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A Story of Trees and Ruling

Ivan Golub

In these hot June days, hotter in the metaphorical than in the literal sense, I think about ruling. And today, on the last day of spring, I read in the Book of Hours about how the trees went out to anoint a king:

The trees once went out to anoint a king over themselves.

So they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.'

The olive tree answered them, 'Shall I stop producing my rich oil by which gods and mortals are honored, and got to sway over the trees?'

Then the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.'

But the fig tree answered them, 'Shall I stop producing my sweetness and my delicious fruit, and got to sway over the trees?'

The the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.'

But the vine said to them, 'Shall I stop producing my wine that cheers gods and mortals, and go to sway over the trees?'

Judges 9, 8-13

Like every story, so this Biblical one has its message and lesson. It talks about ruling. The olive, the fig and the vine refused to be anointed king. This is unusual. Usually power is coveted, hoped for, fought for, chased.

How the olive, the fig and the vine explain their refusal to rule is even more unusual. The olive will not give up its oil to rule, the fig its



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sweetness, the vine its wine. This clearly shows that renunciation is expected of a ruler. To rule is to renounce. To rule means to renounce. Renounce what? The story makes it clear. He who would rule must give up that which is his special gift, that which has a special meaning for him, what is his joy and his talent.

The story makes something else clear, too. When the olive, the fig and the vine refuse to rule the trees, they do not do so to keep their oil, sweetness and wine to themselves, but because the olive's oil, the fig's sweetness and wine are to the honour and cheer of God and men. This »influence and delight« are the attributes of play, and playing is the root of art. In other words, some re-

nounce power for the sake of art. Man does not live only from the bread of power, but also in the word of art.

A memory comes to mind, a conversation with Miroslav Krleža. He told me one day in his home on Gvozd that all his life he had been stretched between power and poetry, politics and poetry; his wife Bela had told him to give all of himself to poetry. I do not remember him saying he was sorry he had never given himself completely to one or the other.

What was Jesus' attitude to power? He told people to give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. He Himself never sought favour with the authorities, on the contrary. He sent a message to King Herod: »Tell that fox.« He went before the authorities bound. And when He founded His community, the Church, which had to have heads, He clearly and resolutely told them not to behave like the kings of this world but to let the first be the last, and that he who rules should in fact be the servant and serve everyone. He did not place John, His beloved disciple, as supreme head. One of the reasons was certainly because He loved him, because He wanted John to remain John, not to have to renounce his very core to become ruler, supreme head in Jesus' community. He wanted to spare him.

Only he who has tasted power knows how one must relinquish self, he who has carried a king's scepter knows how heavy it is, he who has known power knows its impotence. But, power is also sweet. I would say that the three things needed for the survival of the individual, the species and society are accompanied by joy: food needed to sustain the individ-

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ual, marriage needed to sustain the species, and — I add — power needed to sustain society. Were those three activities not accompanied by joy, who would embark on them or persist in them? When people are depressed, it is those three activities

that suffer: people will not eat, do not care for sex, and shun company. A depressed man has lost the joy that accompanies those activities. The thoughts the Biblical story about trees has awoken! You will understand why I have set down the Book

of Hours and taken the pen on the eve of the first day of summer.

*Translated by
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Nives Kavurić-Kurtović, Mats for Dreams without Sleepers — Pietà, 1983, Biškupić Collection