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THE QUEST FOR THE “LONG EPIC”
IN 19TH-CENTURY SERBIAN CULTURE*

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In his *Serbian Dictionary* [*Srpski Rječnik*, 1818], Vuk Karadžić included an entry titled *lazarica*: “what the blind [singers-N.R.] call that great poem about Prince Lazar and the Battle of Kosovo. “All other Kosovo poems are fragments of the *lazarica*”.¹ The songs are those about the *Battle of Kosovo* (1389), a historical event that played a prominent role in Serbian epic and each is focused on some theme, either historical or fictional: loyal knight is accused of treason, Prince Lazar receives a message from heaven, a girl searches for her betrothed on the battlefield, and so on. The *lazarica*, as a whole, includes all or nearly all of these themes; it was an emic term for a long song whose multi-episode structure approaches that of a long epic.

This paper explores the *lazarica*'s status in 19th- and early 20th-century Serbian culture when they acquired new position – the quest for “long epic” as we called it following the formulation of Lauri Honko² – and looks at its interplay with other cultures, Slavic and non-Slavic alike. Hence, it leaves the concerns of folkloristics aside, drawing on them only when they can shed light on the modern reception of epic poetry.

The first stage: the *lazarica* in its primary context (folklore)

While indirect evidence suggests of an oral tradition about the Battle of Kosovo already in Middle Ages, there are testimonies about written *lazarica* poems from Adriatic coastlands (late 17th - first half of the 18th century) and from the Serbian community in Hungary (in the 18th and 19th centuries). They stem from contact of oral and written traditions. The literate compiled handwritten, private songbooks (*pesmarice*) and often included folk poems or

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¹ V. St. Karadžić, *Srpski rječnik*, Beč, 1818; 1852.

² L. Honko, *The Quest for the Long Epic. Three Cases*, in *Dynamics of Tradition*, ed. by Lotte Tarka, Helsinki, Finnish Literature Society, 2003, pp. 191-212.

poems emulating the traditional style. Such *lazaricas* appear even in the 20th century. (Similarly, collections of oral poetry collected after Karadžić sometimes contain *lazaricas*). Scholars of oral poetry have yet to reach a consensus on whether long *lazaricas* were ever performed orally or emerged as secondary products, in written form, by merging short-form originals. Whatever the case may have been, it is of secondary importance for the subject at hand: whether they existed in the oral tradition or emerged in songbooks, they are nevertheless part of what can be described as the primary context in which they existed.

Great popularity was enjoyed by auctorial emulations of folk poetry by Dalmatian Franciscan Andrija Kačić Miošić (*The Pleasant Conversation of Slavic People* including one *lazarica* [Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskog]), which surpassed confessional and regional divisions in reception, and by Gavriilo Kovačević (1765-1832), from Hungary, the center of the Serbian cultural diaspora, whose *lazarica*-like poem (1805) saw multiple editions in the 19th century. The variants we encounter in manuscript collections were penned by people who were literate yet still felt oral poetry as something intimately close. Their textualization, to use a term from modern folkloristics, was not driven by an early pre-Romantic and Romantic wish to “salvage the folk treasures”. Instead, they recorded those poems in writing for their own needs and those of their immediate milieu. This stage was not simply about using themes from the oral tradition; it was a hybrid form of the oral and the written, beyond rigid oral/written dichotomy, long misread as the distinction between the authentic and non-authentic. (The importance of these matters for the long epic is attested by the *Kalevala* debate in folkloristics. The American folklorist Alan Dundes labeled it *fakelore*, whereas the Finnish scholar Lauri Honko employed sophisticated concepts to prove the multifaceted nature of authenticity).³ A point worth underlining is that these *lazaricas* were created *bottom-up*: readers and authors were still in contact with the oral tradition; they composed these writings for their own purposes or those of a narrow circle of readers; even when they had their works printed, as Kovačević did, they were not guided by the ideas promoted by Romanticism at that time. These processes unfolded independently of the reception of Herderism and Ossianism, which were confined to a small circle of erudite 19th-century Serbs in Hungary. In the milieu of *lazarica* composers, the *lazaricas* lived in their “natural” environment.

³ A. Dundes, *Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore*, “Journal of Folklore Research”, 22 (1985), 1, pp. 5-18; L. Honko, *The Kalevala as performance*, “Studia Fennica Folkloristica”, 12 (2002), pp. 13-25.

Second stage: European Romanticism

The Italian prelude to Scottish themes: Fortis, Ossianism and Vico

The next step important for the emergence of the long epic idea was the reception of Serbian oral epic poetry in Europe which had begun via Alberto Fortis, whose travel book *Viaggio in Dalmazia* [Travels into Dalmatia, 1774] launched the movement of so-called Morlachism (later developed in French literature too). One aspect of it is a comparison with Homer. Fortis marks "the simplicity of Homeric times" in "Morlach" poetry.⁴ One of Fortis' Dalmatian friends, Julije (Giulio) Bajamonti, who penned a short treatise in Italian titled *On Homer's Morlachism* [Sull morlachismo d'Omero, 1797] notes similarities of content and form shared by Homeric and "Morlach" epics and has in mind their general cultural backgrounds. It is not sure whether Bajamonti was aware of Wolf's treatise, published two years earlier, but he is known to have tried (and failed) to get his text translated into German, indirectly suggesting that he was familiar with the new theory.⁵ However, there is no doubt that Bajamonti was a follower of Vico's in Dalmatia,⁶ just as Fortis was familiar with Neapolitan philosopher.⁷ Seeing poetry as part and parcel of a community's life corresponds to Vico's organicist understanding of culture. Add Ossianic background of Fortis' work,⁸ and you have the emergence of typological thinking.⁹ An interesting example is Carlo Gozzi who in his memoirs of Dalmatia also compares "Morlachs" to Homeric world.¹⁰ Gozzi, who visited Dalmatia before Fortis's book, published his recollections after

⁴ A. Fortis, *Travels into Dalmatia*, London, 1778, p. 84.

⁵ D. Nevenić Grabovac, *Homer u Srba i Hrvata*, Beograd, Filološki fakultet, 1967, p.109.

⁶ S. Roić, *Giulio Bajamonti. Un vichiano dalmata*, "Bollettino del Centro di studi vichiani", 24-25 (1994), pp. 195-203.

⁷ L. Wolff, *Venice and the Slavs*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p.183.

⁸ V. Kostić, *Alberto Fortis i njegovi britanski pokrovitelji*, "Zbornik Matice srpske za književnost i jezik", 46 (1998), 1-3, pp. 5-23; M. Janković, *Ossian kao poticaj za sakupljanje narodnih pjesama kod južnih Slavena*, "Zbornik za narodni život i običaje", 38 (1954), pp. 177-221; M. Drndarski, „Putovanja“ Alberta Fortisa – ekonomska i politička misija, in *Živa reč. Zbornik u čast prof. Dr Nade Milošević-Đorđević*, ed. by M. Detelić, S. Samardžija, Beograd, Balkanološki institut SANU, 2011, pp. 155-164.

⁹ Cf. L. Pompa, *Vico. A Study of the „New Science“*, London-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 2: "The historical scheme which Vico put forward as an alternative to these accounts [transmission-N.R.] involves the entirely different assumption that the parallel growths of civilized practices in different historical nations were a consequence not of some common historical origin but of a common essential nature".

¹⁰ C. Gozzi, *Memorie inutili*, vol. I, Bari, Laterza e figli, 1910, p. 70.

Fortis and disputing strongly with learned abbot's image of "noble savages" – but even Gozzi accepted comparison with Homer. However, this is more about the type of culture that gives birth to such poetry. Considerations of the long epic had yet to emerge, when Fortis' Morlacks were passed to Germans.

The German symphony: Grimm's network

Between Fortis (1774) and Karadžić's first collection (1814), Friedrich August Wolf published his *Prolegomena*, at a time when the pre-Romantics fostered the cult of Homer as a natural poet, an *Urdichter*.¹¹ Wolf's theory melded with the Romantics' image of Homer. Wolf's influence on pre-Romantics and Romantics was apparent, among other things, in their understanding of the folk poem as an invariably short piece.¹² The Homeric question Wolf had opened emerged as a possibility that could materialize in the present. Also, for Herder, *Volksdichtung* was not limited to folk poetry but included original works written in the spirit of folk poetry, something Herder expected from contemporary authors to do. Reception of Serbian epic happened in that context, and that corpus of living folk poetry appeared as a possible key to unlocking the Homeric question and, by extension, epic poetry in general. Were Serbian short poems a form of Wolf's pre-Homeric proto-poems and could they be merged into a "true" long epic by some new bard? These questions, raised in German culture, resonated with Serbian writers. As with similar projects in 19th century Europe, production of long national "Homeric" epic should prove to Europe cultural strength of a nation struggling for the political emancipation; but, other questions too, as we will see, were raised around it.

In the preface to his first collection of poems (1814), published before he met illustrious Germans, Karadžić says he hopes someone "whom God endowed with the gift of song-making" would collect all folk poems, compile some poems "to his taste and the taste of his people" and "make a whole of these small collections".¹³ Karadžić seemed to know something of the Homeric question already at this early stage,¹⁴ probably handed down by Kopitar. Actually Kopitar knew Wolf personally and corresponded with him helping him in his textological work (1811-1819). Kopitar informed Wolf about songs from Karadžić's collection sending translations of some songs (on

¹¹ P. Grippin, *La theorie du genie dans le preclassicisme allemand*, Paris, PUF, 1952, pp. 32-33.

¹² Z. Dukat, *Homersko pitanje*, Zagreb, Globus, 1987, p. 79.

¹³ V. St. Karadžić, *Pjesnarica 1814; 1815*, Beograd, Prosveta, 1965, p. 43.

¹⁴ Lj. Stojanović, *Život i rad Vuka Stef. Karadžića*, Beograd, BIGZ, 1987, p. 68.

recent historical event, Serbian uprising against Ottomans) obviously seeing that material as possible source for confirmation of Wolf's theory.¹⁵ However, a reader interested in the *lazarica* will be surprised by Vuk's (later) collection of epic poetry, which does not include such a long poem. Karadžić's materials included one *lazarica* (about 2000 verses), as the posthumously published papers from his legacy shows¹⁶ but he decided not to publish it. The poems about the Battle of Kosovo he published are short. He designated some poems by the title as fragments of *various* songs (retaining this in different editions). It is unclear whether Vuk changed his opinion of the *lazarica*, abandoning the belief in its original existence. The reasons that led him to reject *lazarica* he had may have been purely aesthetic because aesthetic criteria usually guided his selection from a much larger pool of material.

The appearance of Karadžić's collections led their first reviewers to compare those poems with Homer. An early review from 1815 (by Jernej Kopitar or Kopitar and J. Grimm)¹⁷ offered a string of parallels between the worlds depicted in the two epic traditions (royal sons personally deliver letters and embrace their servants, princes herd sheep) and between their blind minstrels. Nevertheless, the comparison is still more about themes, i.e. cultural setting, than the length and epic technique. Karadžić became embedded in the network of Jacob Grimm,¹⁸ who followed his work, reviewed his publications, and supported him professionally.¹⁹ Grimm concluded elsewhere that since Homeric times, all of Europe has seen nothing that could this comprehensively explain the essence and origin of the epic like Serbian

¹⁵ I. Petrovic, *On Finding Homer: The Impact of Homeric Scholarship on the Perception of South Slavic Oral Traditional Poetry*, in *Homeric Receptions Across Generic and Cultural Contexts*, ed. by A. Efstathiou and I. Karamanou, Berlin-Boston, Walter de Gruyter, 2016, pp. 320-321.

¹⁶ *Srpske narodne pjesme iz neobjavljenih rukopisa Vuka Stef. Karadžića, Knjiga druga. Pjesme junačke najstarije*, Beograd, SANU, 1974, br. 30.

¹⁷ J. Grimm, *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. IV, Berlin, 1869, pp. 437-455; J. Kopitar, *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. I, Wien, 1857, pp. 347-369.

¹⁸ N. Radulović, *Voices of the People in Letters. The Romantic Concept of Folkloreas Cultural Transfer Europe-Serbia/Serbia-Europe*, in S.G. Markovich (ed.), *Cultural Transfer Europe-Serbia: Methodological Issues and Challenges*, Belgrade, Institute of European Studies, 2023, pp. 145-170.

¹⁹ The available literature is extensive, but notable contributions on Grimm and Serbian folklore include M. Mojašević, *Jakob Grim i srpska narodna književnost*, Beograd, SANU, 1983; K. Schulte Kemminghausen, *Jakob Grimm und das serbokroatische Volkslied*, "Deutsche Jahrbuch für Volkskunde", 4 (1958), pp. 301-326.

songs.²⁰ Just as Kopitar informed Wolf about Serbian materials, so Grimm informed Karl Lachmann, another important figure of Homeric question,²¹ Johann Severin Vater (whom Karadžić also knew personally) highlights the length of Serbian epic poems as a key to Homer and Ossian in the title of his foreword to Grimm's translation of Vuk's Serbian grammar: *Ueber die neueste Auffassung langer Helden-Lieder aus dem Munde des Volkes in Serbien zur Vergleichung mit Homer und Ossian* [On newest opinions on long heroic songs from the mouth of people in Serbia compared with Homer and Ossian]. Unsurprisingly, he sees Serbian poems as examples of natural poetry but also emphasizes the length of one 1227-verse poem. Vater goes no further in comparison; the poem he highlights, *The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević* [Ženidba Maksima Crnojevića], is indeed the longest in Vuk's collection, but it is also a rarity. Listing poems about Marko Kraljević and noting that they run up to a few hundred verses, Vater remarks that they did not merge into one, although they offer material for a longer piece of epic poetry.²² The Austrian poet Johann Nepomuk Vogl published such an epic in 1851, citing Vater in his preface.²³

Grimm himself tackled the question of the long epic, but he saw the Prince Marko (Marko Kraljević) songs rather than the Battle of Kosovo ones as a corpus that would lend itself well to such an endeavor. His lecture on the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, delivered in 1845 at the Academy of Berlin, discussed Serbian and German epic poetry as well. Explaining that there are surviving Serbian poems that can run up to 500 or even 1000 lines in the "purest language," he remarks: "If one were to merge [the poems] that treat specific subjects and go together, particularly the Prince Marko poems, one could create entire cycles constituting a small epic".²⁴ The same year, Grimm spoke of this in a letter to Karadžić. Having praised Lönnrot and remarked that he must put Vuk's name next to the "deserving" Lönnrot's, who "salvaged" the Finnish epic, in the following passage, in brackets (which could be Grimm's roundabout way of stating the crux of the matter), he notes that the Prince Marko poems could be printed in a stand-alone book as an epic about Marko

²⁰ J. Grimm, *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. IV, cit., p. 419.

²¹ Quoted in M. Mojašević, *Jakob Grim i srpska narodna književnost*, cit., p. 418.

²² V. St. Karadžić, *Kleine Serbische Grammatik*, München-Beograd, Verlag Otto Sagner-Prosveta, 1974, p. LIX.

²³ J. Nepomuk Vogl, *Marko Kraljevićs: serbische Heldensage*, Wien, Druck und Verlag von J.P. Sollinger's, Witwe, 1851, p. V.

²⁴ J. Grimm, *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. II, Berlin, Ferd. Dümmler, 1865, p. 77.

and his exploits.²⁵ Was Grimm suggesting that Vuk should do what Lönnrot had done? However, if Grimm indeed suggested such an endeavor, Vuk did not accept his advice. Grimm's interest in this matter was likely broader than the academic interest in the Homeric question of the classicists or the theoretical concerns for epic poetry in general: according to one observation, the Serbian and Finnish epics, which Grimm believed to be older forms of the epic, could facilitate the understanding of German epic poetry.²⁶

The concept of fragment/whole deserves closer attention in the context of Romanticism. The fragment acquired a prominent role in the Romantic concept of folklore. For Jacob Grimm, "folk poetry", customs, and beliefs were all vestiges of myths: poems and tales as remnants of the erstwhile wealth of Germanic poetry (introduction to *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*),²⁷ tales as "echo of ancient splintered myths." (the foreword to the German translation of *Serbian Folk Tales*),²⁸ mythical elements in fairytales "like fragments of a shattered stone".²⁹ It was this view that became the bedrock of Grimm's monumental *Teutonic Mythology* (*Deutsche Mythologie*, 1835). Underlying premise is that folklore is a bastardized form of something better, fuller from the past (the devolutionary premise).³⁰ Romanticism sought to re-establish the primeval whole, searching for the source of force in various places (India, Middle Ages), folk poetry and myth among others, being strongly inspired by organicist worldview (which underpinned the Romantic understanding of folklore).³¹ The fragment is laden with meaning, being more than

²⁵ Original italics; V. St. Karadžić, *Prepiska*, vol. VII, Beograd, Prosveta, 1993 (Grimm to Vuk on 29 May 1845).

²⁶ M. Mojašević, *Jakob Grim*, p. 221. Mojašević noted (ivi, p. 7) that Vater also highlighted the parts in the content of the *Wedding of Maksim Crnojević* that appear in the *Nibelungenlied* (the wedding quest, tricking the bride, bloodshed), although he never explicitly mentions the German epic poem.

²⁷ Brüder Grimm, *Kinder und Hausmächen*, vol. I, Jena, Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1857, p. [I].

²⁸ J. Grimm, Vorrede in: Wuk Stefanowitsch Karadschitsch, *Volksmärchen der Serben*, Berlin, Georg Reimer, 1854, p. VII.

²⁹ Brüder Grimm, *Kinder und Hausmächen*, vol. III, Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1856, p. 409.

³⁰ A. Dundes, *The Meaning of Folklore. Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, Logan UT, Utah State University Press, 2007, pp.164-176.

³¹ V. Tr. Hafstein, *Biological Metaphors in Folklore Theory. An essay in the history of ideas*, in: A. Dundes (ed.), *Folklore. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 407-435.

a purely philological tool, and reconstructing the whole from the surviving fragments could be framed as a Romantic antimodernist counter-project. The relationship between the fragment and the organic whole could be seen as analogous to unifying the nation around a national epic (and general restoration of organic ties in the world).

There is another possible source for the fragment/whole nexus, contemporaneous with Wolf: biblical criticism, which since the 18th century set out to find the proto-texts of the Bible's books. Biblical criticism also employed the philological approach to "dismember" a book previously seen as an integral whole into a set of pre-existing texts gradually melded together in different ways. Vater, a theologian and Orientalist, was a follower of this approach, then seen as revolutionary. The influence of this tradition to the formation of folklore concepts deserves more attention.

The Polish etude: Mickiewicz's reception

Comparisons of Serbian folk poetry with Homer continued throughout the 19th century among European scholars. Those comparisons did not stop at Homer: at a lecture in Vienna, Franz Miklosich compared creating an epic from Serbian folk poems ("by a German poet", referring to Vogl or Kapper) to the creation of the *Kalevala*.³² Even in the late 19th century, after the decline of Romanticism, Jacob Burckhardt in *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* [The Greeks and Greek Civilization] still described Serbian epic poetry as *Ilias ante Homerum* that had yet to find its bard.³³ All this resonated back in Serbian culture. The leading Serbian classical scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries compared Homeric and Serbian epics.³⁴

But, beside scholars, some authors both in Europe and among Serbs, tried to compose such long epic, influences passing from both sides to one another. The efforts of Serbian authors to create a long epic had a lot to do with the influence of Adam Mickiewicz, who taught Slavic literature in the 1840s at the Collège de France. In his seventeenth lecture on Serbian folk poetry, Mickiewicz explored the Kosovo songs, remarking that the poems in Karadžić's collection were reminiscent of the "fragments" predating the *Iliad* in

³² *Podunavka* (28.9.1858), p. 312.

³³ J. Burckhardt, *History of Greek Culture*, Mineola, NY, Dover publications, 2002, p. 168.

³⁴ As an interesting post scriptum we can remind that the quest to resolve the Homeric question in the 20th century with Parry and Lord also turned to South Slavic oral epic poetry. Special role songs collected from Muslim singers were given in oral-formulaic theory, especially one of *Odissey*'s length, influenced cultural and identity politics of Yugoslav Muslims after Yugoslavia's dissolution.

Greek literature (he omits comparisons with Ossian).³⁵ He wondered whether a poet would emerge among the Serbs to weave them together into something akin to the *Iliad*. Mickiewicz was skeptical; in spite of “hopes of Grimm and Vater” he did not believe that learned persons would create new *Iliad*, if such organic whole did not come to being in folk itself. The same goes for other Slavic nations so it seems he spoke of Serbian epic poetry as an example – a metonymy? – of Slavic epic poetry in general. Regardless of these views, Mickiewicz suggested how the poems in Karadžić’s collection should be arranged in a future epic.³⁶

Mickiewicz’s lectures were well-received in the Serbian milieu, and their translations appeared quite early (in two journals in 1843-1845, but not the seventeenth lecture, which discussed the long epic).³⁷ However, the full scope of his influence went beyond mere lecture translations. In the 1840s, Mickiewicz was one of the most popular poets among the Serbian youth both in the Principality of Serbia and among those who studied with Ludovít Štúr in Bratislava, where many became Polonophiles and learned to read Polish.³⁸ This poet’s presence in the Serbian milieu should be seen, among other things, in the context of the political ties between the Serbian government and the Hôtel Lambert.³⁹ Taking his cue from Mickiewicz, the critic Emil Čakra compared Serbian epic poetry with Greek epics and Ossian.⁴⁰ The Dubrovnik poet Medo Pucić translated lectures into Italian (the language of high culture in Dalmatia) and included all poems Mickiewicz had mentioned.⁴¹ Mickiewicz’s authority bolstered the influence of their sugges-

³⁵ A. Mickjevič, *O srpskoj narodnoj poeziji*, Cetinje, Narodna knjiga, 1955.

³⁶ Mickiewicz owned a copy of Vuk’s *Dictionary*, which would have provided another opportunity for him to get acquainted with the term *lazarica* (Đ. Živanović, *Adam Mickjevič o kosovskoj epopeji*, “NSSVD”, 19 (1991), 1, p. 513.

³⁷ Đ. Živanović, *Mickiewicz in Serbo-Croatian literature*, in W. Lednicki (ed.), *Adam Mickiewicz in World Literature*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1956, pp. 495-523. For bibliography of translations: P. Bunjak, *Pregled poljsko-srpskih književnih veza (do II svetskog rata)*, Beograd, Slavističko društvo Srbije, 1999.

³⁸ Đ. Živanović, *Neke misli Adama Mickjeviča o našoj narodnoj poeziji i njihov odjek kod nas*, “NSSVD”, 4 (1974), 1, pp. 49-68. A text about his lectures was published on the cover of *Srbske novine* “among the most important news from Europe” (ivi).

³⁹ There was even a suggestion to call Mickiewicz to develop the Principality of Serbia’s school curriculum – indicatively, Belgrade’s invitation said that anyone could compile it as long as it had Mickiewicz’s signature (ivi).

⁴⁰ *Slovenka* (1860), pp. 135-148, 479-486, 567-573.

⁴¹ A. Mickiewicz, *Dei canti popolari illirici*, Zara, Fratelli Battara tipografi editori, 1860. This body of poetry is sometimes mislabeled a Pucić’s *lazarica*, but it only served to illustrate his lectures and was not limited to the Kosovo songs.

tion among Serbian authors, betraying also a change in the reception process: although he doubted the possibility of an epic, his proposal for the arrangement of the poems encouraged the *lazarica* compilers.

The history of the *lazarica* entered a new phase. Compiling a *lazarica* was now a programmatic endeavor taken up by distinguished figures as part of the Romantic view of the epic. There were two ways to go about this: existing epic poems were weaved into a new whole, or authors created original works. In 1847, Joksim Nović Otočanin, a Romantic poet of an equally Romantic life, published his epic *Lazarica* (with over 2,000 lines), modeled on folk poetry. The year of publication is significant: 1847 is usually taken as the triumph of Karadžić's language reform, when books by Njegoš and B. Radičević appeared along with Đuro Daničić's treatise on language reform. Nović was another member of this generation, nowadays largely forgotten but in its day his book ranked among the most widely read. He was (at the time) a follower and collaborator of Karadžić's and in a letter to Karadžić, Nović asked him to publish his *Lazarica* in one of his folk poetry collections, alluding that Vuk had already read one of its early drafts.⁴² The idea that Nović's epic could be included in a collection of folk poems signifies how porous boundaries between the oral and the written were and also that Nović thought of himself as someone who had brought the idea of the national poet to fruition. In the end, the work was published as a stand-alone book. Karadžić's role in Nović's endeavor warrants closer examination. Another associate of Karadžić's, Vuk Vrčević, reprinted Kovačević's epic, this time in the common language. He wrote of the Battle of Kosovo poems in his collection: "After or before I die, let a patriot appear to collate all Kosovo poems in the same volume and name it *Kosovka*".⁴³

Among European authors, (leaving aside Vogl's Prince Marko book), the Russian folklorist Pyotr Bessonov compiled in 1857 an amalgam of prose (retellings) and poetry (verses from folk poems), history, and oral traditions. Milan Đ. Milićević translated it into Serbian as early as 1858.⁴⁴ Siegfried Kapper, a Bohemian-German writer, compiled the epic *Lazar der Serbenzar* (1851; reprinted in 1853 under a different title; over 4,000 lines), which in-

⁴² V. St. Karadžić, *Prepiska*, vol. VII, Beograd, Nolit-Prosveta, 1993 (Joksim Nović to Vuk, 25 July 1844); cf. the letter of 27 August 1844. V. Milinčević, *Lazarica Joksim Novića Otočanina*, "Zbornik Matice srpske za književnost i jezik", 43 (1995), 2-3, pp. 311-330.

⁴³ R. Pešić, *Vuk Vrčević*, Beograd, Filološki fakultet, 1967, p. 97.

⁴⁴ P. Nikolajević Besonov, *Lazarica. Narodne pesme, pripovetke i predanja Srba o propasti njihovog starog carstva*, in M.Đ. Milićević, *Časovi odmora*, vol. II, Beograd, 1858, pp. 18-87.

cludes both original content and verses taken from Vuk’s collection – by Kapper’s own admission, in the footsteps of Grimm and Vater and in defiance of Mickiewicz’s doubts. Kapper mentions the term *lazarica* and notes that he mostly reproduced the poems. Suggestively, at the end of his preface, he describes this body of poetry as belonging to *urkraeftigen und urpoetischen Volkes*.⁴⁵ Another epic was compiled by Elodie Lawton Mijatović, a pioneering intermediary that bridged the two cultures who was married to the author, historian, and politician Čedomilj Mijatović, himself also intermediary between Serbian and English cultures.⁴⁶ Her lengthy preface includes a list of previous similar attempts. Polish scholar Izydor Kopernicki also published a collection of songs about Kosovo battle (translations from Karadžić).⁴⁷ A more widely read contribution came from the French diplomat Adolphe, Baron d’Avril (1822–1904), who, in 1862, published *La Bataille de Kossovo, rhapsodie serbe*. (Term rhapsody is used by Mickiewicz, too). Serbian poems are again seen as proto-poetry, but the glorious example of old is not Homer but the medieval *chansons de geste*.

The poems about the Battle of Kosovo are separate parts or simple fragments unconnected to each other. Such were the early cantilenas that preceded our *chansons de geste*. The endeavor I have undertaken here is a rhapsody: I have tried, following the Greek model, to sew those fragments together and make a whole. I have added nothing to the essence and changed nothing in the form; I only took out some verses from one part and inserted others to preserve their appeal and avoid tedious repetitions.⁴⁸

In this case, the compiler started from his national tradition. Like Grimm, he saw Serbian epic poetry as a key not only to the Homeric question but to other epic forms, too. Avril says (p. 7) that he consulted two contemporary “compositions about Kosovo”, probably the respective works by Kovačević and Nović; he added three songs to Mickiewicz’s list.

Serbian epic poetry was seen as a possible key to solving the Homeric question and epics in general, contributing to attempts to understand the national epic traditions of living European languages and contemporary cultures. Conversely, the importance assigned to Serbian epic poetry in “learned Europe” encouraged erudite Serbs familiar with Romantic notions to bring

⁴⁵ S. Kapper, *Lazar der Serbenzar*, Wien, Franz Leo, 1851, p. XI

⁴⁶ E. Lawton Mijatovich, *Kossovo: an attempt to bring Serbian national songs, about the fall of the Serbian empire at the battle of Kossovo, into on poem*, London, Isbister, 1881.

⁴⁷ *Pieśni serbskie o Kosowskim boju/w nowym przekładzie przez Izydora Kopernickiego*, Kraków, nakładem Księgarni Gebethnera i Spółki, 1889.

⁴⁸ *La bataille de Kossovo, rhapsodie serbe*, Paris, Librairie de Luxembourg, 1868, pp. 14–15.

the idea of compiling an epic to fruition. European authors were inspired by Serbian materials not only to ponder over epic but to compose Serbian epic themselves (as we have seen in case of d'Avril, he was inspired not only by songs from Karadžić's collection but also from already published *lazaricas*); these attempts, both in theory and in practice, reached back to Serbian autor inspiring them to "homerize", of which we will say more in next chapter. Shortly, we have a case of bidirectional exchanges with two sides stimulating each other, something which perhaps can be understood as cultural transfer, in sense given by M. Espagne.⁴⁹

The third stage: Romanticism of *longue durée* or a positivist version?

The last decades of the 19th century saw a few more attempts at *lazaricas*, with the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (1889) providing an additional impetus. One was compiled by Stojan Novaković (1842-1915), statesman and polihistor. He published his version of the Kosovo epic in 1871 to roaring success: by 1906, the book saw eleven reprints in Belgrade and Zagreb (the twelfth reprint was canceled due to the outbreak of World War I).⁵⁰ Novaković's role models were Mickiewicz and d'Avril. He wrote a lengthy review of the latter's book,⁵¹ describing his own attempt as succession and emendation of d'Avril's, where he found "sound logic".⁵² Novaković initially kept to the poems in Vuk's collection, only including other sources in his later editions. The selection criterion, he explained, was uniformity of style – the view that an epic should be created from fragments from the same source and period, as Mickiewicz and d'Avril had done. By that time, Vuk's collection had already become canon.

Novaković revisited this question, and not only in prefaces to his re-editions. In 1877, a Zagreb professor of philology Armin Pavić (1844-1914) published a treatise on the Kosovo epic poetry, which opened a debate about the long epic.⁵³ Pavić also contributed to the debates surrounding the epic

⁴⁹ Cf. N. Radulović, *Serbian Folklore and European Framework: Some Remarks*, in *Serbia and the Balkans: three centuries of embrace with Europe*, ed. by S.G. Markovich, Belgrade, Faculty of political science – Zepter Book World, 2025, pp. 341-344.

⁵⁰ M. Milović, *Stojan Novaković o narodnoj književnosti*, Beograd, Zavod za udžbenike, 2010, pp. 219-220.

⁵¹ "Vila", 4 (1868) 26, pp. 612-618.

⁵² S. Novaković, *Kosovo*, Zagreb, Tisak i nakl. knjižare L. Hartmana, 1906, p. 15.

⁵³ A. Pavić, *Narodne pjesme o Boju na Kosovu 1389*, Zagreb, JAZU, 1877.

Osman by the Ragusan Baroque poet Ivan Gundulić, arguing – obviously inspired by the Homeric question – that the work was created by combining different poems. There are two aspects to Pavić’s treatise on the Kosovo epic poetry. The first is the political one, in which he attempts to reframe the Kosovo corpus as Croatian; although he notes that this is not to say that he sees it as any less Serbian, he does insist that this corpus belongs to Croatian literature. For Pavić, the matter was apparently not purely historical but had to do with the politics of his days. The second is the theoretical question of its origins. In the introduction, Pavić, mentioning Wolf and international expectations from the Slavic South, argues that a (long) poem about the Battle of Kosovo appeared shortly after the famed battle. None of the poems in Karadžić’s collection retained the full scheme of this original Kosovo poem, he opined; however, Pavić argued that the existing poems could be used to compile a contemporary national epic and proposed a blueprint of the order in which those poems should be arranged. In his view, not only do Vuk’s poems confirm that Homer’s *Iliad* was a collective creation but a poet could use them to make a common folk epic, and that epic “would indeed remain a creation of the people”.

In response to Pavić’s treatise, Novaković published a lengthy study.⁵⁴ His reply was twofold: one aspect was Novaković’s criticism of Pavić’s appropriation of the Kosovo poems as Croatian. Novaković, himself a member of the Zagreb Academy (Pavić was a member of its Belgrade counterpart, too), supported the Yugoslav idea. However, he notes that Pavić’s pronouncement of something to be both Serbian and Croatian was a thinly veiled attempt at appropriation. The second, theoretical aspect concerns the long epic. Novaković argues that poems recounting particular events had always existed, but what bound them together are the “unity of event” and a “deep national feeling, highlighting the battle as widely known moment in national history.” He builds on the general view of a folk epic poem as an “improvisation” focused on a particular event. The poems created after the event must have been such as well; the whole – the long epic – eludes the singer. Commenting on the fact that his work was limited to the poems in Karadžić’s collection, he compares this method with the critical edition of a text. In textology, even the most flawed manuscript can prove useful. However, Karadžić’s publications are “unrivalled, and other collections seem like “scattered material,” he concludes. In his concluding remarks, Novaković touches on Pavić’s suggestion. If his proposal is taken not as a reconstruction

⁵⁴ S. Novaković, *Srpske narodne pesme o Boju na Kosovu*, “Godišnjica Nikole Čupića”, 2 (1878), pp. 97-177.

of a hypothetical ancient poem but as a new literary endeavor, he admits that it bests his own attempt, which followed d'Avril's method. His own attempt was homogenous and readily available for reading, whereas Pavić's required a gifted poet to try and weave its heterogenous elements into a whole. Even though Novaković, as a scholar of folk literature, believed that there was no epic whole in the past, he thinks it possible to write in the present.⁵⁵

The polemic attracted the attention of Zagreb professor Tomo Maretić (1854-1938), a distinguished linguist, and expert on epic poetry, as not only his studies but also translations of Homer, Virgil, Ovid, *The Story of Nal* and *Pan Tadeusz* (all from original languages) show. On the occasion, to mark the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1889, Maretić delivered a lecture at the Yugoslav Academy in Zagreb, firmly siding with Novaković. Maretić emphasizes the compositional characteristic of Serbian epic poetry as single-episode songs, finding no reason to assume they had been any different in the past.⁵⁶

Notably, by this time, scholars had moved away from exploits in the Romantic spirit toward a scholarly debate. Serbian epic poetry was not just a key to deciphering the canonic Homer; in fact, the Homeric question model was now applied to Serbian epic poetry.

The popularity of Novaković's work did not discourage others to propose their own versions. Tihomir Ostojić (1865-1921), a Serbian literary historian from Austria-Hungary published in 1901 a book of Kosovo poems labeled as "a book for the common people" and "for the masses and schools"⁵⁷ stating his didactic and patriotic aims in accompanying texts. Indicatively, in a letter to Novaković, Ostojić complains that the aesthetically superior a poem is, the more it defies being strung into a unified whole.⁵⁸ Ostojić's phrase "a book for the common people" is noteworthy: while this term described booklets that enjoyed popularity among a broad readership (chapbook, *Volksbuch*), it could also mean a book created by the educated to spread knowledge, education, or – like in this case – the national spirit among the masses.

⁵⁵ The outline proposed by Pavić was adopted by Elodie Lawton Mijatović (see supra) and Bosnian Franciscan Grga Martić in their creation of *lazaricas*.

⁵⁶ T. Maretić, *Kosovski junaci i događaji u narodnoj epici*, "Rad JAZU", 97 (1889), pp. 69-181.

⁵⁷ T. Ostojić, *Kosovo. Narodne pesme o boju na kosovu 1389 Za narod i školu*, Novi Sad, Matica srpska (Edicija knjiga za narod), 1901.

⁵⁸ M. Milović, *Stojan Novaković*, cit., p. 225.

The second successful attempt was made by Sreten (Sreta) J. Stojković (1854-1928), a math teacher, novelist, travel writer, and a prominent Freemason. In 1901, Stojković published an overview of the long epic debate, and his own proposal of the order in which the poems should be arranged.⁵⁹ Stojković soon put his idea into practice and published his own epic in 1903, with a second, revised edition printed in 1906 by the reputable publisher Srpska književna zadruga. Stojković disagrees that an epic composed by someone could become accepted by a folk; the best strategy was Novaković’s and d’Avril’s. The question of the original form was of no relevance to this endeavor. Hence, Stojković thought it would be advisable to amend Novaković’s and Ostojić’s attempts, add more material, improve the structure of the whole. He had wanted his publisher to publish the epic as a “book for the common people,” opining it would have been beneficial “to give back to the people what they had lost or forgotten”, but the publisher decided to include it in an elite series.⁶⁰ The book was popular among readers (seeing multiple editions) and received good criticism. The historian Ljubomir Kovačević wrote that, with the appearance of “this Serbian *Iliad*”, the question of creating a Kosovo epic by stringing together folk poems could be considered “closed”. The writer Stevan Sremac suggested disseminating Stojković’s epic among the masses so that it could become what the *Iliad* was in Greek households, concluding that it should be published as much and as frequently as possible, as affordably as possible, in all formats, in the Cyrillic and Latin scripts, with illustrations – “Let us give the people what they need to read and distribute it to the masses in all regions”.⁶¹ The ethnologist Tihomir Đorđević also praised Stojković’s attempt: “A path should be carved for this book to reach the masses so that the people can get back some of what it had lent”.⁶² (A shift in terminology was telling: d’Avril, in the wake of Mickiewicz, spoke of a rhapsody, Novaković of a “heroic poem” and later “epos”,⁶³ whereas Stojković, already in his subtitle, resolutely adopted the term “folk *epos*”).

The texts by Novaković, Ostojić, and Stojković signal certain change. A brief overview of their intellectual profiles may help us clarify the nature of

⁵⁹ Sr. J. Stojković, *Kosovska epopeja*, Beograd, Državna štamparija Kraljevine Srbije, 1901. Previously published in the journal “Nova iskra”, 1901, 4-10, 12.

⁶⁰ Sr. J. Stojković, *Lazarica ili Boj na Kosovu*, Beograd, Srpska književna zadruga, 1906, pp. VI-X.

⁶¹ Quoted in Sr. J. Stojković, *Lazarica*, cit., p. IX

⁶² T. Đorđević, *Lazarica ili Boj na Kosovu*, “Karadžić”, 4 (1903), 2, pp. 151-154.

⁶³ D. Živanović, “Adam Mickjevič o kosovskoj epopeji”, cit., p. 511.

this shift. Stojan Novaković was a herald of positivism: being probably the first Serb to quote Herbert Spencer, he published works by H.Th. Buckle, and translated histories of literature by Johannes Scherr and Alexander Py-pin.⁶⁴ His approach to folk poetry was historical one, at a time when the natural mythology school was en vogue (in spite of his good personal relations with Angelo De Gubernatis). Ostojić and Stojković were of the similar profile. As for their reviewers, Kovačević argued against Romantic historiography, Sremac is classic of realist fiction; Đorđević was a pioneer of modern ethnography. In short, these figures belonged to Positivist elite. Their texts, when they discuss epic, moved toward the educational or even didactic tone. Was this, then, a post-Romantic, positivist approach to an inherited topic? Remarkably, there was no poetic rivalry between Novaković, Stojković, and Ostojić: instead of contest of bards, their exchanges are reminiscent of conference discussion. Novaković even made some changes to the later editions of his *Lazarica* inspired by Stojković's and Ostojić's ideas.⁶⁵ They debated how to best compile a national epic as if they had been given the same scholarly and political assignment.

Alternatively, should their attempts to compile a national epic be seen as a survival of Romanticism, Romanticism of *longue durée*, revealing that there was an ambivalent side to positivism? Indeed, their attitudes toward Romanticism seem ambivalent enough. Novaković wrote Romantic poetry in his youth before turning to history and later in life published a novel with many features of Romanticism. Unsurprisingly, his name appears in some histories of Serbian Romanticism. Some other figures display a similar duality: among other things, Sremac wrote historical short stories in the spirit of Romanticism. The presence of Romanticism was obviously powerful, and the new generation had a more ambivalent attitude to it than their programs would have us believe.

Here, however, political history gave an impulse to intellectual history. The national question in the Balkans was not limited to the early 19th century and stretched into the early 20th century (the Serbian-Turkish wars of 1876-1878; the First Balkan War against the Ottoman Empire in 1912). Therefore, these collections should be understood in the context of the Eastern Question – as efforts to bolster the national spirit through a national epic. For those authors, in the early 20th century, “giving back” poetry to the people by creating an epic had the same purpose it had at the beginning of the 19th century.

⁶⁴ M. Popović, *Romantizam*, 2, Beograd, Zavod za udžbenike, 1985, pp. 352-360.

⁶⁵ M. Milović, *Stojan Novaković*, cit., p. 220.

While the ideological intention is transparent, the interplay of poetics and politics is much more complex and long epic topic cannot be reduced to ideology only. For instance, Ostojić and Novaković criticized (in their private correspondence though) Stojković’s and Pavić’s subjecting poetry to political agenda and their lack of art.⁶⁶ For many of them, the long epic was an important theoretical question, as we have seen, and not purely a practical matter – and an aesthetic question no less than a national task. It would be reductive to see them solely within the frameworks of ideologies only.

The reaction of readership is equally important: while it is beyond the scope of this paper, the number of editions and testimonies about readers’ response testify that “common people” accepted these *lazaricas* as their own, as something familiar to what they already knew, not simply as a good sent from elites. While analysis like this deals with intellectual history (and history of intellectuals), the history of mentalities and emotions of “common people”, as in case of *lazaricas* reception, is equally important.

The fate of the long epic project: European framework

Despite their popularity, none of these *lazaricas* acquired the place that the *Kalevala* has in Finnish or *Kalevipoeg* in Estonian culture.⁶⁷ Their impact began to wane at the beginning of the 20th century, although some appeared even later. Stojković’s work compared to *Iliad* is nowadays mostly forgotten. Instead, Karadžić’s collections occupied that lofty place in the national cultural canon. All these attempts were made when Karadžić was in the process of securing or had already secured his place in the canon. Their authors acknowledged Karadžić’s status: there was no agonal attitude toward him. And Karadžić had opted for a different solution. As his authority rested not only on folkloristic work but also on language reform, it contributed to his status. The *lazarica* compilers approached the poetry in Karadžić’s collections as original (pre-Homeric) yet canonized material, but his volumes had already become “Homeric” in terms of their canonical status.

To conclude, let us revisit Karadžić’s collections in a comparative context but from a slightly different angle. Several possible models emerged for

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Cf. Honko’s remark: “The *Kalevala* has been and still is approached from three levels: as a folk epic, as Lönnrot’s epic and as a national epic. We might call them the levels of folkloristics, literature, and cultural policy” (L. Honko, *The Kalevala: The Procesual View*, in *Religion, Myth and Folklore in the World’s Epic. The Kalevala and its Predecessors*, ed. By L. Honko, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 1990, pp. 181-230.

treating the short and long epic in Romantic Europe. One was publishing short poems in their original form, as Karadžić and Hanka had done (leaving now aside the character of Hanka's work (mystifications) as different from Karadžić's). The second possibility was stringing together short poems to form a long epic, like Lönnrot, D'Avril, Stojković, and Novaković. The third model was for an author to create a national epic inspired by folklore, like Pumpurs in Latvia, Kreutzwald in Estonia, and Nović among Serbs. It is interesting to note that Karadžić's influence is visible in some of the foreign cases too. Lönnrot began collecting Finnish folk poetry after he had come across a Swedish translation of Karadžić's collection. Swedish was the literary language of the Finns, and Karadžić's example showed to Lönnrot the value of collecting material in the common language; Hanka translated the poetry in Karadžić's collection early on, and work of Karadžić (whom he personally knew)⁶⁸ encouraged him and his circle to compose "Manuscripts" even including some decasyllabic poems; Andrejs Pumpurs, who belonged to younger generation, followed Vuk's literary footsteps – his epic even includes a canto in the decasyllable (a meter of Serbian epics).⁶⁹ And yet, Lönnrot and Pumpurs followed different paths from Hanka's circle which prioritized creating "little" poems over big ones.

In the Serbian milieu, all three possibilities were on the table. Ultimately, the short poem model prevailed, which should be attributed to Karadžić's immense influence which went well beyond folk poetry. It should also be mentioned that there was the "spillover" of the Battle of Kosovo themes into history plays, a remarkably popular genre. Finally, the idea of creating a national epic and the appearance of a national bard was not limited to this approach, as shown by the epic *Serbijanka* by Sima Milutinović Sarajlija (1826) or Petar Petrović Njegoš's *Mountain Wreath* [Gorski vijenac] or some minor authors who also wrote historical epics (Jovan Subotić). By the time Stojković's "heroic poem" and Ostojić's "book for the people" appeared, the tastes of the literary mainstream had long changed, moving away from both Romanticism and Realism, with French Parnassianism all the rage in poetry. That is not to say that the Kosovo themes disappeared; instead, they moved on to a new medium and expression, both in literature and visual arts. Indicatively, the new artistic styles at turn of the centuries and the modernist poetry of the time also relied on Kosovo themes. *Lazaricas* could not compete with this

⁶⁸ But they never mentioned the Manuscripts in their correspondence.

⁶⁹ N. Radulović, *Voices of the People*, cit., pp. 145-170.

new mood. But they continued their lives, as said, among “common” readers where they originated at the beginning.⁷⁰

We could say that the history of *lazaricas* had three stages: their grass-roots (bottom-up) emergence in the transitional zone between the oral and the written; their programmatic formation under the aegis of Romanticism in a lively exchange between the Serbian and European cultures; and their programmatic creation with a more theoretical slant, halfway between Romanticism and positivism, with wish to “give it back” to the folk/nation. These boundaries were far from sharp: some *lazaricas* created in the second and third stages became so popular that they approached their first-stage counterparts. While Romanticism was part of a general European intellectual history and mutual exchanges, it, in case of *lazarica*, at the same time built on previous layers coming from national popular culture and found response within that layer. And the third stage still contained some vestiges of Romanticism. *Lazarica* thus made full circle, from common folk to elites, and from elites back “down”.

Abstract

The Quest for the “Long Epic” in 19th-Century Serbian Culture

Lazarica is a long epic poem the Battle of Kosovo (1389). The paper examines how “lazarica” became a national epic in 19th century sense of the word. Three stages can be discerned. In the first one, “lazarica” is still part of the milieu of an audience close to folklore. Leaving aside strictly folkloric question if “lazarica” existed as such in an oral transmission (and there is a debate about it in folkloristics), it is important to notice that even when composed and transmitted in a written form, or even printed, “lazarica” was accepted as a folk poem existing in a continuum between oral and written traditions and forms. Such type of “lazarica” creation we call “grassroot”. In a second stage, the interest of European intellectuals for Homeric question and “natural poetry” led them to pay attention to Serbian songs published by Vuk Karadžić. The key figures here were Alberto Fortis, Jakob Grimm, Johann Severin Vater, and Adam Mickiewicz. That Serbian epic poetry can be as a possible key for unravelling Homeric question became a common place in European scholarship of 19th century. These ideas, specially Mickiewicz’s, resonated

⁷⁰ There are examples of folk *lazaricas* even in 20th century: S. Samardžija, *Knežopoljska “Lazarica” – istorija (i) tradicije*, “Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju i folklore”, 75 (2009), pp. 75-110.

back to Serbian intellectuals who tried to compose long epic out of separate songs published in Karadžić's collections. After this Romantic stage, a third one is somewhere between a prolonged Romanticism and Positivism. Beside creating "lazaricas", intellectuals now turn the tables and apply the tools of Homeric question to Serbian material discussing about its emergence. Seen in an European framework, "lazaricas" turn out to be one of the possible models for long epic making (closer to Lönnrot, other ones being publishing short songs, like Karadžić, or writing a national epic based on folklore, like Pumpurs). However, the canonical status was not acquired by some of "lazaricas" but by Karadžić's collections, due to his significance in folklore and language reform.

Keywords: epic, folklore, Romanticism, cultural transfer, Homeric question.