

Branko Radičević and the Serbian Oral Tradition

Nada Milošević Đorđević
University of Belgrade

When Branko Radičević started to write his poetry, he already had considerable knowledge of folk songs and oral tradition in general. Convinced of the correctness of Vuk Karadžić's opinions, Radičević wanted to help him in a twofold manner. First of all, he wanted to settle accounts with Vuk's opponents, and secondly to show that the language of folk poetry, "the native melody," could be poured into written forms of art as well. Radičević took Daničić's idea from his crucial philological arguments that "folklore is the seed" and that "from that seed, our literature should sprout, and that will be the only true literature."¹ He placed that idea in the lines of the polemic poem *The Way (Put)*: "The ears are ripe, ready for the harvest / Harvest them, brother, don't waste a minute."² *The Way* is a criticism of classic poetics and its defenders, as is the poem *Anonymous (Bezimena)*; these two poems are sharp and uncompromising, youthfully unbridled, and even somewhat rude. For Branko Radičević, Pegasus is a nag, Apollo a weakling, and the muses are of suspicious moral character. Jovan Hadžić, one of the most educated and competent of Vuk's opponents and a champion of the old orthography, was a "fat-headed" creature who kept stumbling on the thick *jer*. Branko believed that modern literature was overgrown with thorns, weed, and chaff. He saw the new literature, based on folk tradition, as spikes "heavy with grain." To the hooting of the owl he opposed the song of the nightingale from the rivers Drina and Sava, Morava and Lim, Krka and Cetina—thus embracing the poetry of the entire cultural area from Vuk's collection. His broad knowledge of folk tradition came to expression in his numerous epic and historic allusions, in his inspired praise, and in a series of borrowed and recognizable formulas from oral poetry. For instance, Montenegro was painted as the last bastion of freedom, where the Serbian eagle, "near the heavens," was healing its wings

¹ Pavle Popović, "Branko Radičević," an introduction to *Pesme Branka Radičevića sa pismima njegovim i jednim spisom u prozi*, eds. Branislav Miljković and Milivoj Pavlović (Belgrade: n.p., 1924), cxx.

² Klasje zrelo, samo da se kosi:
Kosi brate, časa ne počasi!

that had been broken at Kosovo. For that time, for 1847, this was an exceptionally important polemic in verse; today, it is nowhere near the sensitivities of the modern reader.

However, Branko Radičević remained a writer of “the native melody,” the “proto-writer” of all new Serbian poetry. Even his rather neglected epic poetry is not without artistic value.

We shall not investigate at this time the well-known influences of European literature upon Branko Radičević’s poetry, neither the intermediary role of German poetry, nor the direct sources of his poems (Heine, Uland, Shiller, and Byron). We shall also put aside his relation to the literary movements before Romanticism in Serbian literature. The poetics of Romanticism—with its genuine interest in history, its magnification of ancestry, its raising of oppressed nations, its motifs of spring and flowers, mornings and springs, dreams and awakening from them—was not only compatible with the poetics of the Serbian oral tradition, but also very able to support it. Branko Radičević made use of that. The motifs of sadness and parting, bound with the themes of “nature and heart,” often with tragic echoes, like a pledge of sentimentalism, gave Branko’s poetry a unique kind of gentleness.

Although Radičević’s epic poems were published four years after his first, mostly lyrical, collection, he thought a lot about them from the very beginning, judging from his correspondence—especially from the letters he wrote to his father in 1844.³ In the first version of the “epos” *Gojko*, originally entitled *Mileta*, he expresses his relationship to the heroic songs. The connection between the oral and the written, singer and poet, is materialized through the animistic picture of the *gusle* as a typical epic symbol: “In my heart a maple has sprouted, / From it I have fashioned a *gusle*...”⁴ Following Vuk’s concept of the good singer as one who “pays attention to order and idea,” who understands and feels the song, Radičević was careful about the logic of his composition. By editing and consolidating, he left out episodes that were unnecessary for the development of the action in the original version, omitting the broad war panorama, which was not exemplary for oral epics, and shortening and sharpening the battle imagery. Thus, a new version was born. Presenting his own synopsis to his father, he cites lines that he wrote as a “pre-composition” (“Traitorous Vuk Branković betrayed Serbia... Dušan’s time was marvelous”),⁵ emphasizing that he would improve them. He also added lines about the Serbian uprising against Turkish slavery, com-

³ See: “Pisma” in *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, 432–34, 446.

⁴ U mom srcu javor iznikao,
Ja sam iz njeg’ gusle sadeljao.

⁵ *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, 432–33.

plaining that he still had not visited Serbia or Montenegro (which Vuk had counseled him to do). Radičević eagerly desired to become familiar with the atmosphere where the epic had been created.

The lines from his synopsis, in quite another form, found their way into his poem *The Hajduk's Grave* (*Hajdukov grob*).⁶ They are significant not for their artistic value, but because they reveal Branko's sources and his poetic laboratory: the entire oral tradition from Vuk's collections, from the first Nemanjić down to the liberation uprisings in the nineteenth century.

This panoramic view, which is seen in all of his epic poetry, does not divide time into individual epochs. Thus Radičević's work evolves with complete continuity, with a refined sense for the binary oppositions on which the epic is created: Traitor/Hero; Liberty/Slavery; Glorious Serbian Empire/Turkish Occupation; etc. Radičević's "Vukish" encyclopedic knowledge of the poetry of all time opened up the possibility for him to adapt to oral thinking, to the oral view of the world (the "oral state of mind" as E. Havelock would call it⁷). His often repeated wish to leave a memorial in this world is not just poetic vanity, not simply fear of death, but rather the epic, heroic aspiration for immortal deeds that will remain forever in the memories of forthcoming generations, without which there is no real oral tradition. Branko's lines "He is dying happy, / But his name never will, / It will remain forever in his poems,"⁸ uncannily remind us, in their spirit, of the words of Vuk's singers, as directed to Marko Kraljević: "May your bright name be remembered always, / As long as there is the sun and the moon."⁹ These lines regarding Miloš Obilić carry a similar effect: "For he remains in the memory of the Serbs, / To be told now and again forever, / As long as men and Kosovo exist."¹⁰ Not accidentally, Radičević made a hybrid of oral and

⁶ *Hajdukov grob*. See the letter sent to Đuro Daničić (February 6, 1849).

⁷ Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1963), 134–44.

⁸ Gine sretan, al' mu ime neće,
Za do vijek u pjesmama traje, -
A od otih jedna i ova je .
(*Hajdukov grob*, lines 16–18).

⁹ Ime ti se svuda spominjalo,
Dok je sunca i dok je mjeseca
(*Uroš i Mrnjavčevići*, lines 255–56); see: Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. 2, *Sabrana dela Vuka Karadžića*, vol. 5, ed. R. Pešić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1988), 146–51.

¹⁰ On ostavi spomen rodu Srpskom,
Da se priča i pripovijeda,
Dok je ljudi i dok je Kosova

Romantic poetics in his *hajduk* poems about weddings, in which Turkish girls cannot resist the dashing allure and courage of handsome Serbian heroes. Composing a poem about unfortunate lovers (*The Hajduk's Grave*), he placed famous verses from the ballad of Omer and Merima, a selection from Vuk's collection, in the mouth of a young girl named Hajkuna: "Treasure is neither silver or gold, / Treasure is what is dear to your heart."¹¹ The girl chooses to die rather than to live without her beloved. In the epic poem *Gojko*, Radičević again utilized the general theme of brothers in arms dying together. This poem is overflowing with self-sacrifice and camaraderie, but also with betrayal, adventure, and battles with the Turks: thus, a typical epic scene has been created, with typical heroes. It is rich with oral formularization, which so often testifies to the breadth and refined character of the poetic tradition with a delicate interplay between the symbols, the symbolizers, and the symbolized. Borrowed from the oral tradition with a unique abstract stylization, famous epic heroes invisibly direct the action, establishing the standards of behavior for the actual characters, who try to live up to them.

Branko Radičević left behind several versions of both longer and shorter epic poems in manuscript form that represent educational material, as he was aware that he was a lyric poet above all. In 1844, he wrote to his father: "I'll correct them... I bound in the poem, just as a lyric poet does."¹²

In his famous poem *The Pupils' Parting* (*Đački rastanak*),¹³ "where love and patriotism are united in poetry," he succeeded in combining the lyric with the epic by alternating them. He encompassed the entire gallery of epic heroes and their actions by evocation, once again from the Nemanjić family to the rebellion and uprising, also including his own experiences and those of his friends at Karlovci. He linked the epic past with a vision of joyful common future for all South Slavic peoples, a future for which Serbian and Croatian ideologists were fighting at the time, each in their own way. Radičević created complete cultural unity from their *differences*, using the phraseology and melody of Vuk's folk songs, along with those of Vojvodina, and the rhythm

(*Car Lazar I Carica Milica*, lines 196–98); Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. 2, 214–19.

¹¹ Nije blago ni srebro ni zlato,
Već je blago, što je srcu drago.

(*Smrt Omera i Merime*, lines 15–16); Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. 1, *Sabrana dela Vuka Karadžića*, vol. 4, ed. V. Nedić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1975), 244–247.

¹² "Treba gladiti ... (komadić od predpeva ... ću po svoj prilici promenuti). Ja u pesmi skačem, kao što čini lirik" ("Pisma" in *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, 423; 433).

¹³ *Đački rastanak*, the first redaction had the title *Oproštaj od Karlovaca* (*Farewell to Karlovci*); see the letter to his father of March 14, 1844.

and clarity of the *bećarac* (a special kind of lyric song which is made up of two decasyllable verses), in a playful dance full of life and poetic vigor.

Students of Radičević have diligently concentrated on his lyric poetry, yet ignored his epic poetry to the very same degree. His first collection, which presented him as “Vuk’s herald, loud and quick,” was met, of course, by harsh criticism from all of Vuk’s opponents, and paralleled by approval of Vuk’s adherents. When the passions had faded, Branko’s debt to Romantic concepts was pointed out, along with his debt to the lyricism of Vojvodina and its middle class.

Only two studies are directly dedicated to Branko’s ties with Vuk’s collections: Svetislav Vulović’s in the nineteenth century,¹⁴ and Marija Kleut’s in the twentieth.¹⁵ The unmediated variants of lyric poems from Vuk’s collection, those which Branko used as models, were revealed, along with the common motifs, characters, fixed epithets, vocabulary, his means of borrowing oral structure, and his versification. And yet, there is still much more to say. It seems that Branko’s lyric poetry was, and still is, easy to study only on the surface.

Branko Radičević interpreted his poetry to his father (in a letter dated May 9, 1844) through Herder’s and Vuk’s concept that real folk poetry is that which is “composed whole-heartedly, innocently, benevolently and instinctively.”¹⁶ This approach is reaffirmed by these lines from Radičević’s *A Prayer (Molitva)*: “Oh, don’t let me use / Your gift for evil things, / Oh, don’t allow it, dear Lord.”¹⁷ “These three lovely last lines complete this truly religious poem,” Branko said to his father. “They are simple and not flowery, like a prayer from a pure heart. I am thinking of putting them after the dedication, as is, when I have my book printed.”¹⁸ It is interesting that he did not put these three lines at the front of his collection, but rather diluted them in the printed version. It seems that he withdrew from such an explicit understanding of Herder’s concept, but he believed, much longer than Vuk, that

¹⁴ Svetislav Vulović, “Branko Radičević, Prilog istoriji nove srpske književnosti,” *Glas SKA* 13–14 (1889–1890).

¹⁵ Marija Kleut, “Branko Radičević i narodna književnost,” *Zbornik za slavistiku* 5 (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1973), 31–73.

¹⁶ “Pjesme ... koe je serdce u prostoti i bezhudožno po prirodi spjevavalo.” See Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Pjesmarica 1814–1815*, *Sabrana dela Vuka Karadžića*, vol. 1, ed. V. Nedić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1975), 42.

¹⁷ O, ne pusti da na zala,
Upotrebim dar ja tvoj,
O, ne pusti Bože moj!

(*Moja Molitva*, the first title); “Pisma” in *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, 431.

¹⁸ “Pisma” in *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, 432.

poetry was exclusively a gift from God, a matter of momentary inspiration: “The moment created them, the moment wrote them.”¹⁹

However, he worked hard and long on his poems. He tried to defend himself against the influx of written literature, mentioning Byron: “I ... will view life from the nicer side, and I will not compose poems about desperation. He was crazy for he did not know how to enjoy life, always presenting the worst side to himself...”²⁰ And yet, cheerfulness is not the only characteristic of Branko’s poems. He created his poems from poetic tradition, by interweaving the oral tradition and his knowledge of the sentimental pre-Romantic and Romantic currents in literature. It can be seen that this was certainly a tortuous process when one compares the various versions of some of his poems, and when one considers his reflections on the adequacy of certain oral formulas and the work he did in collecting materials for Daničić’s dictionary,²¹ the unpublished letter he wrote to Ljudevit Štur,²² and so on.

Since it is impossible to indicate all the aspects of his use of oral poetics, we will focus only on a few of them. We shall show his marvelous command of the very essence of poetry. Using finished phrases as a starting point, he would decompose the composition, searching for the secret of the creation of sayings and expressions. In the posthumously published poem *Two Stones* (*Dva kamena*), he subordinates the ethnological legend of the origin of the white stone to a love story. In its final phase, the legend unfolded into the saying “Turned to stone from sadness” (hardened into stone, petrified). He decomposed the metaphor and searched for the most adequate image that could objectify the sadness of a maiden who has been left in the lurch, only to attempt the creation of another metaphor from reality in the second part of the poem. In Serbian, “even a stone would cry” is a common saying when one feels enormous sadness. Branko brings it to life. A river forms from the tears of the maiden turned to stone, and these waters of oblivion return her lover to his first moment of love when he quenches his thirst from them. This poem is important because it demonstrates the process of creating written poetry on the basis of oral tradition, and not because we should consider it artistically successful.

¹⁹ “Pisma” in *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, 432.

²⁰ “Pisma” in *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, 434.

²¹ See: “Pisma” in *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, letters to Đ. Daničić, 447; 453–54; 457; 459–66; 467–72. These materials represent not only some kind of short insight into Serbian “linguistics” of the time, but also a precious collection of sayings, proverbs, different short forms of Serbian folklore, children plays, with Radičević’s explanations of the word’s significance.

²² “Pisma” in *Pesme Branka Radičevića*, 482.

A fulfilled wish, in a poem of the same name, is built upon the materialization of a childhood dream (“When I was a wild child / My wish was / If only God would allow me / To have wings”).²³ In the all-encompassing panorama of the wide variety of riches his homeland had to offer, Radičević’s awe was expressed by the decomposition of the saying “to get wings.”

The poem *To Mina* (who was Vuk’s daughter), written in her album, was inspired by the legend in verse about the origin of the stars and has been compared to the mythological songs in Vuk’s collection.

The simple application of images and motifs to a corresponding situation within the same traditional culture appears in only a few of Radičević’s poems. He used the verse “She cuts her hair, and with it ties up the vines”²⁴ from the song *The Slavery of Stojan Janković* in the poem *Harvesters (Beračice)* to announce the death of one of the girls at the harvest. Furthermore, in his poem *Hey, Morava* he directly applied the technique of *brojnica* (a rhythmic song sung while doing manual labor).

Drawing upon the primordial and unbreakable bond with nature from the folk tradition, Branko Radičević created a magical view of the world, but ennobled it with Christian goodness. His sun is alive (“The blazing sun is sitting”), “The grass looks, its gaze toward the ground / And full of tears,”²⁵ the thin grass is bathing in tears.²⁶ All nature becomes gracious, a cheerful participant in the enjoyment of love. Its twisting path moves about (*The Traveler and the Bird [Putnik i ptica]*), dawn smiles, the whirlpool flees, the rocks flee as well (*Night, and Then Night [Noć, pa noć]*), “The breeze gives a smile, / The leaf licks at the smoke / The bright day began to move / Peeping through the lime tree, / The lime tree spread its leafy branches / Whispering to the bright day: / Peek bright day peek, / But keep the secret.”²⁷ Just like in the

²³ Kad sam ludo dete bio,
Želja mi je bila
Kad bi Bože, udelio
Meni jedna krila.

²⁴ Kosu reže, pa vinograd veže
(*Ropstvo Janković Stojana*, line 50); Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, *Srpske narodne pjesme*, vol. 3, *Sabrana dela Vuka Karadžića*, vol. 6, ed. R. Samardžić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1988), 131–34; hair cutting is a ritual tied with the mourning.

²⁵ Trava gleda oborena lica,
A puna suzica.
(*Neka Sunca*)

²⁶ *Sadness and a Warning (Tuga i opomena)*.

²⁷ Laki vetrić osme’nu se,
Listak liska dirnu,
Beli danak pokrenu se,

folk songs of Vuk's collection, nature is not only the framework, it actually participates in feeling, it is a faithful participant and is able to listen as well. Birds communicate messages, the whirlpool stops its babbling and the flower withers on the breast of a worried sweetheart (*Sadness and Warning* [*Tuga i opomena*]). As in a lament, the sweetheart asks nature to participate in her pain: "Cry with me Grass, and sing, Nightingale!" The curse, as a type of indirect outpouring of emotions, actually represents a blessing: "May the water carry you away, / And bring you to me!"²⁸

Sometimes his departure from oral poetry was to the detriment of artistic value (for example, in the poem *Killer Unaware* [*Ubica u neznanju*], he edited out the brilliant, playful atmosphere of the Christmas carol in which the sun, a divinity in a red cap, "takes the dance from his belt"). At times, he also did not depart far enough and, as a result, simplified his poetics. He followed the lead of folk poetry, as already mentioned, in the picturesque expression of feelings and in his careful attention to the logic of narration: "Lifted the jug, lifted her hand, / Her hand trembling ... the jug fell to the ground.../ and broke into two or three."²⁹

Radičević repeated some preexisting devices and themes from the oral traditions and used them like a folk singer, in a variety of contexts, ultimately creating his own formulas on the basis of the folk formulas. Sometimes his creations have functions identical to their precursors', and at other times their functions differ: "the Winding path" (*staza vita*) and the "Narrow path" (*stazica tanana*), illustrate this point. The connection is between two lovers, but there is also a witness to the events in both. A girl approaching "on a nimble horse" (*na konjicu laka skoka*) is always a lead-in for her excitement; birds carry good news, but news as well.

We shall answer negatively the question asked several times in scholarship as to whether Radičević's realization of Vuk's program actually clipped its wings. We stand in the ranks of those researchers who think that Vuk's influence was a fruitful one, and that Branko's significance was enormous

Pa kroz lipu virnu.
Lipa brsne, grane širi,
Šapće danu sjajnu:
"Viri, dane, sjajni, viri,
Ali čuvaj tajnu".
(*Tajna i opomena*)

²⁸ Crn ti obraz ka' na gori sunce;
(*Sabrana dela Vuka Karadžića*, vol. 4, song no. 530).

²⁹ Digo krčag, ruku digo,
Ruka drkti ... krčag dole ...
Ode na dve na tri pole.

“because ... in the development of our poetry, he also interwove his own achievements and his own failures, decisively, fruitfully, and permanently,” and that “without him, one cannot even imagine any of our modern poetry.”³⁰ His cry in his most famous poem *If I Die Young* (*Kad mladijah umreti*), “Oh, poems, my poor orphans ... your father is leaving you in rags,”³¹ is a lament for the perfection he was always seeking. He was on the right road, he achieved many things, and he surely would have done even more if he had not passed away in his twenty-ninth year.

³⁰ M. Leskovac, *Iz srpske književnosti I* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1968), 296.

³¹ O, pesme moje, jedna siročadi, / ... / U traljama otac vas ostavlja.

