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Folk Traditions in Serbo-Croatian Literary Culture

Svetozar Koljević

The interplay of oral and literary traditions in Serbo-Croatian—whether in the form of reference, inclusion, imitation, or creative use—reflects some major features of Balkan social and cultural history. To begin with, St. Sava, the founding father of the Serbian Orthodox autocephalous Church, encouraged the spread of Christianity by preserving old folk customs and giving them a distinctly Christian meaning and significance. In his later cult among the Serbian Orthodox population he came to be seen as a traveling deity introducing order and welfare by teaching men how to plow and dig, and women how to cook, make cheese and sour milk, and bake bread, weave, and knit, so that he seems "to have taken over the role of the ancient Slav deity Dabog" (Petrović 1970:263). But he was also praised by his biographer Teodosije, a thirteenth-century monk, for shunning folk culture—particularly "indecent and harmful songs of youthful desires that weaken the soul in the extreme" (Bašić 1924:83).[1] The early Catholic animosity to all forms of lay folk singing in the Balkans was also coupled with the translation of the Latin hymns into vernacular oral poetic forms in which they are sung to this day as "folk" Christmas carols among the Croatian population (Kombol 1945:40). This ambiguous tradition goes on among Serbs and Croats—the two peoples often divided by similar historical misfortunes and sometimes even by the same language—well into the eighteenth century. The fifteenth-century *Statute of Poljica* entitled parents to disinherit their sons if they became professional singers of popular songs (Latković 1954:190), and many Catholic and Orthodox priests spoke in the same voice about the folk "wanton, base, and impure songs," "dishonorable songs," "empty and useless songs," and "the songs of love" (Pavić 1970:427-28).

[1] My thanks are due to the late Professor Anne Pennington, Oxford University, for help with many of my English translations of Serbo-Croatian quotations in this text.

But the *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja*—a confused and often fictitious genealogy of medieval Slav rulers, and an account, for the most part legendary, of their exploits from the middle of the fifth to the middle of the twelfth century—contains a beautiful medieval hagiography with distinct folk epic touches.[2] And the history of the Renaissance urban Dubrovnik literature is also instructive: Šiško Menčetić (1457-1527) is far less readable in his fashionable literary compositions than in his shorter lyrics, "which are in their tone reminiscent of the simple expressions of the fervor, gaiety, or grief of folk poetry" (Kombol 1945:91). His contemporary Džore Držić (1461-1501) also wrote some of "the most charming examples of our oldest lyrical love poetry" in the manner of folk lyrics (*ibid*.:91), which again shows the dependence of a gifted poet on folk forms in the situation in which his setting and language are dominated and sometimes "falsified" by the political and cultural forces of powerful alien centers. And this is why the limitations of Ivan Gundulić's long epic, *Osman*, left unfinished when he died in 1638, are sometimes explained by the triumph of his literary culture and rhetoric over his insufficient imaginative gifts, so that he comes to be seen as an important influence on Ivan Mažuranić, whose masterpiece, *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* (1846), was much more deeply steeped in folk traditions and forms (Kombol 1945:235).

However, it was Petar Hektorović, a Hvar literary nobleman, who spelled out the most fascinating chapter in the history of the interplay of folk and literary forms. His *Fishing and Fishermen's Conversations* (ca. 1555; published 1568) is a long poem describing a few days' outing of two humble fishermen who entertain a grand literary nobleman in various ways, among other things, by performing folk lyrics and epics and solving riddles. Thus a highly literary form of the Italian fishermen's ecologue has been modified for the purpose of folk diversions with their distinct social and linguistic features and so become a form of "folk" characterization in a highly stylized poem (Čale 1970:99-100). It should not come as a surprise that this happened, and perhaps could only happen, in the Renaissance agrarian setting of Hvar, in Starigrad, where a grand literary nobleman could go a long way in sharing forms of life and entertainment with his humble compatriots.

When Andrija Kačić Miošić, an educated Dalmatian Franciscan friar, published his *Pleasant Recreation for the Slavic People* in 1756, it was a major step in another culturally significant direction. His versified

[2] I have discussed this elsewhere in greater detail (Koljević 1980:16-19).

chronicle of major historical events in the past was so skillfully written in the manner of folk heroic songs that it was soon widely accepted as a form of folklore, and sung by the illiterate populace. In the nineteenth century, when the linguistic forms of folk culture came to be seen as the foundation of national and cultural identity, and, owing to the work of Vuk Karadžić, gained international recognition, the folk traditions became the objects of literary cult and inspiration. The results, of course, varied—most frequently in the wrong direction—but the two greatest epics in the language, Mažuranić's *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić* and *The Mountain Wreath* (1847) of Petar II Petrović Njegoš, were major landmarks in the cultural and literary history of the Balkans. For the first time major educated poets, incidentally also powerful political figures—Mazuranić was ban [governor] of Croatia and Njegoš Prince-Bishop of Montenegro—were writing national literary classics that were at the same time politically topical and molded in the language, forms, and associations of traditional folk epic poetry.

In his epic *The Death of Smail-aga Čengić*, Mažuranić deals with a contemporary event that was, characteristically enough, reported in the newspapers and immediately treated in folk epic poems. Apparently, a small company of Montenegrins ambushed and killed a comparatively humane and decent landowner in Herzegovina (Živančević 1969:13-14), but since the cruelties of the Turkish tax-gathering system were a major topic of European politics and the epic spirit disregards the trifles of personal guilt and merit, the incident was seen as a subject of burning political significance: the small but valiant company of underdogs, the Montenegrins, had seen to it that a Byronically perverse tyrant, a Turkish tax-gatherer, should meet the fate he has richly deserved, in person and by proxy, as a small screw in a big machine. The rituals and associations of traditional folk epic language were ideal for his purpose, and since Mažuranić lived in his formative years in a setting in which such traditions were fully alive, and, of course, was a major poet, his poetry, like that of Njegoš, showed the kind of wisdom that is fully alive in a folk idiom, that makes it as obvious to the simple as it is enigmatic to the wise. He combines the octosyllabic and decasyllabic lines, each characteristic of folk poetry even if not in such combination. The illusion that this is traditional oral poetry is also sustained by occasional use of fixed epithets and of the semantic and syntactic patterns that we find in some of the generally

recognizable lines of traditional oral poetry.[3] Such examples are indeed not very many; their frequency varies, but one is generally surprised by how few they are in any well-known passage—on an average, perhaps about three or four clearly recognizable epic formulas in a hundred lines. But everything is so much an organic part of the prevailing epic folk tone and spirit—sustained also by the truncated folk metaphors (when, for instance, "heaven is weeping," l. 824)—that it is the very few classical allusions and coinages that sound "strange."[4]

This explains, perhaps, why Mažuranić seems to be full of "quotations": many of his greatest lines have become fairly common currency in the language. As a rule these lines sum up the poet's vision within a dramatic moment of the story: the night of horrors and suffering of helpless victims of a bloodthirsty tyrant, for instance, is described in a laconic, almost neutral statement: "The earth is hard, the skies are high" (l. 766). It sounds like a proverbial, clichéd utterance; but the standard proverbs also realize their meaning in an active interplay with a particular situation. And it is only against the background of a particular form of human suffering that this line is moving, even if one can ask who is it that has never felt that "[t]he earth is hard" and that "the skies are high." But the contrast between "[t]he earth" and "the skies," between the "hard" immediate and the inaccessible ("high") beyond, only "sounds" like a proverb. It is, in fact, primarily an *ad hoc* personal utterance, which embodies a collective sense of history. Its structure and texture reflect

[3] Sometimes Mažuranić "quotes" standard folk epic lines: "The sun went down and the moon came out" (Živančević 1969:l. 114); "Not even the *vilas* [fairies] could carry the hero through / Let alone his own feet" (ll. 139-40); "And Novica came to Cetinje" (l. 163); "For the honorable cross and golden freedom" (l. 206); "The aga flamed up like a living flame" (l. 912). The following are the instances of fixed epithets: "cold water" (ll. 7, 826), "the hero's head" (l. 147), "the hero's heart" (l. 200), "golden freedom" (l. 206), "honorable cross" (l. 206), "great God" (l. 184), "unknown hero" (l. 167), "falcon's eye" (l. 356), "white hands" (l. 458), "fierce pains" (l. 80), "bright arms" (ll. 482, 792), "war horses" (l. 483), "white tents" (l. 483), "living flame" (l. 912), "a good horse" (l. 551), "flat field" (ll. 547, 581), "black earth" (l. 575). There are also examples in which we find broad semantic parallels with folk epic poetry, such as, for instance, the "gifts" of torture: "He presents them with the Turkish gifts: / To each youth, a sharp pole, / To some, a pole, to others, a piece of rope" (ll. 23-25). On the other hand, sometimes Mažuranić's lines follow only the syntactical patterns of folk epic poetry: "The servants started shouting, on their horses, / The horses started running, under the servants" (ll. 552-53). Finally, there is also an example of Slavonic antithesis: "Is it an outlaw or a Turkish spy? /... It is neither an outlaw, nor a Turkish spy, / But Novica, Čengić's servitor" (ll. 132, 135-36).

[4] Apart from references to Hector and Troy (ll. 564-65), we also find some Homeric coinages: "silk-fleeced flocks" (l. 133), "thin-horned herds" (l. 134), "wing-legged horses" (l. 563).

Mažuranić's creative predicament and a characteristically nineteenth-century historical situation in which language of this kind could be used with such individual and personal force to express a collective awareness.

Further on, the same dramatic situation evokes a purely lyrical touch: "Fine dew, as if heaven were weeping" (l. 824), a touch that embodies an intimate relationship between nature and personal, or collective, fate, which is so often found in folk epics and tales. Sometimes the account of what is happening in the story lives on in its reflective and lyrical undertones, as, for instance, when an old priest blesses the Montenegrin fighters: "A weak old man cheering the weak / To give them strength approaching that of God" (ll. 466-67). And often his voice has both a historical and a prophetic epic ring: "'The eagle makes his nest on top of Timor / For there is no freedom in the plain'" (ll. 344-45). That so much actual history and landscape could be contained in a single image is also significant; it explains why these lines have attained such wide circulation in the language, second perhaps only to Mažuranić's truly scriptural vision of the Montenegrin heroic spirit: "Fear the man ready to die / Without much complaining" (ll. 62-63). Such, and similar, lines testify to the unique historical moment of the threshold of national identity when a major poet could speak in such a powerful voice in the folk expressive idiom.

Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath* illustrates—even in more paradoxical and aphoristic terms—the same point. It was widely known by heart by the illiterate populace of Montenegro and naively taken to justify the eradication of Islamized Montenegrins by their Christian brothers, appropriately enough on a Christmas eve at the end of the seventeenth century. This reading was fully endorsed by patriotic scholarly opinion, and the research that showed that this "historical event" never took place must have come as a blow to national pride.[5] In fact, Njegoš took the subject from a folk heroic song that makes a series of extremely inept attempts to see what must have been many local conflicts and skirmishes as a grand national gesture of the eradication of Islamized Montenegrins. It is true, of course, that Njegoš uses the traditional popular decasyllabic line, that he introduces the folk round dance in the function of a chorus, that he quotes, sometimes in a highly original dramatic and moral context, the formulas of laments, curses, blessings, charms, incantations, proverbs, and

[5] No reference to "the eradication of Turks" can be found even in *Grlica* (1835), which lists, with patriotic zeal, all the memorable events during Bishop Danilo's rule, including "the introduction of potatoes" in Montenegro (Banašević 1957:11).

aphoristic utterances, if sometimes with slight modifications.[6] But *The Mountain Wreath* has a dramatic form, the eradication is pushed into the background and comes only in the form of a message, and the central figure is the hesitating Bishop Danilo, whereas his heroic compatriots, far too ready for quick action, are seen in a slightly comic light. In short, Njegoš dramatizes his own position as an educated ruler and sensitive poet engaged in desperate struggles in an extremely cruel environment of tribal rivalries and the Turkish penetration of Montenegro.

The difference between the folk poem from which Njegoš took his subject and the way he treated it in his dramatic poem is significant. In the folk poem Bishop Danilo is treacherously captured by the Turks during the consecration of the church in Podgorica, and he asks his congregation to sell their "crosses and icon lamps," to give all the "ecclesiastical treasure" in exchange for his ransom; when the ransom is duly paid, he concludes that there are too many Islamized Montenegrins and gives a simple and straightforward order: "'Let us slaughter Turks in Montenegro'" (Bošković et al. 1980:l. 170). When the job is finished, Bishop Danilo shouts for joy: "'Dear God, thank you for everything, / I have yearned for this feast for a long time!'" (ll. 175-76). In *The Mountain Wreath*, however, Bishop Danilo is no more a simple-minded epic hero, but a lonely martyr to his insights and his moral fate. Faced with his compatriots who are only too ready to indulge in the prospective blood-bath—"Strike the devil, so that no trace is left" (Banašević 1973: l. 301)—Bishop Danilo curses the day he was born (ll. 84-85), and his human and moral position is mirrored in the imagery of "a straw among the whirlwinds" (l. 35) and "The closed skies above his head" refusing his "tears and prayers" (ll. 39-40). And if he is "torn by black thoughts" at the idea of the prospective eradication of Islamized Montenegrins (l. 522), if "his breast boils with horrors" (l. 523), it is not because he is a coward but because he is a wise man, because his

[6] In *The Mountain Wreath* we find about a half-dozen examples of standard folk epic lines: "Do you see this wonder, O Montenegrins" (Banašević 1973:l. 143); "No Serb would betray a Serb" (l. 1051); "But they all fell side by side" (l. 1055); "O hateful day, may God destroy you" (l. 84); "Who live as long as the sun shines" (l. 78); "I dreamed a terrible dream last night" (l. 1367). The following are the instances of fixed epithets: "the blue sea" (ll. 55, 1110), "razor-sharp sword" (l. 368), "clear sky" (l. 584), "living eyes" (l. 202), "living heart" (ll. 1267, 2781), "honorable cross" (l. 1329), "bright arms" (l. 669), "slender voice" (l. 1292), "green coat" (l. 1349), "a grey falcon" (l. 1834), "sore wounds" (l. 1959), "white towers" (ll. 2269, 2790). There are also several examples of close imitation of folk epic syntactic patterns: "He who escaped the Turkish sword... / Took refuge in the mountains" (ll. 262, 265). For further instances of this kind see P. Popović 1939:275-76. And, of course, the whole of the lament of Batrić's sister strictly follows folk patterns (ll. 1913-63).

brains have not been confused by heroism as "a drink" on which "generations got drunk" (606-7). Finally, when he is driven to accept the decision and call on his compatriots to "kiss a bloodstained saber," so that "the smoke of the blood of the just can rise on the altar," he feels that his moral drama is taking place in an indifferent world: "'The earth groans, the heavens are silent'" (l. 630). And his final war-whoop has a characteristic ring: "'if there were a brother in the world, / his pity would be like help'" (ll. 647-48). If his counsel-taking and moral bewilderment appear to his heroic compatriots like "the cackling of geese" (l. 300), if they are frightened that children will mock them unless they take immediate action, if they tell him that they are "afraid of much thinking" (l. 519), as if they "had no business but to think" (l. 504), such utterances are not so much a judgment on Bishop Danilo as instances of dramatic irony.

The split between historical and moral loyalties is also embodied in dense, paradoxical imagery that hovers formally between proverbs and riddles. The fact that hegumen Stefan, an old, blind prophet who has quaffed the cup of the horrors of life to the full and found ultimate peace of mind, should incite Montenegrin warriors to action is another major paradox in this poem. But the way he does it is often more paradoxical: "'A blow finds a spark in stone / Or else the spark dies of despair'" (ll. 2322-23). The relentless "stone" embodies, literally and metaphorically, the geographical and historical landscape of Montenegro, and the "spark" the spirit of the people. The relationship between "stone" and "spark" suggests perhaps what Montenegrins were up against, or, indeed, what human life is about. It is not a simple heroic act but the heroism of moral spirit that can impose human significance on chaos, or give humanity a moral chance, if only a tragic one, in any situation, however desperate. And, of course, the only alternative to this paradox, to this madness, is despair and death. And does this option for the impossible become any clearer when Bishop Danilo reaches the same decision and says: "'Come what can never be'" (l. 659)? The fact that the greatest line in the language—the equivalent of "To be or not to be"—consists of semantic auxiliaries that have no definite meaning if taken separately is paradoxical in itself. But it is even more paradoxical that in such a line "meaningless" words should, in their interanimation, embody as much a sense of history and national identity as a spirited response to a hopeless situation. This reflects perhaps the extraordinary creative predicament of a highly sophisticated, sensitive poet in a historically cruel situation. That he could resort to such simple folk devices for such paradoxical purposes may be a sign of his genius, but it is also a sign of a cultural setting and historical

situation that offered such an exceptional meeting ground for folk and urban culture. The same feat has certainly never been repeated again.

But in the different and changing conditions of social life in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the new era of freedom and corruption in Serbia, in the era of urban awareness and the "educated" cult of folk traditions, the comic possibilities of the heroic heritage became much more apparent. Of course, most of the literary forms that assume and express a lofty view of man and his destiny lend themselves easily—often too easily—to mock-heroic usage. And indeed many of the traditional songs about Marko Kraljević exploited such possibilities: in *Marko Kraljević and General Vuča*, Marko is seen on his Šarac that is not "like other horses are / But spotted like a cow" (Nedić 1976:no. 42, ll. 129-30) and with his mace so heavy that nothing but a sheepskin of wine can keep it in balance (l. 87), while in *Marko Kraljević Recognizes His Father's Saber*, when he drives the sultan to the wall and plants his boots on the praying-rug, it is only a rich pourboire that can appease his rage (no. 57, ll. 135-41). He is also funny as a lover, which is not surprising, but there is a touch of humor even when he has to die after spending only three hundred years in this world. In *The Death of Marko Kraljević*, "[d]eceiving world, my sweet flower" is his last, mature word on himself and human life as he has come to know it (no. 74, l. 68).

There are, indeed, comic elements in Duke Draško's account of Venetian life in Njegoš's *The Mountain Wreath*, but the first great instances of comic transformation of epic heritage, of placing the old heroes and their heroic language in a new setting, are to be found in the poetry of Branko Radičević and Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, poets who were born and lived in a far more urbanized and sophisticated social setting, mostly in the region of Vojvodina. At the heart of Radičević's "Farewell to Schooldays" (1847) is the famous round dance of brotherhood that is still sometimes sung as a national classic. The whole poem is a masterpiece of romantic gaiety and joy of life, but the round dance is keyed in a spontaneously sophisticated reaction to the patriotic urban cult of a folk custom. Among the Serbian population in Vienna, where Radičević was a student, the round dance was not so much a genuine folk custom as a cultivated form of folklore used in a foreign setting to express both national loyalty and defiance (M. Popović 1972:123). In his round dance Radičević sings, quotes and misquotes, and at one moment invokes the popular epic figure of Marko Kraljević, proposing a toast to the heroic hand that has killed Filip Madžarin [the Hungarian]. Marko, as we have seen, has lived for three centuries, and he has killed many enemies, mostly Arabs and Turks,

also some friends, including his own brother, for whose death he will take revenge on the Turks who had killed him![7] However, Hungarians were Radičević's nearest neighbors, so it may not be surprising that the little episode with Filip Madžarin is evoked. The actual folk poem describing the adventure, *Marko Kraljević and Filip Madžarin*, ends in a memorable image of Marko's triumph: "Marko went away singing his song, / Filip was left behind digging the ground with his foot, / His faithful wife bemoaning his death" (Nedić 1976:no. 59, ll. 192-94). Radičević, however, changes the imagery of this happy ending and leaves Marko at the end of the duel laughing and watching the fire that comes out of the stone under his blows. But there is also the afterthought that Marko would have been even happier if wine, instead of fire, had come out of the stone and that is apparently one of the reasons why we should never stop grieving for the death of such a hero. In our grief we should remember that wine, if not Marko, has been left to us; and if Marko had remained alive, who knows if any wine would have been left! It is in this mock-heroic banter that Marko comes alive and becomes identified with the spirit of the boundless joy of the poem; it is in his irresponsibility that he lives, not as a patriotic dummy idolized out of existence in an overenthusiastic attitude. Radičević's achievement has only to be compared to the hundreds of abortive evocations of the grand spirit of epic poetry that can be found in almost all Serbian Romantic poets, even such major ones as Djura Jakšić and Aleksa Šantić (in an early phase); the difference between lively creative use and a respectful dead cult of the folk heritage becomes glaringly obvious.

But what is less obvious and perhaps more interesting is the nature of Radičević's superiority over Zmaj and Radoje Domanović, who used similar mock-heroic forms for purposes of political satire, even if the works of Zmaj and Domanović may be more significant in terms of social and cultural history. Zmaj's "Official Gusle in Belgrade" (1865) invokes a typical mock-heroic comparison between the old stringed instrument, a symbol of the heroic songs and their moral values, and modern government newspapers. The poet appears in it as a fool: "Budalina Zmale" is perhaps a slightly strained coinage on the analogy with the comic, club-wielding Moslem hero Budalina Tale. Anyway, the poet masked as a fool prepares for a great national celebration, washes his eyes in the lead article of a government newspaper, goes to the palace of the

[7] Marko kills his brother in the well-known song *Marko Kraljević i brat mu Andrijaš*, which Hektorović recorded, and which he first published in 1568 (Hektorović 1953:12ff.). He takes revenge on the Turks for the death of his brother in *Marko Kraljević osveti brata Andrijaša koga mu Turci pogubiše* (Bogišić 1878:no. 89).

"glorious police," breathing deeply—if not sweet smells, at least attitudes that may help him to get through that day. He prepares himself to be blind to all he is going to see and swallows in advance all that he is going to hear. But what he cannot swallow is the traditional guslar celebrating urban political lies, the government, and the police: the gusle with "official standing," the weapons of the police, the new "ministerial Muse" which has just been born to sing the new government hero who is "just sprouting wings" (Leskovac 1970:224). It is only in this ending that the strains of the mock-heroic analogies completely disappear and that we hear the natural tonal vigor of great poetry.

In a similar but richer vein Domanović used the legends and poems about Marko Kraljević in his description of the late nineteenth-century political and urban scene in Serbia in his short story "Kraljević Marko for the Second Time among the Serbs" (1901). In the grand opening scene that takes place in heaven, God grants Marko's prayers to return to his Serbs who invoke his name so ardently in their political agitation and poetry. This scene is followed by Marko's comic duel with a cyclist and his visit to an inn, where he beats the innkeeper for bringing him his wine in a ridiculously small modern glass instead of a sheepskin. Marko is finally arrested but, owing to his previous services to the nation, sentenced to only ten years' imprisonment. When he leaves prison, he tries to move with the times, but his old-fashioned epic heart begins to burn at a political meeting when his name is invoked. When he stands to speak in response, everyone is embarrassed and he is told that he has taken literally the modern art of political rhetoric. Since he is unwilling to part with his weapons out of a sense of duty, it turns out that the only government job for him in a modern state is that of a policeman. In this role, however, he comes into conflict with his superiors because of his old-fashioned sense of justice, and finally has to be shut up in an asylum. But who is really mad and morally insane—the old epic hero or the modern world? Domanović is certainly at his best in his linguistic handling of his material: the slightest inversions of the heroic decasyllabic line often produce absurd effects, and as a rule Marko speaks in verse, lapsing into prose only when he cannot stop laughing at his petty-minded and cowardly latter-day countrymen. Thus the prosaic deflation of the traditional heroic language becomes a medium of satirical moral judgment on modern civilized life.

The short stories of many regional writers—from Milovan Glišić to Dinko Šimunović—live on the interplay of the old moral concepts and the new social realities, but it is in the works of Petar Kočić that this issue is embodied for the first time in a highly ambiguous modern way. In his well-

known cycle of four stories about Simeun the Novice—the "novice" is an elderly gentleman who has never taken vows but lives in the monastery of Gomionica—we are faced with the hero who glorifies his own absurd heroic exploits against the Austrian armies and who is so carried away with his epic fantasies that it becomes more and more difficult to say whether he is a straightforward liar or is genuinely self-deluded. The framework of the stories is ironic rather than heroic: instead of drinking wine the heroes are brewing and sipping plum brandy, and there is even a voice "behind the vat" asking awkward questions and pricking epic bubbles. But the heroic fantasies are in a sense indestructible; Simeun's heroic daydreaming, inspired by brandy and decasyllabic songs, remains fundamentally more human than the realities of "progress" that the Austrians have brought to Bosnia. Simeun sees his age as "the final period" of an approaching doomsday: bishops "go for walks with German sluts" in Banja Luka (Koljević 1982a:139); everything is weaker—"the harvest, the brandy, the people" (123)—even plum brandy is no longer graded by the human tongue! Simeun's absurd daydreaming is his only chance for being human, and this tone of satirical nostalgia suggests, perhaps, what the heroic heritage will have to offer to twentieth-century writers.

To begin with, the heritage of diverse folk forms—epics, lyrics, proverbs, riddles, and questionings, together with various beliefs and legends that embody an animistic sense of the world—is no longer taken "literally," but metaphorically, and it is not imitated or even parodied but freely used for the expression of the poets' sense of history and the personal human drama in it. A modern sense of the cruel absurdities of history, which assumes that its "meaning" and "significance," what people read into it, are political and social frauds, is reflected in the poetry of such different writers as Miroslav Krleža and Matija Bećković. Krleža is certainly the most sophisticated and perhaps the greatest Croatian writer of the century, and in his masterpiece, the *Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh* (1935-36), he uses the local kajkavian dialect and the mask of a wise village idiot for a grotesque evocation of great peasant revolts of the sixteenth century when Matija Gubec, "the first emperor of rascals," was actually crowned with burning iron in Zagreb (1573).[8] In the introductory poem, "Petrica and the Gallows Birds," Petrica sings in his rich folk idiom a humorous song about the peasants' "wounds, tears, and punishments of blood," about "crushed knees, broken ankles, / Tithes in the skull," and the fate of three

[8] As he came to be called in one of the aristocratic invectives against the peasant revolts. This pamphlet had the form of a nobleman's edict purporting to be issued in 1713 by Matija Gubec, "the first emperor of rascals."

peasant rogues, swinging to the rhythm of his tambour on the gallows, while "bishops like blabbering parrots" pray "for a blessing from the Chains" (Krleža 1956:11). This grotesque exposure of what law, order, morality, church, and state were about for those who did not share the upper-class morphology of their interpretation is expressed in a rich interplay of folk music and idiom with German and Latin phrases, often in idiotic aphorisms in which all the assumptions of upper-class syntax and semantics are exposed by a sly peasant wit.

In an equally sophisticated way Matija Bećković uses diverse folk forms in his collection of quasi-epic poems, *Someone Told Me* (1970). Bećković's language is also a very local dialect, spoken, if we can trust his explanatory note, in the Montenegrin village of Velje Duboko, "the ancient resort of outlaws and fugitives," which "had seen enemies' heads, but never their feet" (163). The poems are set in postwar times, and the disappearing old heroic ways of life are apparently ridiculed by the poet, tongue in cheek, from an ultra-progressive modern point of view. Instead of the outlaws, there are police agents, and their life is hardly any easier: "It is not easy to be a spy anywhere, / Especially where there are no secrets" (95). And instead of the old-fashioned meaningful tragedy of Njegoš's Bishop Danilo, who felt that above him "the skies" were "closed," refusing his "tears and prayers" (Banašević 1973:ll. 39-40), Bećković's modern hero lives in meaningless chaos and feels that "the skies above him never sober up" (65).

Diverse forms of folk heritage are also interwoven into the surrealist and paradoxical patterns of many modern poets, including such major names as Momčilo Nastasijević, Branko Miljković, and Vasko Popa. In this sense Edward D. Goy pointed out that Nastasijević was "the first to use rather than to imitate folk poetry" (1969:13-14), and his poetic credo "to be the fetishist of all things" (8) brings us to the heart of this matter. Thus in the first cadence of his lyrical cycle, "Silences," his urban shriek for dumbness is voiced, as Goy remarked, in a typical folk vocative: "Be calm / my too heavy heart / change stony me into stone / O silent rock" (Mihajlović 1971:85). Of course, not only the vocative form but the whole idea of being changed into stone has the distinct imprint of ancient folk beliefs. And surrealist semantic patterns are also haunted by the folk syntax of proverbs and riddles in many of his other poems as, for instance, in his vision of urban love: "You are a cure / And I suffer you alone" (88). Similarly, the personal drama of urban loneliness lives in Miljković's poem "The Pipe," in which a traditional folk image illuminates modern metropolitan horizons: "Falconers are weeping under the empty skies"

(Miljković 1972:107). If the image is strikingly like Yeats' view of the "falcon" that "cannot hear the falconer" in "The Second Coming" (1961:210), the comparison is interesting primarily because it points to an almost identical creative predicament in which a major modern poet succeeds in harnessing the traditional folk heritage for his own avant-garde purposes.

The richest illustration of this creative destiny is found in the poetry of Vasko Popa, which not only is distinguished by its aura of folk heritage but thrives on a strange imaginative collapse and revival of old legends and myths. So, for instance, in his collection of poems *Earth Erect* (1972), the title refers to Serbia and its history, to the legends and the epic awareness of what it was about and what it can mean to a living, modern poetic sensibility. In the first cycle of these poems, "Pilgrimage," we are faced with old Serbian monasteries—a traditional subject in folk epic poetry—to which the poet makes his journey in search of his own roots and identity: "I go with my father's staff in my hand / My burning heart on the staff" (13). The image radiates the mystery of a religious emblem as much as it expresses a modern restlessness. It is, as Ted Hughes put it, one of the "solid hieroglyphic objects, meaningful in a direct way, simultaneously solid and spiritual, plain-statement and visionary" (Popa 1972:note on cover). In a similar way the monasteries themselves come alive; Žiča is not addressed as a building but as an animate being: "You stride towards your heights / And high love / In the only possible direction" (16). And most of the other poems in this collection also embody a restless quest. Thus a quotation from a Serbian folk song—"In vain I went a pilgrim / To St. Sava's spring"—is used as a motto in the cycle "St. Sava's Spring." And when the old belief in the miraculous powers of this saint is invoked, the invocation defines what the poet is seeking in the past (23):

> To wash in this water
> Heals all pain of death
> To drink of this water
> All pain of life.

The image is deeply rooted in the folk sense of miraculous healing powers, but it lives as a metaphor of an actual belief that has been lost. The attempt is not perhaps quite unlike T. S. Eliot's use of Christian symbols in *Four Quartets*, but instead of Eliot's cosmopolitanism, we are faced here with the patterns of language and associations deeply rooted in their own soil. For a poet this need not be a disadvantage.

Finally, what is it that makes the folk patterns so miraculously

persistent and recurrent in the cultural and literary history of Serbs and Croats—from the illicit medieval love affairs of folk and literary traditions to their strange marriage in the works of Mažuranić and Njegoš, their fruitful quarrels in the mock-heroic literary works, and, last but not least, their restless union in the modern metaphorical explorations of the possibilities of language and its historical memories? There is, of course, the intrinsic value and excitement of the epic understanding of history and the lyrical exploration of human possibilities in folk poetry. There is also the fascination of paradox and enduring wisdom in proverbs and riddles, in curses and blessings, in the ancient cries of grief and joy. But as our greatest twentieth-century writer Ivo Andrić put it (1977b:196), "the folk wisdom of ancient sayings and verses... is the cruel *fata morgana* of our consciousness," and his works are certainly the greatest literary monument to this belief (Koljević 1982b). And it is perhaps appropriate to remember what he said about them in Stockholm (1977a:25): "in the second half of my life I came to the conclusion that it is in vain and mistaken to search for meaning in the senseless, but seemingly so important, events taking place around us, but that one should seek for it in the layers that the centuries build up around the few main legends of humanity." These "layers constantly, *if ever less faithfully*, reproduce the shape of the grain of truth around which they gather" (emphasis mine); therefore, "[in] fairy tales" lies "the true history of mankind" (25). At the same time the interplay of folk and literary culture is also a sign of a living union of the imagination with ages past and vanished people, who live on in the heritage of language. "The idea that underlies this," to use Pasternak's words about Christ's parables (1958:42), "is that communication between mortals is immortal, and that the whole of life is symbolic because it is meaningful."

University of Sarajevo

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