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Subverted Epic Oral Tradition in South Slavic Written Literatures, 16th–19th Centuries

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Considering the importance of Irish folklore in W. B. Yeats's work, it does not come as a surprise that this poet was among the first to recognize how much written literature owes oral tradition. In a literary "causerie" published in the *Speaker* in 1893, Yeats noted that,

Folk-lore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine Articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, and well-nigh all the great poets lived by its light. Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and even Dante, Goethe, and Keats, were little more than folk-lorists with musical tongues.¹

The presence of folkloric elements—as well as the fascination by "primitive" modes of expression—can be detected within the most diverse literary trends and periods. Thus, in the first edition of *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, Stith Thomson discovered twenty-eight folkloric motifs in fifty-eight stories from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In the second edition of Thomson's book, however, there was an increase in both the number of motifs and the number of the stories in which they appear: 128 motifs in eighty-nine stories.² Although—with a few exceptions, including the *Miller's Tale*—the sources of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have been established as literary, some researchers insist that "folkloric analogies" exist in twenty-two out of twenty-eight stories included in the collection.³ According to John Ashton, even the plays of Ben Jonson—despite the playwright's strong classicistic inclinations—

¹ W. B. Yeats, "The Message of the Folk-lorist," in *Uncollected Prose by W.B. Yeats I*, ed. John P. Frayne (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 284.

² A. Baudoux-Spinette, "Les motifs folkloresques dans le *Decameron*," in Gilbert Tournouy, ed., *Boccaccio in Europe* (Leuven: Lueven University Press, 1977), 4.

³ F. L. Utley, "Some Implications of Chaucer's Folktales," in Georgios A. Megas, ed., *IV International Congress for Folk Narrative Research in Athens*, September 1–6, 1964 (Athens: [s.n.], 1965), 588.

show that “the native folklore contributed to the creative idea and pattern” in his work as well. As for Shakespeare, Ashton insists that “hardly one of his plays is without some fairly clear reflection of some kind of folklore.”⁴ This interest in folk tradition became especially apparent during the period of Romanticism as a number of national medieval epics were discovered in the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century: *Die Niebelungen* in Germany (1784), *Slovo o polku Igorovu* in Russia (1800), *Beowulf* in England (1815), or *La chanson de Roland* in France (1837). In an effort to establish their own national identity and, in some cases, independent national states, smaller nations like the Finns, the Irish, and the Serbs also turned to their oral epics: *Kalevala* (1835, 1849), *Irish Popular Songs* (1847), and *Srpske narodne pjesme* (1841–62). As testified by the works of James Joyce and William Faulkner, the fascination by the “primitive” and “traditional” continued well into the twentieth century.

Considering the enormity of oral production among the South Slavs, it is not surprising that writers in the Balkans were among the first—if not *the first*—to utilize the creative potential inherent in the dialogue between oral and written tradition. However, in light of recent critical focus on intertextuality, as well as the possibilities that arise from the manipulation of various literary discourses, the role of folkloric elements embedded in works of written literature seems to be particularly interesting in those cases in which oral epic becomes subverted. This paper will discuss a few important works which illustrate this process, belonging to older literary periods, from Croatian Renaissance to Serbian Realism.

Renaissance: Petar Hektorović

The first example of incorporating folk songs into a literary text in South Slavic literatures can be found in the work of the sixteenth-century nobleman from the Dalmatian island of Hvar, Petar Hektorović (1487–1572). His *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* (Fishing and Fishermen’s Conversation, Venice 1558) deals with a three-day fishing trip to Brač and Šolta, which he probably took in 1555, accompanied by two local fishermen, Paskoj Debelja and Nikola Zet, who entertained their master by telling stories, solving riddles, discussing various topics, and, on four occasions, singing songs. Two of these, “Marko Kraljević i brat mu Andrijaš” (Marko the Prince and His Brother Andrijaš) and “Vojvoda Radosav Siverinski i Vlatko Udinski” (Duke Radosav of Severin and Vlatko of Vidin)—performed in the “Serbian man-

⁴ J. W. Ashton, “Folklore in the Literature of Elizabethan England,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 70 (1957): 12.

ner”⁵—are heroic songs of the *bugarštica* type (“the long-line ballad”), probably much older and of different social and cultural origin than the songs of the more common *deseterac* type (“the decasyllabic line”), which are characteristic of Vuk Karadžić’s nineteenth-century collections of epic poetry and some earlier, eighteenth-century manuscripts from Slavonia and Dalmatia. As a matter of fact, these two *bugaršticas* may well be the first published folk songs in all of European literary tradition,⁶ not counting the fragment of an even older *bugarštica*, recorded by the Napolitan court poet Rogeri di Pacientia in 1497, which, however, remained in manuscript form.⁷

In this way, *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* offers an interesting early example of the cohabitation of “high” and “low” culture in Croatian literature. The narrative framework is established through Hektorović’s account of the trip—it consists of a number of vivid, realistic descriptions of the seascape and the fishing. However, nine interpolated “eclogues” present an equally important part of the poem. Significantly enough, only one of them deals with Hektorović’s own reflections on various religious and philosophical subjects, while the remaining eight belong to Paskoj and Nikola and contain numerous folkloric elements, including the two *bugaršticas*. So the “fishing” and the “fishermen’s conversation” sections consist of 866 and 818 lines respectively. In this way, the story combining the two juxtaposed literary discourses is almost evenly distributed between the characters who personify the same division, as the sophisticated, educated nobleman is contrasted to his two simple fishermen. This thematic/structural point-counter-point can be observed at the formal level as well—while Hektorović utilizes doubly-rhymed, twelve-syllable lines characteristic of Croatian Renaissance poetry in order to establish his narrative “frame,” Paskoj and Nikola sing their *bugaršticas* in the traditional folk meter, using twelve to sixteen-syllable non-rhymed lines, grouped in five to six-line stanzas followed by short, four to six-syllable refrains.

The composite nature of Hektorović’s poem sparked and interesting controversy regarding the role and function of folkloric elements in it. According to Josip Torbarina, due to the inclusion of the nine “eclogues” *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* is in many ways similar to Italian *eclogua piscatoria*, a literary genre that Jacopo Sannazaro, the author of the first pastoral novel *Arcadia*, created and developed some fifty years before Hektorović. Pointing

⁵ P. Hektorović, “Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje,” in *Hanibal Luci—Petar Hektorović*, Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti, vol. 7, ed. Marin Franičević (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska/Zora, 1968), 187.

⁶ J. Torbarina, “Hektorovićevo ‘Ribanje’ u kontekstu evropske književne tradicije,” in *Zbornik radova o Petru Hektoroviću*, ed. Jakša Ravlić, in the special issue of *Kritika* 6 (1970): 218.

⁷ S. Koljević, *The Epic in the Making* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 27–28.

out that Hektorović is not “a conscious imitator,” Torbarina still insists that “certain paragraphs from his *Ribanje* [...] are obviously based on similar paragraphs from the works of Italian piscatory and pastoral tradition.”⁸ He quotes a few lines from the introduction to eclogue no. 10 by Hektorović’s contemporary, Italian poet Bernardino Rota (1509–75), in which “the fishermen Nigello and Dami challenge each other to a singing contest and suggest the prize that the winner should receive. In front of Timeta, they compete in solving riddles.” According to Torbarina, an equivalent situation can be discovered in *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* in the scene in which, in Hektorović’s presence, Paskoj offers Nikola a “cup of red Muscat” if he solves his riddle.⁹ Although Torbarina claims that the close analysis of the poem does not yield a single line that Hektorović directly adopted or “translated” from an Italian source, the interpolation of the two *bugaršticas* as well as other folkloric elements could be interpreted as an effort on Hektorović’s part to enhance the description of his fishing trip by using methods typical of the Renaissance piscatory eclogue—perhaps in order to confer some refinement onto his otherwise uncouth Croatian fishermen.

On the other hand, Ramiro Bujas, the editor of the critical edition of Hektorović’s poem, insists that *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* is a strikingly original work, which cannot be classified as belonging to any of the known Renaissance literary genres. He claims that there is “nowhere to be found anything even remotely similar to *Ribanje*. This poem has no precedent—it is unique.”¹⁰ Frano Čale furthers the claim that *Ribanje* is a *sui generis* product of Croatian literature, stating that there is nothing “foreign,” i.e., Italian about it. In Čale’s opinion, Hektorović was primarily influenced by Croatian authors of patriotic orientation—“Marulić’s moral and Christian philosophy and his attitude towards the rampaging Turks, [...] Pribojević’s Pan-Slavism and his admiration for Dalmatian mental and moral adroitness, and Šišgorić’s love of folk poetry.” After all, Hektorović was himself an ardent Croatian patriot, and his patriotism was kept alive by constant Turkish threat against his home-island of Hvar—some fifteen years prior to the fishing trip he had barely survived a Turkish assault on the island and had had to spend a year in Italy as a refugee. Consequently, Čale insists that *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* is “deeply rooted in domestic soil” as a “humble yet authentic expression of an

⁸ Torbarina, 214, 213.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁰ R. Bujas, “Predgovor,” in Petar Hektorović, *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje*, (Zagreb: Jadranski institut JAZU, 1951), 13.

independent literary tradition.”¹¹ In his view, the two *bugaršticas* play a crucial role in bringing together all these “local” elements, thus contributing to the “unity of inspiration” in Hektorović’s poem.¹²

In light of this controversy, it is interesting to consider Hektorović’s own explanation of the presence of the folkloric elements in *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje*. In a letter to Mikša Pelegrinović, dated October 20, 1557, Hektorović actually expresses concern that his friend might find the incorporation of several popular songs into his poem awkward: “You may wonder why I included the songs that other people are familiar with and know how to sing rather than some *bugaršticas* of my own making.” The reason was simple—Hektorović had always “cared for truth in everything.”¹³ Although somewhat unusual, this explanation indirectly confirms Bujas’ view regarding the essential quality of Hektorović’s work. Namely, Bujas argues that *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* has no “precedent” in Renaissance literature due to its “realism.” This quality, however, reflects what today we call a journalistic rather than a literary mindset—in Bujas’ words, Hektorović prefers “reporting to fantasizing.”¹⁴ The Pelegrinović letter contains more details which confirm that this was what Hektorović actually had in mind. Worried that his audience “might realize that [the *bugaršticas* ‘of his own making’] are actually products of imagination and consequently false”—which might lead them to “conclude that everything else [in *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje*] is imaginative and false”—Hektorović made a conscious effort to convince his readers that what he wrote was actually *true* and *real*. This is why the *bugaršticas* proved to be so instrumental—like most of his compatriots, Hektorović still considered these epic folk songs to be based on historical facts. As he put it, “All of us who speak the [Croatian] language believe that, unlike tales and many other poems, *bugaršticas* describe events that truly happened.”¹⁵

This belief in the historicity of heroic songs was not typical just of Hektorović’s time—it survived well into the twentieth century. Matija Murko, who was the first to ever make sound recordings of epic singing performances in the Balkans, reports that, during his several trips to Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro (1909–32), he often came across singers who were shocked

¹¹ F. Čale, “O jedinstvu nadahnuća u ‘Ribanju i ribarskom prigovaranju,’” in *Zbornik radova o Petru Hektoroviću*, ed. Jakša Ravlić, in the special issue of *Kritika* 6 (1970): 97.

¹² *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³ P. Hektorović, “Poštovanomu gospodinu Mikši Pelegrinoviću,” in *Hanibal Lucić—Petar Hektorović*, Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti, vol. 7, ed. Marin Franičević (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska/Zora, 1968), 224–25.

¹⁴ Bujas, 12.

¹⁵ Hektorović, “Poštovanomu gospodinu Mikši Pelegrinoviću,” 225.

to learn that their songs were not true to history. Such was the case of the Muslim singer Arif Hajdarović from Dobrun, Bosnia, who, during World War I, was evacuated to the north-west part of the country. There he was deeply disturbed by the realization that the field near the west-Bosnian town of Kladuša was “incomparably smaller” than its epic equivalent he had described in his songs, and that it was “without golden water-fountains and other epic paraphernalia.” His Serbian colleague Ljubisav Grujić from Loznica went even further—having read in a book that Kraljević Marko was indeed a Turkish vassal, he started to “hate the greatest South Slavic national hero and refused to sing about him anymore.”¹⁶

Since Hektorović shared almost identical views on heroic oral poetry and included the two *bugaršticas* in his *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje* in order to produce an essentially “realistic” effect, his poem may be seen as the first work that offers an example of manipulation—if not outright “subversion”—of the elements that belong to epic oral tradition in South Slavic literatures. In this regard, the ambiguous compliment that Mihovil Kombol paid Hektorović in his seminal *History of Croatian Literature* simply shows how much our understanding of epic poetry has changed over time. *Ribanje i ribarsko prigovaranje*, Kombol says, “is certainly not devoid of poetry.” The problem is, however, that “poetry” is not to be found in Hektorović’s own descriptive and didactic passages but “in the *bugarštica* about Marko Kraljević and his brother, and—to a smaller extent—in the poem about Radosav of Severin.”¹⁷

The Age of Enlightenment: Andrija Kačić Miošić

No critical controversy, however, surrounds the work of Hektorović’s compatriot, the learned Franciscan monk Andrija Kačić Miošić (1704–60), who—more than 200 years later—wrote a history book disguised as a collection of poems entitled *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* (A Pleasant Discourse about the Slavic People, Venice 1756). This work became so popular that a second, much enlarged edition followed as soon as 1759. Since the popularity of the book continued to grow, Kačić planned a third edition, but died before he could produce it. In addition to all Croatian lands and the western parts of Slovenia, in the northwest the book soon found its way to Bohemia and Slovakia. In the southeast, via Serbia and Macedonia, it reached as far as Mt. Athos. This happened no later than a year or two after the publication of its

¹⁶ M. Murko, “Geografija i historija u narodnim epskim pjesmama,” in *Ka poetici narodnog pesništva*, ed. Svetozar Koljević (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1982), 311.

¹⁷ M. Kombol, *Povijest hrvatske književnostido preporoda* (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, 1961), 137.

second edition.¹⁸ By way of the so-called *Zograph History*, composed by an anonymous monk from Mt. Athos, some passages from Kačić's book became available to Father Paisii from the monastery of Hilandar, who incorporated them into his *Istorija slavenobolgarskaja* (Slavo-Bulgarian History, 1762). Thus, according to Jakša Ravlić, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* became "the most popular and widely spread book by a Croatian author ever."¹⁹

As if anticipating the "Yugoslav" spirit of Ljudevit Gaj's Illyrian Movement, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* does not deal with the history of only one South Slavic nation, i.e., the Croats. Without any religious or ethnic bias, it includes Serbs, Bulgarians, and even non-Slavic Albanians, who also had to deal with foreign oppressors. Like most of his literary predecessors, Kačić mostly targets the Turks. As for the Venetians, he avoids to openly criticize their presence on the eastern Adriatic coast, occasionally even commending the Doge for the "peaceful and heaven-like conditions" the Venetians "created" in Dalmatia.²⁰ Considering the tragic fate of his fellow Franciscan from the Zaoštrog monastery, Filip Grabovac—who was imprisoned for the political and cultural opposition to Venice, which he expressed in a book that directly inspired Kačić to write *Razgovor ugodni*, and who died in exile just a few years before—the selectiveness of Kačić's criticism of foreign rulers can perhaps be understood, if not quite morally appreciated.

Kačić's purpose was thus both patriotic and pedagogical. A typical representative of the Croatian Age of Enlightenment, a philosopher and educator who spent more than twenty years in classroom working with generations of young monks and laymen, his main goal was to teach his compatriots about their once glorious past and thus hint at the possibility of a not too distant bright future. As he put it, he composed his book hoping that "the knights and warriors of our own time will look into these pages like in a mirror and see the brave campaigns and famous feats of their grandfathers and grand-grandfathers; then, emboldened, they will freely follow their ancestors' example and confront our common enemy once again."²¹ He also emphasized that the

¹⁸ A. Kadić, "The Importance of Kačić-Miošić," *Slavonic and East European Journal* 16 (1958): 112.

¹⁹ J. Ravlić, "Andrija Kačić Miošić," in Andrija Kačić Miošić, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga/Korabljica*, Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti, vol. 21, ed. Jakša Ravlić (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska/Zora, 1967), 14.

²⁰ A. Kačić Miošić, "Pripoljubljenom štociu," in Andrija Kačić Miošić, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga/Korabljica*, Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti, vol. 21, ed. Jakša Ravlić (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska/Zora, 1967), 29.

²¹ A. Kačić Miošić, "Bratu štociu," in Andrija Kačić Miošić, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga/Korabljica*, Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti, vol. 21, ed. Jakša Ravlić (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska/Zora, 1967), 33.

book was intended for “the poor Slavic farmers and shepherds,”²² who, due to the lack of education, did not “speak any other language but Slavic” and consequently could not consult foreign sources from which they could learn more about their national history.²³

It was with these goals in mind that Kačić decided to write in the way that would be most appealing to his audience—he used the form of a song-book rather than a history book, and utilized *deseterac*, the traditional line of Serbo-Croatian heroic oral poetry. Kačić was born in the village of Brist near Makarska, on the Adriatic coast where epic singing was still very much alive. As a monk, he was well acquainted with oral tradition—at that time, Franciscan monasteries in Dalmatia were “centers that attracted the most important disseminators of popular culture.”²⁴ He could also learn many popular songs from monks from other parts of the region, who often visited monasteries in which he served. Just like his fictitious bard “old Milovan,” who “traveled with his *gusle* from Skadar to Zadar and from Mostar to Kotari,”²⁵ Kačić himself spent summers traveling up and down the eastern Adriatic coast and through Bosnia, “visiting Korčula, Dubrovnik, Kotor, as well as some Albanian regions farther south” where epic singing was still extremely popular, both in rural and urban communities.²⁶

And yet, echoing Hektorović’s words from the letter to Pelegrinović, in his prefatory note Kačić warns his reader not to look for “rhetoric or poetry” in his book. According to him, it does not contain any “ornamental, decorative embroidery” but only a “building erected on the firm foundations of truth, constructed from natural rocks that poor Milovan excavated from deep under the ground.”²⁷ Kačić decided to write history as poetry simply because, “in order to preserve the memories of the knights of old, our Lord endowed our people with the natural ability to sing about the same things that other nations put into their history books.” Although these popular songs were not “quite true,” each of them still contained “a good portion of truth.”²⁸ But since Kačić’s main goal was to give his readers a fully accurate historical account

²² Kačić Miošić, “Pripoljubljenom šticiu,” 29.

²³ A. Kačić Miošić, “Najposljednji razgovori starca Milovana s bratom šticiem,” in Andrija Kačić Miošić, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga/Korabljica*, Pet stoljeća hrvatske književnosti, vol. 21, ed. Jakša Ravlić (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska/Zora, 1967), 264.

²⁴ J. Ravlić, 12.

²⁵ Kačić, Miošić, “Pripoljubljenom šticiu,” 264.

²⁶ K. Eterović, *Fra Andrija Kačić Miošić na temelju novih istraživanja* (Dubrovnik: Knjižara Jadran, 1922), 32.

²⁷ Kačić Miošić, “Bratu šticiu,” 34.

²⁸ Kačić Miošić, “Pripoljubljenom šticiu,” 29.

of the past events—of the kind that existed only in “books”—writing his poems he always scrupulously consulted all available sources, various “Latin, Italian, and Croatian books,” individual historical documents, and “testimonies by old men, both clerics and laymen.”²⁹ Researchers have identified most of the sources he used, including Orbini’s *Il regno degli Slavi oggi corrotamente detti Schiavoni*, Bedeković’s *Natale solum*, Vitezović’s and Šilobadović’s chronicles,³⁰ as well as the works by Italian authors Barlezio, Sagredo, Brusoni, and others.³¹ Kačić obviously did whatever he could “to present the events the way they truly happened, or at least the way he believed they truly happened.”³²

Kačić’s method was simple—his “chronicle” is composed of “chapters” disguised as traditional epic songs. With the exception of basic formal elements—the decasyllabic line with a caesura between the fourth and fifth syllable and “formulaic” language—he rarely used ready-made folkloric material and only occasionally paraphrased parts from other well-known folk songs. One typical example of this kind is his “Pisma od strašnoga boja koji se učini na dan svete Justine” (The Song about the Fierce Battle Fought on St. Justina’s Day), in which he included several lines from the beginning of the famous “Hasanaginica” (The Wife of Asan-Aga).³³ However—unlike Hektorović—Kačić generally avoided incorporating original songs in his book, no matter how “historical” they may have been. This is why there are only three real folk songs included in the entire collection, out of forty one poems in the first edition and 137 in the second.³⁴ It is interesting to note that in the second edition Kačić in fact *corrected* several historical errors he discovered in one of these songs immediately after the book had been printed, although most critics agree that his insistence on historical accuracy was to the detriment of

²⁹ Kačić, Miošić, “Bratu štociu,” 33.

³⁰ Kombol, 363.

³¹ Ravlić, 14.

³² Kombol, 364.

³³ “Kad su bili ispod svete Mavre, / Govorio Dorija Principe: / *Što se bili gori u istoku, / Al’ su snizi, al’ su labudovi?* [...] Nit’ su snizi, nit’ si bile vile, / Nit’ je magla, nit’ su labudovi, / Ni popeti bili čadorovi; / Već su ono tuske ormanice” [emphasis mine]; see Andrija Kačić Miošić, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* (Zadar: Bratja Battara Tiskari Izdavatelji, 1851), 406. The italicized lines closely paraphrase the famous “Slavic antithesis” from the beginning of “The Wife of Asan-aga”: “Šta se b’jeli u gori zelenoj? / Al’ je snijeg, al’ su labudovi? / [...] Nit’ je snijeg, nit’ su labudovi, / Nego šator age Hasan-age”; see *Monumenta serbocroatica*, ed. Thomas Butler (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1980), 418.

³⁴ These three original songs are “Pisma od grada Zadvarja,” “Slide pisme vojvode Janka koje općenito pivaju Dalmatini, Bošnjaci, Ličani,” and “Pisma od Sekule, Jankova nećaka, divojke Dragomana.”

poetry.³⁵ Kačić, however, did not seem to care—after all, he never saw himself as a poet.

And yet, a poet he was even in spite of himself. It is true that *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* greatly influenced the understanding of national history among common people in the Balkans in the eighteenth century and that “some distinguished individuals from Balkan history, like George trioti Skenderbey, became extremely popular due to his work.”³⁶ However, Kačić’s collection was first and foremost accepted and cherished as a song-book, not a history book, and today he is considered a great national bard rather than an obscure historian.³⁷ Even the usually skeptical Kombol admitted that “Kačić was not completely lacking in poetic imagination.”³⁸ It is somewhat ironic that this humble Franciscan monk, a trained philosopher turned an amateur historian, was the first Croatian writer whose poems entered a foreign anthology and were translated into Italian, German, and French. The learned Italian abbot Alberto Fortis included one of Kačić’s poetical-historical compositions, translated as “Canto di Milos Cobilich e di Vuko Brankovich,” into his *Saggio d’osservazioni* (Venice, 1771) as a typical example of a “Morlacchian” traditional song. A year later, Fortis sent an Italian translation of two more Kačić’s poems dealing with John Hunyadi to John Strange, the English consul in Venice, still thinking they were folk songs.³⁹ One hundred and fifty years later, Matija Murko made the same mistake. While conducting field research around Makarska in 1925, he took some of Kačić’s poems that were still sung by the locals to be folk originals.⁴⁰ This is why it is impossible to say whether Kačić was the first Croatian writer who successfully subverted oral tradition in his “history book” or was it oral tradition that eventually subverted his original historiographic and educational intentions.

³⁵ The two versions of the song entitled “Pisma od grada Zadvarja,” the original and the “improved” one, are published in Andrija Kačić Miošić, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga/Korabljica*, 241–43; 292–93.

³⁶ Kombol, 363.

³⁷ Kačić popularity has not seemed to wane in Dalmatia as yet. My family used to rent a house in the fishing village of Podaca in the late 1980’s, owned by one Tomislav Rogulj (one of his ancestor, Matija Rogulj, was Kačić’s contemporary and is mentioned in a Zaoštrog monastery chronicle from 1750’s [see Eterović 1923, 61]). Kačić’s *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* had the place of honor in the bookcase that we found in the house.

³⁸ Kombol, 365.

³⁹ Kadić, 113.

⁴⁰ Ravlić, 14.

Romanticism: Petar Petrović Njegoš

In *Gorski vijenac* (The Mountain Wreath, 1847), Petar Petrović Njegoš, the Bishop-Prince of Montenegro and Serbian most distinguished poet (1813–51), shows the same concern for national well-being and indebtedness to oral tradition as his Croatian counterparts. This long dramatic poem of over 2800 lines was composed in 1846, when first draught and then famine hit Montenegro so hard that its ruler had to leave for Vienna to raise money to buy food for his people. The situation was desperate, there were many cases of religious and national apostasy, and Njegoš had to act quickly and decisively in order “to preserve the recently organized state from disintegrating.”⁴¹ These circumstances may have influenced the choice of a historical and patriotic topic for his poem.

Looking for an appropriate subject matter, Njegoš focused on an event that apparently took place a century and a half before, when Montenegro was ruled by Bishop Danilo, the founder of the Petrović dynasty. According to popular lore, Danilo decided to destroy local Muslim converts, whose presence at the time threatened the internal stability of the country, which—due to the inaccessibility of its mountainous terrain and the readiness of its Christian majority to defend it—was never fully conquered by the invading Turks. Thus the situation Njegoš had to deal with in 1846 somewhat resembled the circumstances in which Danilo found himself at the end of the seventeenth century.⁴²

However, the factual basis of this historical event—usually referred to as “the extermination of converts”—has been repeatedly called into question by several scholars. The French Slavacist Michel Aubin points out that “not a single contemporary historical document has been found which confirms that the ‘extermination’ actually took place.” The first printed source that mentions it is dated “around the end of the 1820’s,” while “the presence of Muslim Slavs in Montenegro is fully documented in the first half of the eighteenth

⁴¹ V. Latković, “Predgovor,” in Petar Petrović Njegoš, *Gorski vijenac* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1963), 5.

⁴² In addition to ideological, religious, and patriotic goals that may have led Njegoš to select this particular topic, some critics speculate about the possibility of foreign literary influences, particularly of Schiller’s *William Tell*, which tells the story of “a small nation of people who live high up in the mountains and liberate themselves from the oppression of those who represent a powerful empire.” Schiller’s work also mentions a conspiracy to massacre political opponents on Christmas Eve. According to Michel Aubin, Njegoš’s tutor Sima Milutinović Sarajlija must have been familiar with Schiller’s work (see Oben [Aubin] 1989, 188).

century, long after the death of Bishop Danilo.”⁴³ Vido Latković, a leading Serbian expert on Njegoš, is equally suspicious regarding the authenticity of the sole surviving piece of “original” evidence that deals with the “extermination,” a short note by Bishop Danilo published as late as 1863.⁴⁴ This is why the mystery of what—if anything—really happened to the Montenegrin converts will probably remain unsolved.

Njegoš first came across a very crude description of this event in a song called “Srpski Badnji večer” (Serbian Christmas Eve), which his tutor, the poet Sima Milutinović Sarajlija, included in the collection of traditional epic poetry entitled *Pjevanija crnogorska i hercegovačka* (Songs from Montenegro and Herzegovina, 1833). Once he discovered a convenient topic, Njegoš decided to address it in the traditional manner of oral epic poetry, using *deseterac*, fixed epithets, epic formulae, allusions to characteristic Serbian heroic motifs and characters, as well as cultural patterns typical of patriarchal society and thus of the South Slavic folk poetry at large.⁴⁵

As a Montenegrin, Njegoš had had a first-hand knowledge and deep understanding of heroic oral epic since his childhood. To the great enjoyment of his peers at the Cetinje Monastery, as a boy of twelve he used to compose mock-heroic songs in the “folksy” manner, so funny that his uncle the Bishop—who otherwise did not approve of these poetic exercises—could not help laughing behind the closed door of his cell. It is interesting that Milutinović’s collection *Pjevanija crnogorska i hercegovačka*—in addition to original folk songs—also contains five poems composed by Njegoš, which hardly differ from their traditional models: “Mali Radojica” (Little Radojica) has only a few uncharacteristic, non-traditional stylistic elements, “Nova pjesna crnogorska o vojni Rusah i Turakah u 1828 godu” (New Montenegrin Song about the Russo-Turkish War in 1828) resembles Kačić’s compositions insofar as it deals with history disguised as poetry, while “Boj na Martiniće,” “Bjelice,” and “Kavajka” (The Attack on the Martinići, The Bjelicas, The City of Kavaja), are practically indistinguishable from any other local folk song that deals with fighting against the Turks. There are indications that

⁴³ M. Oben, *Njegoš i istorija u pesnikovom delu*, tr. by Živojin Živojinović (Belgrade: Književne novine, 1989), 184.

⁴⁴ Latković, 8–9.

⁴⁵ For example, in *Gorski vijenac* one can find numerous references to the central event of Serbian medieval history and epic poetry, the battle of Kosovo, as well as to the historical and imaginary characters from some of the most popular Serbian epic songs: Miloš Obilić, Banović Strahinja, Relja Krilati, Duke Momčilo, Stojan Janković, Starina Novak, Bajo Pivljanin, etc. As for the cultural patterns and modes of behavior, the poem contains several examples of the sacredness of the bond between human society and the natural world, the relationship that is central for such songs as “Marko Kraljević i soko” (Marko the Prince and the Hawk).

Njegoš used traditional meter of folk poetry in his first more ambitious poem, *Glas kamenštaka* (The Voice of the People from the Craggy Land, 1833), as well.⁴⁶ As a matter of fact, he never fully abandoned that practice during his poetic career.

This is probably why in Serbian literary criticism *Gorski vijenac* has been traditionally taken to represent “the ultimate accomplishment of heroic poetry, the idealized version of historical tribal identity, and the expression of powerful experience of the collective, communal beauty that produced it.”⁴⁷ Some critics go even further, insisting that Njegoš simply “codified traditional folk elements” in his poem, acting no differently from a *guslar*, “who does not create new motifs but arranges the existing ones around a new topic”—the method virtually identical to the one Njegoš used in the five poems from Milutinović’s *Pjevanija*. In this extreme view, *Gorski vijenac* should not be approached as a piece of written literature, composed by an individual poet—it is “a work that belongs to oral tradition.”⁴⁸ One should point out that, no matter how radical, this critical opinion is not isolated. Some of the best and most perceptive Serbian critics from the first half of the twentieth century, such as Pavle Popović, Isidora Sekulić, and Milan Bogdanović, seem to have at least partly agreed with it.⁴⁹

And yet, as some scholars have recently pointed out, *Gorski vijenac* could also be interpreted as a work that shares no essential similarities with a heroic epic, despite the numerous formal elements it contains. According to Svetozar Koljević, probably the most convincing proponent of this view, one of the basic suppositions of the epic mode is the unity of moral purpose and heroic action. This means that epic heroes—immersed in their epic environment—embrace the fundamental principles of the “heroic age” so fully that they actually never ask themselves “if their action is morally justified.”⁵⁰ *The Iliad* would simply not exist if Greeks and Trojans were bothered by such moral “trivialities.” This is why Koljević insists that *Gorski vijenac* does not fit the traditional definition of an epic as a “narrative poem, on a grand scale, about

⁴⁶ We know about this work only indirectly, through an Italian prose translation, done for the Austrian censor who eventually declined to publish it.

⁴⁷ M. Pavlović, “Njegoševa *Luča mikrokozma*,” in Miodrag Pavlović, *Eseji o srpskim pesnicima*, Izabrana dela, vol. III (Belgrade: Vuk Karadžić, 1981), 111.

⁴⁸ M. Pavićević, “*Gorski vijenac* kao narodno djelo,” *Etnolog* 20 (1937): 20.

⁴⁹ See, for example, P. Popović, *Iz književnosti*, ed. Đ. Gavella (Novi Sad/Belgrade: Matica srpska/Srpska književna zadruga, 1972), 183; I. Sekulić, “Prolog i epilog za knjigu o Vladići Radu,” *Pregled* 12/14 (1938): 334–36; M. Bogdanović, *Kritike*, ed. Z. Gavrilović (Novi Sad/Belgrade: Matica srpska/Srpska književna zadruga, 1972), 37.

⁵⁰ S. Koljević, “Smrt epa u *Gorskom vijencu*,” *Letopis Matice srpske* 169/451 (1993): 812.

the deeds of warriors and heroes.” Unlike *The Iliad*, it does not describe heroic *action* but is in fact based on the dilemma “to act or not to act.” In the context of the poem, “the rift between the imperatives of personal morality and collective action becomes unbridgeable.”⁵¹ Consequently, the poem’s basic structural principle is not epic but dramatic, as it focuses on the “polarization between a group of individuals who think and are able to see (even though they may be blind, like Abbot Stephen) and those who ‘fear too much contemplation’ and consider the whole assembly as well as Bishop Danilo’s moral dilemmas as ‘cackling of some geese’.”⁵² This is why Bishop Danilo often resembles Hamlet, sharing the same sense of moral isolation, indecisiveness, and doubt. As a matter of fact, the poem opens with a Hamlet-like monologue in which Danilo expresses his desperation faced with the horror of the dilemma he has to resolve regarding the massacre of his converted compatriots:

What can I do? Who is there to help me?
 There are few hands and all too little strength.
 I’m a lone straw tossing in the whirlwind,
 a sad orphan without friend or kinfolk...
 My people sleep a deep and lifeless sleep;
 no parent’s hand to wipe away my tears.
 Above my head the heaven is shut tight;
 it does not hear my cries or my prayers.
 The world has now become a hell for me,
 People have turned into hellish spirits.⁵³

Despite the heroic *deseterac* that Njegoš uses throughout *Gorski vijenac*, these are certainly not the words of a typical warrior-hero of South Slavic epic poetry. As a matter of fact, due to this Shakespearean twist, “the main characters Bishop Danilo and Abbot Stephen acquire strong reflexive, anti-epic characteristics, while their heroic tribesmen are shown in ironic light.”⁵⁴ The split between an active, “heroic” take on life and a passive, “metaphysical” attitude—so uncharacteristic of Homeric epic—Koljević sees as the central imaginative quality of *Gorski vijenac*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 815.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ P. P. Njegoš, *The Mountain Wreath*, tr. by Vasa D. Mihailovich (Irvine, California: Charles Schilaks Jr., Publisher, 1986), ll. 33–42.

⁵⁴ Koljević, “Smrt epa u *Gorskom vijencu*,” 815.

And yet, we should not look for the explanation of such a bifurcation in Njegoš's conscious attempt at subverting epic tradition. Like Shakespeare's plays, whose renaissance understanding of man's puzzling complexity is paradoxically combined with a medieval view of the world in which everything is assigned to its fixed hierarchical place, Njegoš's poem also reflects a crossroads of cultural epochs. In this regard, *Gorski vijenac* announces "the death of epic and its spirit and vision, the end of the prevalence of morally unambiguous action."⁵⁵ Consequently, the poem marks the beginning of a modern age in which everything is relativized, while "paradox becomes the fundamental mode of literary expression." This is why Njegoš and Shakespeare look so similar to Koljević:

What the image of medieval cosmic order and universal hierarchy provided for Shakespeare, the moral clarity of South Slavic heroic oral poetry at its best provided for Njegoš, i.e., the faith and the sense of certainty that his powerful yet skeptical artistic imagination craved for, distraught by all the paradoxes of his personal and historical destiny.⁵⁶

If this interpretation is valid, Njegoš the poet lacks what Gerhard Gesemann sees as the *sine qua non* of authentic epic singing. Despite his background and firm grasp on tradition, Njegoš was not part and parcel of the "heroic-patriarchal environment" which was fully permeated with the "delayed spirit of the heroic age" and "patriarchal culture." According to Gesemann, only in such an environment can oral epic become the vehicle that "best expresses its essence," while "traditional morality and equally traditional form" are still the "inalienable parts of [the culture's] true self." In other words, "heroic songs are sung for heroes by heroes."⁵⁷ However, the heroic age was behind Njegoš and he was not able to revive it in his poems notwithstanding his enormous creative powers. In a word, Njegoš certainly knew how to play *gusle*, but he was not a true *guslar*.

Realism: Radoje Domanović

Contrary to Njegoš, Radoje Domanović (1873–1908) was not a transitional author—he was one of the most articulate representatives of modern, liberal

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 826.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 826–27.

⁵⁷ G. Gezeman, "Kompoziciona shema i herojsko-epska stilizacija," in *Ka poetici narodnog pesništva*, ed. Svetozar Koljević (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1982), 257.

aspirations in the late nineteenth-century Serbia. First a provincial high school teacher, then a Belgrade journalist, political activist, free-lance writer, bohemian, clerk in the Ministry of Education, and finally a text editor, at the beginning of his writing career Domanović followed the example of most of his literary contemporaries and tried his hand on short stories, which he wrote in the realist manner. However, his true creative gift was of a different kind. The oppressive regime of King Aleksandar Obrenović (1893–1903) and Domanović's unrelenting opposition to it helped bring that talent out, and he soon turned into "the most important satirist that Serbian literature has ever had."⁵⁸ Having discovered his true literary voice in the late 1890's, Domanović continued to attack state bureaucracy, opportunism, careerism, and the lack of professional and moral integrity in Serbian public life until his premature death in 1908.

Just like his irregular personal life, Domanović's satires also assumed a variety of different forms. Critics traditionally emphasize the quality of his satirical allegories and fantastic stories, but he also wrote satirical fables, feuilletons, literary parodies, pseudo-scholarly essays, as well as satirical poems in the manner of epic poetry, such as "Mitropolitova ženidba" (The Metropolitan's Marriage, 1905). As a son of a village teacher, Domanović grew up fully immersed in folk tradition and later developed a lifelong interest in Njegoš. Witty and eloquent, he was so familiar with Serbian epic songs that he "could almost improvise a speech on any subject using the folk *deseterac*."⁵⁹ In addition to that "technical" gift, Domanović also discovered the comic strain of Serbian folk tradition, which is usually centered on the Serbian national hero, Marko Kraljević. Njegoš was the first to explore this aspect of epic poetry in his *Gorski vijenac*; some of Domanović's literary predecessors or older contemporaries, like Branko Radičević or Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, followed in his suit.

It was the combination of Domanović's keen sense of social injustice, his ability to "manipulate" *deseterac* and other folkloric elements, and his awareness of comical potential inherent in Serbian epic poetry that resulted in some of the most caustic yet hilarious satires in Serbian literature. This is why one of the most noted Serbian literary critics of the older generation and Domanović's contemporary Bogdan Popović is only partly right when he sees Domanović as the Serbian equivalent to Swift, Voltaire, Rabelais, and Lukian.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ M. Pantić, "Radoje Domanović (1873–1908)," in Radoje Domanović, *Izabrana dela* (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1961), 23.

⁵⁹ Pantić, 9.

⁶⁰ B. Popović, "Alegorična satirična priča," in *Epoha realizma*. Srpska književnost u književnoj kritici, vol. 5, ed. Miodrag Protić (Belgrade: Nolit, 1966), 264.

Due to his indebtedness to epic poetry and his ability to manipulate its idiom, Domanović is probably closer to Alexander Pope, the English master of mock-heroic.

In Serbian folk songs that deal with Marko Kraljević, comic elements are usually found in the descriptions of his appearance and actions that do not quite fit a traditional epic hero. Unlike his “true” heroic counterpart, Miloš Obilić, Marko Kraljević is often shown as a trickster, sometimes even a clown.⁶¹ On the other hand, humor in *Gorski vijenac* is most often based on the juxtaposition of two different cultural contexts, as in the section in which Voivode Draško compares the heroic, “sublime” Montenegro with the prosaic, down-to-earth Venetian Republic. In one of his most popular satirical stories, “Marko Kraljević po drugi put među Srbima” (Marko Kraljević’s Second Life among the Serbs, 1901), Domanović combined these two approaches as he “resurrected” the central character of the Serbian folk epic five hundred years after his death and allowed him to return to Obrenović’s Serbia with the task of restoring the country’s past glory.

Comedy works on two levels in this satire. The first one is created through numerous quotes of and references to songs which feature Marko as an atypical epic hero,⁶² songs with comic elements in which Marko does not necessarily appear,⁶³ and other well-known songs from which Domanović borrows an occasional, easily recognizable line or epic formula.⁶⁴ The second level is based on the incongruity of two mutually antagonistic contexts—the

⁶¹ On Marko Kraljević and Miloš Obilić as representatives of “comic” and “epic” strain in Serbian oral poetry see Svetozar Koljević, “Kraljević Marko,” *Letopis Matice srpske* 148/409/4 (1972): 342–55 and Svetozar Koljević, *The Epic in the Making* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 177–202.

⁶² These references include such well-known songs as “Prince Marko and Musa the Highwayman,” “Prince Marko Drinks Wine at Ramadan,” “Prince Marko and the *Vila*,” “Prince Marko and Philip the Magyar,” “Prince Marko’s Death,” “Prince Marko in the Azak Prison,” “Marko Abolishes the Marriage Tax,” and “Marko and Mina of Kostur.” All these folk songs to which Domanović refers were published by Vuk Karadžić in *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. 2 (Vienna, 1845).

⁶³ Such are the songs “Stephen Dushan’s Wedding” which features the comic-heroic character of Miloš Vojnović who resembles Marko in many ways (compare Domanović, “Marko Kraljević po drugi put među Srbima,” in Radoje Domanović, *Izabrana dela* [Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1961], 88), and the song “The Wedding of King Vukašin,” which contains a few comic scenes as well (compare *ibid.*).

⁶⁴ Such is the famous line “I have no one to drink cold wine with me,” from the song “Banovich Strahinja” (compare Domanović, “Marko Kraljević po drugi put među Srbima,” 84) or the equally famous image of Duke Prijezda’s sword that “cuts through trees and through rocks, / through the wood, through the stone, through cold iron,” from the song “The Death of Duke Prijezda” (compare *ibid.*).

past/heroic vs. the present/prosaic one—which usually clash through the manifestations of some of their “linguistic” idiosyncrasies. This same method, the combination of highly “poetical” elements typical of oral epic and the dry, matter-of-fact “prosaic” style of journalistic writing, Domanović also used in many of his other satires. A scene in which Marko is interrogated by a police officer after he killed an innocent passer-by who rode a bicycle and thus confused and frightened Marko, unaccustomed to modern ways of traveling, gives a good example of the comical “misunderstanding” between the two temporarily and culturally exclusive contexts as well as their modes of “verbal expression”:

Police Officer: Where are you from?

Marko: *From white Prilep, from that city I am.*

[...]

Police Officer: Listen: Are you a clerk, a merchant, or a farmer?

Marko: *Though my father never was a farmer,
He was able, yet, to feed me daily!*⁶⁵

Formally speaking, Marko answers in *deseterac*, the characteristic decasyllabic line of South Slavic epic poetry, with a caesura after the fourth syllable. Describing his place of birth, he uses a phrase with a fixed epithet, yet another element typical of oral epic (*grada bijeloga*, “the white city [of Prilep]”). Finally, his second answer is a slightly modified quotation from the song “Ženidba Dušanova” (The Wedding of Dušan) in which yet another comical epic hero Miloš Voinović, not Marko Kraljević, insists on the superiority of cattle-raisers over farmers.⁶⁶

Apart from introducing all standard elements of the South Slavic epic idiom, meter, fixed epithets, epic formulae, motifs, and quotations from existing folk songs, Domanović discovers other possibilities of subverting epic discourse as well, thus distancing himself even further from writers like Hek-

⁶⁵ Due to the numerous stylistic features of *deseterac*, this excerpt should be also considered in the original:

“Odakle ste?”

“Iz Prilipa, grada bijeloga.”

[...]

“Pitam: jeste li činovnik, trgovac, ili radite zemlju?”

“Nije meni ni babo orao,

pak je mene hlebom othranio!”

(R. Domanović, “Marko Kraljević po drugi put među Srbima,” 88, emphasis mine.)

⁶⁶ V. St. Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. 2, ed. Vladan Nedić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1969), 108.

torović, Kačić, and Njegoš. In addition to occasionally inserting clearly recognizable *deseterac* lines or using “formulaic” language in paragraphs otherwise written in plain journalistic prose,⁶⁷ his most effective and original strategy for subverting traditional epic is the adoption of lines from well-known songs which he then slightly modifies by changing their metric structure. Reducing or expanding the number of syllables per line, Domanović thus transforms *deseterac* into ordinary non-rhythmical prose. In this way, the adopted lines lose their basic epic properties and “heroic” quality and turn into their own non-heroic, prosaic opposites, thus ridiculing the elevated epic style of the traditional songs to which they refer.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ See, for example, the scene in which Marko prepares to go after the bicyclist Petar Tomić (the *deseterac* parts are italicized while other characteristic epic formulae are underlined): “[Marko] popi još jedan legen vina i dođe krvav do očiju, *jedan dade Šarcu da popije*, pa onda vrže tuluminu u travu, *samur kapu namače na oči* i uzjaši Šarca, koji već beše od pića krvav do ušiju” (Domanović, “Marko Kraljević po drugi put među Srbima,” 82).

⁶⁸ Compare the scene in which Marko hits an inn keeper and knocks out his three teeth from “Marko Kraljević’s Second Life among the Serbs” (the “prosaic” references to the song are italicized): “Kad vide Marko onu malu čašu, bednu, ispljuskanu, pomisli da onaj zbija s njime šalu. Rasrdi se jako i *ošinu mehandžiju dlanom po obrazu*. Udario ga je tako lako *da mu je pomerio tri zdrava zuba*” (Domanović, “Marko Kraljević po drugi put među Srbima,” 83) with the scene in which Miloš Voinović hits an inn keeper from “Stephen Dushan’s Wedding”:

Mehandžija njemu odgovara;

“Id’ odatle, crni Bugarine!

“Da s’ donio Bugarsku kopanju,

“Ako bih ti i usuo vina;

“Za te nisu čaše pozlaćene.”

Pogleda ga Miloš poprijeko,

Udari ga rukom uz obraze,

Koliko ga lako udario,

Tri mu zuba u grlo sasuo.

(Karadžić, 109)

There is another reference to this episode, the scene in which Marko hits the wife of Philip the Magyar from “Prince Marko and Philip the Magyar”:

Udari je dlanom po obrazu,

Na ruci mu burma pozlaćena,

Načini joj ranu na obrazu

I tri zdrava pomjeri joj zuba.

(Karadžić, 253)

The quoted section from Domanović’s story contains another “prosaic” allusion to epic poetry, the phrase “udario ga je tako lako.” In its rhythmical form, this phrase appears in a number of Serbian epic songs, related to both Marko Kraljević and other Serbian epic heroes. See, for example, “Stephen Dushan’s Wedding” in which Miloš Voinović confronts a merchant who wanted to steal his horse:

Al’ on skida zlatna šestoperca,

Te udara Đakovicu Vuka,

Domanović rates among the best Serbian authors who exploited the possibilities of the mock-heroic: “Not one of his contemporaries or predecessors was able to create such a grotesque image of the *homo politicus* at the turn of the twentieth century, or of retarded epic mentality based on the glorious traditions of Serbian history and folklore.”⁶⁹ The epic idiom of Serbian oral poetry is at the core of his art. It is due to the folkloric elements, “to their imaginative interplay and complex interrelatedness, that—at its best—Domanović’s essentially realistic and didactic prose allegorically, even paradoxically, opens up to more advanced and modern forms of expression, overcoming the limits of a rural, patriarchal civilization with its basic moral values that initially were the sources of Domanović’s literary inspiration.” Therefore, Domanović’s predilection for folklore does not imply “a return to more traditional literary forms.” On the contrary, by “exploiting its endless imaginative possibilities, he creates stories that undermine a stifling, uniform and dogmatic take on reality.”⁷⁰

Considering the ingenuity with which Domanović handles various elements of epic poetry and incorporates them into his own satires, he may be considered the first major South Slavic writer who consciously subverted oral tradition, turning it into a powerful, corrosive critical device for exposing the criminal stupidity and pretentiousness of the Serbian social and political élité of his time as well as their “retarded epic mentality.” Since then, however, many have followed in his steps, using various traditional epic elements to achieve their own literary goals. Therefore, various “uses” and “abuses” of epic tradition are noticable in the works of a number South Slavic—mostly Serbian—Modernist and post-Modernist authors, including Petar Kočić, Ivo Andrić, Borislav Pekić, Matija Bećković, and Rajko Petrov Nogo. Due to the fact that the “cohabitation” of oral tradition and written literature started with Petar Hektorović in the sixteenth century, this literary procedure may be considered the oldest continuing trend in South Slavic literatures.

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Koliko ga lako udario,

Tri puta se Vuče premetnuo.

(Karadžić, 108)

⁶⁹ S. Koljević, “Funkcija folklornih elemenata u pripovetkama Dinka Šimunovića i Radoja Domanovića,” *Komparativno proučavanje jugoslavenskih književnosti* (Zagreb/Varaždin: Zavod za znanost o književnosti Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu, 1987), 66.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.