

## Repetition as Invention in the Songs of Vuk Karadžić

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The “formula”—we have learned from Milman Parry—is “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (1930:80). And, since “the singer’s mode of composition is dictated by the demands of performance at high speed,” “the poetic grammar of oral epic”—Albert Lord has shown—“is and must be based on the formula,” on “frequently used and useful phrases” (1960:65). And, of course, not only on phrases, or their variants, but also on motifs, themes, tales, and, as the Chadwicks had demonstrated, on common ways of thinking and feeling in the Heroic Age. In this context the tradition of Serbo-Croatian heroic songs is interesting because it offers a diachronic insight into formulaic composition; several centuries of recording, and of continuity and change, by and large confirm the conclusions of Albert Lord. However, there are also some areas in which we can see how new formulas are born, how the old ones are used for unpredictable purposes and how—by the substitution of one or two elements—old formulas, motifs, themes, and tales come to serve new purposes and survive even the change of formal conditions.

There are, to begin with, some formulas that mark the difference between the feudal *bugarštice*, recorded in the Adriatic region from the end of the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, and the peasant decasyllabic songs, recorded in the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century in Dalmatia, Slavonia, and many other regions. On the one hand, for instance, the “fine-dressed hero”<sup>1</sup> or the “good knight”<sup>2</sup> turn up only in

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<sup>1</sup> “Gizdav junak,” Bogišić 1878, nos. 37, l. 1; 52, l. 35; 83, l. 7.

<sup>2</sup> “Dobar vitez” (in fact, invariably in plural form), Bogišić 1878:nos. 63, l. 12; 65, ll. 17, 32, 68, 80, 83, 125, 128; 67, ll. 65, 83.

*bugarštice* and they “bow finely”<sup>3</sup> or “bow” to everyone in their “proper order,”<sup>4</sup> whereas the decasyllabic heroes greet each other by “spreading their arms and kissing one another’s face.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, treasure is seen in terms of “the small coins” almost exclusively in *bugarštice*,<sup>6</sup> whereas in the decasyllabic poems it is measured by “boots,”<sup>7</sup> “loads,”<sup>8</sup> or even “towers.”<sup>9</sup> The double-epithet formulas are also, for obvious metrical reasons, much more characteristic of the long-winded *bugarštice*, even if the decasyllabic singer can also use them—if they have no more than six syllables and so can fit into the second part of the decasyllabic line.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, in both traditions, as in many others, heroes “drink wine,”<sup>11</sup> “hold a council,”<sup>12</sup> write or receive messages in the form of

<sup>3</sup> “L’jepo se je . . . poklonio,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 1, l. 57; 10, ll. 45, 74; 30, ll. 19, 31, 36, 37.

<sup>4</sup> “Svakome se po redu . . . pokloniše,” Bogišić 1878:no. 30, ll. 15, 26.

<sup>5</sup> “Ruke šire, a lice se ljube,” Karadžić 1976:nos. II, 8, l. 313; 9, l. 56; 40, ll. 101, 172, 232; 89, l. 44; 97, l. 96; 99, l. 80; III, 22, ll. 367, 381; 25, l. 110; 42, ll. 66, 371; 43, ll. 56, 75; 53, l. 72; 54, l. 105; 58, l. 296; 81, l. 89; IV, 1, l. 130; 3, l. 98; 13, l. 23.

<sup>6</sup> “Drobna spenca,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 5, ll. 10, 14; 25, ll. 28, 29; 47, l. 23; 51, l. 13; 63, l. 83.

<sup>7</sup> “Dvije čizme blaga,” Karadžić 1976:II, 56, l. 167. “Tri čizme blaga”, *ibid.*:II, no. 56, l. 254.

<sup>8</sup> “Dva tovara blaga,” Gesemann 1925:no. 98, ll. 25, 31. “Tri tovara blaga,” *ibid.*:nos. 83, l. 15; 123, ll. 72, 83, 89, 113; 127, l. 50; Karadžić 1976:II, 56, ll. 56, 83; 61, ll. 143, 149; 73, ll. 19, 28.

<sup>9</sup> “Sedam kula groša i dukata,” Karadžić 1976:II, no. 23, l. 5.

<sup>10</sup> I have discussed this question in more detail in Koljević 1980.

<sup>11</sup> “Vino piju,” Bogišić 1878:no. 55, l. 1; Gesemann 1925:nos. 6, l. 1; 15, l. 1; 63, l. 1; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 59, l. 1; 67, l. 1; 73, l. 1.

<sup>12</sup> “Zbor zborahu,” Bogišić 1878:no. 8, l. 1. In l. 3 the same idea is repeated in a different wording: “v’jeće v’ječahu.” In this wording it is also found in Bogišić 1878:nos. 31, l. 1; 80, l. 1. “Zbor zborila” is also found in Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 23, l. 1; 24, l. 1.

“thin”<sup>13</sup> or “small-lettered books,”<sup>14</sup> which usually lead to journeys, battles, or single combats. These require the “good horses,<sup>15</sup> the “white tents,”<sup>16</sup> “cold water,”<sup>17</sup> “cool”<sup>18</sup> or “red wine,”<sup>19</sup> “battle lances,”<sup>20</sup> “naked swords,”<sup>21</sup> “sharp”<sup>22</sup> or “razor-sharp swords,”<sup>23</sup> or, in later times, “small

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<sup>13</sup> “Tanka knjiga,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 15, l. 1; 67, ll. 10, 13; 71, l. 1; Gesemann 1925:nos. 120, ll. 22, 32; 123, l. 76.

<sup>14</sup> “Sitna knjiga,” Gesemann 1925:nos. 143, l. 3; 210, ll. 14, 42; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 50 (I), ll. 2, 16; 56, l. 95; 59, ll. 25, 38; III, 16, ll. 57, 63; 81, l. 207.

<sup>15</sup> “Konj dobri,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 1, ll. 112, 151, 189, 194, 215; 17, ll. 10, 12, 27, 36, 37, 43; 18, ll. 37, 55, 94; Gesemann 1925:nos. 81, ll. 21, 24, 37; 83, ll. 25, 36; 110, ll. 44, 64, 72, 87, 104, 124; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 16, ll. 37, 41, 81; 48, ll. 19, 21, 26, 34; 51, l. 124.

<sup>16</sup> “Bijeli šator,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 19, ll. 12, 19, 43; 35, l. 30; 55, ll. 26, 34, 54; Gesemann 1925:nos. 59, ll. 69, 91; 87, ll. 5, 8; 110, ll. 2, 108, 109; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 29, l. 388; 44, l. 472; 56, ll. 221, 228.

<sup>17</sup> “Hladna voda,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 4, ll. 4, 38, 39, 46, 51; 35, ll. 41, 42, 44, 47, 49, 51, 58, 59, 66; 59, ll. 44, 46, 84, 85; Gesemann 1925:nos. 110, ll. 29, 41; 126, l. 51; 176, ll. 4, 28; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 51, ll. 8, 15, 27; 55, ll. 8, 15; IV, 33, l. 449.

<sup>18</sup> “Hladno vino,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 12, ll. 49, 57, 69; 18, ll. 28, 33, 45, 70, 87; 19, ll. 22, 57, 64; Gesemann 1925:nos. 63, ll. 5, 18, 33; 78, ll. 81, 145; 117, ll. 51, 127; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 50 (III), l. 49; III, 7, l. 286.

<sup>19</sup> “Rujno vino,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 14, l. 38; 20, ll. 76, 78; 26, l. 61; Gesemann 1925:nos. 59, l. 73; 117, l. 101; 216, l. 32; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 25, l. 52; 47, ll. 27, 80, 94; 59, ll. 87, 93, 129.

<sup>20</sup> “Bojno koplje,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 1, ll. 108, 197; 15, ll. 12, 14; 47, ll. 37, 46; Gesemann 1925:nos. 89, ll. 7, 10; 96, ll. 13, 24; 134, ll. 2, 8; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 44, ll. 602, 617, 627; 49, ll. 46, 47; 51, l. 121.

<sup>21</sup> “Gola sablja,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 46, ll. 40, 52; 26, l. 33 (“gola korda”); 53, l. 31 (“gola korda”); Karadžić 1976:III, nos. 50, l. 61; IV, 26, ll. 167, 192.

<sup>22</sup> “Oštra sablja,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 27, l. 22; 24, ll. 16, 21 (“oštra korda”); 40, l. 86 (“oštra korda”); Gesemann 1925:nos. 70, l. 106; 87, ll. 19, 117, 120, 1212; 89, ll. 9, 14.

guns.”<sup>24</sup> What follows is “the parting from the sinful soul,”<sup>25</sup> sometimes foreshadowed by a “strange dream,”<sup>26</sup> or brought about by “bad luck.”<sup>27</sup> And all this takes place in a world in which a knight, a wife, a friend, or a servant can be either “faithful”<sup>28</sup> or “unfaithful,”<sup>29</sup> but in which “firm faith”<sup>30</sup> or “God’s faith”<sup>31</sup> has to be kept and the “faithless brood”<sup>32</sup> has to

<sup>23</sup> “Britka sablja,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 65, l. 154; 67, l. 48; 78, l. 24; Gesemann 1925:nos. 110, ll. 24, 75, 78, 90; 114, l. 53; 161, ll. 59, 68; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 25, ll. 71, 182; 44, ll. 478, 564, 583, 646; 50 (V), ll. 2, 3.

<sup>24</sup> “Mala puška,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 63, ll. 59, 60; Gesemann 1925:nos. 135, l. 52; Karadžić 1976:IV, nos. 32, ll. 211, 279.

<sup>25</sup> “S grešnom dušom razd’jelio,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 16, l. 85; 35, l. 93; 52, ll. 30, 33; 78, ll. 54, 57; Gesemann 1925:no. 108, l. 46 (“s dušom delijaše”—“parting from his soul”); 108, l. 54 (“dušicu pusti”—“breathed out his soul”); Karadžić 1976:III, no. 1, l. 69 (“dok sam njega s dušom rastavio”—“before I separated him from his soul”).

<sup>26</sup> “Čudan san,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 28, ll. 10, 17; 50, l. 10; Gesemann 1925:nos. 80, ll. 22, 25; 109, l. 10; 163, ll. 20, 24; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 25, l. 138; 62, ll. 64, 65; III, 14, l. 28.

<sup>27</sup> “Huda sreća,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 1, ll. 118, 183, 186; 43, ll. 12, 39; 78, ll. 25, 31, 49; Gesemann 1925:nos. 108, l. 39; No. 67, l. 32 (“zla sreća”); Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 51, l. 134; 25, l. 183 (“loša sreća”); IV, 31, l. 294 (“loša sreća”).

<sup>28</sup> “Vjera” (literally “faith”), Bogišić 1878:no. 14, ll. 58, 61, 138; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 50 (III), ll. 31, 32, 53. Faithfulness of wives or servants is usually denoted by specific formulaic patterns: “vjerna ljuba” (“faithful love”), “vjerna sluga” (“faithful servant”).

<sup>29</sup> “Nevjera” (literally “unfaithfulness”), Bogišić 1878:nos. 14, ll. 58, 61, 138; 61, l. 20; Karadžić 1976:II, no. 50 (III), ll. 31, 32, 44, 48, 53.

<sup>30</sup> “Tvrdá vjera,” Bogišić 1878:nos. 65, ll. 228, 240, 246; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 29, l. 92; 67, l. 9; IV, 4, l. 8.

<sup>31</sup> “Božja vjera,” in “bugarštice” usually “vjera Boga velikoga” (“the faith of great God”): Bogišić 1878:nos. 17, ll. 21, 25; 40, l. 103; 61, l. 15. In the decasyllabic poems this formula usually figures as “božja vjera tvrda” (“God’s firm faith”): Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 26, l. 91; 44, l. 404.

be tied to the horses' tails.<sup>33</sup> This moral clarity is both a reflection of religious faith and of the pagan light that comes from the "hot sun"<sup>34</sup> in the "clear sky"<sup>35</sup> and shines on man and beast and the "supple fir-tree"<sup>36</sup> alike. Many such and similar formulas are closely connected with particular themes—feasts, messages, traveling, fighting, triumph, death—and they all fit perfectly Parry's definition of the formula as "a group of words regularly employed . . . to express a given essential idea."

However, leaving aside the question of metrical conditions in *bugarštice* and the decasyllabic songs (they are, of course, the same in the segment in which a formula is repeated, even if the lines are different), it is more pertinent to notice that there are various ways in which the same formulas, formulaic phrases, motifs, themes, and tales change their meaning or make us wonder what it is. Sometimes this is merely a matter of semantic and social history: in the gradual social downgrading and the artistic development of heroic singing from the feudal *bugarštice* to the peasant decasyllabic songs, heroes continued to live in "white palaces" (or castles). But the "white palaces" of the Ban of Skradin<sup>37</sup> are certainly much grander edifices than the solid buildings of the border fighters who lived in

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<sup>32</sup> "Nevjerno koljeno," Bogišić 1878:no. 14, l. 122; Gesemann 1925:no. 6, l. 24; Karadžić 1976:III, no. 7, l. 256.

<sup>33</sup> "Konjma za repove," Karadžić 1976:nos. 5, ll. 80, 85; 25, l. 294; 52, l. 65.

<sup>34</sup> "Žarko sunce," Bogišić 1878:nos. 18, ll. 39, 51; 20, l. 19; 23, l. 15; 37, l. 9; Gesemann 1925:nos. 67, l. 55; 71, l. 43; 75, ll. 3, 9, 41; Karadžić 1976:II, no. 10, l. 28. "Jarko sunce": Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 29, l. 565; 44, l. 321; III, 78, ll. 161, 173; IV, 24, l. 446.

<sup>35</sup> "Vedro nebo," Bogišić 1878:nos. 1, ll. 74, 81; 28, ll. 12, 25; 30, ll. 67, 70, 76, 90; Gesemann 1925:nos. 10, l. 2; 47, l. 86; 75, l. 39; 109, l. 18; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 10, l. 79; 55, l. 34; III, 31, ll. 3, 21; IV, 24, l. 95.

<sup>36</sup> "Vita jela," Bogišić 1878:no. 83, ll. 13, 19; Gesemann 1925:nos. 17, l. 70; 174, ll. 1, 20; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 74, ll. 46, 58 ("tanka jela"); III, nos. 7, ll. 66, 75, 77; 78, l. 205. This account of the general formulaic framework of Serbo-Croatian epic singing is an abridged version of my discussion of this issue in Koljević 1980:36-49. I have disregarded here some minor variations of the same formula and the question of different numbering of lines in Bogišić's published collections and the original manuscripts.

<sup>37</sup> "Bijeli dvori," Bogišić 1878:no. 78, l. 2.

the small town of Perast on the Montenegrin coast,<sup>38</sup> whereas the “white palaces” of the Montenegrin warrior Tašo Nikolić, where the outlaws get together before they proceed on their mission of vengeance, must have been ordinary peasant houses.<sup>39</sup> This is not to say, of course, that in the decasyllabic songs the “white palaces” did not often refer to feudal palaces and castles,<sup>40</sup> or indeed to something in between the two,<sup>41</sup> if not to something existing only in the Serbo-Croatian epic never-never land in which the village customs had so much pervaded the life in the castles that the grand feudal ladies and Queen Mothers—in “The Building of Skadar” and “Marko Kraljević’s Ploughing”—had to do their own laundry.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, there are also common stock formulas that seem to have expressed “the same essential idea” over many centuries of Serbo-Croatian epic singing, even if scholars cannot always agree what the idea was and if sometimes their reading would take any native speaker by surprise. So, for instance, some of the most common formulas in the tradition—such as “grozne suze”<sup>43</sup> (“terrible tears,” which are plentifully shed on many occasions, when receiving threatening or bad news, when suffering a great loss) and “rujno vino”<sup>44</sup> (“red wine,” which is also frequently drunk in quantity on such typical epic occasions as feasts, council-taking, or the eve of the battle)—create confusion if scholarly opinion is consulted. For “grozne suze” are usually defined as being as large or as

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<sup>38</sup> Bogišić 1878:no. 67, ll. 16, 30, 61, 67, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Karadžić 1976:III, no. 69, ll. 45, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Gesemann 1925:no. 92, ll. 47, 57; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 26, ll. 98, 225, 230; 45, ll. 18, 109; 56, ll. 38, 137, 243.

<sup>41</sup> Gesemann 1925:no. 98, ll. 39, 76.

<sup>42</sup> Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 26, ll. 143, 147; 73, ll. 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Bogišić 1878:nos. 1, l. 98; 16, ll. 43, 45; 82, ll. 23, 63, 113; Gesemann 1925:nos. 42, l. 132; 213, l. 95; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 30, l. 213; III, 78, l. 181; IV, 28, ll. 38, 120.

<sup>44</sup> Bogišić 1878:nos. 14, l. 38; 20, ll. 76, 78; 26, l. 61; Gesemann 1925:nos. 59, l. 73; 117, l. 101; 216, l. 32; Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 25, l. 52; 47, ll. 27, 80, 94; 59, ll. 87, 93, 129.

plentiful as grapes,<sup>45</sup> whereas “*rujno vino*,” it has been argued, means “white” and not “red wine” because *rujno* may be etymologically derived from *ruj* (“sumac,” German *Gelbholtz*), which has yellow flowers.<sup>46</sup> It is true, on the other hand, that most people think of *ruj* in connection with its reddish autumn colors, but whatever the ultimate truth of the matter may be, this variance shows that through long usage a formula may outlive its original meaning or at least lead to confusion as regards its “essential idea.”

However, apart from such linguistic curiosities, a formula may change its meaning for what one might call “literary” reasons; and even if this does not happen frequently, it seems significant that it happens in some of the greatest poems in Karadžić’s collections. Sometimes the change is simple and effective: a standard concept embodied in a formula is suddenly turned the other way round at a dramatic moment in a story. So, for instance, the marriage-making in the patriarchal setting is seen as leading to a future relationship not only for the bridegroom and his bride, but also for many other people involved, who may find worthy companions for drinking. Thus in “The Wedding of Prince Lazar” Tsar Stjepan (Dušan the Mighty) tries to explain to his “servant” Lazar that he cannot marry him to a girl who is a swineherd or a cowherd, but has to find a lady whose father can sit “by his knee” and with whom he could “drink cool wine.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Marko Kraljević, who could be satisfied even with his horse as a wine companion, is delighted when he comes to think, in one of Old Milija’s songs, of Captain Leka’s beautiful daughter as his future bride—but apparently above all because his prospective father-in-law is a wonderful man and “he would have someone to drink wine with.”<sup>48</sup> This formula—“to have someone to drink wine with”—expresses the essential idea of feasting in honorable company, but it is used by the same singer in a completely different way in “Banović Strahinja,” usually considered the greatest poem in the decasyllabic tradition. This poem describes Strahinić Ban and his in-laws, the grand feudal lords Jugovići who refuse to help him in saving his wife, who had been captured by a Turk. However, it turns out

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<sup>45</sup> See *grozan* in Stevanović et al. 1967:I, 574.

<sup>46</sup> See Maretić 1966:73-74.

<sup>47</sup> “Koji će mi sjesti uz koljeno, / Sa kojim ću ladno piti vino,” Karadžić 1976:II, no. 32, ll. 36-37.

<sup>48</sup> “Imao bi s kime piti vino,” Karadžić 1976:II, no. 40, l. 26.

that she had betrayed her husband and even attempted to kill him in his duel with her new Turkish master. Strahinić Ban triumphs in the duel, and when he brings his treacherous wife back with him, his in-laws want to kill her. He tells them that he could do that himself, but that he had pardoned her—and concludes that he “has no one to drink cool wine with.”<sup>49</sup> Thus the formula which signified feasting in honorable company comes to express contempt and is used as the greatest possible insult, which works because of the drastic inversion of its original “idea.”

Sometimes the singer shows his ingenuity not by dramatic inversion but by the substitution of one of the semantic elements, which takes an established formula into a new and unique semantic adventure. So, for instance, the walking of a beautifully dressed and richly ornamented girl is often described in terms of sounds produced by clinking necklaces and rustling clothes. Thus in “Atlagić’s Hajka and Jovan the Bachelor” (or “Reveler”), a Turkish girl secretly meets a Christian boy in her garden by night, and her appearance is described in this way: “The small necklaces go clinking, / The yellow dresses go rustling, / The leather slippers go clattering.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in “The Two Kurtići and Boičić Alil” the beauty of Stojan’s daughter—more impressive than that of a *vila* (“mountain nymph”)—is seen in analogous formulaic terms: “The necklaces go clinking round her neck, / Her trousers go rustling.”<sup>51</sup> And in “Little Radojica,” which deals again with the secret love of a Turkish girl and a Christian boy here imprisoned by her father, the appearance of Hajkuna in a ring dance is described again in terms of clinking necklaces and rustling clothes.<sup>52</sup> However, in the far superior and better-known poem “The Humane Pasha and Mihai the Shepherd,” this formula is moved into a different semantic field. The poem describes a pasha who shows his sympathy and understanding for a Christian shepherd who was turned into an outlaw when Turks drove away thirty lambs from his flock. The shepherd, in short, had to face what he could not bear: “The thirty mother-sheep go bleating, /

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<sup>49</sup> “Nemam s kime ladno piti vino,” Karadžić 1976:II, no. 44, l. 807.

<sup>50</sup> “Stoji zveka drobnijeh djerdana, / Stoji škripa žutijeh kavada, / Stoji klepet mestva i papuča,” Karadžić 1976:III, no. 19, ll. 58-60.

<sup>51</sup> “Stoji zveka na vratu djerdana, / Stoji škripa skuta od sandala,” Karadžić 1976:III, No. 35, ll. 108-9.

<sup>52</sup> “Stoji zveka na vratu djerdana, / Stoji škripa gaća od sandala,” Karadžić 1976:III, No. 51, ll. 86-87.



Each of them goes bleating and looking at Mihat.”<sup>53</sup> Is this the same formula? It certainly does not express “the same essential idea,” and it is formulaic perhaps only in the sense in which everything is “formulaic” in language from the point of view of generative grammar.

However, it is only in “The Battle of Salaš”—one of the outstanding songs by Filip Višnjić, the best-known singer in the tradition—that this new seed of an old formula is found in its full and unique flourish. The description of the cattle and sheep, driven away by the Turks and grieving for their homeland, is one of the highlights of this poem and illustrates the rich growth of a formula:

And the sheep go bleating after their lambs,  
And the lambs go mewling after their ewes,  
And the goats go baaing after their kids,  
And the kids go screaming after their nannies;  
And the cows bellow after their calves,  
And the calves bleat after the cows;  
And the bulls of Mačva keep roaring,  
Because they do not see their own shepherds—  
The cattle see the road they will travel  
And all the cattle sorrow for their home.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from the onomatopoeia and other sound effects that are possible only in this richly developed form of the formula, the subject of the raided cattle grieving for their home is also unique in the Serbo-Croatian epic tradition. Thus a substitution in the formula and its growth help it to carry a burden it has never carried before and to live in a way it has never known before, and it is also significant—both for the singer and for his audience—that it remembers and echoes what has already been heard.

Sometimes, however, a formula can achieve a great change and a dramatic enrichment of its meaning without substitution or development of any of its elements. Thus two dialectal variants of one formula expressing

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<sup>53</sup> “Stade bleka trides podojnicah, / Svaka bleji, gleda na Mihata,” Karadžić 1976: III, No. 62, ll. 64-65.

<sup>54</sup> “Stoji bleka ovac’ za janjcima, / Stoji meka janjac’ za ovcama, / Veka stoji koza za jarići, / A jarića dreka za kozama, / Stoji rika krava za teladma, / A teladi meka za kravama; / Buka stoji mačvanskih volova, / Ne poznaju svojijeh čobana, / Vidi stoka de će putovati, / Pake žali svoga zavičaja,” Karadžić 1976:IV, no. 28, ll. 258-67.

one and the same essential idea—“The dream deceives, God is true,”<sup>55</sup> “The dream is fancy, God is true”<sup>56</sup>—occur in identical forms in several poems, but are used for different purposes. The phrase is in fact a proverb<sup>57</sup> mostly used for the purpose of dispelling fears after a bad dream, and the prosaic wisdom of the proverb seems to imply that bad dreams do not come true. But, of course, in epic poetry they do—or what would be the point of a bad dream? So, for instance, in the well-known poem “Marko Kraljević and Mina of Kostur” the hero is away from home and sees in his dream “a fleece of mist” coming from the town of Kostur and “winding itself round” his own castle;<sup>58</sup> the dream foreshadows the impending devastation. When his servant Goluban tries to console him and dispel his fears—“The dream deceives, God is true”<sup>59</sup>—his words help the narrative interest, but they cannot, of course, stop what is epically inevitable. Similarly, the great disaster in “The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević,” another of Old Milija’s masterpieces, is foreshadowed by a bad dream, followed by the same comment and the inevitable outcome.<sup>60</sup> These two great poems do not depend for their achievement on the dislocation of this formula; they use it in the same standard way in which it is used, for instance, in such a mediocre song as “Hadži of Risan and Limun the Merchant.” In this song a beautiful girl on a wedding journey dreams that wolves have bitten off Durmiš-bey’s arms and torn out her heart and she is duly told that “The dream deceives, God is true,”<sup>61</sup> but, eventually, the outlaws cut off Durmiš-bey’s arms and kill the girl.

However, when Milan-bey is persuaded, or rather blackmailed, by his

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<sup>55</sup> “San je laža, a Bog je istina,” Karadžić 1976:II, nos. 25, l. 153; 62, l. 79; 89, l. 512; III, 68, l. 211; IV, 5, l. 104.

<sup>56</sup> “San je klapnja, sam je Bog istina,” Bogišić 1878:no. 97, l. 47; “San je klapa, a Bog je istina,” Karadžić 1976:II, no. 10, l. 84.

<sup>57</sup> “San je laža, a Bog je istina,” Karadžić 1969:249.

<sup>58</sup> “Dje se pramen magle zapodjede . . . / Pak se savi okolo Prilipa,” Karadžić 1976: II, no. 62, ll. 66, 68.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 79.

<sup>60</sup> Karadžić 1976:II, no. 89, l. 512.

<sup>61</sup> Karadžić 1976:III, no. 68, l. 211.

wife to kill his brother on a hunt, and when his brother tells him next morning that he had dreamed that the lightning had killed him when it struck their “palaces,” Milan-bey—who has already decided to kill him— consoles him with the standard formula: “The dream is fancy, God is true.”<sup>62</sup> In this dramatic context the formula is hardly used to express the same “essential idea”: deprived of its good will and innocence, it has a macabre, cynical undertone. Similarly, in the two versions of “The Wedding of King Vukašin” the different usage of this formula is illuminating and of considerable significance in the overall artistic effect. In the earlier and poorer version, written down in the eighteenth century in Dalmatia, the hero dreams that “grey mist” spread from his enemy’s country and that “a fierce snake” coiled round his heart; he tells his dream to his brothers, who console him in the standard fashion: “The dream is fancy, God is true.”<sup>63</sup> In the later and superior version in Karadžić’s collection the dream is again repeated in terms of “a fleece of mist,” but here the hero does tell it not to his brothers but to his wife, who has already betrayed him to the enemy (by burning the wings of his horse and dipping his sword into salty blood). And when she tells him that “The dream deceives, God is true,”<sup>64</sup> the old, simpleminded epic formula obtains a Shakespearean aura of horror and becomes an ironic expression of tenderness, truth, and deceit. The ironic transformation of meaning is not due to any change in the formula, but to a new dramatic context in which it is used.

This shows a creative possibility in formulaic composition which manifests itself even more clearly and frequently when a standard epic

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<sup>62</sup> Karadžić 1976:II, no. 10, l. 84.

<sup>63</sup> “Sinja magla, ljuta zmija, / San je klapnja, sam je Bog istina,” Bogišić 1878:no. 97, ll. 39, 41, 47.

<sup>64</sup> Karadžić 1976:II, no. 25, l. 153. An analogous if much cruder example of cynical transformation of proverbial wisdom can be found in IV, 25, ll. 252-53. The proverb “Treasure is neither silver or gold, / But what is dear to one’s heart” (“Nije blago ni srebro ni zlato / Već je blago što je kome drago,” Karadžić 1969:203) is sometimes quoted by young girls when faced by the choice of a young (and poor) or an old (and rich) husband (Karadžić 1976:III, no. 82, ll. 65-66). But when a Turkish dignitary refuses ransom for Karadjordje’s sister, pointing out to the future leader of the Serbian uprising that “Treasure is neither silver nor gold, / But what is dear to one’s heart” (“Blago nije ni srebro ni zlato, / No je blago što je srcu drago,” Karadžić 1976:IV, no. 25, ll. 252-53), and adding that he would keep the girl just for one night, what he means is hardly within the standard either of proverbial wisdom or of its normal epic usage.

motif or theme is introduced in to a new context. Thus, for instance, in one of the undistinguished *bugarštice*—which tells the story in which Jerina of Smederevo drinks a toast to Damijan Šajnović, offers him her cousin Mara for a bride, puts him into prison when he refuses the offer on the grounds of the sexual mores of the prospective bride, only to let him out when pressed by her husband, in his turn pressed by Duke Janko (John Hunyadi)—the wording of the toast is an epic reflection of an actual custom: “Health to you, Damijan, this cup of cool wine, / Drink the wine and the cup is your gift!”<sup>65</sup> However, this standard toast begins to take on a new epic and moral life when introduced into the orbit of Prince Lazar’s feast on the eve of the disaster of Kosovo and prospective treason. The feast, which was a part of actual Byzantine military protocol, is described in an early prose version of this story in which Ludovik Crijević (1450-1527), the well-known Dubrovnik historian, implied that Lazar believed that Miloš would betray him and yet showed unearthly generosity in his toast: “This cup of wine is your present, Miloš, although I have been told that you will betray me.”<sup>66</sup> However, it is only in “The Prince’s Supper” that this motif is worked out in the rich epic and ironic terms of a Last Supper scene. In this poem, on the eve of the disaster, Lazar knows—as Christ had before him—that he will be betrayed, but he is deluded into believing that he will be betrayed by his most faithful knight. Hence the ironic pathos of the generosity of his toast:

“Health to Miloš, the faithful traitor,  
 First faithful, then a traitor!  
 At Kosovo you will desert me,  
 You will run to Murad, the Emperor!  
 Health to you, drink this toast,  
 Drink this wine, and this cup is yours!”<sup>67</sup>

And when Miloš thanks him for the wine, but not for the speech, when he

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<sup>65</sup> “Zdrav ti budi, Damijane, ovi pehar hladna vina, / Vino da mi popiješ, pehar da ti na dar bude!” Bogišić 1878:no. 11, ll. 33-34.

<sup>66</sup> “Na poklon ti, Milošu, ovaj pehar s vinom, iako mi je javljeno da ćeš me izdati;” see Samardžić 1978:34.

<sup>67</sup> “Zdrav Milošu, vjero i nevjero! / Prva vjero, potonja nevjero! / Sjutra ćeš me izdat’ na Kosovu, / I odbjeći turskom car-Muratu; / Zdrav mi budi! i zdravicu popij: / Vino popij, a na čast ti pehar!” Karadžić 1976:II, no. 50, ll. 31-36.

promises to kill Murad and tie Vuk Branković, the real traitor, to his battle lance “as a woman ties wool on a distaff,”<sup>68</sup> it is in this mixture of sublime loyalty, tragic delusion, irony, and the comic, homely “wool on a distaff” that the standard theme achieves unexpected tonal range and a rich interplay of epic suggestions. Even the “wool on a distaff”—expressing Miloš’s anger and contempt for the actual traitor—does not seem to be the simple distaff that heroes promised to send to their enemies, as a sign of mockery of their feminine cowardice, when they would not accept a challenge to a duel.<sup>69</sup> The simplicity of this standard comic device seems to be lost in the prevailing tragic pattern, which achieves its significance partly through ironic associations with the Last Supper drama.

Of course, the possibilities of introducing new elements and changing the dramatic context of the whole constellation of the story are even more striking. They could be easily illustrated by the superiority of many of Karadžić’s versions to their earlier variants—such songs as “The Death of Duke Prijezda,” “Sick Dojčin,” “The Wedding of King Vukašin,” and “Old Novak and Deli Radivoje.”<sup>70</sup> The “repetition” of the “same” story offers possibilities of change and invention as diverse as the “repetition” of a formula or a theme. In this respect a comparison of two variants of “The Betrayal of Grujo’s Wife,” recorded in the Erlangen Manuscript and about a century later in Karadžić’s collection, is of considerable interest. The “basic” tales are closely parallel: in both variants the heroic outlaw, Grujo Novaković, puts up his tent in a mountain, drinks wine, and falls asleep. Three young Turks come along and when the son warns the mother to wake up his father, she tells him that they are not Turks. When they come, she talks to them and agrees to tie her husband’s hands; when the Turks get drunk—in the Erlangen version this happens immediately, in Karadžić’s after a journey that brings them to a tavern—the father asks the son to steal the mother’s knives and cut his ropes. While doing so, the son cuts his father’s hand, and is frightened when he sees the blood but is consoled by his father that it is not his hands but the ropes that are bleeding. Grujo kills the Turks and burns his unfaithful wife.

The tale, however, reads almost like a different song in Karadžić’s

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<sup>68</sup> “Kao žena kudjelj uz preslicu,” *ibid.*, ll. 61-62.

<sup>69</sup> See Gesemann 1925:no. 98, l. 39; Karadžić 1976:III, nos. 69, l. 26; 70, l. 15.

<sup>70</sup> Karadžić 1976:II, no. 84, cf. Gesemann 1925:no. 70; Karadžić 1976:II, no. 78, cf. Gesemann 1925:no. 110; Karadžić 1976:II, no. 25, cf. Bogišić 1878:no. 97; Karadžić 1976:III, no. 3, cf. Gesemann 1925:no. 66.

collection: apart from “the ornamentation,” elaboration, “the human touches of character” that distinguish a superior singer,<sup>71</sup> there is also a secondary theme that colors and, indeed, changes the meaning of the tale. It is only in Karadžić’s version that the child’s relationship to his mother and father is developed into a moral drama that gives a different twist to the whole story and, particularly, to its cruel ending. It is only in this version that Stevan runs to wake up his father and that his mother catches him and beats him in a savage way:

She hit her own child on the cheek;  
So lightly, lightly she struck him,  
The child turned over three times on the ground  
And three of the sound teeth jumped out of him.<sup>72</sup>

The motif of the mother’s cruelty is further developed during the journey (that takes place only in Karadžić’s version): when the child cannot keep up with the Turkish horses, the Turks whip him across the eyes—and when the father tells him to ask his mother to put him on her horse, she also beats him with the whip. This contrast between mother’s cruelty and father’s tenderness also came to the foreground when Grujo was tied: he could have gotten away from the Turks, but he stayed because in his absence his child would be islamized:

“And what would happen to my sinful soul?”  
Because of the child he surrenders to the Turks.<sup>73</sup>

The motif of the mother’s cruelty, richly coupled with her beauty, not only provides added justification for the terrible punishment at the end, but also paves the way for the ultimate moral drama in which the child emerges as a hero. For while his mother is burning, the child shows that his pity for his mother transcends her cruelty and his father’s righteousness:

“My mother’s breasts are burning,  
Which nursed me, father,

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<sup>71</sup> Lord 1960:78.

<sup>72</sup> “Udari ga rukom uz obraze, / Kako ga je lako udarila, / Tri puta se dete premetnulo, / Tri mu zdrava iskočila zuba,” Karadžić 1976:III, no. 7, ll. 26-29.

<sup>73</sup> “Pa kuda će moja grešna duša?” / Kroz dete se predaje Turcima,” *ibid.*, ll. 93-94.

Which put me on my feet.”<sup>74</sup>

The introduction of these elements not only adds to the depth of character study and the oral richness of the tale; it changes its meaning, so that the poem does not read anymore like a story about deserved punishment, but rather like a drama of patriarchal loyalties and love and forgiveness beyond the historical realities and their epic interpretation. This example shows that a tale, as well as a theme or a formula, can be in its repetition utterly transformed by the appearance of a new star that changes the outlook of the whole constellation.

In summary, oral composition in Karadžić’s collections is dependent as much on repetition and variation as it is on transformation of what is repeated and varied. A formula can be passed on from one tradition of heroic singing to another, from *bugarštice* to the decasyllabic songs; or it can die out with the modulation in its social framework and its audience. It can be, and often is, “regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.” The idea itself, however, can also be inverted or utterly changed by being transplanted into a new dramatic and epic context—without any change in the formula. The formula itself can be changed by the introduction of a synonym for one of its elements, sometimes in order to make it more suitable to the local dialectal conditions—and the “idea” may remain “intact.” Finally, the substitution of one element in the formula can take it into a completely different semantic field, so that we are faced with a new formulaic pattern that expresses a completely different idea, even if it leans heavily on the syntactic pattern of the original formula. A frequently used theme can also be put into a new and different dramatic context—like Lazar’s toast in the setting of prospective treason—and we are again faced with repetition that bears the imprint of invention. This kind of transformation in repetition, which can be observed in various formulaic and thematic patterns, is also significantly paralleled in the way in which one and the same tale is repeated. Not only is there no end to the possibilities of ornamentation and elaboration, but the introduction of new motifs, or a sub-plot, as in “The Betrayal of Grujo’s Love,” can transform the obvious story about deserved punishment into a mysterious tale about undeserved forgiveness and generosity. This kind of formulaic, thematic, and narrative transformation may not be, and certainly is not, the rule; it is “only” the artistic fate of the greatest singers and their songs. Statistically, such moments may be

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<sup>74</sup> “Izgoreše mojoj majci dojke, / Koje su me odranile, babo, / Koje su me na noge podigle,” *ibid.*, ll. 314-16.

negligible, almost as negligible as some of the highlights of Serbo-Croatian heroic singing, when a singer has to construct a unique utterance because his dramatic and imaginative instinct for the moral interest and possibilities of a given situation causes him to step out of history and the prevailing social and moral norms. But this, of course, was “in another country”; and, besides, “the wench is dead.”

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