

Background for...

THE BATTLE OF KOSOVO Serbian Epic Poems

"Everyone in the West who has known these poems has proclaimed them to be literature of the highest order which ought to be known better." (Charles Simic)

Translated from the Serbian by John Matthias and Vladeta Vuckovic

Preface by Charles Simic

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The *Battle of Kosovo* cycle of heroic ballads is generally considered the finest work of Serbian folk poetry. Commemorating the Serbian Empire's defeat at the hands of the Turks in the late fourteenth century, these poems and fragments of poems have been known for centuries in Eastern Europe. With the appearance of the collections of Serbian folk poems by Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic, the brilliance of the poetry in the Kosovo and related cycles of ballads was affirmed by poets and critics as deeply influential as Goethe, Jacob Grimm, Adam Mickiewicz and Alexander Pushkin. Although translations into English have been attempted before, few of them, as Charles Simic notes in his preface, have been persuasive.

Ivan V. Lalic, the contemporary Yugoslav poet, has declared that Matthias and Vuckovic have "found the right approach, the right answer to the challenge" of translating the entire cycle of *Kosovo* poems. He has called the results of the collaboration "a series of fine, inspired, sometimes brilliant, truly poetical solutions" which will be "a great thing as far as the modern reception of Serbian traditional culture is concerned." Charles Simic compares the movement of the verse in these translations to the "variable foot" effect of William Carlos Williams' later poetry, and argues that Matthias "grasps the poetic strategies of the anonymous Serbian poet as well as Pound did those of Chinese poetry."

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Charles Simic

PREFACE

I was ten years old when I first read these heroic ballads. It was during one of the bleak postwar winters in Yugoslavia. There was not much to eat and little money to heat our apartment properly. I went to bed as soon as I got home from school, to keep warm. Then I would listen to the radio and read. Among the books my father left was a thick anthology of "Serbian Folk Poems." That's what they were called. In the next few years I read the whole volume and some of the poems in it at least a dozen times. Even today I can still recite passages from my favorite ballads. None of this, of course, was in any way unusual. Every Serbian loves these poems.

The Kosovo Cycle I learned to appreciate somewhat later. I first fell in love with the ballads that describe the adventures and heroic feats of various rebels during the Turkish occupation. They are "action packed," as they used to say on movie posters. The Turks are the cruel conquerors and the Serbs are either clever slaves or outlaws.

In the ballad *Little Radoyitsa*, for example, the inmates of Aga Becir Aga's notorious prison are rejoicing because their pal, little Radoyitsa, still hasn't been caught. But then, he is. They throw him in the deepest dungeon among the now despairing prisoners and he figures out what to do. He tells his comrades to inform the Aga as soon as the day breaks that he died during the night. That's what they do. The Turks carry Radoyitsa, who is pretending to be dead, into the prison yard. The aga takes one look and tells his servants to throw the stinking corpse into the sea. But now his wife and daughter show up. The wife says that Radoyitsa is only pretending, that they should build a fire on his chest to see if he stirs. They do, and he doesn't. Then she asks them to hammer nails under his fingernails. Still Radoyitsa doesn't budge. The aga has had enough, but the wife has one more idea. She asks her daughter to dance with her girlfriends around the dead man, and the daughter, we are told, is very pretty. There follows a wonderful description of the daughter's flowing robes and jingling bracelets as she dances. Poor Radoyitsa is opening one eye and his mouth is curling up into a grin. The daughter sees this and throws her veil over his face. Radoyitsa is finally thrown into the sea where he manages to swim out to a far rock to nurse his wounds and wait for the night to come. The aga is having supper with his family when he breaks in, kills the parents, frees the prisoners, and takes the daughter to be his wife.

I hope the bare plot outline of *Little Radojica* conveys how entertaining these poems are. What is missing, of course, is the building suspense, the wonderful descriptive details, as well as the humor and poetry of the piece. Even in these later ballads the complexity of the vision, for which the Kosovo Cycle is famous, is present. It's not that Turks are all bad and the Serbs all heroes. The view of history and the appraisals of the individual figures found in the poems are full of ambivalences and psychological savvy. These rebels are often ordinary brigands out to enrich themselves. They collaborate with the enemy and seem to have every ordinary human weakness. If they're heroes, it's in spite of themselves. Neither the tribe nor the hero are idealized. The world view of these poems is different from that of the Kosovo Cycle where the mythic and epic dimensions reign supreme. Nevertheless, they both touch the earth. A sense of proportion and a sense of realism is what they share.

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One day in school, in what must have been my fifth or sixth grade, they announced that a *guslar* would perform for us. This was unexpected. Most city people in those days had never heard a gusle being played, and as for us kids, brought up as we were on American popular music, the prospect meant next to nothing. In any case, at the appointed time we were herded into the gym where an old peasant, sitting stiffly in a chair and holding a one-stringed instrument, awaited us. When we had quieted down, he started to play the gusle.

I still remember my astonishment at what I heard. I suppose I expected the old instrument to sound beautiful, the singing to be inspiring as our history books told us was the case. *Gusle*, however, can hardly be heard in a large room. The sound of that one string is faint, rasping, screechy, tentative. The chanting that goes with it is toneless, monotonous, and unrelieved by vocal flourishes of any kind. The singer simply doesn't show off. There's nothing to do but pay close attention to the words which the *guslar* enunciates with great emphasis and clarity. We heard *The Death of the Mother of the Jugovici* that day and a couple of others. After a while, the poem and the archaic, other-worldly-sounding instrument began to get to me and everybody else. Our anonymous ancestor poet knew what he was doing. This stubborn drone combined with the sublime lyricism of the poem touched the rawest spot in our psyche. The old wounds were reopened.

The early modernist Serbian poet and critic, Stanislav Vinaver, says that the sound of gusle is the sound of defeat. That, of course, is what the poems in the Kosovo Cycle are all about. Serbs are possibly unique among peoples in that in their national epic poetry they celebrate defeat. Other people sing of the triumphs of their conquering heroes while the Serbs sing of the tragic sense of life. In the eyes of the universe, the poems tell us, the most cherished tribal ambitions are nothing. Even the idea of statehood is tragic. Poor Turks, the poet is suggesting, look what's in store for them.

Vinaver also speaks of "heroic spite." Achilles rebelled against all the Greek chieftans; Gilgamesh against the gods. The poet of the Kosovo Cycle rebels against the very idea of historical triumph. Defeat, he appears to be saying, is wiser than victory. The great antiheroes of these poems experience a moment of tragic consciousness. They see the alternatives with all their moral implications. They are free to make a fateful choice. They make it with full understanding of its consequences.

For the folk poet of these poems, true nobility and heroism comes from the consciousness of the difficult choice. They say the old Greeks had a hand in this. Very possibly. The world from which these poems came didn't change that much from the days of the Greek dramatists.

There's also the Christian context, but even that doesn't fully explain the poems' view of the human condition. The Serbs do not think of themselves as Christian martyrs, or as chosen people with a mystical destiny. The ballads are remarkable for their feel for actual history. The mythical is present but so is realism. This is the fate of all the small peoples in history and of all the individuals who find themselves the tragic agents and victims of its dialectics.

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Everyone in the West who has known these poems has proclaimed them to be literature of the highest order which ought to be known better. And, of course, there have been many translations since the mid-nineteenth century. Except for one or two recent exceptions, they do not resemble the originals at all. We either get Victorian Homer or just plain incompetence.

There's no question that the poems are hard to translate. Their literary idiom is somewhat unfamiliar. There's nothing quite like it in English or other western European literatures. One has to invent equivalents rather than to just recreate familiar models.

Perhaps the main stumbling block is prosody. The ten-syllable line in Serbian is a mighty force. Each syllable is audible and distinct. The trochaic beat sets a fairly regular and steady pace. The translator immediately runs into a problem. The lines in English translation tend to be much longer. Both the conciseness and the syllabic quality of the verse are lost. One is left with a lot of words per line and no meter to recreate the narrative drive of the original.

Then there's the problem of the diction. The early translations tend to poeticize and idealize what is really a model of economy and understatement. This is not Ossian, or even Tennyson. In the Kosovo Cycle there's an absolute minimum of verbosity and epic posturing.

What John Matthias and Vladeta Vuckovic have done strikes me as an ideal solution. Breaking the line at the caesuras gives it a lilt, an anticipation at the break, a "variable foot" effect in the manner of William Carlos Williams's later poetry, that captures the pace of the narrative. Matthias is a superb craftsman. His intuition as to where and how to adjust the tempo of the various parts of the poem to achieve a maximum narrative and dramatic result almost never fails him. He grasps the poetic strategies of the anonymous Serbian poet as much as Pound did those of Chinese poetry.

The other great accomplishment of these translations is in the language. When it comes to fate and tragedy, the original seems to be telling us, use only absolutely necessary words. The clarity, the narrative inevitability, and the eloquence and poetry of the Kosovo Cycle come through in these translations. I don't know any better ones. If the Serbian heroic ballads are indeed great poetry, as people keep saying, you will get a good taste of that greatness here.

John Matthias

INTRODUCTION

The Serbian Empire reached its brief moment of glory in the mid-fourteenth century during the reign of Tsar Stefan Dusan. Two centuries earlier, the Nemanja dynasty was born when its founder, Stefan Nemanja, obtained recognition from the Emperor of Byzantium as grand *zhupan* of Serbia in 1159. Nemanja's younger son, Stefan the First-crowned, and his remarkable brother Sava, established the kingdom on a firm military, cultural, and religious basis after the Crusaders' victory over the Byzantines at Constantinople in 1204. Stefan became king in 1217, and by 1219 Sava had succeeded in establishing an autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church with himself at its head as archbishop. By 1331, following the violent reign of Milutin and the murder by his son of Stefan Dechanski, Stefan Dusan, patricide and political visionary, was king, becoming tsar in 1346. He pacified Bulgaria by marrying the Bulgarian tsar's sister, conquered much of Macedonia, defended himself against the aggressive Hungarians, and aspired to the crown of Byzantium while ruling over a rapidly expanding empire which stretched from the Sava to the Gulf of Corinth, from the Bulgarian border to the

Adriatic Sea. Rebecca West has famously compared him with Elizabeth I, saying that upon his sudden death in 1355, and with the resulting factional struggles which occurred during the reign of his son Uros and coincided with the Ottoman invasions culminating in the battles of Marica and Kosovo, it is probable that as much was deducted from civilization "as the sum of England after the Tudor Age."¹

The chief contenders in the factional struggle after 1356 were two members of the Serbian nobility, the brothers Vukasin and Ugljesa. By 1371 they had recognized too late the necessity of unity against the Turks, and perished together fighting Sultan Murad's marshal, Evrenos, at the Battle of Marica. In this year Uros also died without an heir. Now the claimants for the throne of Serbia were three: Marko, the son of Vukasin; Tvrtko, the king of Bosnia; and Lazar, the nobleman who would lead the armies at the Battle of Kosovo and become the much-mythologized and Christ-like tsar of the epic songs. The son of Vukasin experienced a similar metamorphosis and became, in time, the epic hero Marko Kraljevic.

"The image of disaster of the Battle of Kosovo has lived for centuries in Serbian literary and oral traditions with the elusive vividness of a hallucination," writes Svetozar Koljevic.² History, in fact, is a good deal less informative than are poetry, folklore, and song; less vividly hallucinatory, it is more like a mirage. What we know is that nine years after the Battle of Marica, Lazar managed to bring his own forces together with those of his son-in-law, Vuk Brankovic, Tvrtko of Bosnia, and other powerful Serbian and Croat leaders for a decisive battle on Kosovo field, the Field of Blackbirds, on St. Vitus's Day, 1389. The fortress at Nis had fallen to Murad twenty-five days before at the end of his steady progress toward the Danube and Sava across the valley of the Morava. The Kosovo battle resulted in heavy losses on both sides, but seems to have been devastating for the Serbs in that most of their leaders and nobility were killed or driven into exile. Sultan Murad was assassinated behind his lines by a Serbian knight, Milos Obilic, and Lazar was captured and beheaded by the Turks. The epic songs give two contradictory reasons for the Serbian defeat: the treachery of Vuk Brankovic - which seems to have no basis in fact - and Lazar's decision before the battle to sacrifice his earthly kingdom for a heavenly kingdom, to lead his men into battle knowing what the tragic outcome was to be as one might lead a host of martyrs consciously into a conflagration. Although full Turkish domination of Serbia was actually only very slowly achieved by Murad's successors, and while the final and conclusive battle was not fought until 1459 for the fortress at Smederevo on the Danube, it is Kosovo which has lived in the popular imagination and in epic poetry as the moment of annihilation and enslavement. Bernard Johnson has compared the "popular belief in 'a great nation strangled at birth' " to "the legends surrounding the Battle of Hastings ... or Roncevaux."³ One might also invoke *The Gododdin* of Aneirin and the Welsh defeat at Catraeth or, it goes without saying, the fall of Troy. Vasko Popa, who like Ivan Lalic and Miodrag Pavlovic, brings the myth of Kosovo forward from the epic songs into the Yugoslav poetry of our own day, writes in *Earth Erect*:

A field like no other
Heaven above it
Heaven below⁴

II

Scholars are still uncertain at what point precisely the songs of Kosovo began to be sung. The decasyllabic poems emerging from a patriarchal village context were preceded by, and evidently for a while developed parallel to, the poems in lines of fourteen to sixteen syllables emerging from a feudal context in an urban Adriatic setting known as *bugarstice*. This tradition may have been uprooted from its natural home in the medieval Serbian courts and obliged to go into exile with those who patronized it and became, in some cases, its epic heroes. Or it may have originated with the fugitives in exile. At any rate, after the Turkish victories at Marica, Kosovo, and finally Smederevo, many Serbs, including numbers of the surviving nobility, migrated to Bosnia, Herzegovina, and along the Adriatic coast, some of them settling in or near the Republic of Ragusa, later to become the city of Dubrovnik.

Dragutin Subotic believes that the strong influence of Italian literature and popular poetry in Ragusa - the Sicilian originals of current *strambotti* and *rispetti*, for example, as much as Ariosto and Tasso - together with the appearance there of troubadour poetry (perhaps through the agency of Petrarch) and certain Castilian romances with their dominant theme of the struggle between Christianity and Islam, acted on the memories of educated Serbian exiles to produce the first bugarstice based on accumulating oral histories and folklore sometime in the late fifteenth century.⁵ Many of these poems dealt with the struggles between Serbs or Croats and the Turks, although most of them sang of battles which were fought well after Kosovo. Svetozar Koljevic, observing that poetic conventions will naturally enough be slow to develop in a migratory culture, also dates the appearance of the bugarstice about Kosovo and later battles with the Turks from the Adriatic coast in the fifteenth century, although he minimizes the Italian influence and doesn't consider that of the troubadours, stressing instead his view that epic singing had always been cultivated in the medieval Serbian courts. He argues that, with the breakdown of feudal civilization and increasingly powerful, systematic, and coordinated Turkish domination in the Balkans, the epic songs of men who had achieved a professional status in the feudal context also, as it were, broke down. This left a debris of themes, techniques, phrases, and epic formulas that were inherited by illiterate village singers who adapted them - not without a certain initial clumsiness showing where and how the metamorphosis had taken place - to the characteristic decasyllabic song accompanied by the gusle, the single-stringed instrument which became ubiquitous among peasants, shepherds, and outlaws during the late phase of Turkish rule.⁶ Decasyllabic songs of a lyric kind - including the so-called "women's songs" treating domestic and erotic subjects - may have been sung in villages and fields for a thousand years. The line proved ultimately to be more flexible and muscular in its handling of the epic subjects than had been the line of the bugarstice. Furthermore, it positively flourished. Although we have only about a hundred feudal bugarstice that have been preserved in written texts, there are literally thousands of the decasyllabic songs. And it is the decasyllabic songs that express most eloquently the tragedy of Kosovo.

If the traditions of the feudal *bugarstice* and the decasyllabic village song are undeniably interconnected, and if there is a case to be made for a connection between the *bugarstice* and a written literature, whether Italian, Spanish, or even French, the question of any direct relationship between the decasyllabic village singing and a written literature is still a matter of debate. Albert B. Lord in particular, arguing for the purity of the oral stream, denies any relationship at all between the two traditions in his famous study, *The Singer of Tales*, and declines to find much significance in the written compositions apparently modeled on oral forms by Sisko Mencetic and Dzore Drzic in the fifteenth-century or in the eighteenth-century literary epic written in a combination of prose and decasyllabic lines by Andrija Kacic-Miosic.⁷ Subotic, on the other hand, believes that "both currents flowed into each other: heroic songs chanted by the *guslari* found their way into literature, while written stories reached the *guslari*, who turned them into decasyllabic lines."⁸ Koljevic, too, believes in what he calls "the rich and fascinating interplay of literary and oral culture in the central Balkans." Taking them more seriously as evidence of reciprocity between the written and the oral traditions than does Albert Lord, Koljevic cites the poems of Dzore Drzic, and he notes that parts of Ivan Gundulic's epic *Osman* found their way from seventeenth-century Dubrovnik into oral poems around Kotor.⁹ Lord himself, in fact, acknowledges that decasyllabic passages from Kacic-Miosic's poem later "entered into the oral tradition whence they had not come."¹⁰ For our purposes, however, what needs now to be observed is the function of the decasyllabic oral song itself as a weapon in the hands of an occupied people leading to the moment of its systematic documentation and literary retrieval by Vuk Karadzic during the nineteenth century rebellion against the Turks.

III

If I were asked to produce a single image among those known to me most resonant of the suffering endured by the Christian Slavic population during the long night of Turkish rule in the Balkans, I would not hesitate a moment before choosing a scene in the third chapter of Ivo Andric's sweeping historical novel, *The Bridge on the Drina*.

Muhammad Sokolovic (later Sokollu), the son of a Bosnian peasant who was among the children regularly taken from their parents and borne off to Istanbul at an early age to swell the ranks of the Janissary corps or to

do the work of slaves, rose to the remarkable heights of grand vizier in 1565 and governed the Turkish empire until his death in 1579. Wishing to be remembered in his homeland, he ordered the construction of the immense stone bridge across the Drina at Visegrad which resulted in years of forced labor for the inhabitants of the area and particular hardship for the members of the unconverted Christian *rayah*. In Andric's novel, one of the peasants pressed for labor on the bridge attempts to sabotage the work, spreading a rumor that a *vila*, the often malicious fairy of Balkan folklore, was destroying the bridge. Caught at night prizing cut and mortared stones into the river, he is tortured and sentenced to be impaled at the highest point of the construction work on a larded wooden stake eight feet in length and pointed at the end with iron. The slow, anatomically detailed description of the execution is an agony; one feels the shaft in one's own entrails. A Gypsy executioner hammers the stake from the anus through the man's entire body, without piercing any of the important organs, until it exits at the right shoulder by the ear. The peasant, slowly dying between noon and sunset, is placed erect on the bridge, spitted like a roasting pig on his stake. To children gathered on the riverbank, it looked as if "the strange man who hovered over the water [was] suddenly frozen in the midst of a leap. " If impaling under the Turks was about as common as crucifixion under the Romans, there is also little doubt with whom this martyred peasant in his death is meant to be compared.

Against such suffering as the impaled man is emblem of, what recourse? In the same chapter of Andric's novel, there is another scene. Exhausted men from the Christian *rayah*, worn down by forced labor on the bridge, sit around the dying embers of a fire in a large stable drying their wet clothes and worrying about the work that's left undone, the autumn plowing, in their villages. A recently impressed Montenegrin is among them. Taking a gusle from the pocket of his cloak, he applies resin to the string while one of the peasants stands guard outside. "All looked at the Montenegrin as if they saw him for the first time and at the gusle which seemed to disappear in his huge hands ... At last the first notes wailed out, sharp and uneven." Excitement in the stable rises. Everyone is motionless, intent now on the tale which is about to be sung.

Suddenly, after he had more or less attuned his voice to the gusle, the Montenegrin threw back his head proudly and violently so that his Adam's apple stood out in his scrawny neck and his sharp profile was outlined in the firelight, and sang in a strangled and constrained voice: A-a-a-a a-a-a-a-and then all at once in a clear and ringing tone:

*The Serbian Tzar Stefan
Drank wine in fertile Prizren,
By him sat the old patriarchs,
Four of them . . .*

The peasants pressed closer and closer around the singer but without making the slightest noise; their very breathing could be heard. They half closed their eyes, carried away with wonder ... The Montenegrin developed his melody more and more rapidly, even more beautiful and bolder, while the wet and sleepless workmen, carried away and insensible to all else, followed the tale as if it were their own more beautiful and more glorious destiny!"¹¹

So it must have been by the sixteenth century in the areas which Koljevic calls "the cradle of decasyllabic village singing"¹² - Bosnia, Hertzegovina, and Montenegro - where Serbian migration had carried the epic debris of the *bugarstice*. Many of the songs, he believes, were sung about Kosovo, though none could yet be written down under the eyes of the Turkish authorities. As Andric portrays the singing in his novel, it is somehow both an escape from pain and a stimulus to action (the sabotage on the bridge follows immediately). As if one were to think at one and the same time listening to the *guslar*: "Lazar is dead, and there is nothing to do but rest in the song of Tsar Stefan who ruled in glory long before the Turks," and "Lazar is dead - but let us avenge him and be free in a kingdom like Tsar Stefan's was before the Turks!", the objective conditions of history at any particular time determining which side of the contradictory response was likely in the end to predominate. One might legitimately compare the analogous power of certain American Negro spirituals simultaneously to provide consolation and assure an enslaved community that a day of reckoning would come

for the oppressors. "When Israel was in Egypt's land," they sang, although in the case of the Balkans it was Egypt that was in the land of Israel.¹³

The day of reckoning for the Turks began in 1804 with the first Serbian uprising and coincided with the career of Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic, the great linguistic reformer and collector of oral literature. Karadzic was born in 1787 in a village on the east of the Macva Plain which is itself bordered on the west by the Drina. His family, having come from Herzegovina, moved to Trsic in the Serbian hill-country on the edge of Bosnia, insuring that the future scholar would grow up not only in the region which had become the heart of decasyllabic village singing, but also where he would experience both the excitement and the cruelties of heroic life later to be sung or spoken for his dictation by Filip Visnjic, Tesan Podrugovic, and others who fought in or followed the fortunes of the revolt. Conscripted as a clerk by Djordje Curcija, a leader of the uprising in his region, Karadzic served in his undisciplined army until it was defeated in the summer of 1804 by a Turkish assault from Bosnia across the Drina into Loznica and on to Sabac. Karadzic's description of Curcija's death at the hands of men fighting under Nenadovic, another leader of the revolt who had persuaded Karadzic that Curcija was guilty of treachery and obtained his superior's permission to have him killed, is as gruesome as anything in the bloodiest of heroic songs.¹⁴

By 1813 the first insurrection was put down by the Turks, who were only driven out of Serbia for good during the second revolt led by Milos Obrenovic beginning in 1815. Like thousands of other Serbs, Karadzic crossed into Austrian territory where, before settling in Vienna, he recorded epic poems by singers who, like himself, had fought in the rebellion. Returning to the monastery of Sisatovac in Srem province in 1814 and 1815, he systematically set about his life-long task of taking down the songs of medieval Serbia, the Battle of Kosovo, Marko Kraljevic, and the recent insurrection itself from men who had inherited the tradition of decasyllabic singing from the peasants, outlaws, border-raiders, merchants' sons, shepherds, and occasional blind visionaries living under Turkish rule. Filip Visnjic, Karadzic's most famous singer, actually personifies this last popularly stereotypical image of the *guslar*, while Tesan Podrugovic, who preferred to speak rather than to sing his poems, was indeed an outlaw driven into the woods for killing a Turk. Podrugovic joined the uprising in 1804 and returned to fight again when the second revolt broke out in 1815, literally in the midst of dictating poems. Most of the great songs about Marko Kraljevic in Karadzic's collection were recited by Podrugovic, and many reflect the characteristics not only of the long tradition he had inherited, but also of his own powerful personality. A unique individual talent also modifies tradition in the case of Old Milija, especially in his wonderful version of *Banovic Strahinja*, and perhaps also Old Rasko and Stojan the Outlaw.

There were, of course, written records of the oral poems before Karadzic began to publish systematically in 1814. Single *bugarstice* had been written down as early as 1555 and, by 1720, the Erlangen Manuscript had recorded decasyllabic heroic poems. Alberto Fortis's Italian *Travels in Dalmatia*, containing *The Wife of Asan-aga* both in the original and in Italian translation, followed in 1774, reaching Goethe whose German version, *Klagesang von der edlen Frauen des Asan Aga*, appeared in Herder's *Folksongs* in 1778 and drew the attention of poets and intellectuals all over Europe to the Serbian oral tradition. Karadzic's work as a collector, however, coinciding with a nationalist revolt and with the enthusiasm of the Romantic movement for folk poetry of all kinds, and reinforced by his reformation of the Serbian language itself based on the conviction that Serbian should be written as it was spoken by the people and preserved in the people's poetry, made an unprecedented and lasting impact. Support in the enterprise came at once from the deeply influential Jacob Grimm, and later from a wide range of poets, critics, and translators including Goethe, "Talyj" (Therese Albertina Louisa von Jacob), Wilhelm Gerhard, Sir John Bowring, Adam Mickiewicz, V. G. Belinsky, and Alexander Pushkin (who, along with translating some of Karadzic's actual texts, was deceived by Prosper Mérimée's synthetic confection called *La Guzla*). Karadzic himself, busy with other projects, often lacking money, and crippled by a mysterious withered leg that required the use both of a wooden attachment and a crutch, traveled for years throughout Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and the Adriatic coast recording for posterity both epic and lyrical oral poems. Not until 1862 was the definitive four-volume Viennese edition of *Serbian Folk Poems* complete. Although there have been other collections since, none has replaced it.

Like virtually all other serious translators of the Kosovo poems, we have used the versions collected by Vuk Karadzic. Interestingly, only one of our selections from Karadzic's second volume containing decasyllabic poems about Kosovo, its anticipation and its aftermath, was taken down from one of his most famous singers - Podrugovic's *Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Militsa*. Along with the five eloquent fragments dictated to Karadzic by his father and an unknown singer's version of *Music Stefan*, several of the best known poems - *The Downfall of the Kingdom of Serbia*, *Tsaritsa Militsa and Vladeta the Voyvoda*, *The Kosovo Maiden*, the post-Kosovo *Death of Duke Prijezda* and probably also an unknown singer's *The Death of the Mother of the Jugovici* - were written down from the memorized recitations of old blind women, some of them associated with monasteries in Srem. It is difficult to know what to make of this. Before Karadzic's time, these songs, or versions of them, doubtless would have been sung to the *gusle* by male singers such as Filip Visnjic. It is hard to know when and how the old women became custodians of several of the greatest epic poems in the tradition. Koljevic calls the part they play "a completely different story . . . which is not usually fully recognized" and finds their greatest contribution to be "their sense of the distant past [which] seems to be stronger and sometimes more accurate than that of other singers."¹⁵ But the old women were not, in fact, singers. Nor was Karadzic's father. Nor even, technically, was Podrugovic when he spoke his poems. We have arrived, therefore, at a point where it is necessary to say a few words about the technique of oral poetry and about what happens when an oral poem is dictated, written down as a fixed text, and translated into another language - in our case English.

IV

Most American and British readers who are acquainted with the tradition of decasyllabic epic poetry know it from the work of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord culminating in Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, the Harvard collection of *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs* taken down by modern recording techniques, and Bela Bartok's musical transcriptions of the actual singing and playing of the *gusle*. Although Karadzic often stressed that the poems of his singers were improvised rather than memorized, it required the work of Parry and Lord to demonstrate in technical terms the manner in which an apprentice singer slowly learned a full vocabulary of epic formulas and phrases in terms of which he would create orally a poem which he had learned orally in the act of oral performance. In his chapter on "Writing and Oral Tradition," Lord likens the act of writing down an oral poem to photographing Proteus; a particular version is artificially preserved while the song itself continues to change its shape in subsequent performances.¹⁶ Podrugovic's version of *Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Militsa* would have been different in some respects on Wednesday from the version he dictated to Karadzic on Tuesday, although there also would have been many stable elements - runs of lines, and of course the epic formulas themselves - remaining intact from one performance to another. And yet even by Karadzic's time, the fluidity of the oral tradition had begun in some ways to harden; Podrugovic himself no longer sang but spoke his poems, and the Kosovo tales dictated by the old blind women sitting in the shade of monasteries had been memorized word for word - like Paternoster, as S. Radojic has remarked.¹⁷

This introduction is not the place to take up in detail the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition or the recent chapters in the debate it has generated.¹⁸ It is enough that the reader understand that, in the case of each poem, he is reading a written English version of a written Serbo-Croatian version of an oral poem which, in the hands of another singer, or in earlier times, or in the hands of the same singer (with the exception of the old women) at a later time, would have been differently performed in certain significant respects.

Looking at a printed text in the absence of actual singing to the *gusle*, the translator is confronting a verbal rhythm which is insistently trochaic. Each pentameter line, moreover, is invariably end-stopped, and there is always a caesura pause after the fourth syllable. Between them, Lord and Bartok have shown how subtle and flexible this line becomes through an interplay of melody and text in actual performance. Accents are not stressed with equal intensity, iambs and dactyls may be imposed and extra syllables supplied by words without meaning. The last syllable is often distorted or swallowed, and the penultimate is inclined to become the most prominent; further, the singer does not usually observe the caesura (although its existence is very real to him)." Written down in cold print, however, the line to be translated is somewhat distressingly regular:

Predictably enough, different translators have dealt with the line in different ways, and solutions range from attempts to write English trochaic pentameter without making the heroic poems sound like *The Song of Hiawatha*, to imitations of William Morris's meter in his translation of *Sigurd the Volsung*, simple syllable-counting, prose that respects the integrity of each line and attempts to achieve occasional rhythmical effects, and prose printed in paragraphs.²⁰ Our own solution has been to break the original line into halflines, vary the position of the caesura (to coincide with the line breaks, which in fact sometimes make for only a visual pause in reading), and strive for a flexible and melodious iambic rhythm. I don't think there is any getting away from the fact that it is pretty much only the iambic pentameter that is capable of expressing traditional heroic emotions in English. (Even Christopher Logue's Homer is often heavily iambic.) We do use fragments of trochaic meter when possible in a dominantly iambic context, but we do not at any point attempt to reproduce a strict decasyllabic line. Although we cannot provide on the page the rhythmic subtleties that an actual oral performance accompanied by the gusle would make manifest, we are able to strive, at any rate, for variety and flexibility within a norm. Again, we do not use a strict syllable count in our line, and we do not always end-stop. The line length varies from four to seven feet; the norm is five. The pause at the line break varies from long, to short, to merely visual.

If this approach proves to be controversial among purists, I suspect that other decisions which we have made along the way will be even more so. I will note just three more possible issues here and relegate the rest to a footnote. (1) We call the Serbian Tsar both Lazar and Lazarus, depending upon rhythmical considerations. Although rather odd on the face of it, I think this works out perfectly satisfactorily in practice. It amounts to treating the name as if it could be inflected in English (which it can be and is in Serbo-Croat). (2) It is characteristic of these poems for the tense to shift back and forth from past to historic present somewhat in the manner of the *Poema del Cid*.²¹ We follow the original changes of tense in our translation only when the effect of doing so is interesting or meaningful in English and never when it is merely conventional or might create confusion. (3) We now and then use Serbian and English titles interchangeably. The "Tsar" is also called "Prince" and "Lord." A "knight" may well walk into a poem and a "voyvoda" or a "duke" walk out of it.²² But at this point I should stop saying "we" and say "I." My collaborator, who has been gratifyingly forbearing throughout our several years of work together, is not responsible for some of the more radical liberties taken with some of our texts. It would take far too much space to explain and defend all of these, and I hope it will not seem disingenuous to say that it was in fact the tradition of oral composition and improvisation itself that made me feel free to add occasional lines and epic formulas of my own, eliminate others, lengthen and shorten lines, and even leave untranslated the uninteresting conclusions of *The Downfall of the Kingdom of Serbia* and *Marko Kraljevic and the Eagle*. (This last, I know, is not properly speaking a Kosovo poem; but I want to include it as a transition to the next major cycle and a promise to myself to keep working.) I have also been perfectly willing to borrow phrases and diction from other translators when neither I nor my collaborator could think of anything better. These small acts of plagiarism, too, seem to me perfectly consistent with a tradition which does not conceive of or reward originality according to the terms in which we have come to understand it. I have tried, in the end, to produce final versions of the poems translated here in a readable, rhythmical English - an English which I have tested myself in oral performance in England, America, and Yugoslavia.

I must give Vladeta Vuckovic the last word. I have tried to communicate something of the nature of our collaboration in my poem to him appearing as an Afterword to our translations. For Vuckovic, the Kosovo poems exist, as they do for Andric, Popa, Lalic, and Pavlovic, as part of a tradition which he himself continues in his work. There is an irony and sadness in his poems which is difficult to render in English, but which, I think, provides a usefully provocative contrast to Andric's vision of the guslar quoted earlier from the pages of *The Bridge on the Drina*. His long poem about Serbian mythology and history is written both in verse and prose. This is part of the conclusion to section one:

"What Serbs remained got up from the plain and counted each other and called out, but nobody got any answers. No one came to help them, and so the Turkish Power passed the border of the First Dimension. After a

while there remained almost nothing at all: dust and ashes, vain repentance, late remorse, and the heavy blackness of total defeat.

The Serbs quieted down, but they did not shut their mouths. Idled by the time on their hands they started to sing and sang themselves hoarse in endless poems accompanied by the mourning sounds of the sobbing gusle. The blind guslars gazed into the future, and those who could see covered themselves out of shame and became the leaders of the blind But what kind of music is this, my poor soul, reduced to just one string!"

John Matthias

Notes

1 Rebecca West: *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1942, reprint, London: Macmillan Publishers, 1982) p. 900

2 Svetozar Koljevic: *The Epic In The Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 154

3 Bernard Johnson: Introduction to his translation of Miodrag Pavlovic's Selected Poems, *The Slavs Beneath Parnassus* (St Paul: New Rivers Press, 1987) p. 20

4 Vasko Popa: *Collected Poems 1943-1976*, trans. Anne Pennington (Manchester: England Carcanet Press 1978), p. 109

5 Dragutin Subotic, *Yugoslav Popular Ballads: Their Origin and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932) pp. 149-60

6 Koljevic, pp. 31-66

7 Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (1960, reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1980) p. 135

8 Subotic, p. 90

9 Koljevic, pp. 2, 33-34

10 Lord, p. 136

11 Ivo Andric, *The Bridge on the Drina*, trans. Lovett F Edwards (1959, reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) p. 34

12 Koljevic, p. 300

13 Of the major European epics, *The Battle of Kosovo* is probably most like *The Song of Roland* where the epic hero is also a Christian martyr. But in another sense, Kosovo is unique. It is both fragmentary and open ended. The slow accretion of parts and episodes what the French call *fermentation epique*, was incomplete by the time the individual sections began to be written down. Or, if one wishes to think of the poem being completed (to the extent that *Roland* was completed by the time it was written down), it is completed only by the cycles which follow it - by the poems of Marko Kraljevic and the poems about the revolt against the Turks - and by the events of 1804-1813 which produced both the last great singers and many of the tales they sang.

14 Duncan Wilson, *The Life and Times of Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 43

15 Koljevic, p. 319

16 Lord, p. 124

17 S. Radojcic, cited in Koljevic, p. 320

18 See especially Koljevic's concluding chapter, "Technique and Achievement", pp. 322-43

19 Lord, pp. 38-42

20 Translations imitations versions and travesties of the Kosovo, Marko Kraljevic and other epic poems have been published in English beginning in 1827 with Sir John Bowring's *Servian Popular Poetry* (Sir Walter Scott's version of Goethe's version of "The Wife of Asan aga" was published only in 1924.) The interested reader should consult the work of Owen Meredith, J. G. Lockhart, Elodie Lawton Mijatovich, Helen Rootham, G. R. Noyes, Woislav M. Petrovitch, R. W. Seton-Watson, W. A. Morison, D. H. Low and Nada Curcija Prodanovic. Representative selections by many of the above are quoted for comparative purposes in Subotic, and a bibliography of all translations published before 1975 is available in *Yugoslav literature in English: A Bibliography of Translations and Criticism*, edited by Vasa D Mihailovich and Mateja Matejic. The most recent translation is *Marko The Prince*, by Anne Pennington and Peter Levi (London: Duckworth, 1984).

21 W. S. Merwin notes in his translation (*Poem of The Cid*: New York: Meridian Books, 1975 p. xxx) that the purpose of using the historic present was to "bring details into the foreground", while the past tense was intended to hold them at a remove. This sometimes also seems to be the case in the Kosovo poems.

22 To continue, but also to exonerate my collaborator: (4) I have felt free to add and subtract formulaic adjectives almost at will. What was the "white castle at Krushevats" may well become "the castle at white Krushevats," etc. (5) I have sometimes stretched the line so far beyond ten syllables that I have had the uneasy feeling I was remaking bugarstice out of decasyllabic poems. (6) Sometimes two lines of the original become one line in English when there is a great deal of repetition of the formulaic matter. (7) I have worked up the last fragment - Who is that fine hero - almost as a lyric. This may be going too far. (8) I have gratuitously included tags from Yeats and Pound: "Raging in the dark" and "I have seen what I have seen". This *is* going too far.

A Note on Pronunciation

In her own frustrated note on pronunciation in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Rebecca West observes that "the Cyrillic alphabet is designed to give a perfect phonetic rendering of the Slav group of languages, and provides characters for several consonants which other groups lack. The Latin alphabet can only represent these consonants by clapping accents on other consonants which bear some resemblance to them; and Croatian usage still further confuses the English eye by using *c* to represent not *s* and *k* but *ts*, and *j* for *y*." She concludes that "in practice the casual English reader is baffled by this unfamiliar use of what looks familiar and is apt to pass over names without grasping them clearly." In the context of poetry one must add "without *hearing* them clearly," and worry more about the English (and American) ear than about the eye. Because line after line of the poems translated here might otherwise be distorted by mishearing names of people and places, we have decided to transliterate where it seems necessary to produce a fluent reading. This has meant that names of heroes such as Milos Obilic and places such as Nis and Pec have been transliterated as Milosh Obilich, Nish and Pech. But there are places where the system breaks down. Rebecca West gave up trying to transliterate "Sarajevo" and "Skoplje" and was regularly plagued by the problem of liquid consonants which the Latin alphabet must indicate by adding *j* to *l* and *n*. The lesson seems to be that one should leave the Jug alone and remind the reader that *j* is usually pronounced *y* as in yard (the exceptions being after *a*, when it is pronounced *ie* as in tie, and in combination with *l* or *n* where *lj* sounds like *lli* in million and *ny* like *gn* in Boulogne) "Jugovichi," therefore, appears in our text rather than "Yugovichi." (NOTE: changed for Internet in Yugovichi) The reader will find some other inconsistencies where we have been unable to devise a transliteration which was not unacceptably ugly.

The chief inconsistency, however, will appear to be our decision to leave the names of people and places in the Introduction entirely untransliterated. The introduction deals with so many historical figures and actual geographical places that we felt it best to spell the names in question with the conventional diacritical marks in order to facilitate easy reference should the reader wish to pursue one thing or another in historical, literary, or critical sources. Besides, rhythm and sound are not at issue here. The reader will understand that, for example, the Marko Kraljevic of the Introduction is the Marko Kraljevich of the text. Although it is somewhat simplified, Subotic's key to pronunciation will help both with reading the Introduction and in making whatever transitions are less than obvious from spellings there to the partial transliteration of the text. In addition to *lj* and *nj* cited above, Subotic lists: *c* like *ts* in lots; *c* like *ch* in chalk; *ch* like *ch* in church; *dz* like *j* in John; *s* like *sh* in ship; and *z* like *s* in pleasure. All vowels, he reminds us, are pronounced "openly," as in Italian; and all are short. This

may also be the place to note that Serbo-Croat permits the reversibility of Christian name and surname, and of name and title: Stefan Musich, for example, may also be called Musich Stefan; Marko Kraljevich may be called Kraljevich Marko. Either order is acceptable, although for some names and titles convention has established a preference: one should say Banovich Strahinja and not Strahinja Banovich. Finally, we have decided to spell Kosovo with a single s throughout, but we should note insistently again that all the vowels are short.