Pleasure and Pain: Corporeality in Ivan Mažuranić’s Smail-aga Čengić’s Death

ABSTRACT

The main aim of this essay is to connect the role of bodily practices with collective memory, collective myths and trauma, as well as with the post-revolutionary ideas in Ivan Mažuranić’s eponymous epic poem Smail-aga Čengić’s Death (Smrt Smail-âge Čengiçâ, 1846). This canonical text marked not only the Croatian 19th century literature and culture, but also redefined various long-lasting national metaphors such as Antemurale Christianitatis (Bulwark of Christianity) that labeled a frontier defense of Christian Europe from the Ottoman Empire. If we analyze Mažuranić’s poem in the framework of the post-revolutionary ideological practices which presume the idea of political freedom as universal right and the final purpose of every society and each governmental system, various direct or indirect references to the French Revolution will be found in the text, and most notably the geopolitical importance of the peripheral “small” nations in the European cultural and ideological landscape.

As an allegory, Smail-aga Čengić’s Death reverberates the modernist idea that historical progress inevitably throws down any despotism and shows that fuit tyrannos signifies a diametrical reposition in the roles of a sovereign as a figure who stands above the law. To that end Aga changes his position: from a sovereign he becomes homo sacer (according to G. Agamben), the one who remains outside the law/society/community. In Mažuranić’s poem, tormented, colossal body of the voiceless nation is transformed into a strong agent of his-tory, and the former sovereign, as a torturer—a colossal voice with no body (E. Scarry) — becomes “a marvelous marvel,” merely a puppet of history, an amusing thing.

1. Introduction

According to E. Hobsbawm, the long nineteenth century1 extends from the French Revolution to the First World War. Nationalism, as one of the most influential ideological forces produced during that period, emerged in correlation with autonomisation of the cultural field and literary canon formation.2

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1 Following Fernand Braudel’s idea of the “long 16th century” (c. 1450–1640), Eric Hobsbawm defined that a long nineteenth century stretches from 1789 (French Revolution) to 1914 (First World War). He laid out his analysis in the trilogy The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848 (1962), The Age of Capital: 1848–1875 (1975) and The Age of Empire: 1875–1914 (1987).

2 According to Pierre Bourdieu (1983), nineteenth century is marked by the historical process of autonomisation and differentiation of the literary field as “an economic world
These, and other diverse and mutually connected processes of the time, stimulated various forms of collective imaginary, as well as new identity policies based on the concept of national history, and especially on the restoration of its mythological Golden age. Croatian literature of the time often referred to the great historical events or themes which, according to its authors, reflected on collective historical victimization that, through the processes of national resurrection, lead to the new political, cultural, and social order.

In relation to the abovementioned typical features of Croatian 19th century literature, and yet – at the same time – standing in opposition from other typical 19th century poems, Mažuranić’s eponymous poem *Smail-aga Čengić’s Death* sets out a traditional theme, i.e. Christian-Muslim conflict, in its, at the time, politically extremely relevant and fruitful concept of natural rights (natural law) and its application on contemporary governmental systems. Theory of natural law stimulated post-revolutionary national conflicts, especially between the, so-called, “small” nations in Eastern and Central Europe, which were, much like the Croatians at the time, typically in the “semi-colonial” position within larger empires. Both, in his literary works, and in his political engagements, Mažuranić was preoccupied with the cultural heritage of the French Revolution, namely, with the ideas of liberty and equality. This heritage is echoed in his major works, and – as my analysis aims to show – especially in *Smail-aga Čengić’s Death*.3

Namely, the title character of the poem, Smail-aga Čengić, is often interpreted as a typical oriental despot who misuses his power over the nation, that is, his subordinates. The connection of this text with the actual historical event,4 where Smail-aga figures as one of the most prominent Ottoman

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3 As it is evident in his epistle *Hrvati Mađarom* (*Croatians to Hungarians*, 1848) – written shortly after *Smail-aga Čengić’s Death*, as well as in his poetry, the Croatian writer was especially concerned with the issue of natural law. As a Ban (effectively prime minister in the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia within the Austro-Hungarian Empire) between 1873 and 1880, he reformed educational, medical and legal system. His political and public activities improved liberalization and democratization of the institutional and social spheres. Born as a commoner, Mažuranić was the first Ban who was not hailed by the old nobility and was, therefore, referred to as “Ban pučanin” (“The Commoner-Ban”).

4 Historical Smail-aga Čengić (1780–1840) was an Ottoman Bosnian lord and general in the Ottoman Army. He was killed by the Montenegrin tribal leader Novica Cerović in revenge for the death of the younger brother of the Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, Petar II Petrović Njegoš. Cerović organized an ambush and murdered Aga in a night attack on his camp. He entered with a group of Christians who killed Smail-aga and then took his severed head to Njegoš. Mažuranić changed historical facts in a number of instances: for example, Smail-aga was historically remembered as a wise and righteous man, while Novica was not a Turk or one of Aga’s soldiers. Also, changes were made in plot and in narration. They were made in order for the text to correspond with the political and social events of post-revolutionary Europe. Not all critics of the day praised Mažuranić’s...
generals (which surely motivated both, aesthetical and ethical layers of the poem) had a great impact on its reception. Although Mažuranić deliberately deflected from the historical context, his poem was interpreted merely as a reflection of Christian moral superiority and of Slavic heroic sacrifice in a geopolitical liminal “in-between” spaces. Later receptions confirmed that the author almost completely changed main characters and a plot. However, the fact that Mažuranić also changed the subject and even the ideological layer of the poem is not so obvious. The plot depicts Smail-aga’s rule through brutality and devastation of every form of humanity, which eventually causes specific social resistance: in the middle of the night, a secret group of warriors gathers in order to kill Smail-aga.

At the time, this could have been (as indeed it was) understood as an expected revenge that, sooner or later, befalls all oppressors. However, I would like to offer a converse argument: namely, the narrator deliberately releases the small company of executors of any motivation that could possibly be related to personal revenge. Firstly, they do not gather with the usual public support, but climb out secretly from behind the rocks (“like the secret voice of the spirits,” 213§; “the cold stone receives life,” 218). Next, they walk through the night having no name or any other sign of individualization, as wheels of justice that grind slowly but grind fine. Undifferentiated “small party” goes on, guided by the eternal Justice,⁶ free from any sorrow or anger, as we are told in the central canto, titled The Company, where the old priest (“good elder”) – which connects the crowd in a kind of Eucharistic celebration preceded by the confection and absolution of sins – is introduced. The ceremony of the voiceless subjects proceeds, and is described as follows:

They are “full of Almighty God
Not like a bloody knife, by which
Mortal and severe wounds are given;
But like a holly golden quill
With which heaven for grandsons to come
Notes the heroic deeds of the fathers.” (470-475)

accomplishment. For example, German writer and poet Dr. F. S. Kraus claimed that Čengić was different in reality: “Smail-Aga in Mažuranić’s poem is described wrongly and unfairly. Our sympathies are with the bold and fearless hero Smail-Aga Čengić, but he was not a burly highwaymen from Montenegro. Čengić was a true Slav and his murderers pathetic, cowardly scum” (Šišić 1908: 179).

⁵ The poem has been translated to English by Charles A. Ward. All quotations are taken from the special edition of the literary journal The Bridge, 1969. Quoted verses are noted in the parenthesis.

⁶ The following verses are particularly illuminating: “The company moves, but whiter?
/ In vain you will ask company / In vain you will ask the quick lightning...” says the narrating voice, adding that echoes beyond the mountain will give a reply: “Not us, not us, but the Thunderer ask, / Whom it is fitting for all to serve” (244-245).
This conclusion explicitly connects the scope of the poem with the main implications of the 19th century national revival, where the quill re-appears as a symbol of a new way of gaining freedom, first and foremost by alluding to the necessity of creating national identity and knowing national (homeland) history. Historical progress is here understood as a direct consequence of plans and actions which the crowd intends to achieve: analogous to the Hegelian concept of history as a movement toward freedom, the voiceless crowd is moving slowly, but is unstoppable. Author’s interventions in the body of the actual historical event are to be understood in relation to his attempts to create a character that could represent a figure of any absolute sovereign, including those European emperors directly affected by the 1848 revolutions, and especially those Austro-Hungarian monarchs who decided upon political future of small Slavic nations, such as Croatian.

Consequently, by equating historical progress with freedom that is both, individual and collective, with freedom related to every language, every religion and every nation, Mažuranić identifies absolutist government with backwardness and barbarity. To that end, the poem demonstrates that the progressiveness, liberalization and democratization, as (stereo)typically accomplishments and ideological goals of the Western European society, are at stage not only in Vienna, Paris or in London, but at the South- and East-European frontier, as well: among Slavic nations that are fighting for their freedom. Well-known (and often misused) historical metaphor of Antemurale Christi-anitatis, which has strong mythological connotations in Croatian literature throughout its historical development, and awards this geopolitical space the important role of a dividing line between (the progressivity of) Christian Europe, and (the backwardness of) the Ottoman Empire, is, in Mažuranić’s poem, re-contextualized within the framework of the nineteenth-century national revival. In the remainder of the essay I will elaborate my claim that Mažuranić’s orientalism in allegoric prefiguration of a historical event is strongly intertwined with the ways the poem’s narrator uses bodily language in order to create tripartite body politics, that of corporeality, pain, and pleasure.

7 “Boj se bije duševni i tjelesni po čitavoj Europi; narodi se hàrvaju i kolju; jedan drugog hoće da nadjača i nadvlada, a naposlietku čija će biti snaga, vidjet ćemo” (“Danica,” XV, 1849, 2: 87-88). Mažuranić follows one of the main political and ideological prepositions of the day: after the heroic times of our forefathers, now is time to fight not with the sword but with the pen.
8 I have also described Hegelian roots of Mažuranić’s thought in: Protrka 2012, and Protrka 2017.
2. The Muteness of the Vassals, or Can the Subaltern Speak (G. Spivak)?

At the beginning of the poem, the main character acts as a villain; he resembles a figure of a warrior; he is trying to hide his fear before the silence and stamina of its victims. In the fourth canto, Harač, readers are again witnessing Aga’s torture as he gathers taxes (harač in Turkish) from the local Montenegrin residents: “(…) from each head they demand a gold coin / From each hearth a fat ram, / And for the night from each in turn a girl” (493-494). As it soon becomes clear, the taxes are too high for his poor vassals who suffer from hunger and poverty:

“Tax, tax!” Whence tax from the rayah?
Whence gold, from those who have no roof,
A peaceful roof to shelter their own head?
Whence gold, from those who have no fields,
But wet with their own sweat the Turkish ones?
Whence gold, from those who have no cattle,
But labor up the hills behind others’?
Whence gold, from those who have no clothes,
Whence gold, from those who have no bread? (633-640)

Not being able to collect taxes, Aga is dissatisfied and furious, and begins to punish the Christian “rayah,” thus being transformed into a persistent torturer. The narrating voice mediates between potential reader’s perspectives, most notably between Croatians of all social classes and that of all “European people” of the time, who agonize Slavic people by referring to them as “Barbarians.” By doing so, the narrating voice anticipates an emotional response from the “people of the world“ (368), but also from the Slavic people of the day who interpreted the allegoric meaning of the poem within the frame-

10 From the beginning of the poem, Aga’s domination (Agovanje) was described as a merciless torture. Narrating voice at the time explicates the problem of speaking for somebody else, and of adequate representation of other people’s suffering and pain: “But who can truly describe / The awful sufferings undergone? / Who can hear with peaceful heart / The extent of bitter sorrow?” (669-672).

11 In his eponymous essay O Čengić-agi Ivana Mažuranića (On Ivan Mažuranić’ Čengić-aga, “Vienac,” VII, 50, 1875, pp. 821–822; 835–839; 849–853), Croatian philosopher and writer Franjo Marković claims that in his poem Mažuranić clearly denounces victorious fuit tyrannus, i.e. the end of all political tyrannies. According to Marković, although he is aestheticizing the “tragic destiny” of the people of the Balkans, Mažuranić, like other canonical writers, such as Shakespeare, Dante or Homer, overcomes historical circumstances of its people, thus creating a transnational and timeless work of art (Marković 1975: 852). “Tyrannicide” is a political strategy well known from the Classical age, and reintroduced in the sixteenth century by French Monarchomachs. They claimed the right of rebellion in cases when the sovereign violated the contract between God and the people. This later affected modern theories of sovereignty and some political
work of the simplified “us / they” binaries, i.e. by adapting “our” glorious history (the fight against the Ottomans) in the contemporary context of the great Austro-Hungarian Empire. Allegoric transference of the meaning becomes more concrete when explained through the bodily pain. Body is here described as an object of torture and as a political agent. Aga’s dominion is sadistic; however, he orders torture indirectly, referring to it as gift, dance, or sports instead:

When the mighty aga saw them,
He had husky oxen brought,
And some headsmen, fierce as lynxes,
And presented them with Turkish presents:
To some he gives a sharpened stake,
To some a stake, to some a rope,
To some he assigns a sharp sword.
“Come on, crosses, share the gifts
Which I, a Turk, have prepared for you,
For you, and your rocky Montenegro:
They will get it just as you will.” (20-30)

Later, in Harač, he acts in a similar manner:

“When, Haso, Omer, Jašar,
Come on, bitches, with good horses
Make sport on the level field,
Let’s see how the crosses run!”
The aga bellowed like a fierce bull. (545-550)

Aga’s sarcastic comments are aimed to humiliate already deprived and tortured “rayah.” As Elaine Scarry argues, torture dissolves the familiarity of the surrounding world: “The room, both its structure and its content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone” (1985: 41). By combining torture and destructive reposition of a common world, the demonic forces of this figure of the enemy (see Dukić 1998) *par excellence* are joined to destruct and re-inscribe familiar order. “Beside the overwhelming fact that a human being is being severely hurt,” as Elaine Scarry lucidly observes, “the exact nature of the weapon is miming the deconstruction of civilization is at most secondary” (Scarry 1985: 41). Additionally, torture is Aga’s attempt to gain power over his vassals. From the very beginning, he tries to conquer not only physical space, body and freedom, but the emotions of his vassals, as well. Therefore it is not surprising that he is especially concerned when he hears no voice, and sees no fear or any sign of pain or suffering on victims’ faces. Even though the practices, such as assassinations (see Skinner 1978, II: 49). For further explanation of Mažuranić’s work in the context of theories of natural law see Protrka 2017.
torture progresses, they do not react, suggesting that the subaltern, evidently, cannot speak:

The stake crackled several times,
The sword whistled several times,
The slender gibbet shuddered there,
But they made no sound, the Montenegrins,
They did not sob nor grind their teeth.
Across the meadow dark blood flowed. (34-39)

However, at this moment the narrating voice justifies Smail-aga’s feelings, thus complicating poem’s affective economy: “Fear that one who is accustomed / To die without much ado.” Obviously, Aga has many reasons to start trembling within: “When the aga saw such strength / A chill numbed the depth of his heart, / Like a chilled blade’s icy point / Touching his soul with its edge” (64-67). Trying to conquer his own fears, Aga manipulates his servants, i.e. the ones who could also be frightened by seeing the courage of the great Christian “rayah” before them, or the ones that could, as the old man Durak did, advise him not to treat them so severely. It is interesting to note that not hearing any voice from his victims, Aga not only feels that his torture has no efficiency, but his heart remains unsatisfied: “This Turk killed so many warriors, / Slaughtered them, but did not sate his heart, / Since all fell before him without fear” (59-61). Later in the poem, this verse motivates Aga to the limitless exercises of cruelty not only upon “rayah,” but upon his own people and servants, as well. Thus the silence of “rayah” in Mažuranić’s poem reveals the common situation of victims who not able to verbalize their experience. When in pain, as E. Scarry demonstrate, they are in a state when their bodies and voices no long belong to them, feeling dissolved in the double experience of agency: internal and external, inside and outside. Destruction of language and the power of verbal objectification, as a major source of human self-extension reveals itself, according to Scarry (1985: 54-55), in the totality of pain.

12 Here we had to put aside the consciousness of the subaltern, “the notion of what the work cannot say“ (Spivak 1994: 82) and the question of “the real receiver“ of “insurgency“ (ibid.).

13 Scarry claims that “pain begins by being ‘not oneself’ and ends by having eliminated all that is ‘not itself,’ eventually occupying “the entire body and spill[ing] out into the realm beyond the body, take[ing] over to all that is inside and the outside, make[ing] two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroy[ing] anything like language or world extension that is alien to itself and threatening to its claims” (1985: 54-55). Pain ends in “the de-objectifying of the objects, the unmaking of the made,” it is “a process of externalizing the way in which the person’s pain causes his world to disintegrate; and, at the same time, the disintegration of the world is there, in the most literal way possible, made painful, made the direct cause of the pain” (ibid.).
In *Smail-aga Čengić’s Death*, crowd is seemingly lacking the ability to speak or to objectivize their situation, but, at the same time, they are able to use their status to resist the oppressor without showing any signs of suffering. This ability, as Mažuranić suggests, arises as a collective strategy to survive long lasting agony. Montenegrins are, besides that, so deeply devoted to their faith, as much as to “the holy freedom,” that they can suffer in muteness, voiceless. To that end, it is important to note that silence in the scenes of torture which disturbed Smail-aga, later becomes a form of rebellion and of Divine (if not personal) revenge (213-224). Aesthetic device of parallelism between the scenes of torture and the slow movements of the voiceless crowd creates specific dramatic atmosphere that finds its final expression in the scene of the final fight and dethronement of the unjust ruler.

This parallelism introduces specific opposition in experiencing tensions between body and voice. In Mažuranić’s poem, torturer and his victim are posited on the opposite sides. The meaning and the bodies are, according to Scarry’s analysis, in analogue position. The body and its pain are overwhelmingly present for the victim, but the voice, world and self are absent (1985: 47). However, torturer experiences something completely opposite – colossal voice with no body (ibid.: 57). In torturing, as Scarry argues, torture becomes an act of “overcoming” the body present in benign forms of power. In other words,

> although the torturer dominates prisoner both in physical acts and verbal acts, ultimate domination requires that the *prisoner’s* ground become increasingly physical and the torturer’s increasingly verbal, that the prisoner become a colossal body with no voice and the torturer a colossal voice (a voice composed of two voices) with no body, that eventually the prisoner experience himself exclusively in terms of sentience and the torturer exclusively in terms of self-extension. (ibid.: 57)

Victims are, in Mažuranić’s poem, mute and unable to speak for themselves, so it is seemingly necessary (although potentially inadequate) to speak for them. Therefore the author engages three narrative instances for the task. First, the narrator asks: “But who can truly describe / The awful sufferings undergone? / Who can hear with peaceful heart / The extent of bitter sorrow?” (669-672). Even though he is completely dedicated to the task and tries to mediate between the oppressed people and the distanced audience of his contemporaries, having described the torture, he takes the liberty of presuming the readers’ emotional reaction:

> It seems to you first that lion roars,  
> It seems to you next that dog howls;  
> And then you hear the wailing of martyrs,  
> Cries, moans, labored breathing.
You hear the clank of flattering iron.
Accompanied by bitter calls for help.
Listen, brother (....)
Listen... listen... oh, that’s not seeming,
Because I see how it pains you deeply.
What... you cry... Oh, that’s not seeming.
For, I think, from seeming you’d not cry. (705-716)

This dialogical section implies affective economy of the poem and corresponds with similar passages in the third section, entitled The Company, when the “good elder,” as the second narrative instance which speaks for the oppressed, explicitly addresses “other people of the world” (368). As he claims, they do not know anything about these heroic (Slavic) people tortured for the sake of Holy Cross/Christ/Freedom:

Oh, should the other people of the world
From the lowlands, where there is no view,
See this famous cross, never defeated,
Atop Lovćen which rises to heaven;
And should they know how the Turkish beast,
Which with giant maw would gladly swallow it,
On these cliffs vainly cracks its teeth;
While you endure tortures for the cross,
Nor would they call you barbarians
Because you are dying while they sleep! (368-378)14

The third narrative instance in the poem is Bauk, who is called to entertain Aga, but who sings a thinly disguised mocking-song to him: about some fictive Rizvan-aga that was clumsy, cowardly, and disgraceful. His allegorical song triggers Aga’s anger, his destructive wish for revenge and his final fall. All these narrative instances: the narrator, the good elder, and Bauk-the singer, are authorized to speak for the oppressed. They all give voice to the tortured, offering a perspective and meaning to their struggle. As a torturer, Smail-aga speaks about his power and his anger, but remains quiet about his fear and sorrows. Later, dethroned and expelled, he becomes a mute puppet. His position is thereat additionally complicated because he stands not only for the torturer, but for the ruler as well, a form of sovereignty par excellence.

14 Edward Said’s (1978) and Maria Todorova’s (1997) groundbreaking cultural and interpretative concepts are here instructive in obvious ways, i.e. in the ways in which Mažuranić questions implicit and explicit orientalism/balkanism from the perspective of the “cultured” European nations. Croatian writer emphasizes that the metaphor Antemurale Christianitatis depends on exclusion and separation of periphery/wall against the “oriental” other which is in direct opposition to the main ideas of the French Revolution. In his epistle Hrvati Madarom (Croatians to Hungarians), he claims more clearly that there is no freedom, equality or brotherhood if they are reserved only for some nations or individuals.
Thus in Mažuranić’s poem the voiceless “rayah” and the colossal body of the sovereign become two opponents in the discussion of the inevitable historical changes implicitly present in the text.

3. Voice Of the Sovereign And a Silent Body of a Nation: What (Is) Beyond Cruelty?

As a sovereign who misuses his legal power, Aga here represents, as Giorgio Agamben claims, “the one with respect to whom all men are potentially homines sacri” (Agamben 1998: 84). In other words, he is able to execute and kill anyone without being punished. Unconditional authority of the sovereign is usually manifested in his right “to decide life and death,” as Michel Foucault argues in the first volume of his History of Sexuality (1978). As a legal governor, Aga severely misuses his power, not only over the Christian “rayah” (the lowest and the most powerless of all vassals), but progressively over his own people, as well. In the latter part of Harač, Aga becomes increasingly dissatisfied, even furious: his effort to collect the taxes is just an attempt to gain power over “rayah.” Although he misuses his legal authority by torturing his vassals and depriving them of their natural rights, he cannot “sate his heart” (60) or, to be more precise, he does not possess the ability to feel powerful.

Although there is little doubt that Mažuranić’s political, and ideological interest has been to pinpoint the main cultural and social implications of the French Revolution in the aesthetic conventions of the epic poem (most notably by stressing the role of European periphery and its small nations), it is important to stress that the main protagonist of the poem is Smail-aga. His intentions, his internal perspective and his feelings drive the events from the beginning to end of the plot. Firstly, he is not able to defeat the “rayah,” his torture does not result in obedience, but in their determination to passively resist him. Trying to conquer them, Aga – defeated by his own fear – progressively deteriorates. Meanwhile, in his attempt to overcome his fear and to gain power over his vassals, he becomes furious and cruel. In the context of Bernard Reginster’s lucid analysis, his cruelty is logical and expected because cruelty is gratifying “not just because we merely contemplate another suffering but because we make him suffer and, in the process, experience an increase in our feeling of power. The ‘pleasure of cruelty’ is therefore the feeling of power, or as Nietzsche explicated it: ‘to practice cruelty is to enjoy

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15 Reginster explores pleasure-pain dynamics, showing their mutual connectedness and inseparability. Following Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, he argues that the “pursuit of pleasure to be insatiable” leads to pain, suffering and, in some cases, cruelty. The cruel individual, according to Schopenhauer, “seeks indirectly the alleviation of which he is incapable directly, in other words, he tries to mitigate his own suffering by the sight of another’s, and at the same time recognizes this as an expression of his power” (2005: 189).
the highest arousal of the feeling of power [den höchsten Kitzel des Machtgefühls]” (2005: 178). According to Reginster’s observations, the cruel individual gets “the effective exercise of his agency – his cruelty is strictly a matter of imposing his will upon his environment and nothing else” (ibid.: 179). On the other hand, cruelty “simply consists in creating, and then overcoming, the resistance” (ibid.). To that end, “the will of others will necessarily oppose to the prospect of suffering” (ibid.). This explanation helps us understand the acts of powerful and cruel individuals (such as Nero, Domitian, or even Smail-aga) who “tend to reach for paroxysms of cruelty: already powerful, they must create ever greater resistance in others by threatening them with ever greater sufferings, in order to derive an increased feeling of power from the infliction of such sufferings” (ibid.). Reginster’s account of cruelty becomes analytically applicable after Aga hears the mocking-song which made other members of his camp laugh at him:

(...) his face anguish.
Pain, wrath, anger, frenzy
And a hundred other furies
Which in his haughty heart
At the sound of each disgrace and jeer
With bloody nails burrow a nest. (990-995)

In his “angry heart” blazed up a bloody flame not only against the “rayah” (so-called Vlachs, the curs, the linden Crosses), but against Turks, as well:

Suddenly like impetuous
Lightning cut through his brain:
Not only the rayah witnessed this shame,
Not only rayah has eyes and mouths;
Crush the rayah, crush the Turks as well,
Only preserve a worthy memory. (1017-1022)

Aga’s obsession with power, memory and his own reputation culminates in the words that dramatically announce his final fall which comes shortly after, and is additionally described as a fulfillment of a historical progress that will overthrow the absolute power and secure new collective freedom for the oppressed.

16 “In the dress of black night” (1075), after the Aga fell, “Grimm death walks the field in blood” merging both sides inseparably. The fall of the main oppressor at the end of the canto, in addition to fight, heroism and death on both sides, means that the crowd finally “reached the night longing” (1100). The night longing here symbolizes fulfilled historical progress, and implies dethronization of the absolute sovereign.
4. Fate in the Epilogue: *Homo Sacer* – the Puppet of History

The death of Smail-aga at the end of *Harač* provides a resolution of the main plot in at least two directions: one in which Aga represents an unjust despot, an autocrat that usurps his legal power, and the other, equally important and intertwined with the first, in which Aga is individualized with his fears and destructive desire (if not will) to power that leads him to enjoy cruelty that goes beyond any limit and leads him to his own destruction. Overreaching his own hubris, at the end of the poem Aga encounters his nemesis, i.e. his fate. This second meaning is at the focus of the last canto (*Fate*), which could be read as a sort of epilogue of the complexity of the poem’s affective economy:

> Mt. Lovćen rises up under the sky,  
> Nearby it a field spreads out.  
> In the field is a hermit’s hovel,  
> And in the hovel one small room.  
> In that room they show a marvelous marvel:  
> A mad Turk as he prays to a cross. (1101-1106)

At the end of the poem, Aga’s dead body becomes merely a puppet that amuses visitors. After a visitor touches the ground with his foot, the death puppet makes funny greeting gestures. In the last canto the affective reader’s response reverberates: Why did the narrator have to symbolically humiliate Aga to that extent? Why was not his death enough? Why Novica, who was the only one personally motivated for revenge, did not succeed in decapitating the dead Aga?

As a sovereign who usurped the natural law, Smail-aga could have shared the same fate as the other “sinners of history,” which were overthrown in the course of the revolutionary terror. Could we claim that the poem’s ending alludes to the author’s intention to turn Smail-aga into the puppet of history? Or did Mažuranić, perhaps, aim to suggest that History is – while maintaining its connection with God’s mercy – beyond the reach of dictators? By articulating a particular concept of History in his poem, Mažuranić claimed that the natural law justifies every resistance, including revolutionary terror as a form of “divine violence,” or “die göttliche Gewalt,” as Walter Benjamin (1977) formulates it. In this specific nineteenth century post-revolutionary actualization of monarch theory, he is obviously especially concerned in giving Slavic (Croatian) people a significant role in the reframing of Western history. This task is, from the position of a small, peripheral, and oppressed nation in the nineteenth century, illusory, “a marvelous marvel,” about as much as the fate of Smail-aga. To make it viable in his time, Mažuranić moves away from the Eastern, Ottoman elements: his people are Christians, they are dying for the Holly Cross (which equals Freedom), and their oppressor is a typical oriental despot who uses horrible strategies of torture. Thus he criticizes the norma-
tiveness of Western exclusivity, the common practice of naming the others “Barbarians” (in speech of “the good elder” in the third canto) and, at the same time, identifies its own community against that imagined oriental Other by producing exemplary “balkanistic”17 aesthetical discourse. His Smail-aga represents a sovereign who stands behind the law, as Giorgio Agamben (1998) argues, and at the beginning – stands symmetrically opposite to homo sacer, the one that could possibly be killed without punishment, but also the one without possibility to be sacrificed.

In the light of the presented analysis, it is important to emphasize that these two figures are not only correlated, but also structured in the similar way:

the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially homines sacri, and homo sacer is the one with respect to whom all men act as a sover- eigns. (…) The sovereign and homo sacer are joined in the figure in an action that, excepting itself from both human and divine law, from both nomos and physis, nevertheless delimits what is, in a certain sense, the first properly political space of the West distinct from both the religious and the prophane sphere, from both the natural order and the regular juridical order. (ibid.: 84)

In his poem, Mažuranić reveals that the seemingly unconditional authority of the sovereign, or, to be more precise, of his right to decide on life and death, does not override the ultimate right to live freely.

Thus a tormented, colossal body of the voiceless nation is transformed into a strong agent of history. This is an implicitly Hegelian perception of the history of the world as the progress of the consciousness of freedom that leads to the state where everyone should be free. Furthermore, at the very end of the poem, Aga’s sovereign body changes his position, as it was indicated before, in a surprising way. If Mažuranić wanted to conceive him as an allegory of a ruler from medieval jurisprudence and theology as having two bodies, he would have to kill him twice or make him change his position in a diamet- rically and become homo sacer. At the end of the poem, Smail-aga loses his double body, i.e. his double lives: natural life and a sacred life.18 It seems as

17 According to M. Todorova (1997), balkanism evolved independently from orientalism: in certain aspects against and despite it.
18 Le roi est mort, vive le roi! (The king is dead, long live the king!) – this traditional proclamation that usually announced the death of a previous monarch and served to mark a continuation of sovereignty to a figure of a new one, gives us insight into two implicated meanings of sovereign’s life. Ernst Kantorowicz in his pivotal study The King’s Two Bodies (1957) introduced the notion of a “mystical” or “political body” of the sovereign and showed the mechanism of transferring absolute and perpetual power of sovereignty “which allows the royal dignitas to survive the physical person of its bearer (La roi ne meurt jamais, ‘The king never dies’)” (Agamben 1998: 92). The poem’s end opens up a new perspective in classical understanding of the sovereignty, i.e. in a new context of post-revolutionary political changes.
though Mažuranić was especially eager to expose that Aga’s fate was not only in losing his bare life, but in changing his historical position as well: he is deprived of any sovereign power. His implicated “royal dignitas” now does not belong to him or to any of his company: the real sovereignty is an eternal category and could be transferred only to those who are able to submit their personal will and attitudes to the almighty Justice, as the rebellious crowd did. In opposition to them, as an absolute and unjust ruler, stands Aga, who, paradoxically enough, from a sovereign position that stands above the law, exercises his power over the bare lives of his vassals, at the end becomes the expelled homo sacer, the one that could (and has been) killed, but not scarified. To that end, by losing his dignitas, he stands outside history and society: as the poem claims, he now stands “outside,” at the “nearby mountain,” “in the field,” “in a hermit’s hovel.”

References


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