reason, natural justice is more profound than written law. Oral tradition is the keeper of this idea of justice vis-à-vis the written tradition of the judge. "Authority is authority, and I respect that there are law articles that you grab on to."

The ballad concludes with a threat as well as a promise. Natural justice is defended not with the law but with what Franz Fanon would call muscular action. „Get away from them (the locust trees), because otherwise I will beat you." The ending to the ballad is firm and definitive, perhaps too firm and too definitive. The narrator reminds one of "Black George," the father of the Serbian nation, known for leading the Serbian resurrection against the Turkish forces, someone who could not live inside any state structure whether it be the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Turkish Empire, or even the emerging Serbian state. Miloš Obrenović feared "Black George" and murdered him, sending his head to the Turkish Sultan.

I will now turn to the second part of this essay, namely to Judith Butler's analysis of Antigone vis-à-vis the law-giving Creon in Sophocles' play *Antigone* and extend her analysis to Balašević's ballad. Butler's theorizing accounts for the anti-authoritarianism of the ballad and the ballad's disdain for the polis, order, and law. Like Antigone, the narrator assumes a pre-political opposition to the hollow practices of established politics and the state. While the state's order is based on the principle of universality, the principle of universality fails to capture something particular and something essential. That is, this principle of universality is not really universal. The irony of the community is that the community is not as subject to the state as the state thinks. While the ballad seems to articulate a pre-criminal mind, it is exempt from this characterization because the importance of natural justice resides outside the state, untouched and unrecognized by the judge. Antigone expresses a concept of desire that Creon and the state can neither repress nor distinguish much as Balašević's ballad does.

The ballad acknowledges the judge knows people well, acknowledges that the judge has important work to do, and even acknowledges the importance of property rights such as the plums in the field. The narrator understands that both the devil and the deacon are subject to law's omnipotence, even when the law is not always fair. Yes, thievery is always present. Yes, nature inevitably wreaks havoc with floods and famine. The ballad, however, like Antigone, possesses a surer knowledge of what justice is and a clearer understanding of where it is found.

For the ballad's narrator, justice is not found in the universal will of the law. Justice is not found in the necessity of human destiny, as the honorable judge assumes. Nor is justice found in the consanguinity of the family cloistered from the evils of society. The narrator shuns the boring task of legislating and testing laws because what is ethical is not found in such intellectual labor. Instead, justice in its essence is found in the particular conscience of a self-conscious individual. "Under them I kissed her." At that moment, the individual is a purely self-conscious as an individual in relation to another. The individual is entirely authentic in being a self-conscious being. This romantic moral sentiment speaks of not only to victims but also to victimizers, which is perhaps why it is so deeply beloved in a trans-ethnic fashion in former-Yugoslavia.

Hegel admires the rebellious but more noble figure of Antigone vis-à-vis the law-giving King Creon. Antigone defies Creon. She buries her brother, knowing it will lead to her living death, to becoming a non-citizen of the state. Her decision is immanently herself. Likewise, listeners admire the ballad's narrator. He defies the judge. He will use force to protect his locus tree, knowing it will result in his criminalization. His decision is immanently himself. Without the locust trees, the winds will blow the ballad's narrator away.

Footnotes

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