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WHY DO THE SERBS NOT HAVE LONG EPIC POEMS: THE EPISODIC STRUCTURE OF SERBIAN ORAL EPIC POETRY

Abstract

This research examines the structure of the oral poetic “text” in a Serbian heroic epic poem, with particular emphasis on the episode as a core unit of narrativity and its role in shaping the perception of reality. Specifically, the study explores how episodes contribute to constructing a distinct worldview. It will be demonstrated that, as a fragment of the broader worldview, an episode becomes intertwined with the poetic universe at the moment it is performed before a specific audience. The events depicted in the episode are typically framed by retrospection (i.e., referring to past events), while prospective narration – mainly through foreshadowing future events – serves to highlight the significance of these events or introduce the epic biography of the hero or their descendants. In this context, the analysis of the epic poem’s structure and meaning is intrinsically linked to the broader spiritual culture of the ethnosocium and the act of performance itself. Consequently, studying the fundamental elements of the epic poem’s structure and meaning extends beyond the boundaries of literary studies and enters the domains of ethnology, mythology, and cultural studies. The episode, often a self-contained fragment of the

worldview, reflects a conceptual synthesis of historical, ethical, and socio-political elements, requiring an interdisciplinary approach for its interpretation. In light of this, the question of why the Serbs do not possess large epic poems is addressed with greater clarity.

Keywords: Serbian oral epic poem, structure, “text”, formula, performance, hero, worldbuilding

The study of oral literature, and thus an epic poem and its meaning, is closely related to the study of the overall spiritual culture of a given ethnosocium, i.e. the context, as well as a specific performing as Ben-Amos’ “a processes within the context”.¹ Therefore, a study of the basic constitutive elements of an epic poem structure and their meaning inevitably goes beyond the scope of literary studies and comes near to ethnology, mythology, the studies of the culture, linguistic rhetoric, cognitive sciences, etc. The initial dilemma is solved by returning to this basic hypothesis, since any comprehensive discussion of the relevant aspects of oral literature must have an interdisciplinary character.

The main subject of this research is the structure of the “text” of Serbian epic heroic poem, with special reference to the episode as the nucleus of a narrative form. The term *episode* is observed from both aspects – broader, as an event presented in a particular poem, and narrower – as a part of the narrative, i.e. “a more or less completed whole, meaningfully associated with the broader whole” of the “text”.²

Generally speaking, when it comes to formal features, Serbian epic poems, and especially those from the four books of Vuk’s anthology collections, have an average of about 200 verses per poem.³ This rather short form usually focuses on the main event and thus shows “an exemplary, but isolated

¹ See BOŠKOVIĆ-STULLI 1983, 34.

² KOLJEVIĆ 1992, 197.

³ SCHMAUS 2011, 200.

episode" of epic past.⁴ This means that single-event episodes are dominant in Vuk's classical epics, as opposed to, for example, Muslim epics, where there are several interconnected episodes that are not related to a single event, but to the central theme.⁵ Also, similar situations could be repeated, motives added from other poems, or incidental situations repeated by varying similar situations (duel, sending letters, etc.⁶). Heda Jason used the idea of a single-event episode as a criterion determining the largest part of the South Slavic epic corpus as subgenre of episodic epic. Therefore, we will first present her view of subgenre of episodic epic in its entirety, and then give a brief comment:

In this tradition, the works are independent of each other and do not form a continuous narrative [...]. There are only very few if any intertextual relations or hints. The works contain one basic story each, which is closed in itself, with a complication and solution. There is no real chronological order between the single works, even when some national learned and scholarly traditions try to build such an order on the basis of the assumed historical properties of the characters. [...] The characters in the episodic tradition are independent of each other and relations between them exist only in the confines of a single work; there is no hierarchy between them which would encompass the whole tradition. The tradition has a stock of names which are used over and over; in each work another order and hierarchy may be supposed to exist between them. The stories and characters are not historical but repetitive. In the South Slavic corpus [...] many names of historical figures are used but rarely is there any direct connection between the event described in the epic work and

⁴ BRAUN 2004, 258.

⁵ BRAUN 2004, 258–259. Actually, there have been attempts to connect in a whole several separated but substantially interrelated episodes – separate poems, following the chronology of events, but they are mostly confined to literary mystifications (as *Lazarica* is an assumed Kosovo epic).

⁶ See SCHMAUS 2011, 202.

historical events.⁷ The episodic tradition, however, may on various levels of abstraction reflect a historical situation which prevailed for a long time. For example, the South Slavic tradition has as its background the five centuries of Muslim-Christian warfare in the Balkans. (JASON *Enonoiá*, part I, chpt. 6.1.1, manuscript).

Although formally bounded (having beginning and end), each “text” of oral narrative poetry “is a model of boundless world”.⁸ Like life itself, after all. Nevertheless, a poem never shows the life of a hero in its entirety. Usually, one event is singled out, proclaimed as a heroic act and made the subject matter of a poem. Therefore, this subject matter also has fragmentary character. Or, as Paul Ricoeur says, “by doing something [...] agents learn to isolate a closed system from their environment and discover the possibilities of the development inherent to this system [...]. Such action includes an intervention at the intersection of the actor’s certain powers and the potential of the system itself”.⁹ In addition, boundedness of the “text” occurs as a result of transcoding from one system to another – from language (as a system that reflects the world as an unlimited reality) to the literature (as collateral modeling system), or “text” (fixed sequence of characters, limited with beginning and end), or phonological string (in sound recordings and live performances).

⁷ However, this hypothesis has only principal value, within a rough generalization. The character and the event usually act as conservators, preserving historical memory, and it can be exemplified by various poems of middle times, which this note primarily refers to. Numerous scholars, including E. Meletinski, M. Kleut, and Lj. Pešikan-Ljuštanović, have already explored the relationship between historical facts and poetic fiction, as well as how a poem „preserves“ awareness of past events. Additionally, there is a considerable bibliography of works dealing with memory and its functions within oral societies, ranging from E. HAVELOCK (1991) to S. ĐORĐEVIĆ BELIĆ (2017). However, this topic extends beyond the primary focus of the present research and will therefore not be explored in greater detail here.

⁸ LOTMAN 1976: 278.

⁹ RICOEUR 1993: 173.

What characterizes all “texts” of oral narrative poetry is a high degree of routine – from motive, theme, plot, and formulaity to the genre conditioned types of stylization, or stylistic procedures and means. This routine caused the oral narrative poetry discourse to codify a system of rules which would, on the one hand, connect the given poem “to other texts within the same discursive system”,¹⁰ i.e. comply with the requirements of the genre and standards of preventive censorship. On the other hand, the epic discourse, as a type of speech, implies the way of “thinking and talking” in a poem,¹¹ which means that it is defined by the principles of heroization and epic stylization. More specifically, it implies, in a recognizable way acceptable to a community, the modeling of the system of ethical norms, some universal existential questions, heroic and ethical deeds, wide range of emotions and moods, archetypal images, and primarily picture of the world as a whole.

Episodicity, in its broader sense, can be seen as a separate exploit/event from epic biography that became the subject of a particular poem. For example, the epic poem *Mali Radojica* (*Little Radojica* – SNP III, no. 51) begins with a wondering given in the initial formula *Dear God, what a great miracle*. A listener encounters a dilemma whether the thunderous shake is a consequence of the forces of nature (lightning, earthquakes, big waves, etc.), or a clash of demonic creatures on the mountain top (*Or the fairies are fighting on Popina*). After the singer won the audience’s attention by an artful rhetorical grip (*captatio benevolentiae*), the mystery is revealed – the thunderous sound originates from the cannons of Bećir-aga who is rejoicing because of the capture of the famous brigand, Little Radojica. The singer intrigued the listeners by this multi-functional beginning, but also sketched a picture of the world through the elements of nature (air, earth, and

¹⁰ LEŠIĆ 2010², 261.

¹¹ LEŠIĆ 2010², 91.

water). After that, both the attention and his linguorhetoric picture of the world¹² are focused on the topos – a city, or actually its stylized picture – tower with cannons and dungeon underground. Since the introduction of the aspect of space – by placing the hero in the dungeon – the narrative (diegesis) about the hero's release from captivity unperceptively moves to presentation or imitative-dramatic representation (mimesis).

The subject is an internationally covered topic – *the deliverance of a hero from captivity*. This episode from the epic biography of the hero became a kind of initiation in the poem – the hero tries to trick his captors by pretending to be dead, suffering three initiatory ordeals (thrusting nails under fingernails, ordeal by fire and the test of courage by putting a snake in his bosom¹³). Final test is an erotic provocation – the hero must not reveal by any gesture that he is alive, while a group of seductive girls are dancing before him. At that point the hero gives up and smiles, but the jailer's daughter quickly covers his face, thus protecting him from being exposed. Taken for dead, the hero is carried out and cast into the sea, but he comes back, delivers other slaves from captivity, kills the jailer, picks up his treasure and takes the jailer's daughter as a wife.

In this way, according to the principles of epic stylization, or the discourse of epic poems, it seems that two favorite narrative patterns – *the deliverance of a hero from captivity* and *the marriage with obstacles* – come together and partially overlap (contaminate). Besides, the described episode attempts to establish itself as the central (main) event within the epic biography of the character – given that the marriage was that very act through which the young hero, in the context of traditional culture and martial epic perception, is making a transition from the status of a neophyte to the full warrior status.

¹² See VOROŽBITOVA 2005.

¹³ See KLEUT 2012, 176–184.

At the same time, at a deeper semantic level, this episode has its mythical archetype. The episode of the descent into the underworld (*descendus ad inferos*) is analogous to the metaphor of slavery and the apparent death (at different semantic levels),¹⁴ while the freeing of fertility deity (or its wielder) by appropriate motives from the poem (primarily gaining a wife), the return¹⁵ and the wedding¹⁶ are analogous to the end of the poem. In this way, a mythic and ritual subtext gets a new appearance and epic stylization in the context of a patriarchal culture and according to the principles of heroization and the feudalization.¹⁷

Therefore, comprehension of the meaning and significance of epic poetry today is organized as a system of concentric circles – from the most general to the narrowest – and requires knowledge of the following levels of meaning: the traditional culture and belief system, verbal folklore, corpus of South Slavic epic poetry, poetics of the genre, epic discourse, circle of international themes and motives, epic biography of a given hero, variants, and so on. That is, the meaning of an epic poem is defined by the way of thinking, by the hierarchy of spiritual values, as well as by the interpretative practice specific for the socio-political situation¹⁸ of a certain ethnosocium at the moment when a particular variant is performed in front of a specific audience. In this way, the overall knowledge of tradition is reflected (to a lesser or greater extent) in every specific variant, so an interpreter of oral epic poetry is put to a special test.

But to dwell for a moment, for instance, on how picture of the world is displayed in different genres of oral narrative

¹⁴ See FREIDENBERG 2011, 101–103

¹⁵ FREIDENBERG 2011, 308–311

¹⁶ FREIDENBERG 2011, 78–81.

¹⁷ See GESEMANN 2002, 127.

¹⁸ This is important because some excellent singers, like Starac Milija, were skilled to incorporate allusions to current political situation in the text of the poem they performed.

poetry. As each new performance is an act of re-creating the entire logocentric world, entering the realm of the work occurs simultaneously with the re-structuring of this realm. In oral lyrical poems, picture of the world is revealed through a horizontal spatial movements (marked by the motives of traveling, going hunting, arrival of the guests, the direction of the wind, etc.). The pure center of that world is often represented by a safe space of home and dining table in it (*white tower castle, golden table*). The forbidden waters (river, sea, or lake) mark the boundary between the worlds, and behind that waters there is an *unworldly* space (wild, alien, *afterworld*).

Also, a vertical model with a distinctive introductory image of a tree is often used – allomorph of a giant three-part cosmic tree (a universal cosmic model), through which the space is symbolically organized: the treetop reaches the upper (heavenly) world, the trunk belongs to the middle world (human world), and the root to the underground (chthonic) world. The animal kingdom is also grouped according to this division – from the sacred to the unclean animals. So, the world is organized from the center – the axis of the world – towards the periphery. At the top of the miraculous tree is a hawk, and his eyes reveals a broad picture of the world (SNP I, no. 621). Horizontal model may contain in itself the previous model – from the (socialized) space (garden, tower, castle), over the boundary waters, to the alien (wild, dangerous, etc.) space.¹⁹

In lyric-epic poetry (primarily in ballads) and in narrative poems, the world of a poem is constituted in different ways – through constructive betrayal of *plant* model with the tree of the world in the center (*Bog nikom dužan ne ostaje – God is a sure paymaster*, SNP II, no. 5), through cosmic framework that emphasizes the importance of the presented action (*Dižoba Jakšića – The Division of the Jakšić Brothers*, SNP II, no.

¹⁹ Except marking spatial relationships, text can be arranged in other ways – temporally, verbally (with pleading, complaint, regret, dialogue), with description of events, etc.

98), through the story of the miracle and so on. In addition, the conventions of literary genus and genre most directly affect the modeling of the world – there is a relatively stable collection of framework formulas (initial and final²⁰), mainly different for lyric and epic and even for their genera and forms. The correlation of these formulas with the subject matter, on the one hand, and genre, on the other hand, is an open question still waiting to be answered by some new researches.

Unlike the lyrics, the world of epic poems is more reduced, fragmentary and, what is especially important, anthropocentrically organized. This is confirmed by the fact that in most of the initial formulas, identified by M. Detelić in the corpus of a broader decasyllabic material,²¹ a human activity occurs as the initial impulse that triggers a sequence of events.²² It seems that by shifting attention to the excellence of events and heroes, the other elements of text structure are put into the background. The hero, as a typical representative of the heroic view of the world,²³ gives evidence about the hierarchy of values and indirectly, about the world he belongs to. Besides, in his designation, he keeps the memory of the loci in the real world he is connected with in the poem, since he himself is – chronotopic.²⁴ Also, the community has a clear awareness of the homeland, i.e. *our* village, city, territory, country, and so on, and incorporates it into the world of the poem, and that awareness is a mediator to a linguorhetoric picture of the world.

²⁰ See DETELIĆ 1996, 125–232.

²¹ See DETELIĆ 1996, 134–152.

²² Only three of the initial formulas, highly stylized, make an introduction to the poem and trigger a further sequence of events, without putting the human factor ahead – *raven messenger*, *fairy's acclamation/call*, and *prophetic dream*.

²³ BRAUN 2004, 9.

²⁴ BAKHTIN 1989, 194. This can be confirmed by the fact that a significant number of characters are often named after toponyms: Marko of Prilep, Smederevac Đurađ / Đuro, Relja of Pazar, Kosančić Ivan, Toplica Milan, and so on.

Examining the spatial framework of an epic poem, H. Jason convincingly demonstrated this.

This anthropocentricity of the epic poetry is conditioned by the genre. Epics, which are among the oldest forms, in the opinion of Olga M. Freidenberg “represent personal stories in their most archaic form.” These earliest epic forms, as she claims, “are built upon funeral eulogies and lamentations over heroic acts, battles and events of gods and heroes.”²⁵ Separate heroic acts – episodes from the hero’s epic biography – are described in separate poems. They have a standard character and, in conjunction with the historical facts,²⁶ bind to themselves a certain number of international topics. These fragmentary episodes from epic biography, which may belong to different heroes, are often presented in surprisingly similar manner, and covered within the same plot layout.²⁷

These poems have originated and lived, therefore, as the narration of significant events and heroes of the past and, as such, reached the recipients (listeners at first, and then readers). Besides, as noted by Zdenko Lešić, “in an epic narrative the historical time is subordinate to the story which separates incidents from the sequence of events, pulls them out of their place in the continuity of historical time and demonstrates them as something that can be vividly presented. In other words, in an epic narrative the time makes a storyline circle”,²⁸ and is entirely subordinate to the demands of epic narrative; whether the events really happened or were invented is of

²⁵ FREIDENBERG 2011, 301. With this hypothesis O. M. Freidenberg joins the group of researchers such as Maximilian Braun, Seth Shain, Zdenko Lešić and others who see the origins of oral epic poems in the genre of lament.

²⁶ SAMARDŽIJA 2008.

²⁷ In addition, it was noted that the subject matter, to some extent, may affect the scope of a poem – e.g. “fighting as a subject allows a low scope poem, while the poems about the abduction of a bride and other poems of novelistic contents tend to expand” (SCHMAUS 2011: 200). Therefore, the concept that epic poems are characterized by single episodes is relative also.

²⁸ LEŠIĆ 2010, 361.

secondary importance.²⁹ What is important is the narration itself, i.e. the subject of narration. Furthermore, whether the poem will be accepted by a community and pass the requirements of preventive censorship or will be rejected³⁰ depends on the narration.

Let's have a closer look at the poem *Prince Marko and Beg Kostadin* (SNP II, no. 60). The poem, apparently, falls outside the scope of heroic epic genre – there are no heroic acts, duels, heroism, or even events. The whole poem is given in the form of a dialogue between Prince Marko and his boastful blood brother Beg Kostadin. In the poem, Beg invites Marko to *slava* (feast day of a family's patron saint), promising to impress him with wealth, splendor and ceremonious welcome. However, Marko indirectly rejects Beg's invitation reminding him of an episode from the past when he attended his celebration. Further in the poem Marko reproaches him for three inhumane deeds (inhumanities). First, he threw out of the house two poor ones so as not to undermine the reputation of his table. Then, he put the upstarts closer to him and the impoverished old nobles away from him. Finally, Beg did not invite at the table even his parents. The poem ends with this retrospection. Beg did not give any answers, so we can assume that he was embarrassed by Marko's reproach.

Nevertheless, the poem does not fall outside the scope of this genre.³¹ Although the conflict is not given in action,

²⁹ LEŠIĆ 2010, 360. Losing connection with historical reality has erroneously led some researchers (for more about it, see PERIĆ 2020: 23–25, 346–353), by the analogy with *byliny* (Russian folk poems), to discuss the “insular” position of epics in time and space (LIKHACHEV 1972: 273), and the absolute character of epic time (BAKHTIN 1989: 445–449).

³⁰ See JAKOBSON, BOGATYREV 1971, 20.

³¹ Of course, this example was chosen as a principled and neutral one in terms of genre specifics, primarily illustrating the ethical rather than the heroic side of the epic. Furthermore, when discussing oral epic as a type, it is important to distinguish between the epic poem as a genre – which encompasses a diverse range of subgenres (such as the heroic epic, mythological epic, fairy tale in decasyllabic verse, religious-moralistic legend in decasyllabic

it exists at the level of verbal confrontation of two persons with different ethical codes. Even if there is no heroic act, the poem promotes the heroic view of the world,³² or more precisely – humane deeds (humanity), and thus the ethical value system. Given that the moral transgressions are given in a gradation row, the last offense proves to be the gravest. The respect for parents in the Old Testament writings is set by a God's commandment in the Third Book of Moses, and in the tradition – by parents' undisputed authority³³ and absolute decision-making right about all important issues related to the family. The significance of origin, clan, and good name stands out in the Beg's second inhumanity and the inviolability of the hospitality in the first. Rejection of the invitation of a violator emphasizes the importance of respecting the unwritten ethical norms.³⁴ According to the poem, Marko is their bearer and exponent, but also the singer and the whole community share them. The fact that the poem is remembered and that there was a need for its repeated performance over time, suggests that the traditional view of the world is occasionally abandoned or undermined by individual offenses. Therefore, reevaluating this system of unwritten rules the poem at the same time warns and reevaluates, and thus obtains a kind of propagandistic function.³⁵

Realized as a story within a story, or homodiegetic narration, storytelling in a poem is structured in such a way that using direct speech get the story closer to the listeners/readers,

verse, etc.) – and the heroic epic, which stands as the most representative form of Serbian oral epic.

³² BRAUN 2004, 9.

³³ The authority of the elders, in the opinion of N. Petković, becomes a culture-building category (PETKOVIĆ 2006, 91).

³⁴ A wider range of this ethical value system – disrespect of which is punished by the torments of hell, and a collective abandonment brings the end of the world, human extinction and chaos – is given in narrative poems, particularly in the subgenre of religious and moralistic legends in verse (see SNP II, no. 1 and no. 2).

³⁵ See BRAUN, 2004: 9.

and the narrative is gradually transferred to the presentation, setting the scene and verbal staging.³⁶ Such convergence and divergence, i.e. going back in the near or distant past (usually through retrospection) is “the essence of the mental process which characterizes epic mentality: the events lose their chronological distinctness and are transferred to the world of epic memories.”³⁷

When an episode is just a digression, i.e. a smaller fragment within a broader narrative context (in the narrower sense of the term), it has a specific function. If retardation does not represent the main subject of the poem (as is the case in certain number of poems), then the interpolated episode that evokes some previous event (as a pre-plot) has a motivational character – it enhances the causality of events, contributes to an improved characterization of the hero, suggests outcome, indicates the reason for hero’s sickness over many years (as a punishment for a sin that he confesses before his death and redeems with a heroic act), and so on. This is, to an extent, also culturally conditioned – a mythical thought is based on the awareness of the continuous connection of different events, or looking for causes in the past. Or, as Lotman states: “the beginning has a determinative modulation function – it is not only a testimony to the existence, but replacement of the latter category of causality.”³⁸

Therefore, the events presented in a poem are the cause of subsequent events (here are also examples from *bugarštice* (long-verse folk poems): a discord of nobility and dissension within the ruling dynasty – the cause of the Kosovo defeat; a hero’s marriage with a fairy leads to the birth of a miraculous offspring – a future hero, etc.). The overall tradition functions as a *reservoir of knowledge*, which is used whenever it is necessary. Therefore, a step forward to the events that are

³⁶ See LEŠIĆ 2010²: 363.

³⁷ LEŠIĆ 2010²: 363.

³⁸ LOTMAN 1976: 282.

yet to come is possible; from cause to effect, i.e. to the future in prospective narrative. The blessings or curses are pronounced as a reaction to the events and are always fully realized. Because of Nemanja's endowments the whole Nemanjić Dynasty becomes sacred and blessed by Christian nobility (SNP II, no. 23), which is confirmed by a poet and the tradition in the last verse of a poem – *whatever they say said, with God's help they did it*. The announcement of marriage between the ruler and the sister of the powerful hero will be an introduction to the epic biography of the famous hero – Prince Marko.³⁹ Likewise, the consequences of the crime presented in the poem can be transferred to future generations, which further explains the etiology of evil of kinship and tribal enmity (see SNP II: no. 89).

Because the whole tradition, as well as the epic history, functions as a totality or system, thereby the episode, or the presented event, necessarily establishes relations with other elements of the system. Thus, the view of the world (primarily attitude of the hero, defined by the need for self-assertion and obliging consciousness of his own heroism), value system, way of thinking, socio-political context in which the variant is performed, and so on are encoded in the poem as a kind of *discourse – the universe*.⁴⁰ Since the episode is (most often self-sufficient) fragment of *picture of the world*, it reflects a kind of *conceptual synarchy*⁴¹ of historical, ethical and socio-political realities, so an interdisciplinary approach is required for its interpretation. This is, also, the answer to the initial question as to whether and to what extent the problem considered here coincides with the question of lack of long epic poems (like *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) in Serbian oral epic tradition.

[translated by Olivera Krivošić]

³⁹ See DELIĆ 2017: 67–75.

⁴⁰ VOROZBITOVA 2005.

⁴¹ VOROZBITOVA 2005.

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Abbreviations

SNP I: *Srpske narodne pjesme. Knjiga prva u kojoj su različne ženske pjesme: skupio ih i na svijet izdao V. Stef. Karadžić*, [in:] V. Nedić. (prir.), *Sabrana dela Vuka Karadžića*, Vol. IV, Beograd 1975.

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