

Petar Petrović Njegoš MOUNTAIN LAUREL (Gorski Vijenac)
Translated from the Serbian by D. Mrkich



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A Farewell spoken by Njegoš's mother Ivana at his burial:

Brothers Njegoš

Falcon Montenegrins!

It is not seemly what you are doing, that you wail and weep over the Vladika.

I have not given him birth that others wail and weep over him, but I bore

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him for the good of your name and of all Serbian names.

I was ever, and am now, the happiest of mothers, when God gave me you, my forever dearest son. You were the handsomest amongst the handsomest, not only in body but in soul too. And in God's truth, I, your mother, will never cry for you, for if I did that, I would not be your true mother.

Let those mothers weep who give birth to traitors and evil men, not I.

Forgiven be to you, my son, your mother's milk, forgiven be to you your Serbian milk, with which I nourished you. Laud be to God, Who gave you to me, so handsome, and Who took you so handsome and young, for He too, my son, will have something to behold in you.



Note: Njegoš, who died of tuberculosis of the lungs on October 19, 1851 — exactly twenty-one years, to the day and the hour after he was proclaimed the Vladika— was by all accounts an exceptionally handsome man, six feet and eight inches tall, courteous, kind, hospitable, a poet of genius, a Bishop, a Prince.

Introduction

Njegoš's Humanism

By Ivo Andrić

(Nobel Laureate for Literature, 1961)

The great drama which began with the appearance of the first Ottoman horseman on the borders of our lands found its poet in Petar Petrović Njegoš. He is one of its protagonists and, at the same time, its greatest poet. In Mountain Laurel there is captured and immortalized but one particular, stern and narrowly defined scene of that drama, which flowed through centuries, in the thousands of such scenes, both greater and smaller, and brighter and darker than this one. But as one particle of a mineral contains all the elements of that species, so this local scene, bound by time and space, holds the

principal meaning and expresses the basic characteristics of the entire drama. This drama which encompasses the main part of our popular epic poetry, and which has not yet found its full, and fully expressed, evaluation in our historiography, nor its place in art, achieved its highest expression in Mountain Laurel. In it truly sings the song of terror.

In his oeuvre, created under specific social and political circumstances, Njegoš gave a highly poetic and strongly realistic picture of an inhumane way of life to which a particular set of circumstances had condemned our people. It contains a whole array of descriptions, oftentimes given with marvelous objectivity and clearheadedness, depicting a picture of this bloody skein in which intermingled two enemies:

Who did not give way one to the other,
But fought and cut off each other's heads,
A male head was not distinguished,
Even if they should find it in the cradle,
But was cut off, by one side and by the other,
They took female captives into slavery,
They set fires to whatever came to hand,
One stole livestock from the other,
They damaged fields, cut down fruit trees,
And committed every evil in the world,
Even what had not been done heretofore.

The False Tsar Stefan the Small, Act V, 333-343

Such is this struggle in the words of Karamanpasha in The False Tsar Stefan the Small. Yet at the same time, Njegoš developed to the highest degree the brightest vision of humanness and manliness, as a miraculous, but logical antithesis to the kind of life inflicted on the people. Thus this poem of terror is, at the same time, a poem of his own resistance, and of Njegoš as a poet of human kindness.

In Mountain Laurel, through blood, keening and smoke, he opens, wherever he can, even the smallest vista toward clear heavens, healthy laughter and humane living, so difficult to achieve and to defend; like the sky over the Balkan gorges, and a light at the bottom of a wild and narrow chasm, there appear shows of humanity.

Such is the small, but characteristic scene with partridges which the Montenegrin warriors catch alive. But as soon as the multitude learns of the matter, all shout as with one voice:

Release them, God's grace be with you,
Because some misfortune must have aroused them,
Otherwise, you would not have caught one;
They've escaped to you, to escape
And not that you cut their throats.

Mountain Laurel: 193-7

One always pauses before this little idyllic passage, strangely inserted in the midst of the most warlike atmosphere, grave concerns and bloody oaths, as one would before a gesture of unexpected kindness. One feels that outside the frame of this, in itself, a naïve scene, there stands Njegoš's suppressed but powerful humanity which, in spite of everything that surrounds it, wishes to shield the weak, give sanctuary to him who runs from the stronger, for an end to bloodshed, and salvation of all things living.

Njegoš's humanity isn't hidden only in these, as if incidentally, inserted little episodes. It appears also in the great, bright, decorous statements, in the psychologically justified and historically accurate places, such as the proud response of Vuk Mićunović to Osman, the man from the Vizier's tower, which culminates in the words:

I do not burn lands and peoples.

Mountain Laurel: 1193

This place, only after the experience of the past war (i.e. WW II) against fascism, and in the light of today's threats by new "powers" and new "tortures", gives us its full meaning. Njegoš's warrior, a prototype of the people's soldier, is equally proud of his humanity and of his bravery.

But immediately after this declaration – that he does not burn lands and peoples – Vuk Mićunović adds in the same breath:

Though many evil tyrants
Have fallen on their nose before me.

Mountain Laurel: 1194-5

This is the other side of the medal. Such is Njegoš's humanity. Lump-in-the-throat dramatic, moving, real and sincere, it is not weak-blooded or

sentimental, it fights, defends itself

It does not suffer evil to triumph.

Mountain Laurel: 2313

Therefore, it can justifiably be said that every celebration of Njegoš's poetic work is both a celebration of humanity and of man's struggle for humanism.

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ASSEMBLY ON THE EVE OF TRINITY SUNDAY on Mount LOVČEN

The dead of night; everyone is asleep

VLADIKA DANILO (*alone, speaking*)

See the devil with seven red cloaks,
With two swords and with two crowns,
The great-grandson of the Turk with Koran!
Followed by swarms of that accursed race,
5 Come to lay waste the whole wide world,
As locusts that devastate the fields.

Had it not been for the French shore,
The Arabian sea would have drowned all.

10 An infernal dream crowned Osman,
Gave him a bride, the full moon-like,
From him issued Orkan, an evil guest to Europe.

Byzantium is now no more
Than the young Theodora's dowry,
The star of dark destiny stands over her.

15 Paleologos invites Murad
To join in equal graves Greeks and Serbs.
Branković and Gertuka were of one mind,
Mohammed, this was Gertuka's due.

20 Out of Asia, from its nest,
The devil brood devours nations:
A nation daily, like a bird to an owl:

Murad takes Serbia, Bayazed Bosnia,
Murad Epirus, Mohammed Greece,
The two Selims take Cyprus and Africa,
25 Each takes something till nothing is left.

It's an outrage to hear what's happening.
Too small is this world for the jaws of hell,

Which cannot be filled, let alone satisfied.

Janko defends the dead Vladisav.

30 Why defend him when you cannot save him.

Skenderbeg was of the heart of Obilić,

But he died a forlorn exile.

And what shall I, with whom will I?

Few hands, all too small our strength,

35 A straw in the midst of windstorms,

A sorry orphan bereaved of everyone.

My people sleep the sleep of the dead,

My tear has no parent's succour,

Above my head heaven is shut,

40 And receives neither cries nor prayers;

My world has turned into hell,

And all men into evil spirits.

Black days, black destiny!

O orphaned, dismembered Serbdom,

45 I have lived through so many of your woes,

And now must fight against the worst one!

Yes, when you sever the head from the body,

In agony the body parts expire.

A plague of mankind, may God kill you!

50 Is half a world too little for you?

Half a world you've poisoned with evil,

That the venom of your hellish soul,

You must spew upon this rock too?

Is too small the sacrifice of entire Serbia

55 From the Danube to the bright sea?

You sit on the throne unjustly taken,

Pride yourself with your bloody sceptre,

Insult God from the holy altar

And build minarets where the crosses were broken!

60 You would defile the relics

That men brought to these shelters,

In the mountains to be their consolation

And remembrance of heroic forebears.

The relics have all been stained in blood,

65 A hundred times in yours and a hundred times in ours!

See the business of that wicked emperor,

Whom the devil teaches all things:

"This Montenegro I cannot subdue,

Can in no way make entirely my own,

70 With them one must do thus and thus..."

Said the Demon's messiah, and began
The sweets of false faith offer to men.

God's curse be upon you, pagan renegades,
Why the Turkish creed among us?
75 What will you do with your forefathers' curse?
With what will you appear before Miloš,
And before other Serbian knights,
Who live as long as the sun shines?

When I consider this council today,
80 Fires of terror flame up within me:
Brothers will massacre brothers,
All blood-thirsty and equally violent,
They shall destroy the seed within the womb.

Cursed be the day, may God strike it out,
85 That brought me into the world!
A hundred times I curse the hour last year
In which the Turks did not do away with me,
So that I do not deceive people's hope.

*Vuk Mićunović lies near the Vladika; he has feigned sleep, but hears
everything well.*

VUK MIĆUNOVIĆ

Don't, Vladika, if you know for God!
90 What misfortune has come over you
That you wail like a cuckoo bird,
And drown yourself in Serbian sorrows?
Is this not the purpose of this festivity,
At which you have gathered Montenegrins,
95 To cleanse the land of the unchristian?
And apart from that, this is our Feast-day,
When the best youths gather
To put to test their abilities,
The strength of biceps, fleetness of foot,
100 To compete in shooting at the mark,
To cleave the ram shoulder-bone for bets,
To hear God's liturgy,
And in the church yard to dance the kolo;
Expand their chests in martial skills,
105 This is the holy incense of the heroes,
This forges the heart in the young!
Cast away your gloomy discourses:
Men must suffer, while weeping is for women,
There is no action in a timid chief.
110 You are not quite alone:

Do you see these five hundred young men,
What marvel of strength and fleetness
We have seen in them here today!

How skilfully they hit the mark,
1 15 With what skill they dodged the ball,
And swiftly grabbed the cap.

As soon as wolf-cubs begin to follow their mother,
They know in their frolic how to sharpen
Their teeth on each other's throat;

120 Or when first feathers sprout on a falcon,
He can no longer be at rest,
But begins to unravel his nest,
Pulling at it twig by twig,
Until with a twig he takes to the sky, shrieking.

125 In all this is learning of some kind.
Not counting these young men here,
Six times as many are at home,
And their strength is your strength.

Before the Turks overcome all of them,
130 Many a Turkish woman will wear black;
There shall be no end to our struggle
Until the Turks have been exterminated or we.

One should not place one's hope in anyone
But in God and one's own arm;
135 The hopes we had were buried
On Kosovo, in one grave.
In good times it is easy to be good,
In adversity one recognizes the heroes.

*Men have carried crosses from the Lovćen to the site of an old church
and sit down on the summit. They fire rifles and count how many
times each rifle echoes.*

Serdar JANKO DJURAŠKOVIĆ

A marvellous rifle, worth a man's head.
140 Each our rifle echoes six times,
But the jeferdar of Vuk Tomanović
Is heard nine times evenly.

Serdar RADONJA

Do you see the marvel, Montenegrins?
Fifty years I've stretched my life's thread,
145 Every summer spent on the Lovćen,
Climbing to this mountain summit;
A hundred times I have watched the clouds

- Where from the sea they roll off
To darken this entire mountain,
150 Drifting this way and that,
With lightnings and tremendous din,
Lightnings running through the peels of thunder;
A hundred times I have sat here,
Warming myself in the sun
155 While lightnings and thunder storms
Rent the sky below,
Watched the hailstorm
Fall down from the dark clouds.
But this marvel I have not yet seen.
160 Do you see, if you know for God,
How much is sea and how much is of seacoast,
Level Bosnia and Herzegovina,
Albania right to the sea,
And how much is there of our Montenegro,
165 A single cloud has evenly covered it all,
Everywhere one hears echoes and thunder,
Everywhere beneath us lightnings flash,
But only on us alone the sun shines;
And it has grown warm enough,
170 On this mount where it is always cold.

OBRAD

- Did you see the marvel and omen,
When two lightnings crossed each other?
One flashed from Kom to Lovćen,
The other flashed from Skadar to Ostrog,
175 Made a cross of living fire,
Oh, so wonderful it was to see.
In the whole world, no one has yet
Heard of, or seen such a cross.
God be our help! Poor Serbs,
180 This will portend some good.

VUK RASLAPČEVIĆ

At what do you aim your jeferdar, Draško?

Vojvoda DRAŠKO

I wanted to shoot a cuckoo,
But was sorry to spend a bullet on it.

VUK RASLAPČEVIĆ

- Don't, Draško, upon your life;
185 It is not seemly to kill cuckoos.

Do you not know, may you be safe from evil,
That cuckoos are the daughters of Lazar?

*There is great commotion on the church ruins on the north side above
the Lake.*

Serdar VUKOTA

Why the riot? What's the distress?
You are worse than children.

VUKOTA MRVALJEVIĆ

190 A flight of partridges flew straight at us,
And we caught each one alive;
Hence this clamour arose amongst us.

All shouting:

Release them, God's grace be with you,
Because some misfortune must have aroused them,
195 Otherwise, you would not have caught one;
They've escaped to you, to escape,
And not that you cut their throats.

*Men release the birds and return with the Crosses to where they had
caught the birds.*

**AN ASSEMBLY AT CETINJE ON THE DAY OF
THE NATIVITY OF THE VIRGIN, CONVENED
FOR THE PURPOSE OF SETTling DISPUTES
AMONG SOME LEADERS.**

The leaders have moved aside, and the people dance the Kolo and sing:

The KOLO

Dear God was angry with the Serbs
Because of their mortal transgressions,
200 Our emperors trampled the law,
And became hostile to one another,
Putting out living eyes from each other,
They cast aside the government and state
And chose folly to be their counsel.
205 Their servants became disloyal to them,
And bathed themselves in imperial blood,
Our noblemen, damned be their souls,
Tore the empire into pieces,
And thus broke the Serb power;
210 Warlords – may their trace be wiped out,
Sowed the land with seeds of hatred
And thus poisoned the Serb nation;