

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, Herzegovina, 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 Karadjordje 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 Sisetovac 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, *Klaggesang 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, "Talvj" (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:

Podi/ze se// Crno/jevic/Ivo.

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. Radojic, 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

Kraljevič Marko. Either order is acceptable, although for some names and titles convention has established a preference: one should say Banovič Strahinja and not Strahinja Banovič. Finally, we have decided to spell Kosovo with a single s throughout, but we should note insistently again that all the vowels are short.

The Battle of Kosovo

Translated by John Matthias and Vladeta Vucković

Fragment

(...)
Sultan Murad fell on level Kosovo!
And as he fell he wrote these few brief
words
Sent them to the castle at white Krushevats
To rest on Lazar's knees in his fine city.
"Lazar! Tsar! Lord of all the Serbs,
What has never been can never be:
One land only but two masters,
A single people who are doubly taxed;
We cannot both together rule here,
Therefore send me every tax and key,
Golden keys that unlock all the cities,
All the taxes for these seven years,
And if you do not send these things at
once,
Bring your armies down to level Kosovo
And we'll divide the country with our
swords ..."
When these words have come to Lazar's
eyes
He sees them, weeping cruel tears
(...)

The Downfall of the Kingdom of Serbia

Yes, and from Jerusalem, O from that holy
place,
A great gray bird, a taloned falcon flew!
And in his beak he held a gentle swallow.
But wait! it's not a falcon, this gray bird,
It is a saint, Holy Saint Eliyah:
And he bears with him no gentle swallow
But a letter from the Blessed Mother.
He brings it to the Tsar at Kosovo
And places it upon his trembling knees.
And thus the letter itself speaks to the Tsar:

'Lazar! Lazar! Tsar of noble family,
Which kingdom is it that you long for
most?
Will you choose a heavenly crown today?
Or will you choose an earthly crown?
If you choose the earth then saddle horses,
Tighten girths- have your knights put on
Their swords and make a dawn attack
against
The Turks: your enemy will be destroyed.
But if you choose the skies then build a
church-
O, not of stone but out of silk and velvet-
Gather up your forces take the bread and
wine,
For all shall perish, perish utterly,
And you, O Tsar, shall perish with them."
And when the Tsar has heard those holy
words
He meditates, thinks every kind of thought:
"O, Dearest God, what shall I do, and how?
Shall I choose the earth? Shall I choose
The skies? And if I choose the kingdom,
If I choose an earthly kingdom now,
Earthly kingdoms are such passing things-
A heavenly kingdom, raging in the dark,
endures eternally."
And Lazarus chose heaven, not the earth,
And tailored there a church at Kosovo-
O not of stone but out of silk and velvet-
And he summoned there the Patriarch of
Serbia,
Summoned there the lordly twelve high
bishops:
And he gathered up his forces, had them
Take with him the saving bread and wine.
As soon as Lazarus has given out
His orders, then across the level plain
Of Kosovo pour all the Turks.

Supper in Krushevats

The Serbian Tsar will celebrate his Slava
Here in Krushevats, a well-protected
fortress.
All the high nobility and all
The lesser lords he seats around the table-
All will honor now his holy patron saint.
On his right he places old Yug Bogdan
And next to him the nine brave Yugovichi.
On his left Vuk Brankovich sits down,

And then the other lords according to their rank.

Across from Lazarus is Captain Milosh;
And next to him are these two noble knights:

The first: Ivan Kosanchich,

And the second: Lord Milan Toplitsa.

Now the Tsar lifts up the golden goblet,

Lazarus thus questions all his lords:

"To whom, I ask you, shall make this toast?

If I must toast old age - to old Yug Bogdan then,

If I must honor eminence - to Brankovich;

If I must trust emotion - to the nine brave Yugovichi,

Sons of old Yug Bogdan, brothers of my queen;

If I must bow to beauty - to Ivan Kosanchich;

If I decide by height - to tall Milan Toplitsa;

But if heroic courage must decide me

I shall drink to noble Captain Milosh.

Yes! to Milosh- to nobody else at all.

I'll only toast the health of Milosh Obilich.

Hail, Cousin! friend of mine and traitor!

First of all my friend- but finally my betrayer.

Tomorrow you'll betray me on the field of Kosovo,

Escaping to the Turkish Sultan, Murad!

So to your health, dear Milosh, drink it up,

And keep the golden goblet to remember Lazarus."

Then up on nimble legs springs Milosh Obilich

And to the dark earth bows himself and says:

"My thanks to you O glorious Lazarus,

My thanks for that fine toast and for your handsome gift,

But I can't thank you for those words you spoke.

Let me die if I should lie to you!

I have never been unfaithful to my Tsar-

Never have I been and never shall I be-

And I am sworn to die for you at Kosovo,

For you and for the Christian faith.

But Treason, Lazarus, sits beside you now-

The traitor sips his wine right up your
sleeve.
It's Brankovich, Vuk Brankovich I say!
And when on Vitus-day tomorrow morning
We make our dawn attack upon the
Blackbirds' Field
We'll see right there at bloody Kosovo
Who is loyal to you and who is not!
I swear to you in God Almighty's Name
That I shall go at dawn to Kosovo
And slaughter like a pig the Turkish
Sultan,
Put my foot upon his throat.
And then if God & good luck aid me I'll
return
For Brankovich & bind him to my lance,
Bind him like the wool around a distaff.
I'll drag him like that back as far as
Kosovo!"

Captain Milosh and Ivan Kosanchich

And Milosh says to Ivan Kosanchich:
"My brother, have you seen the Turkish
army?
Is it vast? and do we dare attack them?
Can we conquer Murad here at Kosovo?"
And Ivan Kosanchich answers him like
this:
"My noble friend, O Milosh Obilich!
I have spied upon the Turkish army
And I tell you it is vast and strong.
If all the Serbs were changed to grains of
salt
We could not even salt their wretched
dinners!
For fully fifteen days I've walked among
those hoards
And found there no beginning and no end.
From Mt. Mramor straight to Suvi Javor,
From Javor, brother, on to Sazlija,
From Sazlija across the Chemer Bridge,
From Chemer Bridge on to the town of
Zvechan,
From Zvechan, Milosh, to the edge of
Chechan,
And from Chechan to the mountain peaks-
Everywhere the Turks line up in battle
gear:
Horse is next to horse and warriors all are

massed.

Their lances are like trunks of forest trees;
Their banners are like endless sailing
clouds

And all their tents are like the drifting
snows.

Ah! and if from heaven a heavy rain
should fall

Then not a single drop would ever touch
the earth

For all the Turks and horses standing on it.
Turkish forces occupy the field before us
Stretching to the rivers Lab and Sitnitsa.
Sultan Murad's fallen on the level plain of
Mazgit!"

Then Milosh looks at Kosanchich and
asks:

"My brother, tell me next where I can find
The tent of mighty Sultan Murad For
For I have sworn to noble Lazarus
To slaughter like a pig this foreign Tsar
And put my foot upon his squealing
throat."

And Ivan Kosanchich replies like this:
"O Milosh Obilich, I think you must be
mad!

Where do you suppose that tent is placed
But in the middle of the vast encampment-
And even if you had a falcon's wings
And flew down from the clear blue skies
above

Your wings would never fly you out again
alive!"

Then Milosh thus implores Ivan to
promise:

"O Ivan Kosanchich my dearest brother-
Not in blood, but so much like a brother-
Swear to me not to tell the Tzar
What you have seen and said to me just
now.

Lazarus would suffer anguish over it;
The army under him would grow afraid.
We must both of us say this instead:
Though the Turkish army is not small,
We can easily do battle with them
And defeat them . . . This is what we've
seen:

Not an army made of knights and warriors
But of weary pilgrims, old and crippled
hodjas,

Artisans, and skinny adolescents
Who have never even tasted blood
And only come to Kosovo to see the world
Or earn a crust of bread, a cup of dark red
wine . . .
And if there is a real Turkish army,
That one's fallen sick from dysentery and
has lost its way.
Far from here they shit upon the earth
In fear of us ... and even all their horses
Suffer illnesses, ruined by distemper,
laminitis,
Spreading fatal hoof and mouth disease
To captured cattle and to captured sheep."

Musich Stefan

In Maydan where they mine the purest
silver
Musich Stefan drinks the dark red wine
That's brought to him by Vaistina his
servant
To a table in his lordly castle.
When he has satisfied his thirst he says:
"Vaistina, my dearest friend and servant,
Drink and eat while I lie down to rest
And then go walk before our lordly castle:
Gaze into the clear transparent skies
And tell me: is the bright moon in the
west?
Is the morning star rising in the east?
Has the hour arrived for us to journey
To the level plain of Kosovo
And join forces with the noble Tsar?
My son, you will remember that grave
oath-
Lazarus exhorted us like this:
'Whoever is a Serb, of Serbian blood,
Whoever shares with me this heritage,
And he comes not to fight at Kosovo,
May he never have the progeny
His heart desires, neither son nor daughter;
Beneath his hand let nothing decent grow-
Neither purple grapes nor wholesome
wheat;
Let him rust away like dripping iron
Until his name shall be extinguished!'"
Then Musich Stefan rests upon soft pillows
While Vaistina his friend and loyal servant
Eats his meal, drinks his share of wine,
And goes to walk before the lordly castle.

He looks into the clear transparent skies
And sees the moon- bright and in the west;
The morning star is rising in the east.
The hour has thus arrived for them to
journey
To the level plain of Kosovo
And join forces with the noble Tsar.
Now Vaistina takes horses from the stable-
Battle-horses, one for each of them-
And saddles them, arrays them beautifully.
Then he carries out a noble silken banner
All embroidered with twelve golden
crosses
And a brilliant icon of Saint John,
Holy Patron Saint of Musich Stefan.
He puts it down before the castle keep
And climbs the stairs to wake his master
up.
Now as Vaistina ascends those stairs
The wife of Musich Stefan stops him there,
Embracing him. Imploringly she says:
"O Servant Vaistina, in Jesus' Name!
By God Almighty and by Holy John,
Till now you were my good & faithful
friend.
If you are still my brother then I beg you:
Do not awaken now your sleeping master.
Pity me; I've had an evil dream.
I dreamed I saw a flock of doves in flight
with two gray falcons flying on before
them,
Flying right before this very castle.
They flew to Kosovo and landed there
In Sultan Murad's cruel vast encampment-
But never did I see them rise again.
This, my brother, is a prophecy:
I fear that all of you are going to die."
Then Vaistina the servant speaks like this:
"Dearest sister, honored wife of Stefan!
I cannot, my sister, be unfaithful
To the master of this noble castle;
You are not bound as he and I are bound
By Lazarus's bitter exhortation:
I tell you truly- this is what he said:
'Whoever is a Serb, of Serbian blood,
Whoever shares with me this heritage,
And he comes not to fight at Kosovo,
May he never have the progeny
His heart desires, neither son nor daughter;
Beneath his hand let nothing decent grow-

Neither purple grapes nor wholesome
wheat;
Let him rust away like dripping iron
Until his name shall be extinguished!
Thus I cannot, sister, be unfaithful
To the master of this noble castle."
Then Vaistina goes up and wakes his
master
Saying this: "The time is now upon us."
And Musich Stefan rises on strong legs
And washes slowly, puts on lordly
garments.
He belts around his waist a well-forged
saber,
Pours himself a glass of dark red wine
And toasts his holy patron saint,
And then a quick and providential journey,
And last of all the saving cross of Jesus.
All this in his castle at his banquet table-
Where Stefan will not eat or drink again.
Then they walk before the lordly castle,
Mount their ready chestnut battle-horses
And unfurl the cross-embroidered banner.
Drums and trumpets break the morning
silence-
Off they ride to battle in the name of God!
When the brilliant dawn has cast its light
upon them
Over Kosovo, that flat and graceful plain,
There suddenly appears a lovely maiden
Bearing in her hands two empty golden
goblets.
Beneath her arm she has a noble helmet
Made of wound white silk with feathers
intertwined
Which are worked in silver at their ends
And sewn with precious threads of yellow
gold-
And all embroidered at the top with pearls.
Then Musich Stefan speaks to her like this:
"May God Almighty bless you and be with
you-
But where can you have found that noble
helmet?
Were you yourself upon the field of battle?
Give it to me, dear one, for a moment,
For I will know at once which hero wore it.
I promise by my providential journey
That I will never injure or betray you."
The lovely maiden answered him and said:

"Greetings to you, warrior of the Tsar!
I was not myself upon the field of battle
But my mother woke me early to get water
From the river Sitnitsa that flows nearby
And when I got there- what a flood I saw!
Of muddy water, horses, dying heroes,
Turkish calpacs, fezes, bloody turbans,
And the helmets worn by noble Serbs
Made of wound white silk with feathers
intertwined.

I saw this helmet floating near the bank
And waded out a bit to reach it there.
I have at home a little younger brother
And I wanted him to have it for a present.
Besides, I'm young myself; I like the
feathers on it."

She gives the helmet to the mounted
knight.

As soon as Stefan has it in his hands
He recognizes it and starts to weep;
Tears flow down his stern & noble face.
He slaps his side so fiercely that he breaks
A golden cuff link joining his right sleeves
And tears the velvet of his trouser leg.

"May God in Heaven help me and protect
me!

Now the curse of Lazar surely falls!"
And he returns the helmet to the girl
And reaches in his pocket with his hand
And gives three golden ducats to her,
saying:

"Take them, dear one, lovely Maid of
Kosovo,

For I am going into battle now
To fight the Turks in Jesus' Holy Name.
If God allows me to return alive
I'll have for you a better gift by far-
But if, my sister, I should die in battle,
Remember me by these three golden
ducats."

Then they spurred their horses into battle
Across the flooding muddy river Sitnitsa
And rode into the camp of Sultan Murad.
Musich Stefan fought and killed three
pashas,

But when he met the fourth that warrior
smote him-

And there he died beside his Servant
Vaistina

And with his army of twelve thousand

souls.

Great Tsar Lazar also perished on that day
And with him died a good and ancient
Empire-
With him died the Kingdom of this Earth.

Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Militsa

Now when at Krushevats the Tsar is
camped
And takes his supper on the eve of battle
Militsa his Queen implores him thus-
"O Lazar, Golden Crown of Serbia,
You ride tomorrow out to Kosovo
And take away your servants & your
knights,
You leave me no one at the castle, Sire,
Who'd ride out with a letter to the field
Of Kosovo and bring an answer back
You take away with you my nine dear
brothers,
All the Yugovichi ride with you
I ask you this leave but one behind
Leave me just one brother here to swear
by."
And Lazarus thus speaks to her and says
"My Lady Militsa, my dear Tsaritsa-
Which brother is it you would like for me
To leave with you in this white castle
tower?"
And she:- "Give me Boshko Yugovich!"
And he, noble Prince of all the Serbs.
"My Lady Militsa, my dear Tsaritsa,
Tomorrow when the white day brightly
dawns,
When the day dawns, the sun bright in the
east,
And when the portals of the town are
opened,
Go and stand beside those city gates
For there will pass the army in its ranks
And all the horsemen with their battle-
lances
Boshko Yugovich will lead them all
And carry high the cross-emblazoned
banner
Give him all my blessings and say this.
That he shall give the flag to someone else
And stay with you in this white castle
tower "
When dawn has broken early in the

morning

And the portals of the town are opened
Out she walks, Lazarus's queen,
And goes to stand beside the city gate
Where all the army passes by in ranks
Out before the warriors with their lances
Comes her brother, Boshko Yugovich,
Riding in his noble golden armor
On his golden-harnessed battle stallion
Holding high the cross-emblazoned banner
Which envelops him, my brothers, to the
waist.

On the staff there is a golden apple,
And on the apple golden crosses stand
From which there hang several golden
tassels
Dangling in the breeze about his shoulders.
Now Tsaritsa Militsa goes up to him
And takes his horse's bridle in her hand.
She puts her arms around her brother's
neck

And thus she softly speaks to him and
says:

"O my brother, Boshko Yugovich,
Lazarus has given you to me
And tells you not to go to Kosovo;
He sends his blessing to you and he says:
To give your flag to anyone you like
And stay with me at white-walled
Krushevats

That I will have a brother here to swear
by."

Boshko Yugovich then speaks like this:
"Go back, my sister, to your castle tower
It is not for me to go with you
Or give away this banner that I hold
Even if the Tsar would give me
Krushevats;
What would all my comrades say of me?
Look upon this coward Yugovich!
The one who dares not go to Kosovo
And spill his blood for Jesus' Holy Cross
And for his faith to die upon that plain."
With that he spurs his horse on through the
gate.

And next rides out Yug Bogdan, Boshko's
father,

And behind him seven Yugovichi;
One by one she stops them and implores
them

But not a one would even look at her.
She waits in misery beside the portals
Until her brother Voin comes riding past
Leading close behind him Lazar's horses
All caparisoned with golden trappings.
She stops his chestnut, takes it by the
bridle,
And then she throws her arms around her
brother.
Thus she softly speaks to him and says:
"O Voin Yugovich, my dearest brother,
Lazar gives you to me for a present!
He sends his blessing to you and he says:
Give to someone else those noble horses
And stay with me at white-walled
Krushevats
That I will have a brother here to swear
by."
Her brother Voin thus answers her and
says:
"Go back, my sister, to your castle tower-
For as a warrior I may not return,
Nor would I leave these horses of the Tsar
Even if I knew that I would perish.
I ride out to the level field of Kosovo
To spill my blood for Jesus' Holy Cross
And die with all my brothers for the faith."
With that he spurs his horse on through the
gate.
When Lady Militsa has seen all this
She falls down fainting on the cold hard
stone
And lies unconscious, still as if in death.
Glorious Lazar, Prince of all the Serbs,
Is next to pass, and when he sees his queen
He weeps, and tears flow down his cheeks.
He looks around him turns to left and right,
And calls out to his servant Goluban:
"Goluban, my dear and faithful servant,
Dismount at once from your white horse
And take my lady in your strong white
arms
And carry her into the narrow tower.
I free you before God from your grave
oath.
Do not ride out to fight at Kosovo
But stay with her inside the castle tower."
When Goluban has heard his master's
words
He weeps, and tears flow down his cheeks;

As ordered he dismounts from his white
horse
And lifts the lady up in his white arms
And carries her into the castle tower.
But yet his heart torments him: he must go
And ride to battle on the Blackbirds' Field.
Turning back at once to his white horse
He mounts and rides to level Kosovo.
As in the east the morning brightly dawns
Two black ravens fly to Krushevats
From Kosovo, that wide and level plain,
And land upon the narrow castle tower,
The castle tower of Lazarus the Tsar.
The first bird caws, the second starts to
talk:
"Is this the tower of Glorious Lazarus,
Or is there no one home in this white
castle?"
Only Lady Militsa is there to hear,
And she alone walks out before the tower.
Thus she speaks and asks the two black
birds:
"Ravens! in the name of God Almighty
Tell me where you come from this bright
morning.
Could it be you come from Kosovo?
Have you seen two mighty armies there?
And did those armies join in furious
combat?
Great black birds: which army won the
battle?"
Then the ravens answered, both together:
'In the name of God, Tsaritsa Militsa,
We come today from level Kosovo,
And we have seen two mighty armies
there;
Those armies met in battle yesterday
And both the Tsar and Sultan have been
slain.
Among the Turks some few are left alive,
But fewer still among the Serbs yet
breathe,
And all of them have cruel bleeding
wounds."
Even as the ravens speak those words
The Servant Milutin comes riding up:
His own right arm he bears in his left hand;
Bleeding from his seventeen grave
wounds,
He reins his sweating blood-drenched war-

horse in.

Lady Militsa thus questions him:

"What happened to you Servant Milutin?

Did you abandon Lazar on the field?"

And Servant Milutin replies to her:

"Help me down, dear lady, from my horse,

And bathe with cool water all my wounds;

Quench my thirst with red reviving wine;

These evil wounds will be the end of me."

The Lady Militsa takes him gently down

And bathes his wounds with cool water

there,

And gives him dark red wine to quench his

thirst.

When she has thus attended to his needs

She questions him again & softly asks:

"What happened, Milutin, at Kosovo?

The noble Tsar & old Yug Bogdan- dead?

The Yugovichi, nine of them, all dead?

Vuk Brankovich and great Lord Milosh-

dead?

And Strahinya the Ban beside them all?"

The wounded servant answers her and

says:

"All remain, my lady, on the field

Where the glorious Tsar has bravely

perished.

There are many broken lances there

Belonging both to Turks and noble Serbs-

But many more of ours have broken, Lady,

Than the Turks' defending Lazarus,

Fighting for our glorious Lord and Master.

And old Yug Bogdan, Lady, lost his life

At the beginning, in the dawn attack

Along with his eight sons, the Yugovichi,

Where brother fought by brother to the end

As long as he could strike and cut;

But Boshko Yugovich remains there still,

His cross-emblazoned banner waving high,

Where he chases Turks in frightened herds

As a hunting falcon chases doves.

And Strahinya died too where blood rose

to the knees

While Milosh, Lady, lost his noble life

Fighting near the river Sitnitsa

Where many dying Turks lie all around.

But Milosh killed the Turkish Sultan,

Murad,

And slaughtered many Turkish soldiers

with him.

May God Almighty bless the one who bore
him!

He leaves immortal fame to all the Serbs
To be forever told in song and story
As long as Kosovo and human kind
endure.

But ask me nothing of Vuk Brankovich!
May the one who gave him birth be
damned!

Cursed be his tribe and his posterity,
For he betrayed the Tsar at Kosovo,
And led away twelve thousand men, my
Lady,
Led his knights away with him from
Kosovo."

Tsaritsa Militsa and Vladeta the Voyvoda

Tsaritsa Militsa went out to walk
Before the castle at white Krushevats,
And with her there were her two daughters:
Vukosava and the pretty Mara.

Then up to them came Vladeta the
Voyvoda

Riding on a bay a charging war-horse;
Vladeta had forced the horse into a sweat
And it was bathed all over in white foam.

Tsaritsa Militsa spoke to him and said:
"In the name of God good knight of the
Tsar,

Why have you so forced your horse to
sweat?

Aren't you coming from the field of
Kosovo?

Did you see great Lazar riding there?
Did you see my master and your own?"

And Vladeta responded in his turn:

"In the name of God Tsaritsa Militsa,
I have ridden from the level field,
But I fear I did not see the Tsar.

I saw his war-horse chased by many Turks,
And thus I think our noble Lord is dead."

When Tsaritsa Militsa had heard that news
She wept and tears ran down her face.

And then she looked at Vladeta and asked:

"Tell me more good knight of the Tsar,
When you were on that wide and level
plain,

Did you see my father and my noble
brothers there?"

Did you see the Yugovichi and Yug
Bogdan?"
And Vladeta thus answered her and said:
"As I rode out and over level Kosovo
I saw the Yugovichi, nine of them, your
brothers,
And I saw your father, old Yug Bogdan,
there:
They were in the midst of all the fighting
And their arms were bloody clear up to
their shoulders,
Their tempered swords clear up to the hilts;
How their arms grew weary though and
sank
Struggling with the Turks out on that
field!"
Again the wife of Lazar spoke to him and
said:
"Voyvoda stay with me and wait!
Did you see the husbands of my daughters?
Did you see Vuk Brankovich and Milosh?"
And Vladeta the Voyvoda replied:
"I have gone all over level Kosovo,
And I have seen what I have seen.
I did see Captain Milosh, Milosh Obilich,
And he was standing on that level field;
I saw him lean upon his battle lance
And saw that it was broken
And the Turks were swarming on him
Until now, I think, he surely must have
died.
And did I see Vuk Brankovich at all?
I did not see him- let the sun not see him
either!
For he betrayed the Tsar out on that field,
The noble Tsar, your master and my own."

The Kosovo Maiden

On a Sunday early in the morning
The Maid of Kosovo awoke to brilliant sun
And rolled her sleeves above her snow-
white elbows;
On her back she carries warm, white bread,
And in her hands she bears two golden
goblets,
one of water, one of dark red wine.
Seeking out the plain of Kosovo,
She walks upon the field of slaughter there
Where noble Lazarus, the Tsar, was slain,
And turns the warriors over in their blood;

Should one still breathe she bathes him
with the water
And offers him, as if in sacrament,
The dark red wine to drink, the bread to
eat.
At length she comes to Pavle Orlovich,
Standard-bearer of his lord the Tsar,
And finds him still alive, though torn and
maimed:
His right hand and his left leg are cut off
And his handsome chest is crushed and
broken
So that she can see his lungs inside.
She moves him from the pool of blood
And bathes his wounds with clear and cool
water;
She offers him, as if in sacrament,
The dark red wine to drink, the bread to
eat.
When she has thus attended to his needs,
Pavle Orlovich revives and speaks:
"Maid of Kosovo, my dearest sister,
What misfortune leads you to this plain
To turn the warriors over in their blood?
Whom can you be looking for out here?
Have you lost a brother or a nephew?
Have you lost perhaps an aging father?"
And the Maid of Kosovo replies:
"O my brother, O my unknown hero!
It is not for someone of my blood
I'm searching: not an aging father;
Neither is it for a brother or a nephew.
Do you remember, brave and unknown
warrior,
When Lazar gave communion to his army
With the help of thirty holy monks
Near the lovely church of Samodrezha
And it took them twenty days to do it?
All the Serbian army took communion.
At the end there came three warrior Lords:
The first was captain Milosh Obilich,
The next was Ivan Kosanchich,
And the last the warrior Milan Toplitsa.
It happened that I stood beside the gates
As Milosh Obilich passed grandly by-
There is no fairer warrior in this world-
He trailed his saber there upon the stones
And on his head he wore a helmet made
Of wound white silk with feathers
intertwined

A brightly colored cloak hung down his
back
And round his neck he wore a silken scarf.
As he passed he turned and looked at me
And offered me his brightly colored cloak,
Took it off and gave it to me, saying:
'Maiden, take this brightly colored cloak
By which I hope you will remember me-
This cloak by which you can recall my
name:

Dear soul, I'm going out to risk my life
In battle for the great Tsar Lazarus;
Pray God, my love, that I return alive,
And that good fortune shortly shall be
yours:

I will give you as a bride to Milan,
Milan Toplitsa, my sworn blood-brother,
Noble Milan who became my brother
Before God Almighty and Saint John:
To him I'll give you as a virgin bride.'
After him rode Ivan Kosanchich-
There is no fairer warrior in this world.
He trailed his saber there upon the stones
And on his head he wore a helmet made
Of wound white silk with feathers
intertwined,

A brightly colored cloak hung down his
back
While round his neck he wore a silken
scarf

And on his hand he had a golden ring.
As he passed he turned and looked at me
And offered me the glowing golden ring,
Took it off and gave it to me saying:
'Maiden, take this golden wedding ring
By which I hope you will remember me-
This ring by which you can recall my
name:

Dear soul, I'm going out to risk my life
In battle for the great Tsar Lazarus;
Pray God, my love, that I return alive,
And that good fortune shortly shall be
yours:

I will give you as a bride to Milan,
Milan Toplitsa, my sworn blood-brother,
Noble Milan who became my brother
Before God Almighty and Saint John:
I will be the best man at your wedding.'
After him rode Milan Toplitsa-
There is no fairer warrior in this world.

He trailed his saber there upon the stones
And on his head he wore a helmet made
Of wound white silk with feathers
intertwined,
A brightly colored cloak hung down his
back
While round his neck he wore a silken
scarf
And on his wrist he had a golden torque
As he passed he turned and looked at me
And offered me the shining golden torque,
Took it off and gave it to me, saying:
'Maiden, take this shining golden torque
By which I hope you will remember me-
This torque by which you can recall my
name:
Dear soul, I'm going out to risk my life
In battle for the great Tsar Lazarus;
Pray God, my love, that I return alive,
And that good fortune shortly shall be
yours
And I will take you for my faithful wife.'
With that the warrior Lords all rode away-
And so I search upon this field of
slaughter."
Pavle Orlovich then spoke and said:
"O my dearest sister, Maid of Kosovo!
Do you see, dear soul, those battle-lances
Where they're piled the highest over there?
That is where the blood of heroes flowed
In pools higher than the flanks of horses,
Higher even than the horses' saddles-
right up to the riders' silken waistbands.
Those you came to find have fallen there;
Go back, maiden, to your white-walled
dwelling.
Do not stain your skirt and sleeves with
blood."
When she has heard the wounded hero's
words
She weeps, and tears flow down her pale
face;
She leaves the plain of Kosovo and walks
To her white village wailing, crying out:-
"O pity, pity! I am cursed so utterly
That if I touched a greenly leafing tree
it would dry and wither, blighted and
defiled."

Fragment

"Who is that fine hero, who's the one
Sweeping with his tempered sword,
His tempered sword in his right hand,
To cut off twenty heads?"

"That is Banovich Strahinya!"

"Who is that fine hero, who's the one,
Impaling four before he's done
Upon his lance and heaving them
Behind him in the river Sitnitsa?"

"That is Srdja Zlopogledja!"

"Who is that fine hero, who's the one,
Riding on the great white stallion,
Holding high the banner in his hands,
Chasing Turks around in bands
And plunging them into the river Sitnitsa?"

"That is Boshko Yugovich!"

The Death of the Mother of the Yugovichi

Dear God! How great the wonder of it all-
When the army fell on level Kosovo
With all the Yugovichi in its ranks-
Nine brave brothers and the tenth, their
father!

The mother of the Yugovichi prays
That God will give her quick eyes of a
falcon
And a swan's white wings that she might
fly

Out over Kosovo, that level plain,
And see the Yugovichi- all nine brothers
And their father, noble old Yug Bogdan.
And God Almighty grants her what she
asks-

Eyes of a falcon, white wings of a swan-
And out she flies over level Kosovo
And finds the Yugovichi lying slain-
All nine brothers, and the tenth, Yug
Bogdan.

Driven in the ground nine lances stand
With nine gray falcons perching on their
ends;
Beside the lances nine brave horses wait,
And near the horses nine grim rampant
lions.

She hears the horses neigh, the lions roar,
The nine gray falcons scream and croak
and caw,
And still her heart is cold as any stone
And no tears rise at all, and no tears fall.

Then she takes with her the nine brave
horses,
And she takes with her the rampant lions,
And she takes with her the nine gray
falcons-
Slowly leads them off to her white castle.
From far away her sons' nine wives could
see her-
And out they walk before the castle tower:
And as the mother hears the widows
weeping
She hears the horses neigh, the lions roar,
The nine gray falcons scream and croak
and caw.
And still her heart is cold as any stone
And no tears rise at all, and no tears fall.
When it is very late, when it is midnight,
Damian's gray horse begins to scream;
The mother goes to Damian's wife and
asks:
"O dearest daughter, my son's beloved
wife,
Why does Damian's stallion scream like
this?
Is he hungry for the choicest wheat?
Does he thirst for cool Zvechan waters?"
And the wife of Damian answers her:
"O my mother, mother of my Damian,
The stallion does not scream for choicest
wheat,
Neither does he thirst for Zvechan waters;
Damian used to feed him oats till midnight,
And at midnight he would ride the roads;
The horse is grieving for his noble master-
That he did not bring him here upon his
back."
And still the mother's heart is cold as any
stone,
And no tears rise at all, and no tears fall.
When dawn has broken early in the
morning,
Two black ravens fly up to the castle,
Their wings all red and bloody to the
shoulders
And their beaks all foaming with white
foam.
They carry there a warrior's severed hand
With a wedding ring upon its finger
And they drop it in the mother's lap.
The mother of the Yugovichi takes the

hand

And stares at it, turns it in her lap,
And then she calls to Damian's faithful
wife:

"O my daughter, beloved wife of Damian,
Do you know whose severed hand this is?"

And the wife of Damian answers her-

"O dearest Lady, mother of my husband,
This is the hand of Damian, your son;
I know because I recognize this ring
Which is the ring I gave him at our
wedding."

Again the mother takes the severed hand
And stares at it, turns it in her lap:
Softly then she speaks to that white hand.

"O dear dead hand, O dear unripe green
apple,

Where did you grow, where were you torn
away?

Dear God! you grew upon this mother's lap
And you were torn away upon the plain of
Kosovo!"

And now the mother can endure no more
And so her heart swells and breaks with
sorrow

For the Yugovichi- all nine brothers
And the tenth of them, Yug Bogdan.

The Miracle of Lazar's Head

When they cut off Lazar's head upon the
Blackbirds' Field

Not a single Serb was there to see it
But it happened that a Turkish boy saw,
A slave, the son of one who had been made
Herself a slave, a Serbian mother

Thus the boy spoke having seen it all:

"Oh have pity, brothers; Oh have pity,
Turks.

Here before us lies a sovereign's noble
head!

In God's name it would be a sin
If it were pecked at by the eagles and the
crows

Or trampled on by horses and by heroes."

He took the head of holy Lazar then
And covered it and put it in a sack
And carried it until he found a spring
And put the head into the waters there
For forty years the head lay in that spring
While the body lay upon the field at

Kosovo

It was not pecked by eagles or by crows.
It was not trampled on by horses or by
heroes.

For that, Dear Lord, all thanks be to Thee.
Then one day there came from lovely
Skoplje

A group of youthful carters who conveyed
Bulgarians and Greeks to Vidin and to
Nish

And stopped to spend the night at Kosovo.
They made a dinner on that level field,
And ate and then grew thirsty afterwards.
They lit the candle in their lantern then
And went to look for waters of a spring.
Then it was that one young carter said:
"See the brilliant moonlight in the water
there."

The second carter answered him:
"My brother, I don't think it's moonlight,"
While the third was silent, saying nothing,
Turning in his silence to the east,
And all at once calling out to God,
The one true God, and holy sainted
Nicholas:

"Help me God! Help me holy Nicholas!"
He plunged into the waters of the spring
And lifted out into the quiet air
The holy head of Lazar, Tsar of all the
Serbs.

He placed it on the green grass by the
spring

And turned to get some water in a jug
So the thirsty carters all could drink.
When next they looked upon the fertile
earth

The head no longer rested on the grass
But rolled out all alone across the level
field,

The holy head moving towards the body
To join it the way it was before.

When in the morning bright day dawned
The three young carters sent the tidings
off-

A message to the holy Christian priests
Which summoned some three hundred of
them there

And summoned bishops, twelve of them,
And summoned four old patriarchs
From Pech, Constantinople, and Jerusalem.

They all put on their holy vestments then,
Put on their heads the tall peaked caps of
monks,
And took into their hands the ancient
chronicles,
And read out prayers, and kept long vigils
there
For three long days and three dark nights,
Neither sitting down nor seeking any rest,
Neither lying down nor ever sleeping,
But questioning the saint and asking him
To which great church or monastery he
would go:
Whether Opoovo or Krushedol,
Whether Jaska or Beshenovo,
Whether Rakovats or Shishatovats
Whether Djivsha or Kuvezhdin
Or whether he would rather go to
Macedonia.
But the saint would go to none of these,
And wished to stay at lovely Ravanitsa,
The church he had himself endowed
Which rose below the mountain of Kuchaj-
His own church, the one he built himself,
Built with his own bread, with his own
treasure,
And not with tears wept by wretched
subjects,
In those years he walked upon this earth.

The Death of Duke Prijezda

Message after message after message:
Who is sending them? Just who are they
for?
The Turkish Sultan Mehmed sends them
all
And they are for Prijezda, Duke of Stalach;
They come to him in his white castle there.
"O Prijezda, noble Voyvoda of Stalach,
I demand you send me your three
treasures:
First, your deadly tempered sword
That cuts so easily through wood and
stone,
Through wood and stone and even through
cold iron;
Second, send your gallant war-horse,
Zhdral,
That flies across the wide and level fields
And leaps the height of double rampart

walls;
Third, I want your faithful wife."
Duke Prijezda studies what he reads,
Studies it and writes a short reply:
"Sultan Mehmed, Tsar of all the Turks,
Raise as large an army as you like
And come to Stalach any time you choose.
Whatever way you may attack us here,
I will not give you any of my treasures;
For myself alone I forged my sword,
For myself alone I fed my gallant Zhdral,
And for myself alone I took a wife:
I will not give you any of my treasures."
The Turkish Sultan Mehmed raised an
army then,
Raised an army, led it off to Stalach;
He bombarded Stalach three long years,
But not a single stone did he dislodge;
He found no way to conquer that white
city,
Nor would he end the siege and march
back home.
One fine morning on a Saturday
Duke Prijezda's wife climbed slowly up
The rampart walls surrounding little
Stalach
And from those heights she gazed into the
Morava,
The muddy river down below the city.
Prijezda's wife thus spoke to him and said:
"O Prijezda, O my dearest master,
I'm afraid, my master and my lord,
The Turks will blow us up from
underground!"
Duke Prijezda answered her and said-
"Be silent, love, do not talk like that
How can anybody tunnel under Morava?"
After that Sunday morning dawned,
And all the nobles went into the church
To stand and hear the solemn mass of God,
And when they left the church and came
back out
Duke Prijezda spoke to them and said
"My Lords, my powerful right wings,
My wings by which I fly to eat and drink
and fight,
After we have eaten and have drunk our
wine,
Let us open up the castle gates
And make a flying raid against the Turks,

Letting God and fortune give us what they want!"

Thus Prijezda calls out to his wife
"My love, go down into the castle cellar
And bring us up the brandy and the wine."

Jelitsa then took two golden pitchers
And went below into the castle cellar,
But when she reached the bottom of the
stairs,

She saw the place was full of Turkish
soldiers
Drinking cool wine out of their boots
And toasting first the health of Lady Jelitsa
And then her husband's death, the death of
Duke Prijezda

She dropped her pitchers on the cellar
stones

And ran upstairs into the castle hall
"Your wine is bad, my lord and master,
Very bad, your brandy is worse still!
The castle cellar's full of Turkish soldiers
Drinking cool wine out of their boots
First they drink my health and then they
drink to you,

But you- they bury you alive,
They bury you and then drink to your
soul."

Duke Prijezda then leapt to his feet
And opened up the portals of the town,
They made a sortie out against the Turks,
And closed with them and dueled with
them there

Until some sixty of the lords were dead,
Sixty lords, but thousands of the Turks;
After that Prijezda rode back home
And locked the city gates against the
Turks.

He took his deadly sword out of its sheath
And cut the head off Zhdral, his gallant
war-horse:

"Zhdral, Zhdral, O my precious dear,
The Turkish Tsar will not ride on your
back."

Then he broke his sharp and tempered
sword:

"O tempered sword, O my true right hand,
The Turkish Tsar must never belt you on!"

Then he sought his lady in the castle
And he took his lady gently by the hand:
"Dearest Jelitsa, wise and faithful lady,

Will you choose to die with me today
Or will you be the lover of a Turk?"
The Lady Jelitsa shed many tears:
"In honor I will die with you today;
I will not be the lover of a Turk
Or trample on the honorable cross,
They cannot force me to betray my faith."
Then they joined hands, the two of them,
And went up on the ramparts above
Stalach;
There it was that Jelitsa thus spoke.
"O Prijezda, O my dearest master,
The waters of the Morava have nursed us;
The waters of the Morava should bury us!"
And holding hands they leapt into the
river.
Sultan Mehmed finally conquered Stalach,
But he did not obtain a single treasure
Bitterly he cursed, this Turkish Tsar:
"May God destroy you, O Stalach castle!
I had three thousand men when I arrived;
Now I start for home with just five
hundred!"

Marko Kraljevich and the Eagle

Marko lies beside the high road of the
Tsar,
His spear behind his head, planted in the
earth:
He draws around him there his dark green
dolman,
Covers up his face with silver-threaded
cloth.
Sharats stands beside him, tethered to the
spear-shaft-
And on the top of it there perches a great
eagle.
He spreads his wings, making shade for
Marko,
And gives him cool water from his beak,
Cool water for the wounded hero.
But suddenly a Vila cries out from the
woods:
"In God's name great gray eagle there,
Whatever kind of goodness did this Marko
do for you,
What act of kindness or of charity
That you should stretch your wings and
shade him in this way
And bring him water in your beak,

Cool water for the wounded hero?"
And now the bird, the eagle, speaks to him
and says:
"Silence, Vila! Shut your stupid mouth!
What sort of goodness has this Marko
failed to do,
What act of charity has he not done for
me?
It could be even you remember this-
The army dropping off like flies at
Kosovo,
The two Tsars dying on the field-
Murad dying, great Tsar Lazar dying-
And all the blood rising to the stirrups,
Rising even to the silken belts of heroes,
Men and horses floating in it, swimming,
Horse by horse & hero next to hero-
And then the coming of the hungry birds.
As we ate our fill of human flesh
And drank our fill of human blood
My wings grew wet and sticky in the sun
Which burst out flaming in the crystal sky
And suddenly I could not fly at all
So stiff with blood & scorched had grown
my wings.
When all the other birds had flown away
I alone remained on level Kosovo
Trampled under foot by horses and by
heroes.
Then God sent Marko to me on that plain
Who plucked me from the flowing blood
of heroes
And set me down behind him on the back
of Sharats.
He took me straight into the nearest woods
And put me on the green branch of a pine.
Then a gentle rain began to rain.
It fell down from the sky and washed my
wings,
Washed away the blood of noble heroes,
And I could fly above beyond the forest
And join all the eagles, join my swift
companions.

Appendix

John Matthias

"To V. V.;
On Our Translations of the *Kosovo*
***Fragments*"**

Vladeta the Voyvoda! knight who brings the news
From Kosovo to gracious Militsa,
Lazarus's queen, sister of the Yugovichi,
Daughter of Yug Bogdan- that's the stock you're made of!
In the name of God Almighty
As they all repeat in these old epic poems
We struggle with (and even in the name
Of Allah maybe) what could ever bring
A hero and a Serb To South Bend, Indiana?
Where Ivan Mestrovich petered out his talent
In the awful portrait busts and bland madonnas
Of his exile we meet beside
The only decent piece of work in town-
His Jacob's Well and puzzle over
Fates as dark as those of Lazarus
And Milosh Obilich sung down centuries
Of Turkish occupation by dusty peasant guslars
Who didn't need to know that fancy alphabet
Saint Cyril left behind in which reforming Vuk
Spelled out phonetically a living language
Where one itches through the final syllables of names
And scratches at the surface of a destiny
In verbal fragments of a people's epic past.
How unlikely, Vladeta, that we should meet at all.
In 1941 when I was born beside a silly field
Of vegetables that noncombatant types
Were urged to cultivate- officially they called
Such doubtful husbandry a "Victory Garden"-
You at just eighteen had taken to the hills
With Tito's Partisans where every urgent message
Sent to Stalin (later on to Churchill)
Was the same: *More Boots!*
The rugged karst that cut away your soles
Kept "the occupier" as the euphemistic
Tour books call him now (for, after all, he's rich)
An easy target in the villages & towns.
Did you swoop right down on him like Marko on the Turks?
You did- but couldn't live with
Certain knowledge of unspeakable reprisals.
Nazi mathematics was a good deal easier
To follow than your theory of recursive functions
Hammered out in hiding six months later in Vienna-
For every officer you blew up in the town
They shot a hundred villagers.
And who is more within his rights

To moralize on firing squads than someone who himself
Would stand before one-
Trying you summarily, your
Brothers tied you to a tree and lined up in a nasty file
With leveled rifles aimed to blow your very useful brains
To far less squeamish hills.
You can laugh four decades later since you've lived to tell
The tale: "But my uncle, who as fate
Would have it, is in charge of this grim liquidation,
Couldn't shoot his nephew.
That was 1941; two years later
And he would have."
He cut you loose and kicked
You in the ass and shouted: run!
In the ballad, Vladeta survives to tell the queen
What he saw at Kosovo: "Tell me knight," she says,
"When you were on that wide and level plain
Did you see great Lazar riding by?
Did you see my father and my noble brothers there?
Did you see the husbands of my daughters?"
And Vladeta must tell of slaughter and betrayal
-the guslar singing mournfully in lines of just
Ten syllables, sliding over pauses at the fourth
Where prosodists would quickly place
Twin horizontal lines- Yes, Vladeta must tell
The queen exactly what annihilation feels like.
That I see you sometimes standing among memories
Like this other Vladeta before the queen
Or Mestrovich among his early works
Or even like Lord Milosh on that open plain
You find, of course, unspeakably absurd-
"With my broken battle-lance, no doubt,
As all the enemy press in upon me fighting
Near the river Sitnitsa. One account says Milosh
Killed twelve thousand Turkish soldiers after
He had polished off the Sultan. In fact they
Took him in the tent and cut off both his arms!"
you open up me slivovitz and go on with your tales
Which, my friend, for all the jokes and ironies
Required for the telling never cease to bleed-
And in your cups you sing to me Prince Lazar's fatal choice,
You sing the ancient downfall of the Serbs.
*"Which Kingdom is it that you long for most?
That's the question that the falcon asked the Tsar.
If you choose the earth, he said then saddle horses,
Tighten girths- have your knights put on
Their swords and make a dawn attack against
The Turks: your enemy will be destroyed.
But if you choose the skies then build a church-
O not of stone but out of silk and velvet-*

*Gather up your forces, take the bread and wine,
 For all shall perish, perish utterly,
 And you, O Tsar, shall perish with them. "*

As you break your words for our inadequate exchange
 And give me phrases which in token of their real worth
 I give you back in scribbled & devalued English notes
 I hear you choose the earth even as you tell me otherwise
 And laughingly declare: *the skies, the skies!*
 For you are out there on that wide & level plain;
 You see yourself great Lazar riding by;
 You see the father of the Lady's brothers there;
 You see the husbands of her daughters-
 And when your uncle cuts you loose
 You stumble through the villages & hills
 Playing tokens for survival, whispering
 In code to border guards & agents, prostitutes & poets,
 Fellow travelers and their wealthy following
 Of contraband tobacconists an anagram compounded
 Of the talismanic words that wound the clocks
 In old Ragusa: OBLITI PRIVATORUM PUBLICA CURATE-
Forget your private business
And concern yourself with public life, that's
 The gist of it- knowing well that only those
 A man can trust will whisper the correct response.
 For if a man's a friend he knows that underneath
 Those proudly chiseled words above the lintel close beside
 The Rector's palace there's a dusty little shop
 Whose owner chalks (in lingua franca too!)
 Upon a blackboard hanging in his narrow window
 The reply: ANYTIME FRIED FISHES.
 And that's the phrase, you tell me, answers Latin.
 That's the phrase that took you underground!
Obliti Privatorum Publica Curate you intone, and I cry out:
Anytime Fried Fishes! and we hug each other like
 Two drunken Slavs and weep like sentimental
 Irishmen & leave our empty bottle on the pedestal
 Of Mestrovich's well.
 Vladeta, my Voyvoda, my dear unhappy friend,
 There is no Kingdom left for us to choose-
 Neither of the earth nor of the sky
 But peace, peace, to all who wander
 For whatever reason from their stony lands
 Bringing all the heavy cargo of their legends
 Humming in a cipher in their lucid, spinning minds!

- **John Matthias**

in

http://www.kosovo.com/history/battle_of_kosovo.html

