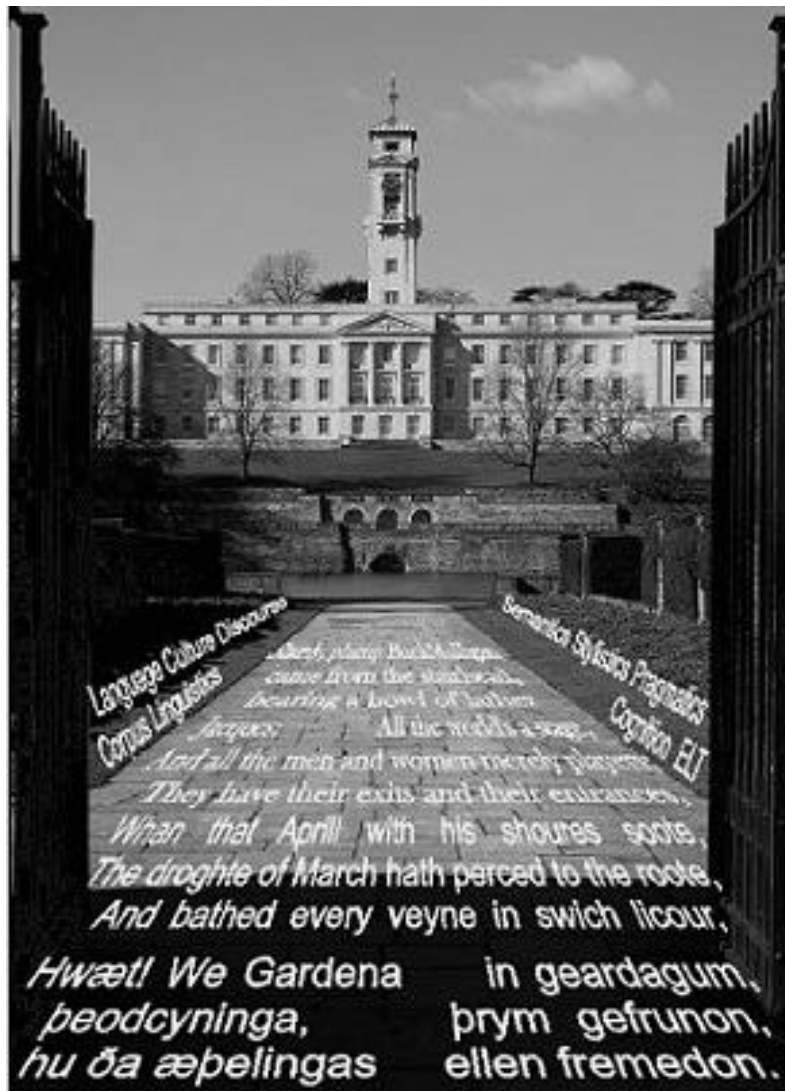


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Petar II Petrović Njegoš: Ecce Homo

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For the subtitle of this paper I have borrowed the words with which Pontius Pilate presents Jesus to the people before the Crucifixion (John, 19: 2-5). This is not in order to represent Njegoš as some Christ-like figure: had I been aware of a similar and as widely familiar story, I could have well used it. Indeed, when he said: “Behold the Man!” Pontius Pilate himself did not see Christ as *Christ*, as what he is to become to the Christians, or to the Western culture, but a man accused, steeped in the moment of final reckoning. This is then how we shall regard Njegoš, only we shall not boast nor bear the burden of the *final* reckoning, just a reckoning. To this we shall return before long, but first, let us note that Pilate’s words are meant to alienate the crowd from whatever they already decided they know about Christ, take a pause, look at him again and then judge. We, on the other hand, need to take a pause and “behold the man” in order to familiarise ourselves with Njegoš.

Petar II Petrović Njegoš was a nineteenth-century Montenegrin prince-bishop and a poet. He was born in 1813 in the village of Njeguši into a family which had produced state leaders for several generations. At the age of seventeen he inherited his uncle’s title and became the head of both the state and the church. During his rule Njegoš strove to achieve a formal recognition of Montenegro as a sovereign state (independent from the Ottoman Empire) and to enlighten his countrymen: he built schools and roads, very few of which had existed before him; he had to bring order among the feuding Montenegrin tribes and organised a small governing body, the Senate; he created the first organised police force in Montenegro to combat crime, collect taxes and prevent these tribal wars; he imported a printing press and started publishing books as well as sending gifted youths abroad to be educated.

Brought up among shepherds, deeply in touch with his roots and yet a cultivated poet, tall (nearly seven feet tall) dark, and handsome, Njegoš is as much a Romantic dream-come-true as a Romantic himself. He at once embodied a “noble savage,” a relentless freedom-fighter, an enlightened ruler and a poet-genius roaming the wild mountains of Montenegro. In his book *Sabre and the Song*, the late Edward Dennis Goy notes that Njegoš possessed Lord Byron’s collected works, and also adds, as something of a curiosity, that one of Byron’s portraits adorned the prince-bishop’s favourite room. Goy goes on to say: “If Lord Byron was one of Njegoš’s heroes, it is easily thinkable that, had he known of him, Njegoš might have been one of Byron’s heroes” (24). He even died young. In 1851, when he was only 38 years old, after several trips to Italy and Austria in search of a cure, Njegoš finally succumbed to tuberculosis. Fittingly, he is buried at the peak of the mount Lovćen.

Njegoš was loved and revered in Montenegro and Serbia during and after his lifetime not only as an enlightened leader, but also as a great poet. His masterpiece, *The Mountain Wreath*, was a must on the educational curricula of the posterity. It is this inventive and deeply reflective epic that, specialists maintain, makes Njegoš a great European poet. However, the recent events that have transposed what was, since the World War I, known as a “gallant little Serbia” into the breeding ground of “the butchers of the Balkans,” have also (and with the same sense for irony) made this “great European poet” *known* to Europe as the poet of genocide. And here we come to that moment of reckoning mentioned before.

In their search for the seeds out of which grew that vile collective psyche of the Serbs, a number of journalists, historians and geography students¹ have come up with Serbian oral epics and Njegoš’s *Mountain Wreath*. This is not entirely their fault. What else is to be expected, if you visit Serbian military positions over Sarajevo in the 1990s and meet unruly, bearded men devouring roast pigs, shooting at the city while quoting at you the nineteenth-

century poet's verses in which the ancestors of the people they now chose to see as their enemies are branded as "a snake in the bosom" (307), "a plague" (637) that needs to be exterminated, verses that demand: "Strike the devil and leave of him no trace,/ Or relinquish this world and the next, too!" (301 - 302). Scary stuff indeed, and straight out of *The Mountain Wreath*. Yet why would the suggestion that *The Mountain Wreath* endorses genocide outrage the aforementioned Slavist, Edward Goy, to the point that he considers it a product of a "Nitwit,"² or prompt the film-studies lecturer, Dina Iordanova, to brand it, rather acerbically, "a deduction equivalent to explaining the Nazi extremities with the macabre aspects in Brother Grimm's fairy tales?"³ One possible answer could be that the verses we just quoted belong to Njegoš's characters, not Njegoš himself, just like the dreams of suffocating two innocent babes in their sleep or massacring King Duncan and his party belong to Shakespeare's characters, not Shakespeare. Another possible answer could be that no artist has control over the interpretations of his or her work, not least over its uses by demagogues and in media wars. This is not to say that Njegoš, or any other past poet for that matter, should be beyond the judgement of this present moment and this present place simply because they belong to another moment or another place. Indeed, as Jerome McGann points out

"This" is always the place to read important works of the past because "this" is the place where the future always has its relation to the past defined. (55)

It is due to its continual reinterpretations in different historical moments and places that a literary work gets to be regarded as "great" at all. There is, however, a vast difference between a critical interpretation of a text and pressing a text into service, which is what both Njegoš's accusers ("critics" would be a misnomer in this case) and his supposed idolaters pounding Sarajevo have done with *The Mountain Wreath*.⁴ This claim warrants some justification and I can think of no better way of doing this than through a close analysis of the primary text and through consideration of its context. The findings will be juxtaposed to those of Tim Judah and Branimir Anzulovic whose recent publications, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* and *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide* (respectively) have reverberated throughout the western world and are representative of the negative attitudes to Njegoš – Judah sees *The Mountain Wreath* as "a paean to ethnic cleansing" (65) and Anzulovic as a "glorification of genocide" (67). At this point my reader should perhaps be made aware of Anzulovic's suspicions as regards "specialists in the area" since they "often accept those myths and end up being more ignorant in important aspects of their fields than sober-minded nonspecialists" (65-6). Mistrustful of the specialists, Anzulovic invests his faith with "educated persons guided by common sense and common morality" (66) instead. So, reader, be forewarned, here comes a literary critic's interpretation.

The setting Njegoš chooses for his epic poem in dramatic form is a historical or quasi-historical event from the end of the seventeenth century, known as "the extermination of the Turkish converts." In the preface to his English translation of *The Mountain Wreath*, Professor Vasa Mihailovich notes:

Although the historical facts about this event are somewhat uncertain, it is known that at approximately that time Montenegrins attempted to solve radically the problem of many of their brethren who, having succumbed to the lure of the Turkish power, had agreed to be converted to Islam, mainly to improve their increasingly harsh lives. (x)

It is immediately obvious to us how sensitive and prone to misinterpretation this choice of a setting is, if we interpret it from the standpoint of our own contingent present. The very use of the word "extermination" here is telling. While these days it sends shivers down the reader's spine because s/he associates it with an army decimating innocent civilians, in *The Mountain Wreath* it has more the meaning of an all-out war, "a war to the last man," against an arms-

bearing enemy, than a slaughter of unarmed victims. When engaging in interpretation of a work historically (or culturally) removed from our own, according to Jerome McGann, it is quite essential that

the historical uniqueness of subject and object is carefully preserved. To do this means that the critic must be as much “subject to” the judgement of his critical “object” as that object is subjected to his criticism. (56)

Both the preservation of “the historical uniqueness of subject and object” and the dialogic aspect of the relationship between the present-day critic and the past literary work are missing in Judah and Anzulovic. Bent on drawing a clear causal line from the recent wars in the Balkans back to Njegoš (Judah sees the significance of *The Mountain Wreath* in terms of a “missing link” (77) between the ideas of national liberation and those of killing one’s neighbours; also, note the determinism of Anzulovic’s subtitle: *From Myth to Genocide*), his accusers neglect to place and observe Njegoš in his own time, to compare his poetry and ideology to those of other contemporary European peoples and poets. Having written his *Mountain Wreath* in the mid 1840s, it is not at all clear why should “the extermination of the Turkish converts,” an event that had supposedly occurred over a hundred years before he was born, be an inappropriate topic for Njegoš. The prevalent trends of his time “support the liberation of oppressed peoples” (24) and there is also a feeling that people unwilling to fight for their own freedom, identity and the way of life, deserve their slavery. Indeed, in the wake of the 1848 war of independence against the Habsburgs (and one year after the publication of *The Mountain Wreath*), the famous Hungarian Romantic, Sándor Petöfi, recited his *National Song* before thousands of his perturbed compatriots, calling upon them to rise up:

For up till now we lived like slaves,
 Damned lie our forefathers in their graves –
 They who lived and died in freedom
 Cannot rest in dusts of thraldom.
 God of Hungarians, we swear unto Thee,
 We swear unto Thee – that slaves we shall no longer be!
 A coward and a lowly bastard
 Is he, who dares not raise the standard –
 He whose wretched life is dearer
 Than the country’s sacred honor.
 God of Hungarians[...]. (7-17)⁵

Note that it is not only the foreign oppressor that induces Petöfi’s anger, but the cowardly compatriot as well. Three decades before Petöfi, in the second canto of Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the narrator, outraged by the sight of turbans “polluting” (79:3), as he says, Sofia church in what was once Constantinople and is now “Stamboul,” exclaims:

Ah, Greece, they love thee least who owe thee most;
 Their birth, their blood, and that sublime record
 Of hero sires, who shame thy now degenerate horde! (83: 7-9)

One can only imagine the brunt borne by those who might have seen themselves as this “degenerate horde.” In the case of the Montenegrins and Njegoš, the “hero sires” who shamed them were not Hector or Achilles, Mattias Corvinus or János Hunyadi,⁶ but Miloš Obilić and Prince Lazar, Serbian medieval lords who met their end defending their country against the Ottoman invaders. Were *The Mountain Wreath* to represent the seventeenth-century extermination of the Turkish converts as an ultimate triumph of the proud, freedom-loving Montenegrins, who let the turncoats feel the wrath of their pride and freedom-loving,

Njegoš's work could still hardly be distinguishable from that of other contemporary works imbued by "the spirit of the age," although I seriously doubt it would be much read. It is perhaps more surprising that Njegoš does not represent the event in this light. Just as with other works of great literary value, one of the chief qualities of *The Mountain Wreath* is that it defies linear interpretations. This resistance of *The Mountain Wreath* to being reduced to a "message" of any kind is also going to be its main line of defence against the charges of endorsing genocide. The reason for this is the fact that when we judge a work of art we do not judge it solely for the artist's choice of themes but, and primarily perhaps, for the rendering, the representation of those themes. We shall return to this soon, but there are, however, some further omissions as regards the context and reception of Njegoš's epic that need to be addressed first.

In order to show the supposed extremity and idiosyncratic deviousness of Njegoš's nationalism, Anzulovic offers as counterexamples poems of Njegoš's distinguished Croatian neighbours, such as the famous seventeenth-century poet from Dubrovnik, Ivan Gundulić, whose epic poem, *Osman*, Njegoš must have been familiar with. While, according to Anzulovic, Njegoš demonises his enemies, Gundulić, although longing for the liberation of the Christians and glorifying the Polish king, still "deals rather sympathetically with the tragic story of Sultan Osman" (Anzulovic 57). Anzulovic takes care to list a few other Croatian poets (some of them famous, some quite obscure) with similar sympathetic insights. What can easily escape the reader's attention, however, is the fact that these poets cover the period from the early seventeenth up till the beginning of the eighteenth century. Rather curiously, Anzulovic completely neglects to mention any Croatian Romantics, Njegoš's contemporaries, who would, surely, provide a much more interesting background for the comparison. Instead, he makes a sudden turn to the Russian poet Pushkin and his tragic love story, *Eugene Onegin*, leaving aside both the Croatian neighbours with their common political concerns and the common theme of the struggle between the Christians and the Turks. The most notable lack on Anzulovic's list is that of the nineteenth-century Croatian poet, Ivan Mažuranić, whose celebrated epic, *The Death of Smail-Aga Čengić*, was published in 1849, just two years after Njegoš's *Mountain Wreath*, and was quite likely inspired by it too. The heroes of Mažuranić's epic are a handful of brave Montenegrins who, in revenge for their slaughtered brethren, ambush and kill the haughty and tyrannous Turkish nobleman Smail-Aga and his host. In this they are aided by an Islamic convert, Novica, a former tormentor of his Christian kinfolk himself, but prompted to vengeance for personal reasons: namely, the ungrateful aga⁷ has needlessly killed his wise old father. One cannot help but conclude that Mažuranić's affinities with Njegoš, as well as the fact that his tax-extracting, sadistic, and relentlessly unrepentant Smail-Aga does not get quite the same sympathetic treatment as Gundulić's Sultan Osman, have something to do with his exclusion from Anzulovic's list.

Njegoš's and Mažuranić's epics have inspired other Balkan poets. The most interesting example is perhaps that of Gjergj Fishta, an Albanian poet of a younger generation of Balkan Romantics, whose national epic, *The Highland Lute* bears traces of both Njegoš's and Mažuranić's literary influence.⁸ That this is so, despite the fact that in Fishta's epic the Montenegrin neighbours feature as bitter foes to the heroic Albanian highlanders, goes to credit both Fishta for his imaginative insight, his ability to appreciate the force of the feeling in the two epics he admired regardless of the nationality of their heroes, as well as to Njegoš and Mažuranić for the literary heights they achieved in their epics. Fishta's example is also very instructive because it holds a key to the question which neither Judah nor Anzulovic consider, although their arguments against Njegoš clearly beg it: is it at all possible that *The Mountain Wreath* could have had any appeal for the nations and minorities other than Serbs and Montenegrins in the multiethnic Yugoslavia? For the not-at-all-politically-impartial

Albanian Fishta it obviously had, and I believe the case could be even more readily made as regards Yugoslavian ethnicities, especially when the socialist Yugoslavia is in question.

While both Judah and Anzulovic assert that the communist reading of the work was to translate the fratricidal war into that of the war of liberation against the foreign oppression, they do not attempt to explain how and why this translation succeeded so well. Instead, Anzulovic abstractly relies on the common knowledge of the oppressiveness of communist regimes and concludes:

[M]onarchist and communist Yugoslavias, both of which glorified Njegoš as a noble mind, fighter for freedom, and champion of Yugoslavism, rewarded those who accepted their myths and closed the door to those who did not. (67)

But why would the proponents of Yugoslavism (and these came from all nations and a medley of ethnic minorities, led by the half-Croatian-half-Slovenian Tito) forge and enforce such myths, how could they ever see Njegoš as “a champion of Yugoslavism,” “a noble mind,” when, the fratricidal message in *The Mountain Wreath* is, according to Anzulovic so strong? Why would they want to cover it? To a similarly confusing effect, Judah relates an anecdote recounted by his friend from Belgrade, Aleksa Djilas, the sober-minded critic of his own dissident father and Njegoš’s biographer, Milovan. Both the anecdote and Judah’s conclusion are worth quoting in full:

Aleksa Djilas says that [his] Montenegrin cousin had just arrived in Belgrade to study and so he asked him, “How did the Muslims in your class react when they had to read *The Mountain Wreath* and learn parts of it by heart?” His cousin was dumbstruck: “It had never crossed his mind to ask his Muslim classmates such a question – even though some were his close friends. Clearly he did not connect them with the Muslims against whom Njegoš wrote.” It may not have occurred to him, but it is in this way that, for generations, literature that elsewhere would have long been banned from schools is still, subconsciously or not shaping the worldview of Serbian children. It is inconceivable that in Germany, for example, poetry inciting the murder of Jews and burning of synagogues would be considered acceptable today, however noble its literary pedigree. (78)

The reader will forgive me, I hope, if I counter this anecdote in a slightly anecdotal mode myself. Having sat in a similar classroom situation as Djilas’s cousin, I can fully relate to his experience of being dumbstruck by the question, as well as the conclusion that Djilas draws from the anecdote. However, I cannot see how the morals Judah draws from this story follow. For example, I find it extremely hard to envisage a literary work which at once has a “noble literary pedigree” and incites anything like murder and arson. But before I engage in further exploration of what I see as a paradox here, let me dwell a while on the first part of Judah’s conclusion. His argument in favour of political censorship of the state over art aside, let me note that, similarly to Anzulovic, Judah does not ask the most interesting question, namely, how was the situation in which Djilas’s cousin found himself possible in the first place. Instead he chooses to consider it as a rare occurrence, and simply concedes that the poison of *The Mountain Wreath* acted on some young minds subconsciously, i.e. not all Serbs were fully-aware little ethnic-cleanser-wannabes: some of them were only subconsciously so. He then goes on to say that the poem would have been banned elsewhere, as though the practice of banning literary works was peculiarly foreign to the communist Yugoslavia. The feeling of Yugoslavism seems to be connected to that of “Serbism” in both Judah and Anzulovic, but, if this is what was attempted, they then fail to account for the numerous poems and songs celebrating Serbian victories in the World War I for example, or the famous song about the last stand of a Serbian 1809 rebel, Stevan Sindjelić, all of which *were* censored by the Yugoslavian communists. The thing is, the WW I songs were not so easily translatable into

the ideology of “brotherhood and unity” as they were not inclusive of all Yugoslav peoples, and some were royalist too (they occasionally invoked the name of King Petar I Karadjordjević whose grandson was still living in exile at the time). With the WW II and *The Mountain Wreath* the things were not so clear-cut. In the WW II, in which the socialist Yugoslavia was born, all its nations and all ethnic minorities had (from the communist point of view) come out victorious as partisans, and had equally all sullied themselves as “domestic traitors,” “servants of the subjugators,” “Quislings” and various other blanket terms equally applied to Serbian Chetniks, Croatian Ustashas, Muslim Balists, Slovenian Domobrans. There were more of those “domestic traitors” on the list, but it is the first two who have created most of the nightmares in the dreams of diligent Yugoslavian “little pioneers” as they were called,⁹ learning their history lessons and watching films made by their “forward-thinking” governments, who, unconcerned with the trifles such as age certificates, let them (one can even say made them) witness numerous throats slit by the long knives of the bearded and long-haired Chetniks, and heads smashed by the mallets of the ugly, black-clad, skinhead Ustashas.¹⁰ In parallel to this, religion was designated as the creator of all divisions, “the opium for the masses” and the enemy to “brotherhood and unity,” so it was discouraged and all but outlawed. In this situation, one can perhaps more easily understand the translatability of *The Mountain Wreath* to suit all Yugoslavian peoples: Turks were to stand for the foreign oppressors past and future, Montenegrins were all of “us Yugoslavs” in partisan, defender roles, the Turkish converts were all of “us Yugoslavs” again, in the “domestic traitors” roles. And “we” all wanted to be partisans at the time. That is why perhaps it did not occur to Djilas’s cousin (whose case is more likely a rule than an exception in this) to identify his Muslim friends as converts of *The Mountain Wreath*. He was never encouraged to do so, and neither were his Muslim friends.¹¹ Tito’s death and the collapse of Yugoslavian economic structures have deeply shaken the ideological structures too, including the “brotherhood and unity” (after all, brothers do quarrel when the purse is tight). And, as the communist halo started losing its lustre, so did the “domestic traitors” emerge out of this blanket term in all their distinctiveness and variety, each rapidly losing more and more of the fiendish hue in his respective ethnic community, but becoming the Satan himself for the rest. As to the subconscious workings on young minds and the crimes against humanity, which all the parties involved in the 1990s wars in the Balkans have committed, perhaps the mentioned propaganda films in which “domestic traitors” of all nationalities readily engage in murder, torture and rape provide much more lucrative study material than *The Mountain Wreath*.¹² But this, of course, is another story.

The Mountain Wreath and its various subsequent stages of reception deserve a much more thorough and more rigorous exploration than has been offered. What I have striven to achieve here, however, is not so much to comprehensively cover the contexts, as to problematise Judah’s and Anzulovic’s selective, haphazard, and rather superficial approach to these matters. Now, we shall turn our attention more closely to the text of *The Mountain Wreath* itself. The reader will remember the paradox I noted earlier in both Judah and Anzulovic: on the one hand, they argue that there is a plain “message” amounting to a “call to genocide” (67), glaring from the pages of *The Mountain Wreath*, leaving no room for any alternative interpretations and denying any subtleties, sidetracks, contradictions in respect to that message. On the other, they both insist on the work’s great artistic appeal: Judah, as we have just seen, acknowledges its “noble literary pedigree,” while Anzulovic says that it has “a high artistic value (which cannot be fully appreciated in any of the existing English translations)” (51). The fact that neither Anzulovic nor Judah attempts to point out the ways in which this high artistry manifests itself has a twofold affect on their reader, especially if s/he has never read *The Mountain Wreath*. The first is the temptation to simply dismiss the notion that there is actually any artistry present in the work, since, as McGann rightly maintains, in

this age and in this culture “‘doctrinal’ poetry is virtually a synonym for unpoetical” (62). The second possible reflex of the reader would be to regard the supposed virtuosity in terms of some alluring “dark rhetoric,” the sheer force of persuasiveness with which Njegoš incites his compatriots to genocide. Neither of these two assumptions is particularly appealing and, more importantly, both are wrong. They are wrong because the artistry of *The Mountain Wreath* lies precisely in its irreducibility to doctrines and in this the work conforms to what McGann brands as “one of our age’s most basic value measurements for any and all poetry” (Ibid.), that is, the self-reflexiveness of poetry, the reader’s experience that the poetry questions itself.

To be sure, there is no lack of doctrines in *The Mountain Wreath*. The ideals of freedom and sovereignty are left untouched by questioning: to surrender your freedom is to surrender your being. What is deeply questioned, however, are the means by which this freedom is to be obtained. This aspect of the epic is completely neglected by Judah and Anzulovic. In their endeavour to “expose” *The Mountain Wreath* as a call to genocide, they simply point to the event the epic makes reference to (the late seventeenth-century “extermination of the Turkish converts”), then proceed to single out the verses near the beginning of the epic in which the converts are condemned by some characters, and then jump to the very end of the epic (the last 8 pages out of 48) and the reports of bloody skirmishes between the Christian and Muslim Montenegrins, thus giving no inkling to their readers of what happens in the largest chunk of *The Mountain Wreath*. Njegoš, in fact, barely represents the actual event at all. Within those last 8 pages Prince-Bishop Danilo gets three reports of two skirmishes:¹³ one of them was in all likelihood initiated by the Christians, and another by the Muslims. Most of the epic, however, concentrates on the council meeting of the Montenegrin chiefs assembled to address the threat that converts pose to their security and identity, as well as to decide the course of action. For most of the assembled chiefs, the matter is indeed simple: they have gathered to ensure that they are all firmly united behind the cause (i.e. the converts will either “convert back” and embrace the faith of their forefathers, or face an all-out war), and all they need is the green light from the Prince-Bishop Danilo (Njegoš’s ancestor). He, on the other hand, is greatly reluctant to give it. Anzulovic is completely silent on this point, while Judah only very briefly mentions that the prince-bishop “agonises” over the matter (76). What their reader cannot possibly know is the fact that, once you gloss over, or take Danilo’s “agonising” out of *The Mountain Wreath* there is very little left indeed: agonising is precisely what goes on in that large part of the epic for which neither Anzulovic nor Judah have time.

The single-mindedness of the illiterate chiefs’ old, unquestioning heroic ethos is far from satisfactory for Danilo who feels doubly isolated: isolated as a leader of a small people alone in their struggle against a potent adversary – “If in the world we somewhere had brothers,/ their sympathy would be the same as help”(647-648) – and, far worse, isolated among his own people as an intellectual and spiritual man. The epic opens early in the morning, with desolate Danilo’s soliloquy in which he equates the Turkish subjugators with devil’s “accursed litter” and compares their conquests to the devastating effects of a locust plague (4-6). But there is something far more specific and immediate weighing heavily on the prince-bishop, something that turns for him, not only the mighty foe, but the whole world into hell and all its people into “hellish spirits” (41-42): namely, Danilo cannot reconcile himself to the idea of the fratricidal war however strong his reverence of the heroic ethos. Aware that his concerns swim against the current of his long suffering people, and yet that they outweigh his political pragmatism, Danilo dreads the pending council meeting:

When I think of today’s council meeting,
flames of horror flare up deep inside me.
A brother will slaughter his own brother,
and the arch-foe, so strong and so evil,
will destroy e’en the seed within mothers. . . . (79-83)

The council meeting commences, and, when the assembled chieftains (including Danilo's own brother) vent their growing impatience with the deadlock, the prince-bishop replies:

Who stands on a hill ever so briefly
Sees so much more than the one in the foothills.
Some things I see more clearly than you do. –
That is either our luck or misfortune. (524-527)

And this is what he sees and feels from his vantage or disadvantage point:

If we should strike at our domestic Turks,
their Serbian kin would never desert them;
Our land would be divided into tribes,
and tribes will start a bitter, bloody feud,
Satan would come to the demon's wedding,
All Serbian light would turn into darkness. (532-537)

In other words, blood only begets blood, and while the Montenegrins fight among themselves, the foreign oppressor only grows mightier.

The character who gives the strongest intellectual representation of the old heroic ethos is Vuk Mićunović. Unlike other chiefs who resolve the situation by simply alienating their Islamised brothers – “what brothers, they who dishonour the Montenegrin face and spit on the holy Cross openly?”(308-310) – Mićunović seems to grasp the complexity of the situation, yet regards the prince-bishop's reluctance as the naivety of an idealist who would see his ideals realised in the messy, dirty world, but is not quite keen on soiling his hands. He sees struggle as the part and parcel of life, and everything in life, including the much-praised bravery, as having a double edge. For Mićunović, it is the aim that makes all the difference and he invests his hope in it. He says:

Without effort a song cannot be sung;
Without effort a sword cannot be forged!
Bravery is the lord of all evil,
as well as the drink most sweet to the soul;
Generations make themselves drunk with it.
Blessed is he whose name lives forever.
A good reason had he to be alive! (603-609)

The following lines, which many people regard as a proverb, not knowing that they come from *The Mountain Wreath*, also belong to Mićunović: “It is easy to be good in good times;/ adversity brings out the true heroes” (137-138).

The prince-bishop does not reject this stance but finds little consolation in it: perhaps some future generations will enjoy freedom, for him and his people, however, he sees only graves. Furthermore, the glorious past so much revered by the chiefs and himself, Danilo comes to perceive as an ultimate nightmare:

Awesome symbols, the Crescent and the Cross;
Their kingdoms are the realms of graveyards.
Following them down the bloody river,
sailing in the small boat of great suffering,
We must honour one or the other. (631-635)

Anzulovic also feels the force of these verses since he quotes the first two in his book, but it is only due to the fact that he refuses to read them in the context of Danilo's quandary that he

can interpret them in terms of Njegoš's "nihilism and necrophilia" (56). The verses might, as Anzulovic maintains, betray some fissures in Njegoš's Christology: throughout his life Njegoš identified himself more with the secular, than the religious part of his office. Charged with utter despair, with an almost existentialist recognition of the absurdity of life and the arbitrariness of one's historical and cultural bounds, the verses transcend the doctrines of all religions, but there is no pleasurable wallowing in, or infatuation with death.

Another voice that the prince-bishop heeds, but cannot adhere to, is that of the old and blind Abbot Stefan who sees Danilo's dilemma as a product of youth and inexperience. Like Mićunović, the Abbot sees the fault in Danilo's quest for a perfect solution in an imperfect world, only he is more forgiving and understanding: "This world is a tyrant to a tyrant, / Let alone to a truly noble soul!" (2499-2500). Unlike Mićunović, the Abbot does not call on the laws of the heroic code, but on those of nature. He, rather surprisingly, sees the struggle with the Turks and the converts in Darwinian terms, as the struggle for survival and the right to self-defence, as the basic instinct we all must follow:

Nature provides everything with weapons
 against a force that is oft unbridled,
 [...] sharp spikes are there to protect the corn stalks,
 and thorns defend a rose from being plucked.
 Myriads of teeth has nature sharpened
 and has pointed innumerable horns. (2301-2307)

Danilo is not convinced by this. If indeed, natural laws are to be obeyed, then they also dictate that the world belongs to the strongest:

Just as a wolf has a right on his sheep
 so has every tyrant to a weakling.
 But to place foot upon the tyrant's neck,
 to make him know what the Right of men is,
 That is the most sacred of one's duties! (616-620)

On one occasion he also says: "He whose law is written with his cudgel/ Leaves behind the stench of inhumanity" (1155-1156). To the old, unbending heroic ethos and to the Abbot's apparently amoral appeal to natural laws, Danilo juxtaposes another socially recognised ethic principle, that of *čojstvo*, or humanness. To paraphrase another famous Montenegrin and Njegoš's contemporary, Marko Miljanov - heroism is when you protect yourself from others, *čojstvo* is protecting others from yourself.

Danilo is, however, not envisaged as a perfect man. Pressed by the feelings of the majority, weighed down by his historical position and the sense of duty, he himself flares up on one occasion and gives a shuddering speech against the converts, enough to shock any humanist:

We should baptize with water or with blood
 Those blasphemers of Christ's glorious name.
 Let's drive the plague out of our sheephouses!
 Let songs ring forth, songs of all these horrors.
 On blood-stained stones let the true altar rise. (671-675)

Yet, here he immediately stops himself in his tracks and asks for the talks to continue: "No . . . no . . . sit down. Let us talk it over!" (676). On the prince-bishop's suggestion, the Muslim chiefs are called to join the talks and are offered the choice of re-embracing the faith of their ancestors. Naive as this suggestion is, the Muslims' *status quo* attitude on the grounds of the equality of blood and customs, proves just as naive, as the stakes are slowly but surely raised

by the events outside the council meeting. A letter arrives from a Turkish vizier announcing his visit in order to check upon the Christian subjects, “to tighten the reins on the *raya*, since the *raya* is like other livestock” (1092-1093), he says. *Raya*, of course, is a derogatory term (it means “cattle”) and is used only of non-Muslim subjects: so much for equality. Muslim leaders leave the assembly at this point. Then a wedding party comprised of both Christian and Muslim Montenegrins narrowly escapes turning into a bloody affair, as both groups of guests start singing songs of their respective heroes; and the tensions finally reach the boiling point when a woman arrives to the assembled chiefs bringing news about the beheading of her brother, a young and promising man, lured into a Turkish trap with a guarantee of safe conduct. The young woman commits suicide and at this point the chiefs do not even wait for Danilo to decide anything but vow to start an all-out war against the converts. Quite unusually in fact (unusually as regards social customs, but not the whole drift of this epic), it is not the prince-bishop who performs the oath ceremony, but sirdar Vukota,¹⁴ a character who barely features in the epic. After that we witness Danilo and Abbot Stefan receiving news of the skirmishes, and while the Abbot greets these news of bloodshed as good news, Danilo mourns the dead.

The action of the epic ceases almost in *medias res* and on a comedic note: fresh from a daring rescue, a warrior, Vuk Mandušić, somewhat childishly mourns the loss of his rifle (he compares it to a loss of a brother). Danilo presents him with one of his own beautifully decorated rifles and consoles him:

May your head stay healthy on you shoulders!
 You will acquire another good rifle,
 for in the hands of Vuk Mandušić
 Every rifle will be right and deadly (2816-2819)

The here and now takes over, drives the action, but the questions *The Mountain Wreath* poses are left unresolved. Freedom is seen as an ultimate ideal, but it is far away from the abstraction to be contemplated in the comfort of a drawing room. It is looked at from the dirty mess that is reality and therefore, “what price freedom?” is one of such questions. Do ends justify the means and does the heroic clash with the humane? Is man a being of instinct or spirit, a creature of nature or culture? Is history a beautiful story of the glorious past or is it also a nightmare? Perhaps the strongest point of *The Mountain Wreath* is that it does not come up with simplistic, consumer-friendly, “good-shall-triumph-over-evil” answers, yet makes the quest for them worthwhile all the same. This tends to happen in good literature. If *The Mountain Wreath* embodies aspects of a “poison narrative,” then it also contains an antidote. The trouble is that the poison fitted so much more smoothly into the contemporary Balkan tales, with the grandeur and exoticism of which their writers were so enamoured.

As any story that starts with “Ecce Homo,” this too shall close with “Ecce Humanitas.”

Endnotes:

¹ See Judah, Tim. *The Serbs: History, Myth, and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997; Anzulovic, Branimir. *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*. London: Hurst & Company, 1999; Kavanagh, Adrian. (1999) “Postmodernity, Economics and Religion as Factors Explaining the Yugoslav Conflicts.” [20 April 2003] <<http://www.may.ie/academic/geography/kavanagh/yupaper99.html>>.

² Goy, *Sabre*, p. 112. Please note that, as his book was published in 1995, Goy’s outrage could not have been directed at any of the works I refer to here. Goy does not offer any clues as to the identity of his “Nitwit.”

³ Jordanova, Dina. (1999) “*Before the Rain* in a Balkan Context.” *Rethinking History*. [24 April 2003] <http://www.manchevski.com.mk/html%20en/m_press_btr1.html>.

⁴ I say “supposed idolaters,” because to be an idolater, you need to know what is it that you are idolising. In other words, there is a difference between reciting passages you were made to memorise from a primary school

textbook (“*Finally, there’s some use of all those literature classes!*”) and actually reading, still more, understanding, *The Mountain Wreath*.

⁵ The translation of the whole poem by Adam Makkai can be accessed at:

<http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Gallery/4602/Petofi.htm>.

⁶ It should, however, be noted that this Hungarian nobleman was much celebrated in Serbian epic poetry where he bears the name of Sibirjanin Janko!

⁷ “Agas” were Ottoman noblemen.

⁸ The translator of *The Highland Lute*, Dr. Robert Elsie, points to these and other influences. He also notes: “It is no coincidence that the title *The Highland* (or *Mountain*) *Lute* is very similar to Njegoš’s *Gorski vijenac*, 1847 (*The Mountain Wreath*).” See <http://www.elsie.de/pub/b30.html>.

⁹ This was probably due to the fact that in proportion to other nations and ethnicities in Yugoslavia, Serbs and Croats were the most numerous and their impact most keenly felt, not that there was anything necessarily milder characterising behaviour of other nationalities.

¹⁰ Organised school trips to cinemas were a fairly regular occurrence. These were not always partisan films - for example, when I was seven years old our class was taken to see *The Snowwhite and the Seven Dwarves*, and as young teenagers we saw an award-winning nature documentary. In between those two, however, we were taken to see *A Girl from Kosmaj*, in which a young partisan woman personally shoots her former boyfriend who had joined Chetniks and had subsequently participated in slaughter of an innocent peasant woman and her children. We also saw *Boško Buha*, about the heroic death of this partisan teenager, a bomber, and alike deaths of the whole fleet of his little comrades. We saw *The Great Transport* with Richard Burton as Tito, and many others. Cinemas and school trips aside, the daytime television was inundated with films and TV series with similar and often quite graphic material.

¹¹ Note that, peculiarly for the communist Yugoslavia, the very term “Muslim” was supposed to be designating nationality, not the religious orientation.

¹² Rape victims of the Nazis and “traitors” shown in these films are among Yugoslavian boys’ first encounters with an image of a naked woman, and these scenes among the earliest experiences to do with a “sexual” act.

¹³ There are three reports of two battles because the first one is reported twice - once by a young observer, and then by the participant, chieftain Batrić.

¹⁴ The title of “sirdar” was awarded for services in the Venetian army, and as Montenegrins used to lend theirs eagerly whenever Venice was warring with the Ottoman Empire, they often won this title too.

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