

## TIDINGS OF DEATH IN THE FOLK BALLAD

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One of the characteristic thematic elements of the traditional poem of the ballad type is analysed in the article: the situation which arises when the relatives of the hero/heroine receive news of his/her death. The phenomenon of that situation is considered in a series of ballad types, while the criterion of differentiation of its individual realizations appears as the decipherability of the information, the ability of the recipient to comprehend it. The situation of receipt of the tragic tidings is joined by certain other similar modes of bearing witness to the hero's death (the premonition of death based on signs and prior convictions). The compositional treatment of such modes is analysed (as incremental repetition) along with its contents (metaphorically formed *don't tell* "motifs", so-called "false news", impossibility motifs), which are contrasted with the same subject in the epic poem. The similarity of the structural formation of the reception of the "tidings about death" and content are considered.

Death in the traditional poem - in this article we are interested in the death of family members - can be merely a link in the chain of events in a poem, or its sole content. In both cases, independently of the narrative richness of the song, death is an event which must be communicated *to others* (either other characters, or the audience of the oral performance) so that the life

itself of the hero or heroine be imparted with some sense.<sup>1</sup> The heroes die far from the safe haven of their families - in places in which wars rage, disease threatens and other hazards lie in wait. The cause of their death can also be a dramatic conflict within the family itself, but the need to communicate the news of the death is equally present in both the ballad and in the epic poem. Consequently, it is understandable that the transmission of the news about the death has a particular place in both of the traditional genres. In the conceived communications ether, the tidings are sent by the dying heroes or heroines themselves or by a witness to their deaths; the news is taken by a fairy, servant, bird, letter or the like; the recipients are always female members of the family although it is not irrelevant whether the news is received by a mother, sister or wife. The hypothetical linear flow of transmission and receipt of news of this type is interrupted or distorted, condensed or prolonged, while - just as the formation itself of the content of the tidings of death - this varies from genre to genre in keeping with their immanent poetic demands.

The deaths of family members in ballads is often narrated only at the moment at which the news reaches the family. This is the very situation which favours the dramatic presentation of the story characteristic to the ballad, which avoids continuity of narration (Gerould 1932:96–97). The

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Matrix Croatica* edition of the anthology of ballads and romances (1909) - hereinafter referred as HNP5 - the most highly represented in quality (typologically) and number is the sub-group denoted "death of family members" (according to the Freiburg proposal for classification of narrative songs; for more on this, see *Arbeitstagung über Fragen des Typenindex der europäischen Volksballade* 1966). The group includes ballads about the death of a maiden who has married far away from home, or those about a widow who has remarried and dies of grief for the son she left behind, whose "eyes have been drained by mountain fairies". Songs about the "birthmark of death" also tell of death as well as those in which the husband is the victim of his wife's beauty, or because of her selfishness when she refuses to give up the necklace which is the only thing which will placate the "mountain fairy". The death motif is widespread also in other ballad groups: in love songs the maiden forced into marriage dies when her beloved returns; a maiden dies because of the death of her prospective groom; the sweethearts fall victim to plague, or because the maiden's mother has put a curse upon them, or they are forced into a marriage with someone else. One death is a magnet which attracts other misfortunes: a wife commits suicide because her brothers murder her husband; a kidnapped sister drowns herself when her captor kills her brother; a mother dies when she does not succeed in redeeming her son from a maiden's curses, and her death is accompanied by the withering of her garden. There are real "will-and-testament songs" in which the dying hero entrusts his wife and children to his brother, or leaves all his goods to his mother, and leaves nothing to his beloved who has always been potentially untrue to him. Or again, the mother on her deathbed advises her daughter how to accept the step-mother and her daughter she foresees will take her place. Sometimes death is not an obstacle to "family communication": a dead brother comes to take away his sister who has married far from home, or a dead mother appears in a dream to the evil step-mother warning her not "to pick roses in a garden which she did not herself tend".

story of the death of a hero in battle leaves a more powerful impression accompanied by the ominous squawking of a raven which "with its beak bloody to the eyes and its legs bloody to the knees (...) with its appearance exudes the odour of hot blood and heroic demise" (Schmaus 1971:334), and, in answer to the mother's or wife's enquiry, narrates the story of the death of their son or husband. Events structured in this way through the compositional scheme of the raven's report interrupted by the lamentations of the woman, link the death of the hero and the reception of the tidings of his death, merging them into one. The hero's death is perceived as though it is happening at that very moment, simultaneously with the death of the mother or wife, who is often killed by the "terrible words" of the bird.<sup>2</sup> The genesis of this compositional ballad scheme was preceded in artistic, although not necessary in genetic, development by the "motif phase" of the epic poem in which the raven "similarly to other birds, appears as a messenger, as one who receives and delivers a particular message" (Ibid.:336). However, here the family members are not the first recipients of the tidings of death: even before the arrival of the raven to the mother or wife, the departure into battle and death has already been narrated in detail. In other words: while the hero in the epic poem dies *before* his family hears of it, in the ballad he dies again or dies *at the same time* as the mother or wife.<sup>3</sup>

Such condensation of the death of the character and the family's reception of the news of his death is also found in a narrative situation in the famous *bugarštica* - the term for the earliest extant Southern Slavic narrative songs in long verse known also as the "old Croatian ballads" (see Marković 1899:127) - about Prince Marko and his brother Andrijaš (Miletich 1990,4). Here the ballad condensation is not achieved by narrating about the past as if it is *the present*, but by narrating about the future as if it is the present, in a hypothetical conversation which the dying Andrijaš foresees will be conducted by Marko the fratricide and their mother. This shift in the conceived chain of communication does not result in a cruel report which fails to spare the feelings of the recipient of the news, but in metaphorical packaging of the news which, in the logic of "I offer you lies instead of the truth", should at least mitigate the ballad's fratricidal motif for Andrijaš's mother. Consequently, Andrijaš advises Marko that when his mother asks why his sword is bloody, he should

<sup>2</sup> The "unbearable lightness of dying" is emphasised as a special characteristic of the ballad in comparison with certain other folk genres e.g. the saga or the fairy tale. The frequency of the suicide motif is also an identifiable characteristic for the genre because suicide, as a "drama in internal space" corresponds to the family staging of the ballad in which the conflicts are solved in a restricted location of events (Lüthi 1970:88).

<sup>3</sup> For more on the phases of epic stylisation in building up the compositional scheme of the raven's report, see Schmaus (1971:334–354). See examples in HINP5, 64; 65; 67.

answer that it is the blood of a "gentle stag" who did not want to move out of his path. When she asks about Andrijaš, he should tell her that her son stayed in a foreign country where he fell in love with a girl who put a spell on him with herb potions and the wine of oblivion. One finds other incidences of "excuses" of this type in ballad poetry: the first are contained in the metaphors resorted to when "irrefutable evidence" of the crime exists - in the bloody sword which cannot be concealed - and they are also seen in the international repertoire of ballad "insincere answers";<sup>4</sup> the second are of local distribution and are classified in *bugarštica* poetic formulae, as pointed out by Maja Bošković-Stulli (Bošković-Stulli 1975:13). However, both "excuses" intended for the mother in this poem, belong to the order of so-called *don't tell* motifs such as are found both in the ballad and in the epic narrative, while their source is a specific family ethics by which the members of the family should be spared bad news which "can never come too late".<sup>5</sup>

We do not know whether the mother in Hektorović's *bugarštica* believed the story about the stag and the charming maiden. The ballad

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<sup>4</sup> The evasive answers which respond to ominous questions are sometimes real riddles: the husband who has murdered his wife, falsely accused of adultery, has a bloody saddle because he has slain a *kosmatica* [hirsute female creature] who blocked his path. [The Croatian Academy's Dictionary gives the only example of this word as a riddle, see AR 1893/1903:364]. He answers his wife's brothers with the information that his wife has remained in the mountains "to pick chive flowers and myrtle" (HNP5, 99). Instead of the bloody sword or knife (Child, 49D, G; 51B), the trace of blood in the Scottish ballad can be left on the brow (Child, 49E), in the Finnish on the shirt etc. (compare Child 1965:168). (In Croatian tradition, such evasive answers are found particularly in incest ballads; see, e.g. HNP5, 139). Authors have tried to interpret the lexical motifs themselves which are part of the ballad evasions. Maja Bošković-Stulli has pointed out that the killing of the stag is a metaphor for the committed crime (Bošković-Stulli 1975:12). The evasions can also be indicators of the social background from which the ballad came: in the Scottish ballad *Edward* (Child, 13), the evasions are multiplied into a series: the falcon-horse-brother series can be replaced by horse-cow-dog-brother or even nag-dog-pig-brother in the village environment (Schmidt 1933:305; quoted from Lüthi 1970:85). Max Lüthi noticed that it was unusual that in one version of the incest ballad, *Lizie Wan* (Child, 51), the grandfather in the horse-grandfather(sic!)-sister series appears in the position usually occupied by the dog or the horse. This position shows that the murder of the grandfather is a "lesser evil" than the murder of the sister. This, however, does not correspond to the social and historical reality of the late mediaeval and the early modern period, in which the European ballads flourished. At that time, the elders of the family held a significant and respected place in the life of the community. It would seem that the world of the ballad is the place of the narrow family circle (*Kleinfamilie*), the dominating relationships being those between mother and father, son and daughter, and sister and brother (Ibid.).

<sup>5</sup> In connection with the *don't tell mother* motif, Samuel Armistead stressed that this is a classical *topoi* of the folk ballad: "In Greek and Hispanic ballads, the dying hero send a final message to his mother, sometimes asking that she not be told the truth, but be given some *innocuous excuse* as to why he has not returned" (1990:328) (Author's italics).

about the poisoned bride also ends "too soon" for us to learn if the mother "fathomed the meaning" when she received her daughter's message to come to visit her, but to bring a "thin shirt" woven in misery, bleached in bitter tears, and dried away without the sun's rays, rather than to bring her gifts (HNP5, 188).<sup>6</sup>

The ballad's condensation and concentration either on the reception of the news itself or on its emission usually leaves unanswered the question of the decipherability of the message. One can but assume that the mother, Margarita (Delorko 1951:7), nonetheless understood the fairy's message that her brother "was seduced by a Greek lass" who quenched his thirst with "the cold water of oblivion", while her son had been enticed by "beautiful Cvita of the Primorje" crowning him with a wreath "of magic *acanthus*". In any case, the fairy herself offers the mother the key to the *bugarštica* metaphors: at the beginning of the conversation, under the guise of charity, the fairy asks how the mother would redeem her brother and son if they were to land in "Turkish dungeons".<sup>7</sup>

However, there are ballads which do not exclude the family reception of the *don't tell* motif, and then the metaphorical news about the death does not remain an "innocuous excuse", as it is called by Samuel Armistead (1990:328). So the mother immediately understands the message that her son has remained in an unknown city and that he will be bringing home a foreign wife together with a silken shirt and "branches of misfortune" (HNP5, 168).<sup>8</sup> It is as though the characters have been

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<sup>6</sup> The same in HNP5, 25. When the message about the shirt is not a component of the *don't tell* motif, its meaning is more directly clear: "Woe is me, my dear mother, / sew me two thin shirts, / in one, mother, I shall ail, / in the other, mother, I shall be buried!" (IEF, ms. 343, No. 42).

<sup>7</sup> The fairy's comfort is in fact the rhetorical figure of charientism or "biting irony in the guise of benevolence" (Zima 1988:58). Otherwise, the recipient of the *don't tell* motif is always the mother. The content of the *don't tell* message to the sister is the news of her brother being wounded (HNP5, 25), and, in any case, it is usually the sister whom the brother calls to for help, just as the sister confronted with the choice between her brother and loved one always chooses the brother, which demonstrates the "Southern Slav cult of sisterly love" (Horálek 1964:23). And again, the news intended for the sweetheart in the ballads about the hero who is bidding farewell to his company, which are similar to the love lyric ballads of the "three sadnesses", are often on the border-line of "weepy sentimentalism" which can be recognised in the "evocation of the sweetheart who will not mourn for him, in the wedding metaphors with black soil and green grass, with worms as the wedding guests and birds as the wedding musicians" (Bošković-Stulli 1975:59).

<sup>8</sup> "Walking through the mountains the company goes singing, / Walking through the castle the mother goes a'wailing" (HNP5, 168). In the Bosnian variants of that ballad in which the son sends a message to his mother that he will be bringing the Nenatka-maiden (who is not to be expected) (Zovko, I., No. 12; Supplement HNP5) or the Nehotka-maiden (who does not wish to come) (Pajić, No. 8; Supplement HNP5), the

"inoculated" with understanding of the poetic language of the ballad, while the metaphorical situation requires no gainsay in favour of the factual state (see Jakobson 1966:312).

In the epic poem (Glavić 1889,7), on the other hand, the message from the dying son that he has received an imperial edict with a call to join the army, asking his mother to come to bless him, remains clouded. Nor does she understand the signs along the way, but is satisfied with the interpretations of the servant-messenger: the horses are unsaddled because they are setting out on a long journey, the banners have been blown away by the wind from the mountains, the drums and pipes have ceased their "banging", the servants are bare-headed because they have been praying to God. In any case, when she is finally standing at her son's bedside and convinces herself that he is dying, the poem is far from over. It is followed by the dying man's last will and testament, and everything ends with his funeral. While the *don't tell* motif in the ballad served as a kind of metaphorical "information system", the "false news" in this epic song is not understood by the mother. This serves to allow an extensive threefold retardation, increased also by the number of family members to whom the news has to be communicated (the servant first visiting the brother). It is not sufficient in the epic narrative to emphasise the relationship between the mother and son, as in the ballad. It is also necessary to stress the love triangle between the two brothers and the wife, even as a possible cause of the death of the hero. The "false news" to the always constant mother contrasts with the "truth" for the brother, just as the dying man had assigned diverse bequests to them (everything to the mother, but nothing to the brother and wife). The drawn-out linear narrative in which the stricken hero sends out a messenger - the messenger transmits the message - the mother sets out to see her son with the messenger, the retardation served by the *don't tell* motif, together with the increased number of actors, has nothing in common with the dramatic nature of the tidings of death in the ballad in which the *decipherability* of the *don't tell* motif also condenses the change itself in the narrative situation.

It could be said that the *don't tell* motif in the epic poem is also present so that the mother can learn with as much delay as possible about the death; in the ballad it is not intended to conceal the truth, but only to tell it "more gently". The content of the *don't tell* motif in the epic poem is indeed an "innocuous excuse" which becomes a means of retardation in order to establish the tactile epic world. In this world, not even the cause of the hero's death can remain concealed. In the ballad, the cause of the

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mother immediately understands the metaphorical meaning of the message, and even dies in one variant (Pajić, No. 8; Ibid.).

hero's death is not mentioned, while the "false news", intended to emphasise the relationship between mother and son, touched upon at the moment when the mother receives the news of the death, is not a retardation but a transparent euphemism. In addition, the respective speeds of deciphering the euphemism in the ballad and the "innocuous excuse" in the epic poem are in inverse proportion to their palliative consequences. In the latter, learning at a later time of the tidings also means to "survive" them; the deciphering of the euphemism in the ballad deals a mortal blow.<sup>9</sup>

The "false news" in the ballads is not always easy to see through. In the ballads about the bandit's wife, the invitation to the wife to attend the "wedding" of her brother and her sister reveals itself, only by degrees, to be news of their death. The intentional postponement of communication of the truth is here used to dramatise the ballad's plot, while the triple variation of the same motif - the tidings of death - structures the entire

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<sup>9</sup> Here we are primarily interested in the shaping of the *don't tell* motif which makes possible its comparison in various poems which are not variants of one specific type. The mentioned ballad of the wounded hero is a contamination of the ballad about the wounded hero from the so-called bandit and/or military songs group, with which it is connected by the hero's instructions to his company on where and how to bury him (see Bošković-Stulli 1975:54–58), and the mother's reception of the *don't tell* motif. The mother's comprehension of the *don't tell* message can also be explained by the fact that in the military ballads, which are particularly susceptible to such contamination, the arrival of the company which the mothers are expecting asking about the arrival of their sons, does not require additional motivation such as that, for example, in the unexpected arrival of the servant. In addition, the message is formed as a euphemism. However, one encounters the same level of decipherability of the metaphorical language in other ballads in which the transposed meaning of the message transmitted to the character does not necessarily have to be so "transparent": the half-sister understands the mother's message to go with the step-daughter to the hills and "pick a lovely bunch of flowers" as instructions for murder (HNP5, 75). In the incest ballad, the mother announces the sister's death as the information that "your sister is plucking red roses" (Zovko I, 238; Supplement HNP5, 139). Sometimes the decipherability of the message cannot be justified by the context of the ballad itself: the woman immediately understand that her husband's invitation to come up into the mountains "to pick chive flowers and myrtle" foretells her death (HNP5, 99). These "floral formulae" which are often encountered in the ballads, have become a characteristic paraphrase of death. Both their decipherability and the mother's understanding of the *don't tell* motifs in Croatian ballads (HNP5, 168) leads to the conclusion that their emergence is the consequence of the same process: the paraphrase of death formulae are "liberated" in the ballad condensation (the ballads in which the characters really do "pick flowers", which causes the fatigue and sleep of the victim, making them easy prey for revenge; see, for example, IEF, Ms. 883, No. 16). The mother's reception, too, of the *don't tell* motif (HNP5, 168) can be explained by the fact that the informer who created the ballad could use his knowledge of the existence of epic poems in which the mother departs with the messenger to go to her son, and there finds him dying. He could simply stylise it by omission of the mother's arrival motif. In this latter case, we could conclude that the *don't tell* message did not merely stay at the motif level, but was a component of a particular ballad compositional scheme.

poem, providing it with geometrical composition. The tragic ending is augured by the bloody shirt of the husband-bandit, the female slave dressed in black, her admonitions to the bandit's wife not to waste time on presents (HNP5, 151). In a variant of the same ballad (HNP5, 152), the wedding is the lexical element which stands in opposition to its metaphoric meaning - the tidings of death - but the postponement of communication of the news is a consistent carrying out of the figure of amphibole, because the servant's words "apart from what it may seem at first, have a completely different meaning as well" (Zima 1988:70), while the woman does not comprehend the ambiguity of those "excuses". Instead of gifts, she is supposed to take linen and wax candles for the wedding table; when they are almost at the house and she hears "saws and axes" instead of "drums and pipes", the messenger's interpretation of the noise is that it is caused by the trimming of the benches for the wedding guests who have grown tired from the festivities. Such excuses - the linen for the wedding table, and the noise from the trimming of the wedding guests' benches - direct attention at the metaphorical meaning of the news about the wedding, because the synecdoche into which the wedding is "broken up" also gives ambiguous meaning to the messenger's invitation to the "wedding". Repetition of the synecdoche is still not redundant. The gradual approach nearer to the revelation of the truth through various "excuses" corresponds with drawing nearer to the parental home by one "who has married far from home". First she listens to the servant, then she hears the noise, and, finally, she sees the funeral. Constant postponement of the tidings of death is dramatised in this way.

In some ballads the *don't tell* motif has no intention of concealing the truth, dramatically condensing the narration and imparting momentary understanding of the "false news" and the consequences it has for the recipient - death of the mother. The ultimate result of gradual postponement of the truth which from the beginning is opaque - and remains so - at least for its protagonist, is seen in the ballad of the bandit's wife. It does not lead to peaceful acceptance of the news as in Glavić's epic poem, but to even greater shock, prepared for by dramatic repetition (variously called *incremental repetition* and Ger. *variierend steigender Wiederholung*). When the semantic ambiguity of the "false news" is revealed with her arrival at the funeral of her brother and sister, the song ends with the woman's death.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For various evasions in that type of ballad in the Southern Slav oral tradition, see Kumer 1968:56 and further. Prolonging the communication of the tidings of death was one of the mediaeval court customs (*Deutsche Volkslieder* 1939:230; quoted according to Kumer 1968:57). The fact that one finds a fashioning of the tidings of death in the Southern Slavic ballad about the bandit's wife confirms the age of that



Finally, if the lexical motifs in *don't tell* tidings in the ballads - which do not conceal the message about death - are compared with those in the epic poems, the conclusion can be drawn that the "excuses" in the ballads which mention the wedding, or the beautiful maiden who enchants the hero with her potions, enter into the domain of a semantic relationship with the world of family ties. This is not the case in the epic poems in which it is not unusual for the hero to be reached by an imperial edict or to "remain in the mountains waiting for Mijat the *hajduk* [anti-Ottoman highwayman],<sup>11</sup> and thus pertain to the heroic world of battle. In the ballads, the literal meaning of the "excuses" - which twinkle unceasingly in both the ballads and the epic poems - is underscored. The *don't tell* motif ceases to be the functional excuse it remains in the epic narrative, nor is it the simple "family pattern" (Ger. *Familienformel*). This only testifies to the importance placed on family relationship in the ballads (Lüthi 1970:81),<sup>12</sup> enriching the songs with new meanings which are drawn from the family repertoire of dramatic ballad conflicts. Tidings of death as of a wedding do not have to be in opposition: by falling in love and bringing home a bride the son is in some way already "dead" for his mother.<sup>13</sup>

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ballad (Ibid.). Similar gradual dramatisation of ambiguous answers is seen in the ballad type with the sudden death of the hero, usually as the result of the activity of supernatural forces. For example, the fiancée of the hero in the Danish ballad *Elveskud* (Greverus 1963:39–40), whose loved one had been seduced by dance and then murdered by fairies, announces that he has stayed behind the hunt to test his horse and his dog. The Italian and Catalan versions are particularly dramatic, attention being concentrated on the reception of the tidings of death, while there is a reduction of the encounter with the supernatural. See F. J. Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* 1965:371–389 for the modalities of shaping the evasions, and their dramatic nature in ballads of this type in diverse European ballad traditions; in *Vile ustrijelili mladoženju* [The Fairies Have Shot the Bridegroom] (Bošković-Stulli 1964, 15), a Croatian epic ballad of that ballad type, the wedding guests who come for the groom are not given false answers.

<sup>11</sup> This last excuse appears in an epic poem which Maja Bošković-Stulli cites as one of the variants of the *bučarštica* ballad about fratricide (Bošković-Stulli 1975:29).

<sup>12</sup> The author calls the family pattern "seeking opinions" of the members of the family who stay on in the ballad even when the family has ceased to be an active factor in the plot: for example, the son can seek advice from the father, mother, sister, brother, but he does not necessarily have to take it. The frequency of such "non-functional" patterns, which became part of ballad structure as a means of intensification of the drama, also depend on the social and historical reality within the individual oral tradition (Ibid.).

<sup>13</sup> The Death-Wedding metaphor, structured on the contrast between the most tragic and the most joyful event, which is frequently the content of ballad *don't tell* motifs, is widely diffused in the Slavic ballad group, whether the wedding is linked to death by drowning, death in battle, or death on the gallows (Bogatyrëv 1963:84). A dying hero in one of the Slovakian military ballads begs his company to give his mother the news that he is going to be married in the land of the French: French canon will be his wedding guests, French shields his bridesmen; another message to the mother has to be news of a wedding in a "the King's grove" in which a sad new gallows stands; in a

There are indications that *don't tell* messages in the ballads can be entrusted with a more complex function in addition to the euphemistic "communications system". In one ballad about a young groom who is mortally wounded while on the journey to bring back his bride, the message the dying son sends to his mother saying that he had to return to the bride's home to take the keys to the treasury seem to include a magic and demonological motivation for the seemingly senseless death of the son (HNP5, 203).<sup>14</sup>

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Polish ballad, the young man asks his horse to tell the mother that he has married, and his bride is the waters of the Danube (Ibid.). [I am grateful to Maja Bošković-Stulli, PhD for translating Bogatyrev from the Russian to me, thus acquainting me with his analysis of the Death/Wedding metaphor.] Samuel Armistead pointed out that it is the metaphor of death as a wedding with the earth which is widespread in the Slavic ballads, but this concept is also not unknown in Greek ballads (1990:329). He allows a possible link between that metaphor and the Slavic customs where if the groom dies before the wedding, a wedding celebration is nonetheless held at his grave, with his love dressed in her bridal finery (Schrader 1904:13–15; cited from Armistead 1990:336). In her analysis of the figurative language in the lament and its performance context (the funeral), Tanja Perić-Polonijo stresses the discrepancy between funeral song text and context, and explains it through the magical function of the text (Perić-Polonijo 1996:393).

<sup>14</sup> The son inexplicably dies because of a headache on the journey. There could be some connection between the "keys" from the *don't tell* motif which he forgot at his wife's mother's house. In the ballad the mother-in-law is a healer while keys are often a subject of magical spells. However, in this ballad which ends with the death of the bridegroom and his mother, and with the marriage of the father and daughter-in-law, the real cause of the young man's death remains a mystery, precluding any definite long-reaching conclusions about the *don't tell* motif as the sole "clue" to the dramatic conflict of the ballad.

This ballad was narrated by Kata Murat, née Palunko, an informer who is graced by an individual spirit and a free style in interpretation, and this can perhaps provide the reason for our not finding a similar use of the *don't tell* motif anywhere else. In addition, the *don't tell* motif in that ballad does not experience a ballad-style reception: the mother does not draw a conclusion about her son's death on the basis of the *don't tell* motif, but only deduces it from the fact that her son has failed to return. We find similar "overcoming" of the reception of the motif in the ballad of a narrator from Šipan: the brother's message to his sister that he has "remained to hunt in the mountains" is not at all important because the sister realises what has happened as soon as she sees his "horse without the hero" (HNP5, 196). Kata Murat's variant of that ballad (Murat, 1) also omits the brother's *don't tell* motif, while the sister's realisation that her brother has been wounded is not given a particular motivation (*Grga has been struck down by wounds/ Grga's sister has learned of it*). It seems that the Šipan informers experienced the *don't tell* motifs in these latter examples as a retardation, which is how it figures in the epic poem. In any case, this is not a song about the wounding of a brother who sends the news to his sister; rather it is a song about a sister who saves her brother by bringing him water, while the song continues to develop in narrative about the brother being wounded; and again, the *don't tell* motif is often used in ballads at the end of the song.

In Croatian ballad (HNP5, 203) the *don't tell* motif is definitely used in a distinctive and individual way, but for that very reason it has remained opaque, along with the motifs of the dramatic conflict.

In addition to the *don't tell* motif in the ballads, one also finds other metaphorical "communications systems". The loved one departs to join the army, leaving a message to his sweetheart that she will know how things stand with him when she looks into the eyes of his falcon. When he sends her a message to visit his mother and falcon, the girl "recognises" his death in the eyes of the falcon (HNP5, 126).

In some of the poems, the death of the members of the family is anticipated. In addition to the "prophetic dream", a favoured means of anticipation in epic poems and the so-called epic ballads, often occurring at the beginning of the song, the motif of impossibility (Lat. *impossibile*, Gr. *adynaton*) foresees the death of the family members. However, unlike the "prophetic dream", this motif has its place at the culminating point of the plot, in the midst of the conflicting situation, and underlines its dramatic charge. The narrative is often "interrupted" after that point, and the motif precedes its abrupt conclusion (the so-called Spanish *final truncado*). The heroes in the ballads formulate their "return" by "a series of impossible events" (Curtius 1971:102). They will return when a particular tree bears an impossible fruit or when a black bird becomes white. The recipient of this message makes every effort for the impossible to become reality - washing a black bird in milk; nurturing the tree - but the impossible usually remains impossible. The mother watches the willow to see if it has borne grapes and her son returned from battle, but it is all futile (Delorko, 10).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>It would seem that here the metaphor of the impossible is joined by the metaphor of futility (rearing a tree and bearing a son, only for him to be "food for the ravens"). Slobodan Šnajder, the contemporary Croatian dramatist, reactualised and reinterpreted the expectation of the impossible fruit from the tree as an "historical antithesis". In his drama *Zmijin svlak* [The Snake's Slough], inspired by the famous fairy tale of the "snake bridegroom", one of the characters says: "For how many more generations will the Earth of the Mother be ruled by the Warrior? We do not know, we only hope. During this time which will perhaps be very long, *women will embrace trees*, because the warriors will kill each other off, and a number of times, at that." (*Večernji list*, Dec 17, 1996). [Author's italics].

In addition to the customary lexical components of the impossibility motif which includes the black bird and the rearing of the impossible fruit, there are songs in which the unattainable task also represents a metaphor of the dark deed, similarly to the "excuses" in the *don't tell* motifs: in a short lyrical ballad in which the sister has sold the brother for "silk and a mirror", the brother will return when a nightingale without a heart shall sing. At that, the sister "Catches the nightin-bird so small,/ And pulls its heart out from its breast" (HNP5, 127). The fact that Croatian ballads often resort to the raven, which is supposed to turn white for something to be fulfilled, is connected with the folk belief that the raven is an ominous bird, which foretells death with its squawking (see Schmaus 1971:336). In Scottish ballads the impossible foretells "the Sun and Moon dancing in the meadow" on the night when the son returns (see, e.g., Child 51A; 49A) or he will return when "the sun and the mune meet on yon hill" (Child, 51B), although that tradition is also familiar with the folk belief in the raven as a bird of bad omen (see, e.g. Child 26). There is a multitude of impossibility-motifs in

However, the impossibility motif, which is a paradoxical paraphrase of the concept of "never" through introduction of the "natural impossibility" (Lausberg 1993:103), can also be an effective "communications system", and is thus combined with the *don't tell* motif. The son who died because of the "maiden's curse", after having forced himself upon her, sends a message to his mother that he has remained in the mountains because he has been enchanted by the fairies' potions, and will return when his mother rears a maple tree which will bear apples (HNP5, 47). The mother tries to do the "impossible", and when she fails, her sister confirms that her efforts were futile because "He lived in an evil way, Ivo, your son./He lived in an evil way, and perished up there".<sup>16</sup>

This latter example also has a didactic function. The moral message is not in question, even if it is not expressed explicitly. In fact, the impossibility motif usually remains without a directly edifying message. Instead, it is replaced by intensification on those occasions when the impossible does indeed occur, but without consequences for the first part of the antithetical premise. The mother whose malicious gossip causes the death of her daughter-in-law, manages to coax leaves from a dried-out poplar, and to whiten a jackdaw - but still her son does not return home (HNP5, 115).<sup>17</sup>

When the informative value of the impossibility motif is compared with the *don't tell* motif, it is seen that while the "false news" in condensed ballad narrative fulfils the communications function - because the characters do understand the metaphorical message of the *don't tell* motif, the informative value of the *adynaton* is enriched by the "moral" of the ballad. Thus, if the reception of the *don't tell* motif in the ballad can be omitted or if the characters immediately understand the message of the *don't tell* motif, the "unattainable promise" is not merely lost "in the wind": it has to be submitted to further verification. These similar "communications systems" have diverse functions. The impossibility motif does not have to condense the plot as is the case with the decipherable *don't tell* motif. Through unsuccessful strivings to realise the impossible or

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Scandinavian ballads: the son-murderer will return when the crow turns white, the swans turn black, stones fly, feathers sink (compare Child 1965:168). The impossibility-motif would seem to be "one of the commonplaces of ballad poetry" (Child), and it is strongly represented in Croatian folk poetry. (According to F. J. Child, it appears in three types of Anglo-Scottish ballads. *Ibid*).

<sup>16</sup> The mother herself comes to the same conclusion in a variant of that ballad: following her son's instructions, she catches a raven and washes it so that it turn white, but when the raven becomes even blacker, she releases it with the words: "Go with the Devil, both Devil and Raven! While he, Bogdan, my darling child, / Stood with the Devil, who then led him away!" (Glavić, p. 4121; Supplement HNP5).

<sup>17</sup> In one Bosnian variant, the horse even return to the mother, but with the dead son's head (Šestić, II, No. 21; HNP5, 115).

through futile achievement of the impossible, it has to stress the moral to be drawn by the members of the family, while its usually implied didactic note honours the poetic principle of the ballad as a genre "which does not moralise" (Smith 1964:3).<sup>18</sup>

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If one cannot expect the story-line tensions of the ballad to be solved by refined nuances in the shaping of feelings nor in the delicacy of observation (Gerould 1932:36), because its dramatic charge is essentially set with "intensity of passion" and "justice of feeling" (Ibid.), the seductive dark crimson flower of Death, which obeys the ballad imperative for a "powerful" denouement, often provides the solution to the autistically hopeless conflict of the entire kaleidoscope of human drama. Death has almost become the trade mark of tragic family subjects in the ballad. However, this does not exhaust the part of Death in the structure of the ballad. In this article, our interest has been concentrated on the way in which the family is informed of the death of its members. We noticed that in some ballads death and the reception of the tidings of death leads into a narrative situation in keeping with the poetic demand of the ballad for condensed presentation of the story, while the ballad's dramatic aura created in this way is even more intensified by the fact that the reception of the news is usually accompanied by the death of family members. In the epic poem, however, death and the reception of the tidings of death have their place in diverse narrative segments, and the news itself is not so "ominous" for its recipients. We also saw that the fact that the ballad - unlike any other traditional genre - placed so much importance on family relationships (Lüthi 1970:79), was also reflected in the creation of particular motifs e.g. the *don't tell* motif, which keeps in mind the particular family ethics - it is never too late for bad news - in the formation of the tidings of death. Those motifs in the ballads which also present the reception of the tidings of death have lost something of their palliative nature, but for that very reason dramatise in a particular way the

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<sup>18</sup>The fact that the attainment of the impossible depends on the "moral fortitude" of the character is confirmed by additional examples: in a ballad in *Erlangen's Manuscript*, dry grass sprouts after Novak guides his Maiden Sister-by-Blood across the mountains, but does not take advantage of her innocence (ER, 150). In the ballad about the brother who sold his sister, and cursed her that she would only bear a child when the dry maple tree sprouted leaves, the impossible is achieved: the sister has a child, but the dry maple also "turns green" (HNP5, 183). The impossible in some popular tales (e.g. in those about the "repentant sinner") is more than a motif; it structures the entire story (compare e.g. Bošković-Stulli, 1959, No. 29). See Curtius (1971:101–105) for more about this motif as part of the *mundus inversus* topoi.

condensed narrative of the ballad plot. The contents of the *don't tell* motif are decipherable to the characters in the ballad, so they become a particular ballad "communications system". In epic poems these motifs have remained "opaque", but figure as the retardational instruments of the song. On the other hand, the literal meaning of the metaphorically formed message in the ballads is more directly related to the world of the family, while the epic poem establishes semantic links with the heroic world of battle. In those songs in which the communication of tidings of death make up their sole content - as in the ballad of the bandit's wife - the *don't tell* motif is a means for intensification of the drama of the plot, although its efficacy here is not based on the decipherability of the content of the motif, but on its threefold variation. It was also noticed that the impossibility motif (Lat. *impossibile*, Gr. *adynaton*) in some cases became part of the ballad's "communications system", while its place at the end of the ballad often made it the bearer of the moral. Through analysis of the "tidings of death" in the folk ballad, we confirmed the sensitivity of the genre to interpersonal family relationships which - through the message giving news of the death of a family member - became part of the ballad's structure in a very special way.

NOTE: The cited collection number which accompanies the author, or the abbreviation of the collection indicates the ordinal number of the song, and not the page number.

(Translated by Nina H. Antoljak)

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## VIJEST O SMRTI U NARODNOJ BALADI

### SAŽETAK

U članku se analizira karakterističan tematski element narodne pjesme baladnoga tipa: situacija kad rodbina glavnog junaka prima vijest o njegovoj smrti. Ta se situacija razmatra u nizu pojedinačnih pjesama koje ne pripadaju nekom zajedničkom tipu, a kao kriteriji razlikovanja individualnih uobličena vijesti pojavljuju se odgonetljivost vijesti te sposobnost primatelja da vijest razumije. Dok je za epsku pjesmu karakteristična prikrivenost donesene vijesti za njezine primatelje, što je u skladu s imanentnim zahtjevom žanra za iscrpnim pripovijedanjem uz karakterističnu retardaciju koja ide na uštrb dramatičnosti ispriповjedanog događaja, likovi u baladi metaforički oblikovanu vijest odmah razumiju. Situaciji prijema tragične vijesti pridružuju se u analizi i neki srodni modusi osvjedočenja likova o junakovoj smrti (naslućivanje smrti na temelju predznaka i preduvjerjenja). Analizira se kompozicijski tretman takvih modusa u baladi te njihov sadržajni sastav (metaforički oblikovani don't tell-motivi, impossibility-motivi, tzv. lažna vijest) koji se kontrastiraju s istim predmetom u epskoj pjesmi. Zamjećuje se podudarnost strukturalnog oblikovanja recepcije 'vijesti o smrti' odnosno zlokobnih nagovještaja smrti s njihovim sadržajnim ispunjenjima: tamo gdje je kompozicija strukturirana putem *incremental repetition* i pripovjednog zgušnjavanja, pjesma svoj izražajni repertoar crpe iz svijeta obiteljskih odnosa; u pjesmama u kojima se u "izgovorima" poseže za junačkim svijetom *međana*, primanje vijesti o smrti znatnije je elaborirano.