

Orphic Poet, Punk, and Museum Guard: Remembering and Forgetting in Esad Babačić's *Machine, Do You Know Your Duty?*

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Esad Babačić (1965) first appeared on the Yugoslav music scene as the frontman of the punk band *Via Ofenziva*. Since then, he has played many different roles in his prolific and varied cultural career. One of them, however, is usually overlooked. At the beginning of his career, the youthful Babačić, endearingly known as Esade, was a trailblazer. As a seventeen-year-old, he was given a reward for the best punk song—a lampoon of the Yugoslav leader Tito—by the Slovenian cult record label FV. Soon after, he enjoyed a different kind of distinction: being apprehended and interrogated by the Yugoslav Communist Party apparatus as the first Eastern Bloc artist to perform a cover of the notorious popular song “Lili Marlene,” which at the time was erroneously associated by Communist regimes with National Socialism. However, as Yugoslav punk gradually succumbed to the social processes that in many ways unraveled Babačić’s youth—the intensification of political censure and political correctness, the first waves of gentrification across Yugoslav urban centers, the premature deaths and withdrawals of legendary figures in the punk scene—he turned to a very different kind of creative work: writing lyric poetry. In the years since, he has published thirteen collections of poetry, receiving numerous nominations and awards in the Slovenian literary world and publishing extensively in significant Slovenian and European magazines.

It is this dual character of Babačić that continues to be most noticed and admired by his Slovenian readership: he is the punk who turned into a poet and transmuted his destructive yelp into blunt-edged verse. And yet, as I noted above, there is one cultural role Babačić occupied during these decades that is not often remarked upon. For several years, while publishing poetry collections and hanging around the old haunts of Yugoslav punkdom, Babačić worked as a museum guard at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana. I would like to suggest that it is this work of the museum guard—suspended between forgetting and remembering, memory and its inadequacies—which most exemplifies Babačić’s artistic achievement in the present collection, *Machine, Do You Know Your Duty?*

This is how Babačić describes his return to the old sentry post of the museum guard in the essay “To Tell Everything I Can’t Hold Inside of Me”: “A lot has happened in the meantime. Or better said, too much has happened, too much for me to tell you all of it. And yet, that’s my only wish: to tell everything that I can’t hold inside of me. [...] I’m back in the museum again after a long time, in my spot, waiting for visitors from the outside world to arrive. While I’m waiting, I write...” This is the solitary museum guard, stalking abandoned galleries and hallways which surround him with the documents of different pasts and histories. The melancholy guard, watching over the museum as a site of defiant memory in the face of oblivion, recollection against the mere passing of time.

Seen in this light, the essays in *Machine, Do You Know Your Duty?* are primarily acts of remembrance. It is this that accounts for one of their central rhetorical strategies, that of listing and cataloguing the things they describe, the places and people and music and poetry of Babačić’s youth. For if one wishes to remember the things that are no more, one must in the first place name them. In this book, Babačić relentlessly, almost mechanically (in a manner that recalls the eponymous machine), names over pages and pages the movies he watched, the clubs he partied in, the

streets he loitered on, the people he spoke to, the poetry he read, the basketball players he treasured and emulated, and so much more. This effort at cataloguing is perhaps nowhere as clear as when he eulogizes the days of Ljubljana punkdom, and it is also here that Babačić's text spills over the page and into his organizing activities. Namely, Babačić also counts as one of the founders of a completely unique institution of remembrance in Ljubljana: The Museum of Punk Culture, as well as an attendant tour of the Slovenian capital city through the lens of punk. Both are described in the collection's eponymous essay, *Machine, Do You Know Your Duty?* In this museum, as well as in these essays, Babačić acts as both creator and watchman of a forgotten scene in a city which he sums up in his emblematic cataloguing style with an unadorned inventory of names, those writers, musicians, and sporting icons that compose Babačić's personal canon of references: "the Ljubljana of Rožanc, Zupan, Kovačič, Kocbek, Šalamun, Strniša, Krese, Bojetu, Detela, Debeljak, Bitenc, Pengov, Habič, and Petrovič." Babačić is gathering, as he describes it in the essay "Don't Want It": "the sole material evidence of what took place back then on the streets of Slovenian cities and settlements from Ljubljana, Idrija, and Metlika to Maribor, Koper, and Straža by Novo Mesto..."

If we think of this collection as a museum, we can almost see Babačić, curator and guard, carefully placing the bands and poets he adores behind glass planes, attaching museum labels to the myriad experiences of his youth. With the act of cataloguing, we see him freezing and preserving outside of time all that he names. In the suggestively titled essay "The Oblivion of Heritage," Babačić describes his struggle to place the things which have passed away outside of the time in which they did so. And again, he does so in the characteristic form of a list:

As for me, I would not want to live in such a world, just as I would struggle to live in a world with no trains that run late, where all the stations look alike, a world where the sun changes nothing, where there are no unannounced

thunderstorms, no waiting without end, journeys with no destinations, reading poetry you don't understand, repeating the same verbal ticks that connect you to your ancestors, lying under the blanket, staring at the ceiling, arguing over each ball, absurd attempts at the basket, sitting in half-empty stadium stands, rooting for a club that has already been demoted from each and every league, waiting for the next World Cup, rebelling without a cause, watching old movies you can still understand, *storing events and memories in a warehouse that might one day constitute a heritage.* (my italics)

To the extent that Babačić is here a champion against oblivion, so too is he a lyric figure, drawing on some of the earliest cultural tropes of the poet as a singer of nostalgic songs. Think of our first poet, Orpheus, whose legend centers on the loss of his loved one, Eurydice. In this legend, the grieving Orpheus travels to the underworld, putting his unrivalled lyrical talents in the service of reclaiming Eurydice from disappearance and oblivion. Or consider the *Illiad*, in which Homer, just like Babačić, employed the rhetorical instrument of the list, endlessly enumerating the heroes who perished in the Trojan War and thereby rescuing them from death on the battlefield, bestowing upon them infinity in the canon of Greek antiquity. Here the first side of the Babačić poet-punk duality resides: that of the poet.

This is how Babačić continues after the description of his struggle against forgetting in “The Oblivion of Heritage”: “A heritage is what you carry in your heart and what you wouldn't give away for anything in the world. [...] If you ask me, I remember from time to time what it is, but then I forget again. Oblivion is also a part of our heritage.” Just as we think Babačić is trying to encase the trains, stations, and journeys of his youth in the unchanging tableau of the museum and thereby to divorce them from the dynamism of the change that occurs throughout time, he reintroduces the necessary counterpart to memory. He reminds us of forgetting. And here, oddly, is where the flip side of the coin lands: that of the punk. In contrast to the poet who hopes to

preserve, the punk embraces and enacts the disappearance of the things he sings-screams about. In contrast to the permanency of the poet's written word, the punk acts in the fleeting setting of the two-minute song, the sweaty concert, the dissolution of a cathartic moshpit.

As noted above, Babačić often foregoes more conventional narrative momentum in favor of the indiscriminate, nostalgic naming of things, and this gives his essays a pleasant rambling quality. The reader has the sense of sifting through someone's wasted summer days with no overarching pattern to them. However, the collection taken as a whole tracks a specific historical trajectory, and for someone like Babačić, this trajectory can only be one of loss. Certainly, Babačić confronts the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and with it, the loss of a shared country, social culture, political system, and language. Against this backdrop Babačić experiences, as well, the disappearance of shared basketball courts, punk bars and concert venues, all the local, miscellaneous specificities that make up the city in which he grew up (and all of us have our own versions of these hazy childhood cities). In this sense, a palpable bittersweetness pervades these essays, autobiographical ventures of an author who writes of his younger days from the sober vantage point of adulthood. A certain sentimental melancholy attends this kind of writing, and it is expressed many times in this collection, such as when Babačić the poet describes the special way the sunlight used to fall on the once glorious, now retired, sporting icons of the author's youth—Jordan, Bird, and Barkley, or closer to home, Dražen Petrović, Dragan Kićanović, Mirza Delibašić, and others...

But there is a different approach to such loss as well, one of acceptance, and it is this posture of acceptance that is taken up by a more hardened Babačić. Here is Babačić the punk, the grown-up and retired delinquent who's come to outlive so many of his punk contemporaries, to see his generation pass in time along with so much else. "Oblivion is also a part of our heritage," the author has warned us. This truth is embodied in Babačić's nonchalant, almost

throw-away statement—“Yeah, that’s the way it goes”—that concludes another one of his long lists, this one from the essay “Vodmat,” named for the beloved Ljubljana neighbourhood where he grew up:

In any case, legend has it that Miki vanished without a trace. Just as there is no trace left of the notorious Disco FV Šiška on 48 Šišenska street, which is today occupied by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, invisible, humble worshippers having replaced the wild punk and new wave parties—parties that Miki never failed to attend. And one day the apartment building called *At the Cave, Na Jami*, where the Bitenc brothers lived, will also come tumbling down. And everyone will forget that in 1980, behind the former Šubičeva gymnasium, which is today Jože Plečnik gymnasium, there was a place called Johnny Rotten Square where all the punks from Ljubljana’s neighborhoods, including Vodmat, used to gather. *Yeah, that’s the way it goes.* (my italics)

How does one respond to all of these processes of disappearance—the vanishing of a cherished friend, the replacement of a disco with a church, the tumbling down of a legendary apartment building, the forgetting of punk gatherings? While the Orphic poet’s first tendency may be to preserve such things, to save these multitudinous Eurydices from their inevitable headlong rush into oblivion, the punk naturally resides in a space of antagonism, the inevitable toppling of categories such as art, culture, and other repositories of memory. The punk is the one who sees it all in flames, vanishing, and says: *yeah, that’s the way it goes.* Counterintuitively, this lends the punk a certain serenity that the poet who clings to disappearing things cannot afford. Take, for example, the essay “The Books that Follow Me,” in which Babadžić recalls the countless books he has lost as he moved through Ljubljana’s myriad streets, apartments, and neighborhoods: “There are many books I have lent to various people—thus also lending a part of myself—as if to throw off a

burden I found too heavy at that moment. And it probably was too heavy.” Even in writing, Babačić the punk is shedding his burdens, getting rid of his stacks of books.

In this way, while Babačić the poet is at work, busily scribbling his lists, Babačić the punk glories in a kind of near indifference to the onslaught of time into which he yelps and screams. In an essay towards the end of this collection, “Essay on a Moment,” Babačić writes: “Nothing is perfect, perhaps only the moments that have already passed. The moment when you are writing and you know that’s the only real moment. And that it doesn’t belong only to you, it belongs to everyone now.” In these lines, the echoing shriek of the punk is made still and quiet by the steady hand of the poet. Orpheus has become a punk, almost. And we can clearly see the poet-punk-Orpheus in the uniform of the museum guard moving among his museum collection. Items and experiences that have vanished from the world and yet are still with us in the museum. There is Babačić, cataloguing solitary offbeat moments that are shared with everyone.

It is no coincidence that the two archetypes I have described here, with Babačić delicately poised between them, can be thought of as ambiguous figures, expressing both triumph and loss. This is because poet and punk sing to each other not in an antagonistic way, but rather in a symbiotic relationship. One’s triumph mirrors and complements the other’s loss. We recall the ending of Orpheus’s legend, how he breaks his pact with the god of the underworld by turning his fateful gaze backwards at Eurydice, how she is taken from him forever. Orpheus’s beautiful music fails in saving her; and yet she remains with us as a figure depicted in his songs. And we remember that the punk movement, wherever it might have cropped up, also quickly flamed out in the face of adulthood, pop music, its own exacting standards of artistic integrity, or whatever else it may have been; the bitter irony of saying “punk’s not dead.” But its elan remains in grizzled guys like Babačić, people who lived to tell the tale. The miraculous resistance with which they say “punk’s not dead!” Together, poet and punk,

just like Babačić's collection, *Machine, Do You Know Your Duty?*, embody the truth that there is no forgetting without memory, and there is no memory without forgetting. The humble museum guard reminds us that there is no loss without someone standing next to you, telling you what you have lost.

But perhaps all of this is too abstract and grandiose. Babačić says this more clearly than I ever could throughout this collection, which is simultaneously an elegy to the past and a love letter to you, the reader, here and now. "Oblivion is a part of our heritage," Babačić warns us. And then he continues: "It is fortunate, then, that there is someone beside me, reminding me again and again, and then I know again what true heritage is. It is a flower that you have not yet given because you know exactly who it is for. It is love."