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INHALT

Beiträge

MIRJANA DETELIĆ	
Dumezil between the east and west. Formulaic use of attributes <i>white</i> and <i>heroic</i> in South Slav oral epic poetry.....	153
MERIH EROL	
Music and the Nation in Greek and Turkish Contexts (19th – early 20th c.): A paradigm of cultural transfers	165
MICHAEL KNÜPPEL	
Zu den Korrespondenzen Ármin(ius) Vámbéry's I: Korrespondenz mit Gerhard Rohlfs	176
VERONIKA KAMPF, BJÖRN WIEMER	
Inventarisierung und Analyse lexikalischer Evidenzialitätsmarker des Bulgarischen: Adverbien, Partikeln und Prädikative (II)	182
GABRIELLA SCHUBERT	
Ungarnbilder. Hintergründe. Mythen	202
OLIVER STEIN	
Die deutsch-bulgarischen Beziehungen seit 1878.....	218
KRZYSZTOF TOMASZ WITCZAK	
The Albanian name for badger	241
ALEXANDER ZÄH	
Der <i>Campanile</i> von Belussi (heute: Kypseli) auf der Insel Zante (Zakynthos). Ein unbekanntes venezianisches Baudenkmal des 18. Jahrhunderts	249

Rezensionen

HARALD BICHLMEIER	
Elena Stadnik-Holzer, Georg Holzer (Hgg.): <i>Sprache und Leben der frühmittelalterlichen Slaven. Festschrift für Radoslav Katičić zum 80. Geburtstag</i>	277
RAYK EINAX	
Marie Janine Calic: <i>Geschichte Jugoslawiens im 20. Jahrhundert</i>	281
SNJEŽANA KORDIĆ	
Nikola Petković: <i>Identitet i granica. Hibridnost i jezik, kultura i građanstvo 21. stoljeća</i>	284

PETER MARIO KREUTER	
Eric W. Steinhauer: <i>Vampyrologie für Bibliothekare. Eine kulturwissenschaftliche Lektüre des Vampirs</i>	285
BJÖRN OPFER-KLINGER	
Oliver Jens Schmitt: <i>Skanderbeg. Der neue Alexander auf dem Balkan</i> .	287
ECKEHARD PISTRICK	
Maria Todorova, Zsuzsa Gille (eds.): <i>Post-Communist Nostalgia</i>	290
WALTER PUCHNER	
Georgios Polioudakis: <i>Die Übersetzung deutscher Literatur ins Neugriechische vor der Griechischen Revolution von 1821</i>	292
WALTER PUCHNER	
Athanasios Anastasiadis: <i>Der Norden im Süden. Kostantinos Chatzopoulos (1868–1920) als Übersetzer deutscher Literatur</i>	296
HOLM SUNDHAUSSEN	
Marc Stegherr: <i>Abschied von der „Wiege des Serbentums“? Das Kosovo in Kultur und Politik Serbiens</i>	300

BEITRÄGE

Dumezil between the east and west Formulaic use of attributes *white* and *heroic* in South Slav oral epic poetry

MIRJANA DETELIĆ (Belgrade)

If there was a need to sum up the present main stream in oral formula studies, there would in fact have to be two of them: conditionally speaking – Russian and American.

Although Russia, to my best knowledge, has never had anything like a school in that field¹, the distinguished figure of Georgii Ivanovič Malycev (tragically deceased at his prime) made all the difference with his “tip of an iceberg” theory of formula². This theory suggests that one single text/poem/variant gets connected with all others by the deep connotative meanings of chosen formulas. Here, formula is seen as a vehicle of condensed, formerly mythical substance or ritual practice, transformed into a cliché capable of triggering a chain of important poetic events. In that case, “the iceberg” would be that primary syncretic basis common to all participants in traditional culture, and its “tip” the actual text which makes the use of it. This also means that a work of oral literary art is seen as a closed system able to correspond and interconnect with other of the kind, within the broader systems of oral literature, folklore, and traditional culture itself:

“The deep level of tradition has its own parameters, tendencies, and relations. It can be discussed as a complex and potentially inexhaustible center which ‘irradiates’ meaning. Tradition is a generic category, and formulas appear as a canonized fixation of certain zones of traditional semantics. At one hand, it gives them a relative autonomy and, at the other, it offers them a chance to make multiple connections with tradition (in texts it shows as a potential score of ‘compositional associations’)” (MALYCEV 1989: 68–69; translation mine).

The most promising analytical method in this context is borrowed from the general theory of models. Its key-point is discovering the criteria for choosing what elements of reality are worth further processing into a work of art, or – to put it simply – what should be picked up, and what skipped out. The significance and elegance of this method come to limelight especially in case of complex folklore dramas – folklore

- 1 Russian scholars (Vesselovsky, Potebnya, later also Propp) showed some interest in oral formula at about the same time the Van Gennep works first appeared, but they saw it as fraseology, a part of linguistics.
- 2 G. I. Malycev was killed in a traffic accident right after his first and only book (his PhD thesis, in fact) was published.

wedding, for example. For the sake of illustration, in Serbian oral tradition epic poems sing only about the parts groom and his family take in the sequence of wedding rites and customs (proposing, formation of wedding guests suite, fetching the bride, going back to groom's home)³. The wedding itself is frequently mentioned throughout the entire poem, as an important event one is expected to boast of. On the contrary, songs about the bride's part of the drama are not epic and they do not mention the wedding at all. They are connected with rites, so they often perform even a ritual weep for the bride and sing metaphorically of her former life in freedom (at her parents' home), and unpredictable future life with strangers. Even in the language itself, this situation is adequately termed by two different expressions: *udaja* for bride (literally: giving-oneself-in), and *ženidba* for groom (literally: taking-over-a-wife), in general congruence with genre differences within oral poetry.

The modelative component of this approach to oral literature makes it the best possible choice for longer genres – epic ballads, folk and fairy tales and similar. In shorter literary forms – proverbs, riddles, charms and alike – which are, by terms of their use, typical open systems, the modeling simply does not work. Here the American, Parry-Lordian⁴ scheme of linear dissipation⁵ is more at home. Its main point is the notion of formulaic nucleus, a traditional resource of elements, rules, and patterns for formula making, mutual to all craftsmen of one and the same language and tradition. From that one source the material is spread all over the singing area through formulas and versification patterns which may be accepted even in neighboring lands, as long as they can be put to unbiased use. In that case a work of oral literary art is not seen as a whole but rather as a set of corresponding elements, i.e. as an open structure, described accordingly as a system of signs. The further consequence of this is thropization of text which enables it to make sense even where there is none. Again for the sake of illustration, one of the common places of Serbian epics – *Viče Arap iz bijela grla* (The Arab shouts with his white throat) – becomes sensible because the formula *white throat* has in time gained a new, thropic meaning: *beautiful, loud voice*. The key-word here is “time”, for – in spite of the most usual prejudice – there is no such thing as a ready-made formula for every occasion. The *black Arab* itself is a stereotype in Serbian epic tradition, but its provenance is Turkish⁶, so in Serbian

3 To some extent, I wrote about it in *Mitski prostor i epika* (Mythical Space and the Epics), Belgrade 1992. In 1998 CLIO released a special issue of its magazine “Kodovi slovenskih kultura” (Codes of the Slavic Cultures) dedicated to the subject of wedding, with contributions by distinguished scholars like Radost Ivanova (Bulgaria), Anna Plotnikova (Russia), Albert Baiburin and Georgy Levington (Russia), Biljana Sikimić and Aleksandar Loma (Serbia) and others.

4 Cf. LORD 1981; 1986. Also American school of proverb studies starting with Archer TAYLOR (1931) in the first half of 20th century and FOLLEY (1994) at its end.

5 This term (linear dissipation) cannot be found in Lord's books, but it could easily become “Lordian”. I used it on several occasions (DETELIĆ 1996; DETELIĆ 2003), mostly in connection with proverbs, always to define a horizontal concatenation of figurative speech.

6 “In Istanbul, this handful of black people were called ‘Arabs’, same as – some time ago – in Latin America the Arabs were called ‘Turks’ ... (Orhan PAMUK, *Istanbul. Uspomene i grad* [Istanbul. Memories and the city], Beograd 2007, 38) (translation mine).

language a *black throat* formula for a loud voice could not originate naturally (and the lack of black people in the Balkans before the Ottoman rule was not of little importance). Under the circumstances, singer will use what he has, or – better – what he knows that his audience will recognize in the right way on the ground of their mutual long-lasting epic experience.

At the first glance these two approaches to oral literature (Russian vertical and American horizontal) may seem incompatible and mutually unfriendly, never to be brought together with good prognosis. Yet it might still be proven the opposite⁷.

It is common knowledge that epic – known also as *heroic* – poetry is built around the image of an epic hero (his destiny, acts, and labors⁸), so it has to be very careful and particular about the structuring of its poetic kernel. Every single poetic device a singer has at his disposal is meant to serve that purpose by telling a story of one or more important events of hero's life⁹. In general, an epic hero has to satisfy two kinds of needs – private and social, whence emerges the structural pattern of his epic image. In all Slavonic epics, and with South Slavs in particular, the image of an epic hero – to be complete – has to be composed of at least six elements divided in two groups: personal (outfit, horse, weapons), and public (family, castle, town)¹⁰. They all together form a hero's identity and the loss of one of them usually initiates the fall of hero himself. Duke Prijezda¹¹ of Serbian epics is a good example, for the loss of his town Stalać, where there was his castle, made him destroy his saber, kill his horse, and commit suicide together with his fateful wife lady Jelica – all that in order to prevent the elements of his knighthood fall into Turkish hands.

Each and every one of those six items is of the utmost importance for understanding the epic creative process. Yet, they show different preferences in attribution, the group of hero's personal features connecting naturally with the attribute *heroic/junački* (meaning also 'what belongs to a hero'), and the social one with the attribute *white/beli*. The excerption largely confirms it, as represented in the Table: both Group I (personal features as *Body parts* and *Militaria*) and Group II (*Dwellings* and *Public places* in general) answer properly to expectations, except the occur-

7 This is not a new concept. Lately, for example, FOLEY (2002) discussed on fusion of even three different approaches to oral genres (immanent, ethnolinguistic and performative).

8 Labors usually suit the classical heroes, like Hercules, but are not completely unknown even to the Slavic epic poetry, e.g. building a church, a fortified town, a bridge etc. On these occasions the hero is appointed to do so either by God, or by his sovereign.

9 The importance and scope of the event has no major influence on this. Even huge stories – like Homer's about Troy – actually sing on Achilles' anger, and on Odysseus' travels. Equally, in the poems on Serbian uprising against Turks in 1804, where the point IS that all nation gets involved, major events are grouped around the person of Karadjordje Petrović, actual leader of the uprising, and because of that the first class epic hero of the moment.

10 More on it cf. DETELIĆ 2008. It probably goes for all the epics in general, but in basically mythological stories it does not have the same importance.

11 "Smrt vojvode Prijezde" (Death of duke Prijezda), song no. 84 in Vuk Karadžić collection, vol. II. Very interesting Croatian variant of this song was published in Matica hrvatska collection vol. III song no. 5, with alterations in geography (Stalać in Serbia – Promin in Croatia) and names of characters (Prijezda, duke of Stalać, and his wife Jelica – duke of Promin and his wife Lehovkinja [=Polish woman] Mara).

rence of *white arm* in the Group I. It largely exceeds every other category in *Body parts* – either *white* or *heroic*, but is actually lesser than the *right arm* feature in the field ELSE. The excessive appearance of “arm”, especially in connection with *right (-hand)*, is natural enough for a society of fighters and duelists, permanently in war, and armed only with hand weapons: guns (long and short), spears, arrows, daggers, swords, sabers which leads to a relatively large number of formulas with “arm” as keyword. But that should mean the preference of *heroic* over *white* and not vice versa. The answer could be in more “indoors” part of the epic events, for *white* in connection with arms, legs, and face has always suggested nobility of the owner, his/her privileged life without hardships and tiring outdoors activities¹². It is therefore associated with aristocracy – some kings and numerous dukes and duchesses, princes and dames, transferred unobtrusively to lesser classes once the old nobility disappeared from the historical scenery.

Table

GROUP	WHITE	HEROIC, HERO'S	ELSE
I. BODY PARTS			
Head	6	24	blond 230; dead 177; alive 121; Turkish 113; male 112
Knee		11	right 34; saintly 19; righteous 12; lordly 11; Serbian 5; cursed 4 – in all ceases meaning the origin, family
Legs	12	79	swift 305; right 33; left 21; bloody 9; Turkish, golden, small 2
Eye/eyes		7	black 240; lively 19; bloody 16; hawk's 7; girl's 4; green, devilish, two springs of cool water, two gems, seaside blackberries 2
Arms	463	16	right 506; left 78; bloody 39; Turkish 28; Christian 18; empty, dead 3; mother's, impure, girl's, cowardly 2; black, green, strong, duke's, full, long, alive 1

12 From the point of view of the singer, usually a figure from the lowest social strata, *white* in connection with body parts signifies also a socially estranged object, a person belonging to the non-working class, therefore somebody *alien/tudj* (not ours, belonging to somebody else). This can go much further, e.g. in the folklore idiom *beli svet* (literally *white world*, meaning foreign geographical parts, a set of places nobody has ever seen).

GROUP	WHITE	HEROIC, HERO'S	ELSE
I. MILITARIA			
Horse	5*	38	dove 280; black 195; battle 184; swan 147; bay horse 143; knight 81; big 63; raven 53; Turkish 46; fat 47; dun horse 42; vast 40; dappled horse 30; winged 26; saddled 32 with white socks 19; the best, furious 31; fairy 16; enraged 14; ready 13; potent 10; hairy 7; with spotted snout 6; racing 5; wounded, tired 3; broken, Bosnian 2; broad, mount, pretty, willing, lop-eared 1
Duel, battle	3	154	long 20; old 3
Weapon		12	shiny 217; for fight, Turkish 16; emperor's 5; gentlemanly 3; French, tidy 1
Rifle		1	Little (a pair of them) 301; slim 74; long 65; golden 25; waste 24; shiny 14; Turkish 13; džeferdar 12; habernik, Italian, silver plated, karabinka 5; šešana, brišamkinja, granalija, ledenica 4; harčalija, garibilja, silver, gadara, kuburlija, loud 3; mljetačkinja, bitter, smithened, secret, nalimanka, venedik, green Latin 2; gun-rifle, krdžalijka, ornated, pavtalija, Danish, paragon, povoznik, Albanian, kolankinja, ornate with coral, captain's, from Šumadija, German, killer, Serbian 1
Wounds		2	serious/hard 129; bitter 70; deadly 30; severe 4
Sabre		3	sharp 220; plated 128; naked 92; from Damascus 67; for fight 23; German, Serbian, for assault 10; bloody 9; Hungarian, Turkish 5; with eyes 4; impure 3; the best, ancient, maritime, plated, father's, gungulača, Christian 2; brand new, green, bright 1

GROUP	WHITE	HEROIC, HERO'S	ELSE
II. DWELLINGS			
Courtyards	35		marble 156; stone 44; deserted, imperial 3; women's 2; green, copper 1
Church	335		sacred 19; beautiful 10; her ladyship's, great 5; God's, tall 3; golden 2; poor 1
Tent	136		of silk 69; green 25; Turkish 19; red 12; bey's, imperial 8; erected 5; royal 3; Vlach, vain, beautiful 1
Court/castle	879		decent 27; imperial 25; royal 22; duke's 16; great 7; high, maiden's, Russian 5; prince's 2; noble, ruined 1
Tower	1629		slim 228; high 178; devastated 28; robbed 9; Turkish 7; ruined 6; burned down 2; at the frontier, the biggest, excavated (meaning destroyed) 1
Chamber	9		excavated 1 (meaning destroyed)
II. PUBLIC PLACES			
City/town	643		imperial 79; bloody 29; stone, border 25; Turkish 24; reinforced 23; Christian 21; capital 14; Latin 10; Vlach 8; small 5; cursed 4; famous, broad, vast 3; pagan, ancient 2; kajmakam, furious, Arabian, French, unfortunate, mild, maritime, vezirski, middle, county, proud, vast 1

*Categories dove (280) and swan (147) also depict a white horse, so the total score would be 432, if the real colour of the animal is what counts. However, the attribute *white/beli* brings along more different connotations. Sometimes, though, they go together: white swan, white dove (for a horse, naturally).

The same ideological motivation is preserved in the use of attribute *white* all along the Group II (*dwelling*s and habitats), where *heroic* does not occur even once, although there is no doubt most of them belong to some hero or other. A bit closer look at items of the Group II reveals yet another interesting thing: compared with all other attributes (ELSE), all units show similar profile except "tower" and "city/

town” whose belligerent nature (bloody, stone, frontier, cursed; ruined, burned down, devastated etc.) prevails over decorous one of chambers, courtyards, castles, and even tents which are royal, marble, golden, silky, and noble in their epic interpretation. This also proves to be very true picture of the real thing, for epic towns were mostly medieval fortresses (except big city centres like Belgrade, Niš, Sirmium, and only a few others), often not much larger than individual towers owned by strong and famous, but individual families. This in particular should fix the attribute *heroic* to them, and yet they are both – tower and city/town – prevailingly connected with *white*. That evidently needs further discussion.

The following analysis is based equally on George Dumézil’s theory about tripartite structure of the ancient Indo-European society (DUMEZIL 1958; 1997), and on the theory of the pre-Indo-European origin of the Slavic decasyllable verse by the Russian scholar Mikhail Gasparov (GASPAROV 1989). Combined, they can explain why the toponomastic formula “white town” (DUMEZIL; SAUZEAU 2005), while present in tradition of all Slavic peoples, as an epic device of regular appearance and high frequency can be traced only in Serbo-Croatian decasyllabic (GASPAROV; JAKOBSON 1966) epic poetry. Today it is completely lost at the territory of its origin (East and West Slavs, even Bulgarians – PETKANOVA 1983; PROPP 1958), but it still remains preserved at the periphery of its former kernel. In terms of space, this periphery is the borderline between South Slavic people and other ethnicities (Greeks, Hungarians, Germans, Italians)¹³. This also means that in Serbo-Croatian oral tradition it stayed unchanged from the times before the Great Movement of peoples, because in issues of folklore the periphery is always much more conservative and oppressive to changes than the centre. However, even thus, to stay the same for so long, a pattern, formula or another device had to be covered by taboo, forbidden to change, which means it must have been sacral. Only that in the context the piles of bones of sacrificial animals, as mentioned in medieval descriptions of some West Slavic sacred places for worship and adoration of gods (like Rhetra – Mecklenburg in present Germany, in Nestor Chronicles), correspond perfectly to so many mythic and fairy towns built of human and horse bones in South Slavic oral epic poetry. Nothing less important and holy could stand the trial of so long a passage of time.

As “tower/castle” and “town” make two thirds of the public personality of epic hero, it could be safely concluded that the adjective *white* has every importance in defining the public elements of his image, and almost none in his personal quarters. Truly, for the elements of Group I (*Body parts* and *Militaria*), the relevant attribute is adjective *junački* (heroic, belonging to a hero), not white. As the table shows, it is mostly connected with the things in close relation to hero’s person (weapons, robes), or with the parts of his body (face, muscles, arms, legs, moustaches, bones, thighs, shoulders, head, forehead, chest, heart, voice). Some of them (head, heart, and knee) are equally frequent in metaphoric and metonymic meaning (*sve junačke glave, srce*

13 This borderline pattern does not work on the west and south neighborhood (Rumania, Bulgaria, Northern Greece, Albania), probably because of relatively long mutual subordination to Ottoman empire. For more than four centuries they were all within the borders of European Turkey. Opposite to it was the case of West Slavs (Poles, Czech) who had to choose between the Russian/Orthodox and German/Catholic influence.

junačko, junačko koljeno – all heroic heads, heroic heart, heroic knee – in the sense: »of the good family«. The same goes for phrases *junački drum* (»heroic road« – road the heroes go by¹⁴) and *junačko zdravlje* (»heroic health« – to ask someone about his heroic health = to greet someone). Finally, as a key-word to the genre itself, the adjective *junački/heroic* is mandatory in combination with all isofunctional terms: battle (*steko sam je u boju junačkom* – I gained it in heroic battle), duel (*da junački megdan dijelimo* – let us do a heroic duel), company (*te junačku četvu četujući* – fighting a heroic battle as a company of heroes), name (*ni junačko ime nađenula* – they gave me a heroic name), life (*i junački život povratiti* – to regain a heroic life), fortune (*ako Bog da i sreća junačka* – by God and hero's fortune) etc.

Such a distribution of two epic key-signifiers – *white* and *heroic* – is motivated by the needs of the genre itself. In epic poetry the adjective *heroic* is not only a carrier of code information essential to the genre – it itself IS that information, so it has to be used literally, precisely, and as close to its primary meaning as possible. This includes the primary subject too, and that subject is epic hero himself, so the word *heroic* – as a defining characteristic – goes with items close to his person (his body parts, his way of life, marks of his trade). The leading line here is the term CLOSE, hence the opposite – public features of the hero are expected to appear as FAR, which they actually do.

»Looking from afar«, or from the point of longest perspective, in epic poetry is not exclusively reserved for towns, but when it is – its realization depends on adjectives *white* and *flat*. If the chosen characteristics of town are *firm* or *hard* and *stone* or *made-of-stone*, the perspective is drastically changed, because such qualities can be checked only from a reasonable vicinity. The point here is that terms chosen to suggest this long distance ARE NOT the carriers of code information essential for epic genre, but – especially in case of the adjective *white* – they are much older than epic itself. Connection with *white* and *flat* as distance markers betrays town for what it never is on the narrative level in epics, i.e. for a civilizational symbol with practically no match at all¹⁵. Apart from its military purposes and functions, from the time immemorial a town/city has been primarily a centre of administration, image of power and security, and – in case of a state capital – also a symbol of divine rule on Earth, incorporated in the person of ruler (lord, king, emperor or other). More often than not, this earthly power amalgamated with the religious one, so the rulers were – like the double-headed eagle on many of their crests – both secular and sacred institution. In that case, they rightfully acquired the privilege of being signified as *white*, for in their system of values that was the colour of the high priest and/or the king. Thus the idea of “white town” (*beli grad*), especially in connection with its sacerdotal ruler, appears as one of the most archaic features not only of pan-Slavic, but also of pan-European significance. It can be traced back to its pre-Indo-European roots, and

14 Conf. *groenir brautir, grêne straeta* in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian medieval poetry, meaning “non-existing roads”, roads going along green pastures (VESELOVSKI 2005: 87).

15 In old and medieval tradition, cities were always depicted as distant, and that was their constant signifier. Conf. FRUGONI 1991.

it is easily recognized as a structural element of actual European cultural inheritance and history¹⁶.

In every other aspect epic poetry treats towns as political and ideological category with long and bloody history. Only here, in structuring the image of epic hero – i.e. the ruler of epic town – it did not dare touch the archaic layers of white town formula which – as I have already pointed – is connected with ancient sacred spots of adoration and sacrifice, what first towns in pra-Slavic homeland had to be. Furthermore, this ancient formula came to us wrapped in an equally ancient kind of verse, the asymmetric, epic decasyllable. Gasparov successfully traced this verse to its pra-Indo-European roots from whence it was freely distributed all over the Slavic world. Otherwise, the here discussed epic image of town could have hardly remained unchanged in two culturally, religiously, socially, legislatively, and in every other way different world-views of Christians and Moslems with South-Slavic origin, which from the beginning of 16th or 17th century was – and still is – the actual situation with epic singers in the Balkans. They could not share their relatively recent history for easily understandable reasons, but *this* attribute + noun formula was older than history as they saw it, older even than singing itself.

So, to go back to Dumézil's ideas again, in South-Slavic epics the cited use of white colour is really strongly confirmed, much more so than I was able to sketch here. The red colour, symbol of knights and warriors as social class, is identified there with blood, and swapped for black (conf. LOMA 2001). This alteration is regular occurrence in folklore and should not be considered unusual in any way. Nevertheless, the colour of blood – together with the warriors, wars, and warlords – belongs to the underworld, to *chthonia*, and that can hardly fit Dumézil's scheme. This, of course, it really does not have to do, because epic poetry is not the image and reflection of traditional society as a whole. As a singing in honour of the ancestral glory – it naturally belongs to the black and white world, a liminal space in which life and death can easily change places. Dumézil himself was well aware that his tripartite social structure, agreeably suitable for reconstruction on the divine plane, can hardly be found anywhere in the present world, let alone as a type of an actual society. What we all deal with nowadays are only pieces and scratches of ancient history, but to understand them properly we need a frame, or a system – no matter how idealistic – that could make them meaningful and sensible.

And so – to conclude – what started as an open system analysis of formula structural patterns, ended in a possible reconstruction of one specific poetic device and its origin. In other words, it used the Parry-Lordian method to open the subject, and Malycev's to close it. The further elaboration of the problem could use the same procedure again, in fact as many times as the need be. What made possible the mutually supportive action of the two, is the omnipresent but sometimes invisible and unnoticeable fact that orality (in both senses – as literature and as tradition) is one and the same in its every aspect. Like Columbo a few centuries ago, we too have every reason to believe that – going West – we shall reach nothing but the East.

16 Conf. BAHILINA 1975; BENVENISTE 1969; KOROLYUK 197; SUROVCOVA 1976; TOLSTOJ 1995; BENEVOLO 1993; DEJEVSKY 1977.

Data about the corpus and abbreviations

The epic corpus presented here is composed of both Muslim and Christian classical printed collections, published by the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century (during the last wave of romantic revival of national oral tradition). In so doing, I obeyed only the linguistic criteria, which is the same language, and for that reason I set aside other South Slav epic songs (Macedonian and Bulgarian; Slovenian do not exist anyway). The corpus consists of 1357 poems (of eight major collections in 22 volumes), sung and recorded on the territory of presently four independent countries: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Monte Negro. Not long ago, they were all within the borders of one and the same state (former Yugoslavia), but in the time songs were being collected, this territory was divided in two: Turkey and Austria with borders on the river Drina. The paradox is that the major part of Christian songs was sung and collected in Turkey (Serbia and Monte Negro), while all Muslim singing was performed and collected in Austria (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

- ER = Герхард Геземан, *Ерлангенски рукопис старих српско-хрватских народних песама*, Зборник за историју, језик и књижевност српског народа, Прво одељење, књига XII. СКА, Сремски Карловци 1925, CXLVIII + 353.
- ВУК II–IV = *Сабрана дела Вука Караџића, Српске народне пјесме II–IV*, издање о стогодишњици смрти Вука Стефановића Караџића 1864–1964 и двестогодишњици његова рођења 1787–1987. Београд.
- ВУК VI–IX = *Српске народне пјесме 1–9*, скупио их Вук Стеф. Караџић, државно издање. Београд 1899–1902.
- SANU II–IV = *Српске народне пјесме из необјављених рукописа Вука Стеф. Караџића II–IV*, Српска академија наука и уметности, Одељење језика и књижевности, Београд 1974.
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